

Writing Your QUALITATIVE Research Proposal/Thesis or Dissertation

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QUALITATIVE STUDY PROPOSAL FORMAT (from Bogdan & Biklen, 2003)

Prior to conducting your study your proposal (which is generally shorter than a quantitative study) can be accomplished in two ways. Your description can follow two approaches:

1. One approach is to conduct some fieldwork prior to writing the proposal. Anselm Strauss (1997) states, "No proposal should be written without preliminary data collection and analysis" (p. 286). After spending some time in the field, you are in a much better position to discuss what your plans are and what might be in your data. You can discuss design and emergent themes in more detail. You will not be sure of the outcome of your study or exactly how you will proceed with the rest of the study, but you are in a better position to make educated guesses with more concrete background and descriptions to satisfy the interests of your proposal readers of both your scholarly ability and the credibility of your research plans.
2. A second approach is to write a proposal without preliminary observations and interviews. Such a proposal is necessarily highly speculative and how you plan to proceed and what issues to examine. This type of proposal is more of an exercise to show those who read it that you are conversant with the qualitative research literature and are imaginative and scholarly in your thinking about the issues than an actual concrete description of what you are actually going to do. This kind of proposal provides an opportunity to review theory and methods literature, but may not be helpful in conceptualizing the study. This is for proposal readers who understand qualitative design.

To demonstrate **intellectual credibility** and **external accountability** you should ask and answer these five questions about the "essence" of your inquiry (Mason, 1996).

- Can you articulately describe the scope and purpose of the research to those involved?
- What is the nature of the phenomenon, entities, or social realities you wish to investigate?
- What might represent knowledge or evidence of entities or social realities you're exploring?
- What topic or broad substantive area is the research concerned with?
- What is the intellectual puzzle? What do you wish to explain? What are your research questions?
- What is the purpose of your research?

Proposals for qualitative studies differ significantly from quantitative ones, but there are commonalities:

- a. What are you going to do?
- b. How are you going to do it?
- c. Why are you doing it?
- d. How does what you are going to do relate to what others have done?
- e. What are the ethical issues involved in your study and how will you handle them?
- f. What is the potential contribution (to basic research and/or practice) of your work?

References consulted in preparing the proposal include:

1. Provide *theory and methods references* as indicated in your study design or intentions for the design as well as terminology used (e.g., grounded theory, case study, biography, ethnography, phenomenology, thick description, lived experiences, etc).
2. You will, as well, *cite authors of works* representing the themes, concerns, topics, or issues related to your study. This proposal is not a blue print, it is a direction to follow that helps you and your proposal readers understand the process and how to proceed!

CONSTRUCTING THE QUALITATIVE PROPOSAL

Two Themes: Design Flexibility and Proposal as Argument

- * Project a specific design which preserves flexibility; discuss contingencies and how future design decisions will be made.
- * Think of your proposal as an argument.
- * Move from generic outline (above) to detailed proposal by building this argument:
 1. Show that research is substantive and will contribute to field.
 2. Show appropriateness of qualitative methods for your study.
 3. Show study's feasibility and your ability to carry it out.
 4. Conceptualize audience as non-specialists on your topic. Clarify and justify.

Creswell's (1994) Format for Qualitative Proposal

Introduction (The "What" and the "Why")

Statement of the Problem
 Purpose of the Study
 The "Grand Tour" Questions and Subquestions
 Study's Relation to Theory and Literature
 Definitions
 Limitations of the Study
 Significance of the Study

Procedure (The "How")

Assumptions and Rationale for a Qualitative Design
 The Type of Design Used
 The Role of the Researcher
 Data Collection Procedures
 Data Analysis Procedures
 Methods for Verification

Maxwell's (1996) Format for Qualitative Proposal

Introduction

Purpose
 General Overview of Main Research Questions

Research Context (Lit Review)

How Your Research Will Fit In and Make a Contribution
 Explanation of Study's Theoretical Framework

Pilot Study (may be separate section, below)

Research Questions

Relation of Your Questions to Prior Research, Theory, Your Own Research, and to Your Purpose

Clarification of Coherent Focus of Questions

Research Methods

Justification of Qualitative Methods for this Research

Setting/Social Context of Research

Researcher Relationship with Participants

Data Collection

Data Analysis

Validity

Threats to Validity and How They Will be Dealt With

Preliminary Results (if any, from pilot study)

Implications

Answer to "So What?" Questions

Marshall & Rossman's (1995) Format for Qualitative Proposal

Introduction (Conceptual Body of the Proposal)

Problem and Significance

Focus and Research Questions

Review of Literature

Research Design and Methods

- Overall Approach and Rationale
- Site and Sample Selections
- Researcher's Role
- Data Collection Techniques
- Data Management
- Data Analysis Strategies
- Trustworthiness Features
- Management Plan

Sources: Creswell (1997), Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches; Lincoln & Guba (1989), Fourth generation evaluation; Marshall & Rossman (1995), Designing qualitative research; Maxwell (1996), Qualitative research design; An interactive approach.