



## WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

A research proposal is a detailed plan which clearly outlines a suggested (or proposed) research project, its purpose, how the findings will add to the field of existing knowledge, and how the research will be carried out. There are strict processes that must be followed for gaining approval before commencing significant research projects and the research proposal is an essential part of this process. As a student, you may also be given an assignment task that requires you to write a proposal for a research project that may never take place, to familiarise you with the research proposal writing process.

A research proposal should address the following:

- what you are going to research
- why you are going to research this particular area
- how this research will contribute to the existing knowledge (filling a 'gap' in existing research)
- what the significance of researching this area is
- how you are going to conduct the research.



**PLEASE NOTE:** This guide explains the purpose and structure of a research proposal in **general terms**. If your research proposal is part of your postgraduate studies, e.g. for doctoral studies, your supervisor will be an invaluable source of discipline-specific advice and guidance on your proposal, and throughout your candidature.

## TYPES OF RESEARCH

While each discipline has some slightly different requirements for setting out a research proposal, the major differences will be dictated by the kind of research you are undertaking – i.e. whether you are doing what is called **primary research** or **secondary research**.

**PRIMARY RESEARCH** means you are going to collect or create your own data through applying different methods of data collection (i.e. experiments, interviews or questionnaires, surveys or by compiling statistical charts). In **empirical** research (which uses data that is systematically collected and analysed), the research proposal plays a crucial role. You need to make clear:

- who (or what) you are going to access for information and how you are going to collect or obtain it. This has to be carefully recorded as part of your proposal.
- what you are going to do with the data, and how it will be processed and analysed. Your proposal will need to include an accurate and detailed methodology and research design section. You may also need to apply for **ethics approval**.

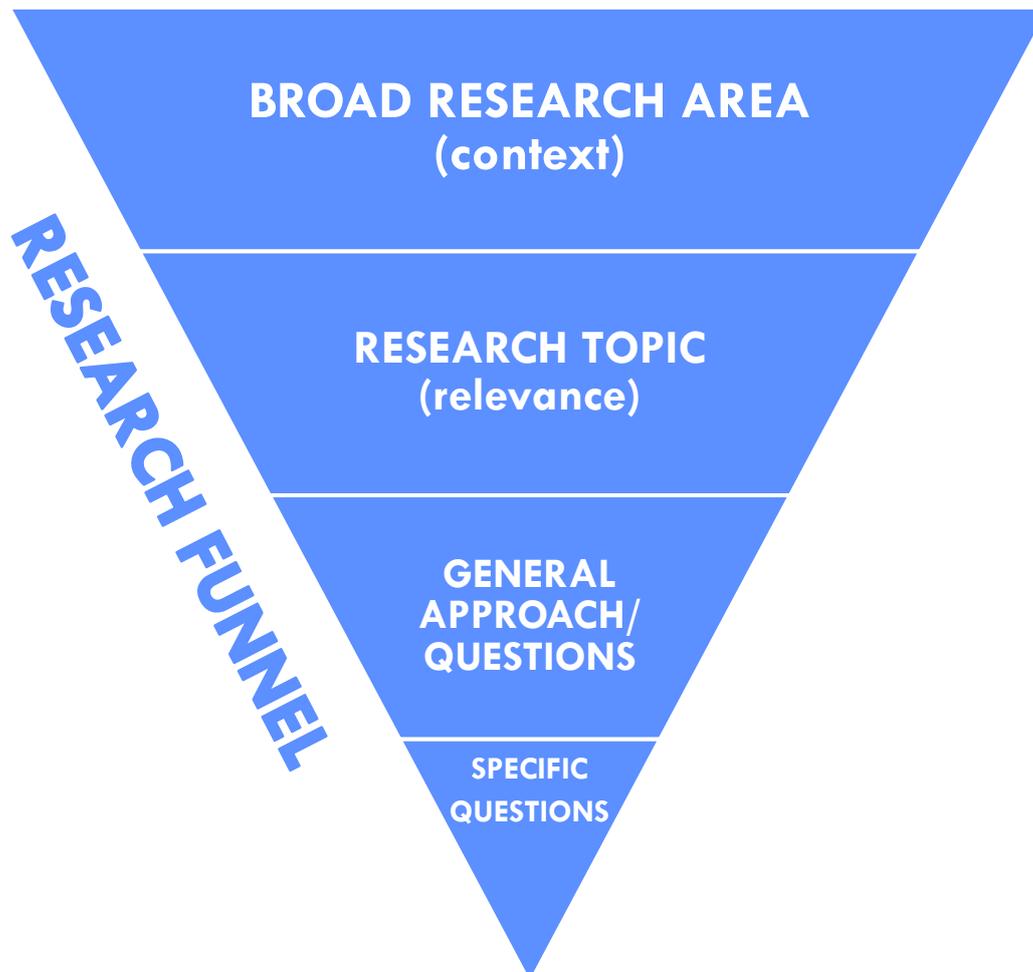
**SECONDARY RESEARCH** means that you are not gathering or creating your own empirical data but are using existing data that someone else has collected, recorded and analysed. Generally, this applies within the Humanities and some social science topics (Sociology, History, Politics). Consequently, you will not need to include a detailed methodology or research methods section in the proposal. However, you should provide an outline of how you intend to approach your research problem, the theoretical framework you intend to use and the areas, issues or authors you intend to focus on.

Although you are not conducting primary research, you should still use what **primary sources**. These will be the original texts, films, magazines, novels or poems produced by the authors themselves. In the case of history, for example, you may need to access original records, letters, journals, diaries, shipping logs or museums. Your proposal must illustrate who and what you intend to access for data and why/how it is relevant to answering your question or problem.



## STRUCTURE

The content of the proposal usually goes from the general to the specific and is often represented as a funnel. (Adapted from Jane Haggis, *Development Studies DV ST 9020, Flinders University*)



## OUTLINE

The proposal needs to show clearly that you understand your field, you have identified an area that warrants research and you know how to conduct that research. It should contain some or all of the following elements:

- Working title
- Statement of the problem or gap in the current research in your field of study
- Context in which the problem arises; historical and current research in the field
- Reasons why the problem exists and justification for addressing it
- Methodology you will use to address the problem
- Key research questions
- Expected contribution to knowledge
- Time-frame and (special) resources required
- References or bibliography.



## HOW TO STRUCTURE A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The following sections provide more detail on what should be included under each section. What is included will depend on the type of research you are doing.

**Working title:** The title for your research proposal should be concise and should clearly indicate the content of your research project.

**Thesis statement/description of research problem:** This summarises your research aims and objectives to introduce and accurately outline:

- the central problem you will address
- the broad research questions to be answered
- the expected outcomes

This section may also briefly indicate the originality of the research or the gap which your research will fill.

**Limitations/delimitations of the study (scope):** This section should set out the parameters of the research project; what is within and outside the scope of your research and why.

## WHY ARE YOU UNDERTAKING THE RESEARCH?

**Background context/literature review:** This section deals with the historic and current state of research in your field. By addressing the literature, you will place your research into its context and reveal what problem it is attempting to address.

**Justification:** It is important to state clearly why there is a problem that needs to be addressed. You will need to show that the research fills a gap in the current research by referring to the literature in the field. It should then be evident where your research project fits in the overall context.

**Research significance:** State clearly why this research is important, what the benefits will be and how your work will contribute to knowledge in your field. This may include commercial benefits, changes in current practice, a new perspective on an old issue or other benefits to the community. You need to indicate why it is significant and how it advances understanding of the issues under discussion.



## HOW THE RESEARCH IS UNDERTAKEN

**Theoretical Framework:** It should be clear what paradigm you are working within, what theoretical assumptions you are making or questioning. You need to offer a justification for the adoption of the particular methodology you will use to conduct your research. This needs to be supported by the literature.

**Research procedures/methodology/design:** This section sets out the mechanisms of conducting your research, the sort of data needed to answer your research questions and the details of how this is to be achieved in practice. State clearly how you plan to conduct your research, to answer the following questions:



- What methodology are you using?
- Why?
- What information needs to be gathered?
- Will this data be applicable to the research questions?
- Who or what will you use as the data source?
- How will you collect data or construct experiments?
- What controls are in place?
- How will the data be analysed?
- Is ethics approval required?



**Resources and Timeframe:** You must consider what sort of resources you will need, how available they are and the costs involved. You may need to attach a proposed budget. You will also need to indicate how long each stage of the project will take.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**References:** The proposal should cite research material which supports your research. Any text referred to or quoted from in the proposal needs to be listed and attached. Formatting should follow the standard method advised by your discipline, for example, the Harvard system or APA systems (both 'author-date' systems) or the footnoting system (an author- note system).

## USEFUL RESOURCES

The following are two of the many useful resources which may further assist you:

Patton, MQ 2002, *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.), Sage Publications, USA.

Punch, K 2006 *Developing effective research proposals*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Sage, London. (in Flinders Library)

If you're a HDR student, your supervisors and the Office of Graduate Research at Flinders University may have resources which can assist you in writing a research proposal appropriate to your discipline.