5 things to remember when doing a research project

I have been an active researcher for over 30 years so. As well as publishing books like Doing Research in the Real World, I've conducting a wide range of studies including national and international surveys using quantitative analysis, qualitative interviews, mixed methods studies and focus groups. I've also supervised vast numbers of masters and many doctoral students who are undertaking their own research studies. What have I learned in this process? What are some of the key things that researchers need to remember? There are many, but here let's focus on my top 5.

1. Work on the proposal. Before many research projects start you will need to construct a proposal that will be evaluated by the sponsor of the study. If the sponsor has a template for this, follow it closely (including the instructions for completing it) and make sure you have addressed ALL of the questions or themes. Make sure you have a clear set of research questions for the study (see 2 next); have a coherent sampling design (see 3 below). Have a research design (for example the use of an experiment, survey, interviews etc.) and be clear about how data gathering methods complement each other. Say how the data are going to be analysed (for quantitative which statistical tests) for qualitative which method (for example, template analysis, content analysis, etc.). Producing a good quality proposal is a great way of kicking off your project.

2. Work on those research questions. Of course, we are not talking here of questions in, say, an interview schedule, although they will probably eventually be linked. The research questions guide the whole direction of your research including what sort of methods you will eventually use. I devote a lot of time to formulating my research questions, drafting them, sitting back and critically evaluating them, then redrafting. I might do this over a number of days, so new thoughts about the questions can emerge. Once I'm reasonably happy, I'll show them to someone else for some feedback. Nail those research questions!

3. Work on the sampling design. Too often I see student researchers boldly stating that they are using random sampling or convenience sampling but never say how or why. Don't claim you are using random sampling when clearly you are not. If you are using a form of non-random sampling there are many to choose from so look at Chapter 9 of this 4th edition and say which are most appropriate for your own study. Having adopted the design, say HOW you are going to select the participants. Where are they based? How are you going to determine who is in the study and who is out? How are you contacting them? In other words, you need the detail.

4. Get ethical approval early. You will find that ethics committees don't meet all the time and that getting ethics approval can often be a slow process, so complete the forms and apply as soon as you can. Getting ethics approval can often turn out to be a helpful process because it requires you to address important outputs such as the design of Participant Consent forms.

5. Keep a research diary for every project. It's up to you how you use it but I always keep one where I record the outcomes of each meeting or conversation (for example, with co-researchers or sponsors), plans for research design such as the date and location for key data gathering activities, thoughts and jottings about the project, literature sources that have been ordered, and ideas/phrases for future research outputs such as conference papers or journal articles. You can't keep it all in your head – get yourself a diary!