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Proposing your Research

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Proposing your Research

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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify characteristics of a strong qualitative research proposal
- List the three main types of qualitative research proposals
- Outline key considerations in writing a qualitative research proposal
- Discuss how to successfully defend your qualitative research proposal

Introduction

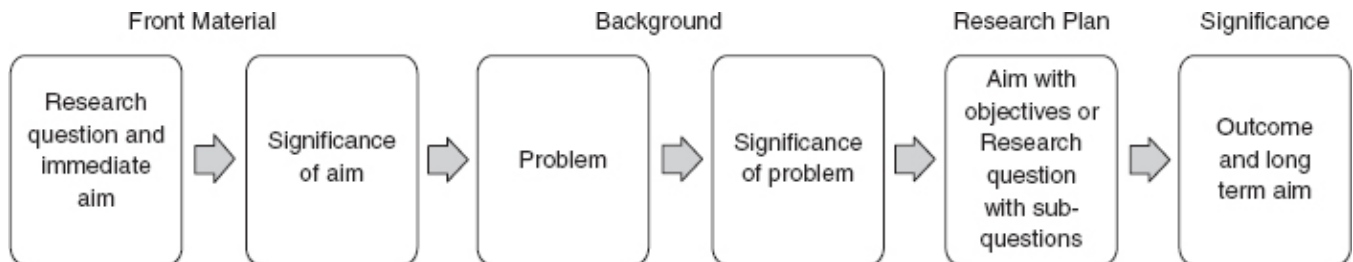
The process of writing your research proposal is an opportunity to clarify and solidify aspirational thinking into a realistic plan of action. Usually we approach a potential qualitative research study with only a loose idea of what we would like to investigate. For those considering a graduate research program, there is often lots of rather romantic talk among your peers, and sometimes your lecturers and supervisors, about the importance of having a 'passion' for your topic that will sustain you through the three plus years that you will engage in this work. We take a much more pragmatic, project management approach to the conceptualization and execution of a qualitative research study that will become apparent as you read through this chapter. Completing a graduate research qualification means engaging a program of research training where you acquire knowledge and skills, which if successfully applied, will result in your becoming an independent researcher. Undertaking graduate research studies does not need to equate to climbing Mt Everest; however, key to keeping your project under control and in perspective is a well thought out and achievable research proposal. Of course not all research proposals are written for entry to a graduate research program; we also write proposals for research ethics approval, and importantly to secure competitive grants. A number of authors suggest important strategies for success when writing a qualitative research proposal (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003; Penrod, 2003; Padgett and Henwood, 2009) each of whom use one of their successful applications to illustrate specific points. In this chapter, we have summarized these strategies in check boxes to provide easy reference points when writing sections of a typical research proposal, which are as follows.

1. **Front material**
2. **Background**
3. **Research plan (methods and techniques)**

4. **Outcomes and significance**
5. **Budget and timeline**

Figure 12.1 provides further detail of the content of each of these sections that require attention when constructing a qualitative research proposal.

Figure 12.1 Constructing a Qualitative Research Proposal



As general principles apply in the production of a qualitative research proposal, the first section in this chapter will discuss a generic approach to producing a comprehensive submission. The chapter will then focus on particular information that should be considered when preparing a proposal for a specific purpose. Here we focus on the three main types of qualitative research proposals, being those produced for: admission to a graduate research program, submission for ethics approval and application for competitive grants. To conclude the chapter we will discuss important points to consider in the defense of your qualitative research proposal.

Qualitative Research Proposals

Before you begin to put together a research proposal for any purpose, the first task is to print the application guidelines and have them to hand as you write your proposal. Refer to the guidelines often, and mark off when you have completed each one of the steps required for your application. Reviewers will be attuned to the required format and you don't want to disorientate them by straying from this prescription. Following on in this theme, as a rule, the use of plain English in a qualitative research proposal works well. Plummer (2009) shares his thoughts about why the researcher as author is sometimes tempted to dazzle the reader by the use of overly intricate language.

Maybe it is the complexity of the ideas which require more complex narratives. Maybe it is the translations from some difficult work of the past. Maybe. More often I think it is more to do with the puffed up pretense – to make our understandings appear more scientific, deep, serious, truly profound – that we dress it all up in a language that obfuscates and obdurately masks what we see and say. (para. 5)

When writing your qualitative research proposal the one thing you don't want to do is unintentionally mask your intent with impenetrable terminology. Remember a number of different reviewers will read your proposal and not all of them will be as au fait with the subject matter and methodology as you are. As LaRossa (2005)

explains,

much the same as a newspaper report or novel will have a slant to it, so also research narratives will have a slant. And that slant may make the difference in whether an article or book is read – and, if read, remembered. (p. 851)

Just like in the case of an article or a book, if reviewers remember the aim of your proposed qualitative research study for the right reasons and understand the difference the findings might make, your chance of success will increase dramatically. If an unfamiliar reviewer can easily read and understand your research plan they will feel more confident in recommending that it go forward.

Conceptualizing a Qualitative Research Proposal

Think about your own purposes for reading this chapter. Are you planning to produce a qualitative research proposal for a specific purpose? Obtain a copy of the guidelines and, as you read through the following discussion, make notes on the guidelines to assist you when you come to prepare your own proposal.

Front Material

Front material of your qualitative research proposal includes the title, key words, research question, the immediate aim of your study and an abstract. Penrod (2003) argues it is ‘...critical that these sections concisely describe the need, significance, research question, and potential for the study to fill a critical gap in current understanding of a phenomenon’ (p. 830).

Creating a ‘snappy’ title for your proposal that is useful, clear and memorable tends to be a work in progress from conception to completion. What do we mean by a useful title? In the past decade, the way people search for information, including research findings, has become reliant on the World Wide Web. Planning ahead to successfully disseminate your findings with the aim of creating impact means a title and abstract including phrases that others would likely be interested in (SAGE Publications, 2013a). Restrain any urge to write a title that is quirky; instead chose a title in plain English that encapsulates the intent of your proposal. Writing succinctly is an art in itself, and the composition of an abstract challenges the author to balance key messages and detail in a very constrained number of words or characters. You need to tie together your title and abstract by including the key words selected in each of these elements. For those researching in health sciences it is vital to use keywords listed in the US National Library of Medicine's list of medical subject headings. These keywords are often referred to as ‘MeSH’ terms and are easily located by using the library's web-based database (US National Library of Medicine, 2012). For other disciplines, there are web-based generators (The University of Texas Libraries, 2013) that will analyse your research topic and provide you with a list of possible keywords to choose from.

In [Chapter 1](#) we argue for a well-constructed research question to guide the selection of an appropriate methodology and subsequent research design. Tied to this research question is the immediate aim of a research proposal, which creates an anchor point for the entire body of work. Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) argue that the aim and significance of the study need to be threaded through the proposal in a specific manner that results in the reviewer understanding the links between each section and the importance of the study overall.

These authors include justifying the significance of the study in the front material and background sections even though there is usually an additional section later on in the proposal that specifically addresses this point. Reminding the reviewer of the potential consequence of the study throughout the proposal is important in getting them to remember your work when it comes to making a decision regarding it going forward or not. In saying this, don't be repetitive in your writing and be careful not to duplicate sentences in different sections, otherwise you risk boring your reviewer or raising doubt in their mind as to your ability as an author.

The immediate aim of a qualitative research proposal 'reveals your intentions to the readers of your study and tells them what you wish to achieve' (Holloway and Brown, 2012: 32). Holloway and Brown (2012) caution against writing an aim that only includes a solution to the problem that has led to the proposed study. Qualitative research may be exploratory, descriptive and explanatory by nature and one of these elements should be included in the aim of the study in combination with a possible outcome that could be realized at the end of the study, or in later work. For example, a recent action research study we conducted had the following aim: '...to identify, describe, implement and evaluate contextually relevant support strategies for student learning in the Bachelor of Nursing Science at the Torres Strait Islands campus of James Cook University'.

Once the title, research question, immediate aim and keywords of the study are written you need to compile a draft abstract of your study proposal. The abstract provides a brief summary of how you will answer your research question and again justifies the need for the proposed study. Possible uses of the abstract include focusing the researcher's thinking, communicating with other possible members of the future research team, forming the body of an expression of interest to garner an invitation to submit a full proposal for funding, or seeking an advisor prior to applying for admission to a graduate research program of study (Locke, Spirduso and Silverman, 2007). The abstract of a research proposal requires constant revision to ensure that it remains aligned to sections of the proposal that will be written and rewritten in the iterative process of developing a final submission. The summative nature of an abstract means that you have few words to use in getting across your key messages. Format wise, the abstract of a research proposal generally covers the same ground as the larger document, however there may be specific guidelines for what is required so check to make sure you have included all necessary information. Knowing your audience's priorities for action is an important factor to consider when writing the abstract of a research proposal. Understanding the reviewers' motivations and addressing these at the outset will improve your rate of success.

Checklist for Writing the Front Material Section

Ensure that your front matter includes:

- A useful title
- Key words
- A well constructed research question
- A statement of the immediate aim of the study
- An abstract that includes all of the above

Background

The background to your research proposal includes a clear and focused discussion of what is known and what is not known about your substantive area of inquiry. How will the proposed research study address a gap in the evidence base? It may be that you have already conducted a small study that has produced preliminary findings that you now plan to build on. If this is the case you need to cite publications reporting these findings to demonstrate your developing expertise in the area, while explicating the need for further research to meet the aim of the proposal already stated in the front matter. As Penrod (2003) states, your goal when writing the background section of a research proposal is ‘... the development of an argument backed by adequate evidence to create and support a clear purpose statement that compels reviewers to consider ... the project’ (p. 822). Importantly for qualitative research proposals you need to account for previous research designs used as well as their key findings. The mantra that the research design must fit the question is important to deliberate on when arguing for further investigation of a substantive area of enquiry already examined using an alternative research design. It may be that an additional study using a qualitative methodology will more fully dimensionalize, describe or explain the issue at hand – but you may need to argue this case.

Many recipients of proposals expect the background section to include a conceptual or theoretical framework, which ‘... helps reviewers to understand how the researcher is approaching the research analytically’ (Penrod, 2003: 822). Including extant theory at this point in the development of a research design can be antithetical for many qualitative researchers posing questions best answered by methods of data collection and analysis that are largely inductive in nature, with the aim of developing their own theory regarding the substantive area of enquiry. As with many things in life however, this is a moment where a prudent compromise can be required of the researcher in order to progress their study. Penrod (2003) suggests a useful approach to meeting the requirement of providing extant theory in a qualitative research proposal is to choose a theoretical or conceptual framework that is abstract, yet able to provide the researcher with a way to organize their thinking and guide their actions. Examples of this type of theoretical or conceptual frame are broad paradigms of feminism, critical theory, post positivism, postmodernism or post structuralism.

In both the background and research plan (methods and techniques) sections practice strategic disarmament

by anticipating controversial areas and pre-empting them with an answer (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003). Be collegial and respectful in your discussion of previous research in the area. Do not say that others have failed, rather, make reference to areas where the need for further work was identified, and report their findings accurately and in context.

Checklist for Writing the Background Section

When writing your background section:

- Don't assume the reviewer is familiar with the area of enquiry, start by detailing the problem introduced earlier in the aims section while re-emphasizing the significance of your proposal
- Ensure your literature review **focuses** on making a case for the proposed study by identifying a 'gap' in research conducted to date
- Include the findings of preliminary research studies you have conducted that led to the current proposal
- Emphasize the proposed investigators' previous work in the substantive area by citing their publications in the background to the study
- Use the **device of contrasts** to highlight the differences between your proposal and previous studies
- Use the **device of 'yet'** to communicate to the reader that you acknowledge differences between your opinions and those of others who have published in the area

Research Plan (Methods and Techniques)

Locke et al. (2007) provide some sensible advice to the novice researcher, which is to begin the research plan section of your proposal with a one paragraph description of the overall study design. As these authors point out, the reviewer needs to know if this is a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods study from the outset. By not clearly identifying your research design as a qualitative study, you can leave a less experienced reviewer grasping at the means to identify what you are planning to do. As well, they suggest you include the parameters of the study in this opening paragraph to orientate the reviewer to the scope of the proposed research study. Revisiting the action research study referred to earlier, the following window into writing a research proposal provides an example of how this can be achieved.

Window into the Qualitative Research Proposal

This qualitative study aims to identify, describe, implement and evaluate contextually relevant support strategies for student learning in the Bachelor of Nursing Science program delivered at the Torres Strait Islands campus of James Cook University. Using an action research design underpinned by theories of decolonization, students currently enrolled in the BNSc at this campus (n=12) will be invited to participate in a mentoring circle. The mentoring circle will be facilitated by experienced Indigenous student support officers and will not include lecturers employed to teach and assess the students. Meeting fortnightly during semesters one and two, data will be generated by mentoring circle participants in the form of artifacts including: minutes of meetings, group activity sheets, photographs, and other creative outputs. As well, an Indigenous research assistant will conduct a series of participant interviews at the end of semester two. Throughout the study, participants will determine, implement and evaluate their actions, with facilitators working alongside the group to assist in this process. The research team including experienced Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, Indigenous student support officers and the Indigenous research assistant will conduct group data analysis at the end of semester two, to identify cycles of action and evaluation in the process of developing student determined strategies to support individual and group learning at this remote site.

The introductory paragraph in the section describing the research plan sets the scene for the reviewer, providing a broad-brush description of the proposed qualitative research study. In writing the introductory paragraph you also have an opportunity to practice strategic disarmament. You will notice how in the 'window into' example, we were very clear about the different roles members of the action research team would play in supporting student participants, the large majority of whom identify as Indigenous people. As non-Indigenous researchers we led this study from behind, supporting and working with Indigenous people who facilitated the group, generated the data with participants, and then analysed the final data set with us, using a collaborative group approach. By outlining this process in the introductory paragraph we practiced a form of strategic disarmament through explicitly applying a decolonizing approach to this qualitative research study.

Typically the introductory paragraph in the research plan section is followed by a number of sub-headings, the first of which concerns the sample for the proposed study. A common pressure point for reviewers less familiar with qualitative methodologies is the small size of the sample required for many research plans. Even more confusing for many reviewers are qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory where it is very difficult to predict both the final size and constitution of the study sample (Birks and Mills, 2011). One way of communicating the scope of data that can be generated by a relatively small sample is to use estimated numbers of, for example, pages of transcribed text, hours of interview time, pages of documentation generated by participants such as diaries or blog entries, hours of time related to artifacts such as films, television and documentaries, or digital stories created by participants. This added quantification of

the sample is another example of strategic disarmament in the writing of your qualitative research proposal. In this section you will also need to address ethical issues, including potential risks to participants and an explanation of how you will ensure informed and voluntary participation in your study. These issues will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Following on from a description of the sample is a detailed explanation of the process of data collection/generation and analysis. As experienced reviewers of research proposals, mainly for competitive grant schemes, we concur with the advice of many that it is valuable to break up the text of this section with the judicious use of diagrams, flow charts and tables. There are a number of reasons for using different forms to present this information, the most compelling one being the need to economize on text, followed by you being able to demonstrate a clarity of thought through elegant and parsimonious expression. The notion that a picture speaks a thousand words can either play out extremely well in this context, or backfire badly depending on how clearly you are able to encapsulate elements of your research plan pictorially. In deciding if your message is clear, or not, you need to rely on a panel of critical friends who are able to provide you with fearless advice on the quality of your research proposal from the beginning of writing this document. Peer review is commonly recognized as a useful strategy to clarify a research proposal prior to submission, however we would advise you to seek this type of feedback from early on and not risk an unpleasant surprise close to the end. In particular, illustrations of any sort require the scrutiny of a number of people to ensure that they all understand what you are trying to say.

Many qualitative researchers choose to frame up the specifics of their research plan using research sub-questions, as opposed to objectives (see [Chapter 1](#)). A clearly articulated overall research question can lend itself to examination either way. Both objectives and sub-questions provide the reader with more concrete detail about how the researcher plans to answer the research question and achieve the immediate aim. When writing objectives and sub-questions, the researcher needs to make them ‘... specific (precise), clearly defined (identifiable) and tangible ...’ (Denicolo and Becker, 2012: 54). Using our previous worked example, the objectives of this action research study were for students to:

1. **Describe and define success in the context of higher degree study in the Torres Strait Islands**
2. **Collaboratively design a suite of student driven and evaluated support strategies specific to the Torres Strait Islands**
3. **Identify and describe contextual enablers for student success**
4. **Identify and describe contextual barriers to student success**

You can see how these objectives could have just as easily been framed up as a series of sub-questions to the overall research question: ‘What are contextually relevant support strategies for student learning in the Bachelor of Nursing Science program delivered at the Torres Strait Islands campus of James Cook University?’

1. **How do students describe and define success in the context of higher degree study in**

the Torres Strait Islands?

2. **What do students consider to be useful support strategies in relation to their BNSc studies in the Torres Strait Islands?**
3. **What are contextual enablers for student success?**
4. **What are contextual barriers to student success?**

Whether you choose to use a research question and immediate aim followed by either objectives or sub-questions is influenced by the chosen qualitative methodology, your preference and the preference of your advisers or research team members – not to mention the application guidelines provided by the body receiving your application. Regardless, the objectives/sub-research questions can be used to create a structure for your explanation of the research methods to be used. We would suggest that you consider emphasizing the objectives/sub-research questions in bold or italics at the beginning of a paragraph that describes how you will collect or generate data to address this element of the proposed research study.

Sometimes the temporal flow of the research study means that different phases may meet a number of objectives/sub-research questions. If this is the case, then consider presenting the research plan using phases or stages as an organizing framework. Again consider if a flowchart will capture the planned phases, allowing the reviewer a 'bird's eye view' of the proposed study. Most word processing programs have templates that will assist you to produce a high quality flowchart or diagram, try and use these where possible to reduce the chances of your pictorial representation losing its integrity when printed elsewhere.

In research proposals more generally, there is usually a divide between the methods of data collection or generation and the methods of analysis. Of course in a qualitative research plan this can be a false separation given the preponderance of concurrent data collection and analysis that occurs. However, for the purposes of your qualitative research proposal it may be that you need to write up these methods in a sequential manner. In saying this, you do need to demonstrate to the informed reader your understanding of the often-iterative process of qualitative data collection or generation and analysis as appropriate to your adopted methodology. When writing up each of these components, don't assume that the reviewer understands what you mean by a particular method or technique. Provide a brief explanation of each of these including how you will operationalize this process in the context of your research plan. As well, provide relevant citations to assure the reviewer of your knowledge of the field (Locke et al., 2007). When defining methods of analysis, relate these to the objectives/sub-research questions asked and explain how the products of this analysis will integrate in order to address the research aims through articulation of the findings. Techniques such as the use of computer software to aid analysis need to be described and justified, as does the management and translation of data more generally (National Institutes of Health, 2001).

For many qualitative researchers the concept of validation is antithetical to their epistemological position, however be aware not all reviewers are of the same view. Experienced researchers such as Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) argue that '... the concern to ensure valid findings is foundational to every design choice. Accordingly, we embed these techniques throughout the design [plan] section' (p. 799). A position endorsed by a number of other authors (Denicolo and Becker, 2012; Holloway and Brown, 2012; Padgett and Henwood,

2009) all of whom argue for the explication of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of findings (see [Chapter 13](#) for an extended discussion of quality in qualitative research). To interrogate the quality of their qualitative research proposal the researcher can begin by considering the following three questions.

1. **How will you ensure that descriptions of participants and context are accurate and complete?**
2. **Are your personal biases a threat? If not, why not, and if so, what do you plan to do about them?**
3. **In what ways and to what degree will participant reactions to you (and to the procedures used in the study) impede acquisition of valid data, and what are your plans for dealing with that problem? (Locke et al., 2007: 104)**

We agree with Sandelowski and Barroso's (2003) approach of threading methods of quality assurance in respect of data collection, generation and analysis throughout the section addressing the research plan. Using an applied approach is much more powerful than a 'catch all' paragraph at the end stating you will maintain an audit trail, document decision making etcetera. Consider the possibility of an expert panel to advise the research team and as a method of checking and balancing each phase of the study.

Checklist for Writing the Research Plan (Methods and Techniques) Section

Ensure that your research plan section:

- Includes an introductory paragraph that summarizes your overall plan and sets the stage for the more detailed explanation to come
- Expands on the aim of the proposal by identifying specific objectives/sub-questions
- Lays out your research plan in a temporal order – consider using phases or stages to describe the proposed study
- Links each phase of the study to one of the objectives/sub-questions
- States explicitly what you are not going to do if you anticipate the reviewers may consider the scope of the study too extensive for either the funding or timeline
- Uses devices such as section headings and visual displays to break up the text
- Identifies how you are going to access your sample – provide organizational letters of support if appropriate
- Emphasizes the volume of data to be generated with a small number of participants
- Identifies methods to assure the quality of your study

Outcomes and Significance

The projected outcomes of your study need to be linked to the immediate aim of the study and should answer the question – ‘How will you know if you have succeeded?’ When discussing the projected outcomes, formulate them in terms of products and discuss the likely impact of these products on the field. In our preparation to write this chapter we have noted differences between countries in relation to a specific section in the research proposal where the overall significance of the proposed qualitative study is argued. It may be that there is not a specific requirement to summarize the significance of the study at the end of the proposal, however, similar to previous sections we would advise that you weave this message into the description of the projected outcomes and their likely impact (see [Chapter 14](#)).

Checklist for Writing the Outcomes and Significance Section

When writing the outcomes and significance section:

- Prepare the section addressing the significance of your research proposal as an executive summary
- Refer to international, national and institutional priorities when arguing the significance of your proposal
- Identify methods of disseminating the products of your research to target a range of audiences including policymakers and consumers

Budget and Timeline

Developing a carefully costed and logically planned-out budget and timeline for your qualitative research proposal is a very important step in both planning for the success of your eventual study, and convincing the reviewers of your ability to manage a feasible project. Part of costing a study is justifying the need for expenditure and this component of a proposal needs to be both detailed and accurate. Initially you need to acquaint yourself with your institution's requirements for costing a research proposal. There are a number of factors for you to account for including salary on-costs (supplementary allowances), institutional overheads and the processes for requesting waivers for these costs if appropriate, and the daily rate for compensating members of the research team who might be required to travel for fieldwork. As an example, [Table 12.1](#) outlines the budget prepared for the action research study conducted in the Torres Strait Islands. This study was funded by a small internal university grant so it was not necessary to account for an institutional overhead charge, however salaries were calculated to include on-costs and overheads in the hourly rate. You will also note that there is no salary backfill for the majority of the research team, as this was not a requirement of this particular granting scheme, however it would be normal to calculate the cost of a percentage of the chief investigator's time and include this figure as an in-kind contribution. In addition, you would also include an amount for administrative costs such as telephone, power and printing in an outside grant application but as a rule this cost does not apply to internal grants or graduate research proposals unless specific to participant

recruitment or data collection.

Table 12.1 Example Budget

BUDGET	Justification	Cost
Staffing		
Indigenous Student Support Officer (HEWL 6/Step 10) (Staff Relief) × 14 days \$40.84/hr – casual including on-costs and overheads \$296.09/ day (7.25hr day)	The ISSO will travel to Thursday Island seven times over the duration of the study for two days at a time. In SP1, the ISSO will lead the facilitation of the mentoring circle activities, while at the same time capacity building the local AO to be able to continue on with this role in SP2 and into the future. Additional time spent by the ISSO on the study will be incorporated into their duties in the Indigenous Health Unit.	\$4,145.26
Thursday Island Campus Administrative Officer (HEWL 4/ Step 10) (Additional Employment) × 24 days = 1 day/ week SP1 and SP2 \$32.69/hr – casual including on-costs and overheads \$237.00/day (7.25hr day)	The local AO employed at the Torres Strait Islands Campus will work with the ISSO in SP1 to facilitate the mentoring circles. As well, this person will act as a liaison between the students, local stakeholders and the broader research team based at the Townsville and Cairns campuses. In SP2 the AO will lead the mentoring circle meetings with reduced onsite support from the ISSO who will visit twice during this time period and provide phone support at other times.	\$5,688.00
Research Assistants (ACA-B/ Step 10) × 21 days \$51.08/hr – casual including on-costs and overheads \$370.33/ day (7.25hr day)	A casual RA will be employed periodically throughout the study to complete the ethics application, conduct a literature review; assist the ISSO and the AO with logging data generated and maintaining an audit trail for the study. In addition, a casual RA will be employed in the Torres Strait Islands to conduct participant interviews.	\$7,776.93
Travel		
Return Airfare Townsville – Horn Island × 7 (SP1: Wks 3, 5,7,9 & 11) (SP2: Wks 1 & 5) @\$776 (return flight) 7 days notice	ISSO travel from Townsville to Horn Island, Torres Strait Islands on seven occasions.	\$5,432.00
Ferry Horn Island to Thursday Island to Horn Island × 7 @\$30 return		\$210.00
JCU Policy Meals (\$105/day) × 14 days	Meals allowance for the ISSO during trips to the Torres Strait Islands.	\$1470.00
Accommodation @ \$250/ night	Seven nights accommodation for the ISSO in the Torres Strait Islands.	\$1750.00
Catering		

Lunch Mentoring Circles 10 occasions × \$11 head × 15 people	Light lunch provided for the mentoring circle participants and facilitators.	\$1,650.00
Student and Family BBQs 2 occasions × \$15 head × 30 people	Potential strategy to develop links with supportive people outside of the immediate university community.	\$900.00
Administrative Costs		
Interview Transcriptions × 20 @ \$100	Recording of participant interviews and professional transcription of these digital recordings for the purpose of analysis.	\$2,000.00
Total Budget		\$31,022.19

There are a number of ways of formatting a timeline for inclusion in your qualitative research proposal. As you can see from [Table 12.2](#), we used a very straightforward approach and followed the steps of the research process to indicate how our action research study was planned for implementation.

Another technique for presenting a timeline is to develop one that is output based. This approach is particularly useful for contract research or consultancies where funders expect particular outputs at milestones in the study. Using an output based timeline is also very useful for post graduate research candidates when planning their qualitative research proposal as creating a self-imposed deadline for drafts of components of your thesis can keep you on track and writing throughout. When you are creating a pictorial representation of your timeline try not to make it too complicated, do use colours that are meaningful and consider using either a word processing or spreadsheet template to provide a professional finish. There are a number of very useful resources on the World Wide Web that can assist you in using spreadsheets, in particular, to create a Gantt chart that maps tasks/outputs and time.

Table 12.2 Example Timeline

Timeline												
	Jan 2012	Feb 2012	March 2012	April 2012	May 2012	June 2012	July 2012	Aug 2012	Sept 2012	Oct 2012	Nov 2012	Dec 2012
Planning Phase	■											
Literature Review	■	■	■	■								
Ethics App	■											
Data Collection		■	■	■	■			■	■	■	■	
Data Analysis					■	■	■				■	■
Final Report												■

Checklist for Writing the Budget and Timeline Section

When writing your budget and timeline section:

- Familiarize yourself with your institution's requirements prior to preparing your budget
- Seek assistance from your institution's research office in the development of your budget
- Ensure your budget is accurately costed and well justified
- Identify in-kind contributions and cost these appropriately
- Consider framing your timeline against the predicted outcomes from the study

Proposals that form Part of an Application for Further Graduate Research Study

Qualitative research proposals that form part of an application for enrolment into a graduate research program are much shorter in length than those produced as applications for a competitive grant scheme. A prospective candidate needs to complete the outline of their research proposal including identifying a title, the substantive area of enquiry, the research question, an overview of relevant literature, the proposed methodology and methods, a timeline and budget in order to be considered for admission to the degree program. All of this

information needs to be provided in 600 to 1500 words, depending on the institution concerned. Writing a qualitative research proposal for admission to a graduate research program can therefore be a very difficult task, and one that if possible should be undertaken in consultation with a prospective adviser or supervisor.

We would suggest that your first task when thinking about enrolling in a graduate research program of study is to identify your area of interest, and then look around various universities to see who is researching in this area and most importantly, who is publishing in this area. Choose your advisers based on their knowledge of both your substantive area of inquiry and/or their methodological expertise. Getting your advisory team right is fundamental to having a positive experience as a graduate research candidate. Of course your draft research proposal may be very influential in attracting the attention of potential advisers and as such, it is important that you invest time in each aspect of the document prior to circulation to make sure that it demonstrates your potential. The qualitative research proposal you submit in the process of applying for admission to a graduate research program is unlikely to be the same proposal you present for other purposes later in your candidature. Nevertheless, craft this document as carefully as you can and seek feedback from critical friends whenever possible.

Ethics Proposals

Proposals produced to satisfy the requirements of an ethics committee or Institutional Review Board (IRB) serve a very specific purpose. These committees have a very important function – to protect research participants from potential risk that may result from their involvement in research. Ethics committees may also often concern themselves with the qualifications and experience of the researcher, as the integrity of the study reflects on the institution and has implications for the wellbeing of the participants. Any research study involving human participants, including material featuring or drawn from human participants, requires clearance from an ethics committee. In Box 12.7, Simon Burgess provides a window into the reasons why ethical issues require consideration when designing a research study.

Window into the Qualitative Research Proposal

As you may have gathered, ethical considerations are taken very seriously by today's universities and research institutes. If you propose to conduct research involving human participants or animal experimentation, for example, you will need to complete a detailed application process that explains the purpose and methodology of your investigation. This will be closely scrutinized by an ethics committee and you will have no choice but to accept the requirements that the committee imposes. Some researchers initially find this process a little frustrating. Rather than indulge in deep self-pity, however, it may be worth reflecting upon some of the activities undertaken by the infamous Nazi doctor, Joseph Mengele.

The Tuskegee syphilis experiments could also be borne in mind. Ethics committees were established to help ensure that such 'research' is never again permitted.

Over time, most researchers actually come to find that the process of gaining ethics approval can be used to their advantage. The application process generally serves as a fairly efficient way of prompting us to think through various ethical and methodological details that we were always going to have to deal with at some stage. When a research proposal involves human participants, some of the common ethical issues to be addressed concern matters of participant risk, vulnerability, and consent; confidentiality; data security; data disposal; conflicts of interest; and differences in power between the researchers and the research participants. Measures that help to prevent sampling errors can also be important. In many cases such measures are required simply to correct an innocent kind of methodological flaw. In some other cases, however, the ethics committee will recognize that a proposed sampling method appears to be motivated by a preference for a certain kind of result, and in such cases it can be reflective of a subtle kind of ethical failing.

Some scholars in the humanities (e.g., in history, literature and philosophy) rely largely upon comparative analysis and other non-experimental methods, and rarely need to engage with human research participants in any direct way. As a result, some of them never need to formally gain ethics approval for the work they undertake. Yet in all academic fields there is an obligation to demonstrate a scholarly acquaintance with the relevant existing literature. And we all need to understand and accurately represent the views of our opponents, regardless of how profoundly mistaken we may believe them to be. It is perhaps also worth remembering that although vanity and pride are merely human, such vices can easily prompt us to write in defence of our own pet theories, even after the critics have conclusively refuted them. Researchers are seldom celebrities. Our first duty is to advance the world of scholarship through honest, informed and productive debate, it is not merely to gain publication, attract attention or perpetuate discussion.

Each institution will have its own guidelines and forms that require completion in order to secure ethical approval to conduct the research. The processes involved in securing ethics clearance will vary from institution to institution and will also increase in complexity when dealing with particularly vulnerable participant groups such as children and the elderly. You should therefore ensure that adequate time is included for obtaining ethics clearance when planning your qualitative research study. Even if you are preparing a research proposal for purposes other than securing ethics clearance, you will need to include reference to potential ethical issues. Reviewers of applications for initial enrolment in a research program of study, or for funding, will expect to see that you have considered such issues as they potentially impact on the viability of your project.

Competitive Grant Proposals

There are few explicit guidelines for qualitative researchers seeking to apply for competitive grants. A search of the government research council sites for Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Europe failed to return any specific instructions for qualitative research proposals. There is however an archived discussion paper published by the National Institutes of Health in the United States (2001), which provides guidance that is still relevant today for those wishing to strengthen competitive grant proposals that use qualitative methodologies. A key recommendation from this report is the need for a focused background section organized in relation to the area that you wish to investigate as opposed to covering too broad a range of information, some of which may be irrelevant to your argument. Another important point when writing qualitative research proposals for competitive grants is to demonstrate the research team's track record of previous research and publication in the area, both individually and collectively. Researchers who can demonstrate shared outputs, including peer-reviewed publications and measures of research impact from previous studies will have an advantage over those who cannot. Chief investigators' findings from previously published preliminary studies that provide evidence for further research will also immeasurably strengthen a larger competitive grant application by demonstrating the feasibility of research in the area using qualitative methodologies. Be consistent in how you define and use various concepts and integrate the research question and immediate aim throughout the research plan. As discussed previously, consideration of participant burden and strategies to mitigate such a burden need to be built into the research plan, as do other methods of ensuring the ethical integrity of the study (National Institutes of Health, 2001).

Evaluating a Qualitative Research Proposal

Institutions that review research proposals for various purposes often make available de-identified examples of successful submissions to guide you in the development of your own proposal. Obtain a copy of a sample submission that has relevance to your own purposes. Using the checklists provided in this chapter, and taking into account the specific requirements applicable to proposals produced for different purposes discussed previously, review the proposal to identify to what extent the author(s) of that document successfully address the various elements of each section of their proposal. What strengths and weaknesses have you noted that may influence the preparation of your own proposal?

Defending your Qualitative Research Proposal

There are two types of defense that an investigator is called upon to provide in relation to their qualitative

research proposal: a written rejoinder or an oral defense. Written rejoinders are often required in the process of applying for a competitive grant. Once reviewers have provided initial feedback on applications, researchers are invited to respond to their comments in defense of their proposal, and to clarify particular points. Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) provide a strategic treatise on their experience of defending a qualitative research proposal which describes how they identified commonalities and differences in the reviewers' responses and then worked with these to their advantage. They began by emphasizing the positives in the reviewers' commentaries, and then followed by playing off reviewers against each other where there were inconsistencies in their responses. After summarizing the overall themes in the reviewers' comments, the authors then addressed individual's issues – sometimes providing a counter-argument, and sometimes responding with an amendment to the proposal. If amendments were made to the original research proposal, the page number was provided to make this easier for the reviewers to track.

In addition to written rejoinders, it is becoming more common for grant review panels to request an oral presentation from short-listed applicants prior to them making a final decision about the allocation of funds. The oral defense of a qualitative research proposal therefore can be part of the process of applying for a competitive grant, but more commonly novice researchers will be required to provide an oral defense of their research proposal in order to meet the requirements of confirming or progressing their graduate research candidature. There is an excellent chapter on the oral presentation of a research proposal (Locke et al., 2007) that we would recommend graduate research candidates in particular read prior to preparing for this event. However in summary, there are a number of points to consider in both the preparation and implementation of an oral defense of a qualitative research proposal.

Checklist for the Oral Defense of a Qualitative Research Proposal

When presenting an oral defense of your qualitative research proposal:

- Realize that the time allocation for an oral defense is much shorter than would be required for a reader to appraise your written research proposal
- Balance the content of your presentation so that the audience are able to clearly discern the research question, immediate aim, background and research plan
- Be discerning with regard to how much of the background you present – don't overload your audience with endless references to the literature
- Ensure the audience knows what your research plan entails – focus on the methods of data collection or generation and analysis
- Identify the expected outcomes from the study, link these to the immediate aim and argue for the significance of these
- Don't read a script if you can avoid it – practice your delivery with your peers in advance

- If you are using presentation software, ensure your audience has a copy of the slides in handout format – this is particularly important if some attendees have English as their second language
- When fielding questions, make sure you understand what is being asked – use rephrasing techniques if need be to clarify the point being made

Conclusion

The novice researcher will often find the need to produce a written proposal of the research a daunting task. It can nonetheless be a particularly satisfying experience as they see the conceptualization of their study unfold in a concrete form. The qualitative research proposal provides the opportunity for the researcher to articulate the purpose and processes of their study and enables identification of potential gaps in planning and thinking that can be overcome in the early stages of its development. Regardless of the purpose for which you produce this outline of your proposed study, you should be aware that in preparing your research proposal, you provide the reader with an important first – and often only – impression of your research study and its potential impact. In the following chapter, we explore how the quality of your proposal can be carried through into implementation and ultimately the outcomes of your study.

Key Points

- The qualitative research proposal provides an opportunity to convert aspirational thinking about a study into a realistic plan of action
- Generally, the research proposal requires inclusion of front material, background, the research plan, outcomes and significance of the study and a budget and timeline
- Each section of the proposal should provide a comprehensive overview, and checklists provided throughout this chapter aid in ensuring that all salient aspects are addressed
- Proposals produced for specific purposes, such as to secure admission to a graduate research program, ethics approval to conduct the study or funding for a competitive grant, will need to be tailored to address specific requirements of the reviewing body
- A copy of the application guidelines for the relevant institution should be kept to hand when preparing a qualitative research proposal to ensure that all

requirements are addressed

- Researchers producing a qualitative research proposal may be required to defend the proposal either via a written response or oral presentation
- Knowledge of specific requirements of approving bodies and an approach of strategic disarmament contribute to likely successful outcomes for qualitative research proposals submitted for review

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Reflect on the discussion of the generic attributes of a quality qualitative research proposal. Which elements do you think carry the most weight? How might this vary depending on the purpose and perspective of the reviewer?

Refer back to the guidelines obtained for the purpose of Activity 12.1. Based on your knowledge of the different methodologies discussed in Section 2 of this text, consider how the different philosophical positions of different researchers might find greater ease or difficulty in addressing the various sections of the application. Do the guidelines favour a particular methodological approach?

Suggested Further Reading

Locke L., Spirduso W., and Silverman S. (2013) *Proposals that Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

‘Covering all aspects of the proposal process, from the most basic questions about form and style to the task of seeking funding, *Proposals That Work* offers clear advice backed up with excellent examples. In the fifth edition, the authors have included a discussion of the effects of new technologies and the internet on the proposal process, with URLs listed where appropriate. In addition, there are new sections covering alternative forms of proposals and dissertations and the role of academic rigor in research. As always, the authors have included a number of specimen proposals, two that are completely new to this edition, to help shed light on the important issues surrounding the writing of proposals. Clear, straightforward and reader friendly, *Proposals That Work* is a must-own for anyone considering writing a proposal for a thesis, a dissertation, or a grant’ (SAGE Publications, 2013b).

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