Writing a Research Proposal

David Silverman, Chapter 9

According to Janice Morse (1994), qualitative research is difficult to sell to funding agencies. This is because:

- Qualitative research is unstructured
- The results of qualitative research are unpredictable
- The outcome I uncertain

How, then, can one convince funders to support a piece of qualitative research? Or a potential university supervisor to support your research proposal? To answer these questions satisfactorily means shifting away from your own concerns and thinking about the questions that the readers of your research proposal will be asking.

There are three questions that research proposal **must** answer:

1. Why should anyone be interested in my research?
2. Is the research design credible, achievable and carefully explained?
3. Is the researched capable of doing the research?

Here comes another question: how can you properly (and successfully) answer these questions? And here comes the answers:

- Be practical
- Be persuasive
- Make broader links
- Aim for crystal clarity
- Plan before you write

Be practical

One way to persuade non-specialists is to show the specific ways that your research can address a social problem or solve an organizational trouble. Such a concern with practical problems cannot be shrugged off even if you are proposing to do a purely academic piece pf research with no expectation that it will be read outside the university. Academic funding bodies are increasingly demanding practical pay-offs as well as analytic insights. However, if what you are proposing is 'basic research', i.e. a study deriving from debates and concepts internal to social science, then all is not lost. You can strengthen the persuasiveness of your case by showing no-specialists why they ought to take your ideas seriously. One way to do that is to write a persuasive proposal as explained below.

Be persuasive

It is very easy to get wrapped up in the subject and think that, because we are convinced of the particular value of our research, others will be too. In truth, the way in which the proposal is presented can enable the reader to appreciate what you are planning to do.

Kelly, is reminding us that, in framing a research proposal, one must think first of the audience who is going to read it (and judge it). This means that it should set out to convince such readers that this is something worth supporting:

The first principle of grantsmanship is to recognize that a good proposal is an argument for the researcher's project. The proposal must make a case to the granting agency that the research question is interesting and that the study is important.

Morse is suggesting that you try to "sell" your proposal. This means that you must recognize that the craft of selling (your proposal, yourself) is not incongruent with working in a university.

Thus, this persuasiveness must be balanced with a realistic understanding about what you can achieve within a few years as a single researcher. Like any good salesperson, do not oversell your goods!

Make broader links

Realism need not mean that you must present your research as entirely a narrow, anaem8ic exercise. Even if you cannot cover every aspect of the field yourself, you should demonstrate your understanding of the broader implications of your proposal research.

Author suggests one way how to do it by hinting at a wider context:
"Place the problem in context to show, for instance that, 'when we understand this, we will be able to work on that' ".

Of course, you will be studying very few cases or maybe only a single case. Show how relatively small database will enable you to conduct an in-depth analysis and argue that your case can indicate far larger phenomena.

Aim for crystal clarity

The proposal should use language and terminology that is understandable to an intelligent lay person as well as to a subject expert.

Bear in mind that your proposal is likely to be read, in the first instance, by a faculty member who is not a specialist in your area of the discipline. So never be content with a proposal which can look like a stream of theories or concepts. Always aim for clear language that describes your research in a way that non-specialists can comprehend.

Morse suggests, that this means that you should resist the temptation to lapse into pure jargon, because some of the reviewers will be from other disciplines, <u>the proposal writer should assume nothing and explain everything.</u>

By explaining everything, you will have demonstrated the ability to think (and write) clearly. Not only is this the way to write a research proposal, it is also the best indicator that your research itself will be organized in a clear and logical way.

For instance, your objectives 'should be clear and it should be easy to decide whether they have been achieved or not'. The ways to achieve this are:

- Be concise (there is no reason why a proposal for a piece of student research should be more that 500 words).
- Use short, simple sentences
- Use headings

Example:

Table 1	**A Structure For a Qualitative Research Proposal**

1. Title
2. Abstract
3. Background or introduction: e.g. contemporary debates in social policy and social science
4. Statement of purpose or aims: the researches question
5. Review of the relevant literature: showing the importance of the project in the context of the classic or definitive pieces of research in this area
6. Methods: description of cases chosen, procedures for data collection and data analysis in criteria of validity and reliability
7. Ethical issues
8. Dissemination and policy relevance: explain how you will communicate your findings
9. Timetable: indicating the length of time to be devoted to each stage of the research
10. References: use a standard system like the Harvard system.

Harvard system: in the body of your text (not in footnotes), give surname of author, followed by date and page reference. In your references, give author (with initials), date, title, place of publication, publisher and page references (of articles and chapters).

Plan before you write

The writer must show that the design is the result of series of decisions that she/he made because of knowledge gained from the literature.

Not only must the proposal demonstrate that it is based on an intelligent understanding of the existing literature, it must show that you have thought about the time you will need to conduct each stage of the research from obtaining access to writing up your data analysis.

As Sara Arber notes, your research proposal will partly be judged how you state you are going to use yor time:

'you need to adopt a systematic and logical approach to research, the key to which is that planning and management of your time'.

For that you can ask help to your teacher, or supervisor, or at last research student. With their help , make q list of all the options available in relation to your research problem, method and cases to be studied. Now you are in a better position to write a reasoned research proposal that explains the actual choices you have made.

Again

When preparing the research proposal try to find answers to three questions:

1. Why should anyone be interested in my research?
2. Is the research design credible, achievable and carefully explained?
3. Is the researched capable of doing the research?

You can answer these questions better by following five principles:

- Be practical
- Be persuasive
- Make broader links
- Aim for crystal clarity
- Plan before you write

I hope you found it interesting and helpful as me. See you on Wednesday.

Keti Chubinishvili