Exercise 8.1

Imagine that you have the resources to study *four* cases of the phenomenon in which you are interested. Following my discussion of Stake (1994; see Table 8.1), draw up a typology to indicate the universe of cases potentially available. This typology should include between six and twelve possible cases.

Now explain why you propose to select your four cases in terms of the logic of purposive sampling.

Exercise 8.2

Using conversation analysis, Harvey Sacks has argued: 'tap into whomsoever, wheresoever and we get much the same things' (1984: 22).

Consider how far your own theoretical model might allow you to use Sacks's argument to justify working with a very small dataset.

9

Writing a Research Proposal

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 is uncertain (1994: 227).

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 reader(s) of your research proposal will be asking. Many of these questions are set out in Table 9.1.

TABLE 9.1 **Questions a 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 researcher capable of doing the research?

Source: adapted from Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 23

How can you properly (and successfully) answer these questions?

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

Each of these suggestions are explained below.

BE PRACTICAL

One way to persuade non-specialists, Morse suggests, is to show the specific ways that your research can address a social problem or solve an organizational trouble (e.g. staff turnover).

Such a concern with practical problems cannot be shrugged off even if you are proposing to do a purely academic piece of 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. For instance, Kelly (1998: 112) quotes a policy statement by the body that funds social science PhDs in the UK:

> Any lingering public perception of social science as a source of irrelevant, introverted and incoherent output is set for radical alteration . . . In future, research which makes a difference to the health and wealth of the population, rather than merely supports 'ivory tower' academic excellence, will be the ESRC's priority. (Student Information: Economic and Social Research Council, 1996)

The issue of *audiences* for your research is discussed further in Chapter 24. 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 non-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 easy to get very wrapped up in the subject and think that, because we are convinced of the particular value of our research, others will be too. The way in which the proposal is presented can enable the reader to appreciate what you are planning to do. (Kelly, 1998: 121)

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 . . . Thus the proposal must be written persuasively. (Morse: 1994: 226)

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. 'Ivory towers' were never so isolated as the term suggests!

However, 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, anaemic exercise. Even if you cannot cover every aspect of the field

yourself, you should demonstrate your understanding of the broader implications of your proposed research.

One way to do that is to hint 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'. (Morse, 1994: 227)

Of course, you will be studying very few cases or maybe only a single case. Be positive about the gains as well as the losses of this! Show how a relatively small database will enable you to conduct an in-depth analysis (see Chapters 8 and 13). And argue that your case can indicate far larger phenomena:

> The writer must show how, in examining a specific setting or group of individuals, she is studying a case of a larger phenomenon. (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 12)

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. (Cryer, 1996: 15)

Although it is tempting to seek to display your newly acquired technical jargon, 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 (perhaps undigested) theories or concepts. Always aim for clear language that describes your research in a way that non-specialists can comprehend.

As Morse suggests, this means that you should resist the temptation to lapse into pure jargon: 'because some of the reviewers will be from other disciplines, the proposal writer should assume nothing and explain everything' (Morse, 1994: 227).

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:

> A sloppily prepared proposal will, at best, send a message to the agency that if it funds the proposal, the research may also be sloppy. (1994: 226–7)

For instance, your objectives 'should be clear and it should be easy to decide whether they have been achieved or not' (Kelly, 1998: 117). The ways to achieve this are:

- Be concise (there is no reason why a proposal for a piece of student research should be more than 500 words).
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Use headings as in Table 9.2.

TABLE 9.2 **A Structure for a Qualitative Research Proposal**

1 Title
2 Abstract (further advice on titles and abstracts is found in Chapter 17)
3 Background or introduction: e.g. contemporary debates in social policy and social science
4 Statement of purpose or aims: the research question ('The intellectual problem(s) I may help solve through this research is (are) . . .')
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 case(s) chosen, procedures for data collection and data analysis in terms of (a) their appropriateness to your theoretical orientation and (b) how they satisfy criteria of validity and reliability (see Chapters 7 and 13)
7 Ethical Issues (see Chapter 15)
8 Dissemination and policy relevance: explain how you will communicate your findings (see Chapters 16 and 24)
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.[1]

[1] Harvard system: in the main 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 (for articles or chapters).
Source: adapted from Morse, 1994: 228; Kelly, 1998: 115–21; Rudestam and Newton, 1992: 18

PLAN BEFORE YOU WRITE

> The writer must show that the design is the result of a series of decisions that she made because of knowledge gained from the . . . literature. (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 13)

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. So, as Sara Arber notes, your research proposal will partly be judged by how you state you are going to use your time:

> You need to adopt a systematic and logical approach to research, the key to which is the planning and management of your time. (1993: 33)

Kelly (1998: 120–1, adapted here) offers an example from an interview study planned to last 32 weeks:

Week 2 Submit proposal to University Ethical Committee.
Week 6 Draw up sample.
Week 8 Begin interviews.
Week 15 End interviews.
Week 23 Complete data analysis.

Week 26 First draft sent out for comments.
Week 32 Submission of final report.

We are not born with a natural ability to prepare research timetables! To help you plan such a timetable, seek the assistance of a trusted teacher in your department. Failing that, seek out an existing research student. With their help, make a list of all the options available in relation to your research problem, method and case(s) to be studied. Now you are in a better position to write a reasoned research proposal that explains the actual choices you have made.

Table 9.2 provides a model structure for such a proposal. When you have read it, you should attempt Exercise 9.1.

SUMMARY

When preparing a 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 researcher 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.

Further reading

A research proposal is crafted according to the level of your research. Beginning researchers should turn to: Moira Kelly, 'Writing a research proposal', in C. Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture* (Sage, 1998), pp. 111–22.

At PhD level, a useful reference is: Pat Cryer, *The Research Student's Guide to Success* (Open University Press, 1996), Chapter 2.

Beyond the PhD, you should consult: Janice Morse 'Designing funded qualitative research', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1994), pp. 220–35.