What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a relatively brief document that contains an outline plan for a research project. It is produced at the beginning of the research process in advance of any data collection. A well-constructed research proposal offers a blueprint for the research that shows what the parts look like and how they will fit together. It describes what will be done, explains how it will be done, and justifies why the research should be undertaken.

A research proposal is an important part of the research process because the success of any project depends on forward planning and organization. A good
proposal is based on careful thought about how the project will be conducted and involves the kind of advance planning that is required if a project is to run smoothly. There is a useful analogy here with house building. No-one would seriously consider starting work on a house without first having drawn up plans for the building. Without such plans it would be virtually impossible to work out exactly what materials will be required, when they are to be delivered, and how they will fit together. The same applies with a research project. Before embarking on a research project, the researcher needs to prepare the groundwork and give careful thought to the practical issues involved at the implementation stage of the research.

**Seven basic questions**

There is logic to research proposals, and it is really very simple. It can be expressed as a sequence of *seven basic questions* that it is reasonable to ask about any proposed research (see Figure 1.1). These questions reflect a general

**FIGURE 1.1 The logic of research proposals**
way of thinking about research and are the ones that most readers will have in their minds when they consider whether a proposal is worthwhile and whether it is feasible. Of course, the sophistication of the answers provided to these questions will vary according to the circumstances; much will depend on the purpose of the proposal and the level of expertise expected of the researcher. Successful proposals, however, have this in common: they manage to address the seven questions in a way that satisfies the requirements of their particular audience.

**Question 1: What is it all about?**

This is a fundamental question that readers will ask about any research proposal. First and foremost, they will want to know what the topic is and they will be looking for precise information about the subject matter of the research. And they are also entitled to ask what the research is trying to accomplish. What is the purpose of the research and what is it trying to achieve? Without this information the readers of the research proposal cannot evaluate the proposal. They cannot judge whether the methodology is appropriate or whether there will be sufficient time and resources to complete the project. And they will get frustrated and annoyed if they do not get this information supplied clearly, precisely, and succinctly in the proposal.

**Question 2: What do we already know about the subject?**

Having addressed the question of what the research is all about, the next logical thing that readers of a proposal will ask is: What do we already know about the subject? What has previous research revealed and where have we got to in terms of our knowledge about the topic? This is a relevant and important question to pose in this context. Primarily, this is because a review of the existing information can prevent us from undertaking research that is not necessary. There is no point in ‘reinventing the wheel’. If the information already exists, there is no point in repeating the research (unless we have the specific aim of checking the validity of the earlier findings).

**Question 3: What does the research need to find out?**

Once readers are clear about the aims of the research and what is already known about the topic, the next step logically is for them to ask what new information is needed. A review of the existing information not only tells us what we already know, it tells us what we don’t know and what it would be useful to find out. This allows the proposed research to be targeted where it will be most useful. It helps to pinpoint the kind of things that need to be studied to shed some light on the topic – the factors (variables, indicators, relationships, etc.) that it will prove useful to focus upon if the research is to produce findings that are relevant in terms of saying anything new or useful
about the topic of research. Readers will be looking for these things to be spelled out clearly and precisely, usually in the form of ‘research questions’.

**Question 4: How will we get the necessary information?**

Having established precisely what the research needs to find out, the next question is fairly obvious: How will the necessary information be obtained? A description of the research methods is called for in order to answer this question. Proposals always include an account of how the researcher intends to collect the data, how much data will be collected, and what techniques will be used to analyse the data. Armed with such information readers can draw their own conclusions about whether the methods are suitable or not for the task at hand, and whether or not the proposed methods are likely to work in practice. It is these kind of judgements, of course, that are crucial when it comes to deciding whether a proposal appears to be worthwhile and feasible, and ultimately whether it is successful or not.

**Question 5: What will it cost and how long will it take?**

Research takes time and costs money, and this is something that readers of research proposals will recognize. It will be of concern to them in terms of the feasibility of the proposed project. They will want to know what resources are necessary for the successful completion of the research, and they will be looking for evidence within the proposal that the researcher has planned the research in accord with the amount of time that is available and the amount of money at his or her disposal for the completion of the project.

**Question 6: Is the research socially acceptable?**

Readers will want to feel assured that the proposed research will be conducted in a manner that meets socially accepted standards governing research activity. They will realize that if there are any doubts on this point it is almost certain that the research project will not be allowed to proceed. Mindful of this, they will look for guarantees that the research will be conducted in a manner that abides by the principles of research ethics and accords with the law of the land.

**Question 7: What are the benefits?**

Most readers will expect a piece of research to be justified on the basis that it will produce some specific, identifiable benefits. Indeed, it is rarely the case that research can be justified ‘for its own sake’. For this reason, it is important for research proposals to address questions about the outcomes of the research and the end-products that it is hoped will arise from the research. They need to contain a clear account of the ‘deliverables’ from the project and an explanation of who, or what, might benefit as a direct result of the project.
The structure of research proposals

As Table 1.1 indicates, these seven questions provide a rationale for the way that research proposals are organized. They provide a basis for providing the readership with relevant information – allowing the vital material to be presented in an efficient manner, in a format that is familiar and a sequence that allows readers to understand things quickly, easily, and with the minimum of effort.

The headings listed in Table 1.1 can be used as the basis for writing a research proposal. They will be recognizable to readers from a wide range of research backgrounds and they provide a sound, generic framework for organizing all the relevant material.

However, we need to be a little cautious about treating them like a ‘one-size-fits-all’ form that can be pulled off the shelf and used in connection with any research proposal in any context. One reason for this is that the kind of detail that is required in a proposal can vary according to the nature of the subject area of the research. It is easy to understand that proposals might look slightly different if they are written to suit the nature of research in particular areas, especially when those areas are as diverse as business, engineering, medicine, sociology, education, history, languages, and so on.

Another reason is that various agencies and organizations that receive research proposals often produce bespoke forms with their own headings to suit their own purposes. They are at liberty to do so and there is no single body with the authority to enforce the use of one single model of a standard research proposal form. This means that when it comes to writing a research proposal, the first thing that a researcher must do is check whether his or her proposal needs to be submitted using a particular form or needs to adhere to specific guidelines provided by the body to which the proposal will be

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**Table 1.1** The structure of research proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical headings/sections</th>
<th>Basic questions</th>
<th>Guidance in this book</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>What is it all about?</td>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>What do we already know?</td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>What do we need to find out?</td>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>How will we get the necessary information?</td>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>How long will it take and what will it cost?</td>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Is the research socially acceptable?</td>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and resources</td>
<td>What will be the benefits?</td>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
submitted. If so, then there is no option but to use the headings and sections as supplied. This is an absolute must. Any attempt to change the stipulated headings and sections is likely to jeopardize the proposal’s prospects of success.

**Top tip**
Always use the prescribed format when one is available.

Although ‘No universally applicable and correct format exists for the research proposal’ (Locke et al. 2000: 7), there is still a *strong family resemblance* underlying the structure and headings to be found across the whole spectrum of disciplines and organizations involved. This, as we have noted, reflects the seven questions that can be asked about any research project. There is a shared logic to the many alternatives and, as Appendix 3 shows, this results in a familiar feel to the headings and sections adopted across a range of approaches and different research traditions.

**The evaluation of research proposals**

Most research projects need to gain approval from a relevant authority before they are allowed to start and the research proposal provides the kind of vital information that enables relevant authorities to evaluate the research and make a decision about whether to approve/support the work and allow it to go ahead.

The analogy with house building is again useful on this point. No reasonable person would start the construction of a house without having sought permission from relevant authorities to embark on the construction. Plans have to be drawn up to show that the house will be structurally sound and that it will meet all the necessary requirements in terms of building regulations. Well, the same logic applies to a research project. In the same way that there are regulations and procedures that are designed to protect the public from rogue builders constructing houses that are likely to collapse or which fail to meet environmental standards, there are standards and procedures that researchers need to take into account to avoid poor research designs that are likely to fail. The blueprint for research contained in research proposals provides the kind of information that allows people to check whether the proposed research will accord with the necessary procedures and regulations and it thus allows those who authorize research to make judgements about the quality of the proposed investigation and the likelihood that it will work and that it will have some beneficial outcomes.
The point to remember, then, is that research proposals are essentially documents that will be evaluated. They are written for a purpose, and that purpose is invariably connected with getting approval for the plan of research that is contained in the proposal. Proposals are written with a view to being evaluated by individuals or committees who have the authority to allow the research to go ahead, or to prevent it from taking place. This applies whether the proposal is written for an undergraduate research project, a master’s degree dissertation or an application for entry to a doctoral research programme. And it also applies when proposals are written as part of a bid for funding or as part of an application for ethics approval. All proposals are scrutinized by experts who use their experience to make judgements about the quality of what is being proposed and the prospects that it can be delivered. Successful research proposals recognize this point. They are produced with a constant eye on the evaluators – who they will be, what they will expect, and what will ignite their enthusiasm.

By their nature, research proposals are documents that are evaluated by their readers.

Who approves research proposals?

Broadly speaking, approval can take four different forms (see Table 1.2). Proposals linked to master’s dissertations and bachelor’s degree projects are generally submitted to tutors who will act as supervisors to the students during

Table 1.2 The evaluation of research proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of the proposal</th>
<th>People who evaluate the proposal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval for research project on a degree programme</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• master’s dissertation</td>
<td>Supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• undergraduate project</td>
<td>Tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications for acceptance onto a research degree programme</td>
<td>Research committees, potential supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• PhD application</td>
<td>Review panels, subject experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding applications</td>
<td>HCR research ethics committees, Institutional review boards (USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• research grant</td>
<td>HCR research ethics committees, Institutional review boards (USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics approval</td>
<td>HCR research ethics committees, Institutional review boards (USA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their relatively short-term research project. These people will be concerned with whether the research is likely to prove worthwhile in terms of knowledge in the subject area, but they will also want to be assured that the proposed research is possible within the resource constraints and the tight time constraints within which dissertations and projects need to be completed.

When a proposal is submitted as part of an application for acceptance onto a PhD programme, the people who evaluate the proposal will be potential PhD supervisors or members of committees established to ensure that entrants on a PhD programme will be embarking on a worthwhile piece of research and that the applicant is academically good enough to take on the task. In this case, the evaluators will place high priority on the potential contribution of the research in terms of advancing theory or solving a significant practical problem.

If the proposal has been produced to gain funding for the research, the funding body will nominate who is to evaluate it. They are likely to be experts who are very knowledgeable about what research already exists in the area. They will have a particular eye on the quality of the research design and the potential value of findings from the proposed research, and will be looking for ‘cutting-edge’ research that can advance knowledge in that particular field of study.

Proposals that are submitted to gain ethical approval are reviewed by committees (or sometimes individuals) with a specific remit to ensure that the research is properly conducted and incorporates appropriate measures to protect the interests of those who will be called upon to participate in the research.

What happens to a research proposal once it is submitted?

Once a research proposal is submitted, the process by which it is evaluated will depend on the purpose of the proposal and on the organization that is involved. Funders, admissions tutors, supervisors, and ethics committees will differ in how formal their systems are and how many stages are involved in the approval process.

In the case of bachelor’s degree projects and master’s degree dissertations, the procedures for approval are not likely to include the formal review process outlined below. In practice, the ‘review’ will probably be undertaken by the project supervisor, without the involvement of administrators or committees in the process.

However, in the case of funding, admissions to university programmes, and ethics approval, the systems are likely to be quite formal and, in such cases, the organizations concerned will normally be quite explicit about their
approval system. It should be relatively easy to find out exactly what will happen to such proposals; details will either be given on the application form itself or will be available on the organization’s website. In general, however, the process is likely to involve the following stages:

**Stage 1: Check and process**

Where formal systems operate to evaluate research proposals, they will generally follow a path that starts with an initial check of the proposal to ensure that it meets the stipulated requirements and that it is eligible for consideration. The application is likely to be checked in the first instance by administrators. Their role is to check that the proposal is complete and that it meets the conditions, the layout, and remit that have been laid down. The administrators will check that the necessary signatures have been included on the forms (or electronic equivalents), that essential information has been supplied, and that the proposal has not exceeded the word limit.

The Economic and Social Research Council in the UK estimates that 10 per cent of bids for funding are rejected immediately because they have not been produced in accord with the guidelines set out.

**Stage 2: Review and evaluate**

The proposal will be sent to relevant experts who will be asked to review and comment upon the quality of the proposal. These ‘referees’ are selected not only on the basis of their subject expertise but also as being able to offer an impartial and unbiased view on the project. Sometimes the person or team submitting the proposal can nominate one or more of the referees to be used, but in most cases the reviewing process will involve referees who are chosen by the organization. As the applicant, you do not normally get to know the identity of the independent experts who evaluate your proposal.

**Stage 3: Selection and decision**

The views of the referees are collected and a decision is then made either by a specific individual or by a committee. This process can take some time, particularly if the decision is to be made by a committee who are scheduled to meet periodically. Details of the frequency of meetings and the dates on which decisions are notified to applicants should be part of the information that accompanies any application process – either in paper format or online at the organization’s website. If in doubt, the administrators can be contacted to supply the dates.
If the *selection* process is competitive, only a few proposals will be successful among the many submitted. This is especially the case for funding applications where the selection process can sometimes involve a number of stages. The early stages involve sifting out projects that are seen to have little chance of success. There might be obvious question marks against aspects of the proposal, which means it needs to be eliminated. A process of short-listing progressively reduces the number of proposals until the final decisions are made.

**Stage 4: Feedback**

The decision, together with *feedback* in the form of referees’ comments, is sent to the applicant. If the proposal is accepted outright, break open a bottle of champagne! However, the referees often request amendments to, or development of, a proposal. And, unfortunately, many proposals are rejected outright. In either of the latter instances, the feedback that accompanies the decision can be painful for the applicant. First reactions might well be that the feedback involves unfair criticism and a misunderstanding of what was said in the proposal. However, before dismissing the feedback, it is wise to pause for a while and then look for the lessons to be learned and the constructive things than can be gleaned from the feedback because there is generally good advice in there somewhere.

**Stage 5: Appeal**

If the research proposal is rejected, there may, or may not, be a process of *appeal* against the decision. This will have been made clear in the documentation about the application. In reality, though, even if there is a process of appeal, it is unlikely to lead to a reversal of the original decision.

**Summary of key points**

Research proposals contain a brief plan for a research project that describes the purpose of the research and how it will be conducted. For the researcher who has produced the proposal, this represents the outcome of a planning exercise in which attention will have been given to fine-tuning the aims of the research and working out how best to conduct the investigation. It involves the kind of planning and forethought that are necessary to enable the project to run smoothly.

Research proposals serve an equally if not more important purpose as well. A brief summary of what will be done and why it will be done provides the basis upon which readers can arrive at judgements about the quality of the research that is being proposed. Crucial among these readers are the individuals
or committees to whom the proposal is submitted who are in a position to approve the project and allow the research to proceed or who can reject the proposal and effectively prevent the work from taking place. Success depends on their verdict.

The process of evaluation sometimes allows resubmission of a proposal if in the first instance it is not approved. At other times, there is no possibility of resubmitting. Either way, the sensible approach is to ensure that the proposal is ‘right first time’ – that it addresses all of the key concerns that evaluators might have.

As we have seen, these key concerns centre around seven basic questions – questions that can be applied to practically any piece of research. These are straightforward questions that the people who evaluate research proposals, whatever their research tradition or academic discipline, are almost certain to ask about any proposed research. Although there is no simple template for the structure of a research proposal that operates in all circumstances, the contents and structure of research proposals generally tend to follow the logic of these seven questions.

**Further reading**

