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Introduction to Research Methods

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MGM 333

Part 1: Starting the research process

CH4: The research proposal

Lecture 5

Chapter
04

The research proposal





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Session Outline

Chapter
04

Session Outline

- ☐ Why write a proposal?
- ☐ Structure of a research proposal
- ☐ Summary.



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Why write a proposal?

Why write a proposal?

- ❑ There are a number of reasons for preparing a research proposal. In the case of funded research it is quite simply that there will be no funding without one.
- ❑
- ❑ All funding bodies have their own framework for a submission of a research proposal; in many cases these frameworks are now in electronic form and very structured, often restricting the writer to a specific number of characters in each section.

Why write a proposal?

- ❑ These proposal frameworks are created to ensure that all the necessary requirements of the funding body are covered in the proposal and to provide uniformity when examining their merits.
- ❑ This is usually a highly competitive arena and proposals will be seen by a number of referees, who will rate each one according to a predefined, criterion-based evaluation

Why write a proposal?

- ❑ However, the role of a research proposal is far more extensive than this; it has a very important function in the research process whether or not funding is an issue.
- ❑ It may be that even though actual funding is not available, you will need to convince your line manager or tutor that this is a viable and worthwhile research project, one that is worthy of your time and effort.

- ❑ Small scale, work-based projects are still costly. Even without direct funding, there is your time to consider, resources that may be needed and possibly the time of potential participants if they are in the same organization.

- ☐ Academic research such as a dissertation will always require some form of proposal.
- ☐ Sometimes this is assessed as part of a taught course of study, other times it is an intrinsic part of a dissertation module.

- ❑ Here we will look at the various elements of a research proposal:
 - what needs to be said
 - why it needs to be said
 - how best to say it.

- ❑ A research proposal should cover what Kumar (1999, 170) describes as the what, how and why of the research:
 - What you are proposing to do
 - How you are proposing to do it
 - and Why you have selected the proposed strategy.

- ❑ But remember there are two major purposes to a research proposal:
 - ✓ To provide others with the information they need,
 - ✓ To provide yourself, the researcher, with a plan that will guide you during your investigation.
- ❑ A well constructed research proposal will provide you with a very useful tool throughout the research investigation



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Structure of a research proposal

- A formal document means that there is a formula which, if followed carefully, ensures that you have covered all of the areas you need to cover in order to present your proposed research.
- Although requirements for a research proposal can often differ slightly according to funding body, academic or professional body regulations, there is an almost universally accepted list of contents' that is expected.

- It is important to pay very close attention to any specific instructions you have for presenting a proposal and use this as a guide to individual sections within that proposal.
- As already discussed, many funding bodies have their own proposal framework ready to receive your input

- Regulations differ from university to university and often within individual departments – be aware of exactly what is required.
- The aim here is to provide as comprehensive a list as possible of the detail that should be included in a proposal.

- It is your responsibility to make sure you conform to the requirements of the target audience, whether reviewers, academic research supervisors or your line manager.

- Remember that research proposals are almost always subject to very stringent word counts; in the case of forms that are completed online you may be limited to a certain number of characters per section. It is up to you to say all you have to say within the required word limit.

- **Bear this in mind when you examine this proposed structure, which includes:**
 - ❖ a clearly defined title and introduction
 - ❖ a statement of aims and objectives, or a hypothesis
 - ❖ a review of the literature
 - ❖ a research design an intended sample
 - ❖ a list of procedures for data processing and analysis
 - ❖ a definition of anticipated research outputs
 - ❖ a statement of anticipated constraints
 - ❖ a discussion of any ethical considerations and how these will be handled
 - ❖ a project timetable



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Structure of a research proposal

- Clearly defined title and introduction

- Make sure you get your title right.
- It will be the first thing that any reviewer or tutor reads and so it is vital that it is an accurate reflection of what you are proposing to do and that it is clear and concise.
- Remember that it may be a working title – things can and often do change as the research progresses – but that is no excuse for not making it clear at this stage.

- **The introduction** to the proposal should include a brief rationale explaining where the idea for the research began and some evidence from the literature that there is a need for this particular investigation.
- This is a brief that sets the scene for the rest of the proposal and gets the message across that this would be a useful and productive research activity.
- It is not necessary here to provide a lot of detail – that will follow in the other sections.

- The introduction highlights the contribution this proposed research will make to the body of knowledge that already exists.
- Remember that there are rarely large leaps in knowledge; knowledge grows incrementally with each new contribution, however small or localized that contribution might be.



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Structure of a research proposal

- Statement of aims and objectives, or a hypothesis

Statement of aims and objectives, or a hypothesis

- ☐ It is vital that you present clear and concise research aims and objectives or state the hypothesis or hypotheses you intend to test.
- ☐ At this stage any statement you make must clearly reflect your understanding of the problem or question and your understanding of the capacity of research to respond to it.
- ☐ The detail of methods and techniques will follow later in the proposal but do not make the mistake of making over-ambitious claims at this stage.



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Structure of a research proposal - Review of the literature

- This is your initial review.
- At this stage in the process nobody would expect you to know all there is to know and be aware of everything that has been published in relation to your intended research.

- **At this stage your review of available literature has two main functions:**
 - ✓ to be aware with current thinking in your subject area
 - ✓ to find out about methods and research processes used by other researchers investigating this topic

- You are providing a broad overview of the topic area, identifying what is already known and what is not known or remains largely neglected in terms of empirical research.
- The ‘newness’ of your proposed research will depend very much on the level and nature of the project.

- An undergraduate research project is unlikely to be attempting anything completely new, whereas an element of 'newness' and contribution to knowledge is a requirement of doctoral research.

- These are the two extremes and there are many variations in between.
- A small-scale, localized study may be seeking to investigate a particular phenomenon only as it relates to the local setting.
- Here novelty and 'newness' are not the issue, what matters is that the researcher has knowledge of current thinking on that particular phenomenon and how theories have been developed.

- This section will follow the same conventions as a more extensive and detailed review outlined in Chapter 2.
- You will begin with a broad overview of the topic and any related topics.
- From there you will take the reader to the central focus of your investigation; depending on your topic, the main themes you should aim to cover in this review, **if they exist in your subject area, are:**

- ❖ major theories in the field, providing an overview of current thinking
- ❖ the historical development of theory and major practical advances
- ❖ major published research findings
- ❖ the main problems or issues that remain
- The initial review for a research proposal needs to be clear, concise and sufficiently detailed to demonstrate your understanding of the field.



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Structure of a research proposal - Research design

- In this section you will be expected to present your plan of action for the research investigation, setting out the major processes and procedures you intend to follow.
- This applies to both quantitative and qualitative research design.

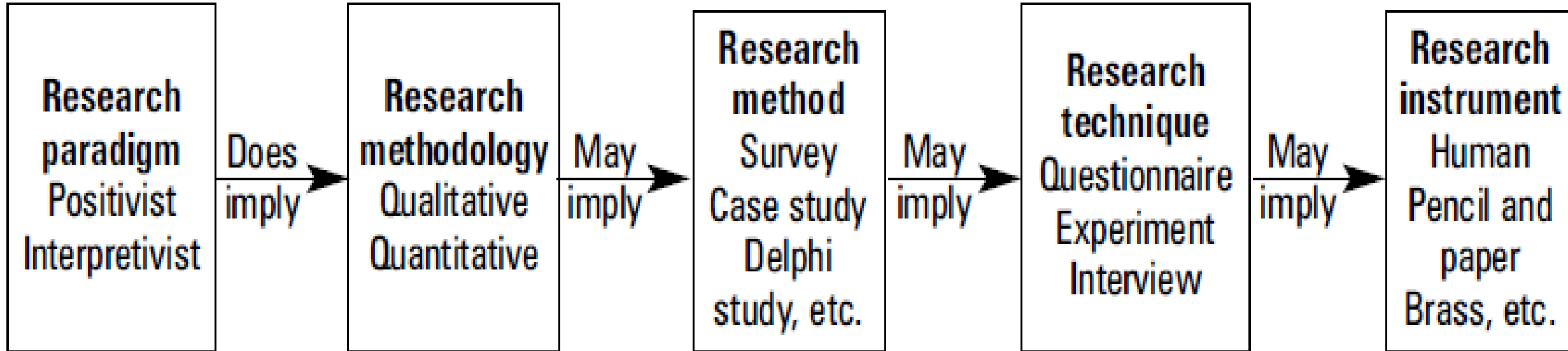
- This does not mean it is impossible to present a plan that provides a framework while still allowing for the emergent nature of the research.
- It is possible to begin with a broad research design and still remain responsive to discoveries made in the field.

- It is important to remember that it is not sufficient to say what you intend to do; you must defend and justify your choices from the appropriate research methods literature

- This section should be referenced, too; not as heavily referenced as your literature review, but it is necessary to demonstrate your understanding of the methodology and that you have read around the subject.

- Every choice, every decision relating to research design should be supported and justified from the published material you have read.
- As you work through this book you will see that it follows the same structure recommended here.

- As you work through this book you will see that it follows the same structure recommended here.
- The structure of this section should follow the research hierarchy as outlined in Figure 0.1 in the Introduction to this book: state your methodology, identify your method/s and explain your data-collection techniques and research instruments.





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Structure of a research proposal - Methodology

- Begin by stating your methodological position; the questions you should be answering are:
 - Is this study qualitative, quantitative or mixed methodology?
 - Why have you made this decision?
 - Why is this the most appropriate decision?
 - What are your research methods?

- Once you have discussed your methodological choices you can then go on to state which research method(s) you will be applying to this investigation.
- The questions you should be answering are:
 - ✓ **What** research method(s) are you applying to the study?
 - ✓ **Why** have you made this choice?
 - ✓ **How** do you intend to structure the method(s) for your investigation?



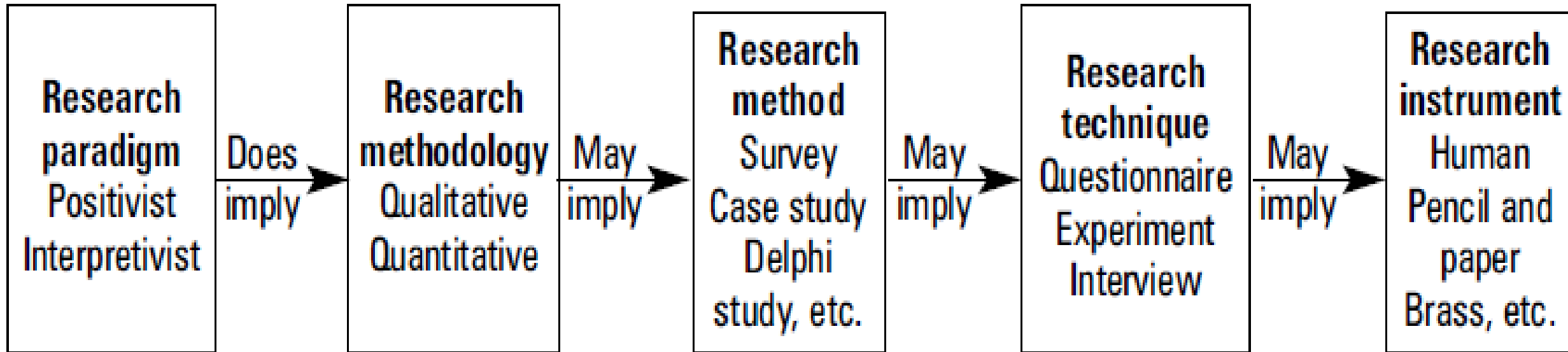
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Structure of a research proposal

- Data collection techniques

- Defining your method(s) may well imply you will use a particular data collection technique but, whether this is the case or not, it is necessary to explain how you intend to collect the data you need for your investigation.
- The questions you should be answering here are:
 - ✓ What data collection techniques will you be using?
 - ✓ Why have you decided to use these techniques?





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Structure of a research proposal

- Data collection techniques

- The previous section has explained what techniques you will be using and why; this section needs to explain how you will be applying those techniques.
- If you are using questionnaires, will they be pencil and paper questionnaires or online questionnaires?
- If you are using interviews to collect data will there be a formal interview schedule or will you be using open-ended interviewing techniques where the researcher becomes the primary research instrument?



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Structure of a research proposal

- Intended sample

- Your choice of sampling technique will depend very much on your research design.
- It is important in a research proposal to identify how a sample will be achieved, and the technique and procedures that will be used.
- It is also important to identify the research population, the size of the sample that will be used, if this can be determined at this stage, and how the sample will be contacted.

- Also give a brief description of the research setting, whether an organization, a community or group, or a very specific geographical area.
- It is important that you provide detail on salient issues relating to your research topic, explaining what it is about this particular setting that makes it an ideal choice.



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Structure of a research proposal

- Anticipated research outputs

- All research must have clearly defined outputs regardless of the level and nature of that research.
- Students frequently fail to see beyond the academic exercise of the research, focusing only on the work as another part of their programme of study.
- This is all very well and of course that is a very important aspect of the research but there is wider potential.

- All good research has a contribution to make, however small that contribution may be, and it is important to state that potential contribution clearly in a proposal.
- That is not to say that you should make over-ambitious claims, but you should realistically and honestly highlight what you, the researcher, hope to achieve.

- Research outputs should relate directly back to the stated aim(s) of your research, to clarify the intended output return to the original purpose of your investigation.
- This section should be very concise, stating exactly what you hope to achieve, who will benefit from the research and how.



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Structure of a research proposal

- Limitations based on design

- Limitations are inevitable in many research studies.
- It is far more usual to make compromises in research design than it is to do everything we would like to do, exactly as we would like to do it.
- What matters is that these limitations are identified and explained from the outset.

- It may be that your sample is smaller than would be ideal.
- Why is this? What impact will it have on the data you collect? The research method you decide on may not be the ideal method but it may be the very best you can do under the circumstances.

- Be sure to share this information at this stage in the process, to clarify your awareness of the research process and ensure that you will respond to any impact on the data when you engage in that process



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Ethical considerations & A project timetable

- All research concerned with human participants needs to consider ethical issues. Universities and many other organizations have their own policy on ethics relating to research.
- Depending on what you are intending to do, where you are intending to do it and who will be involved in your study, there will be different regulations and standards concerning the ethics of your research

- All research proposals need to include a realistic and well organized timetable.
- You need to present a schedule of work that includes all elements of the research, both desk-based and empirical work.
- This should be structured in such a way that critical incidents are highlighted, periods of intense activity can be easily identified and each activity has been realistically scheduled



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Summary

- In this chapter we have looked at the research proposal, the reasons for preparing a proposal, the structure of that proposal and its content.
- Although there is an accepted formula for presenting a research proposal, the content depends on your own situation, the nature and level of the research and local requirements.
- It is important that you are very familiar with what is expected of you before you prepare your proposal.

- Be sure to follow any guidelines provided and fit your detail into those guidelines, not the other way around. Your proposal may well be dismissed for not meeting basic requirements.
- Be realistic – this is not a theoretical exercise. You are preparing the rationale and presenting the plan for an actual research study.

- Time, effort and logical planning at this stage will serve you very well indeed when it comes to engaging in the research activity.
- Define your aim(s), objectives and/or hypothesis clearly and concisely; become immersed in the theoretical background to your topic.



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Thank You

