

Writing a research proposal

Dr. Cherie Todd-Williamson, Learning Consultant
Centre for Teaching and Learning
C.Todd@massey.ac.nz

OVERVIEW

- What is a research proposal?
- Organizing a research proposal
- Writing the research proposal

What is a Research Proposal?

- Written for thesis & dissertation
- A statement of intent: outlines what you *propose* to do, and
- Why your research should take place

Why a proposal?

You need to convince your readers that:

- Your research topic/issue warrants further investigation
- That it is a significant issue and that further research will uncover more information on the topic/issue
- You have chosen appropriate methods for studying the problem (methodology and design)
- You are the right person to do it (knowledgeable and confident)

Length

- Will vary depending on:
 - The purpose of your research and details provided
 - University requirements, discipline and topic
- The total page count can vary significant. For example, it could be 10-15 pages, or 75 pages. We highly recommend:
 - Reading your department guide, and
 - Discussing it with your lecturer/supervisor
 - Write concisely but without losing the meaning

Defining your research topic

Find your passion and topic of interest

- What are you interested in?
- What question/s do you want to answer?
- What contribution will it make? (this can include how your research will challenge or change existing knowledge on the topic)
- Are you willing to study this for several years?

Organizing a research proposal

What Sections are included in a Research Proposal?

- Title of Study
- Introduction
 - The Problem
- Literature Review
- Methodology
 - Research design
 - Data analysis
- Ethical statements
- Timeframe/Plan & Budget
- Primary references

Title of Study

- Not too general – should reflect what your study is about
- Clearly indicates your topic and the key issues/concepts that want to explore
- Should encapsulate what you intend to do
- No more than 15 words
- Catchy and attention grabbing (if possible)
- May change as you progress

Introduction

- Acquaints reader with the topic
- May begin with a brief historical overview
 - How your topic within the larger context (E.g. Outlines the general field of interest → how your chosen topic fits within it)
- Why you are interested in the study → statement of the problem

The problem

1. Rationale or significance
2. Statement of the problem
3. Hypothesis (if relevant)
4. Delimitations (i.e. the choices made by the researcher that should be mentioned, which describe the boundaries that have been set for the study)

1. *Significance of the study*

Purpose:

- What is the purpose/overall aim of your research?
- What objectives do you expect to achieve?
- What specific research question/s will be addressed?

1. *Significance of the study, continued...*

Significance:

- Why is the research important?
- What is your study's contribution to the field of knowledge?
- What are its wider implications or uses?

2. Statement of the problem

- State clearly and briefly
- Must follow logically from the purpose statement
- May be a question or a statement
- Do not promise more than is necessary

Example: Filipino Women Writers in Spanish: A Literary History & Anthology (1900-1969) [extract from DA thesis]

Introduction

Background of the Study

The evolution of feminist criticism in literature has contributed much to the study of women's writings and the experiences they depict. The latter half of the 20th century placed significance on the study of women writers and their works, with numerous published anthologies and poetry collections. All these were attempts to understand the female psyche and explain what it meant to be a woman. Certainly, except perhaps for the last decade, women's literature in the Philippines was not conscious of the feminist agenda. Albuero (1994) claims that early works [by women] were written from the margins. But the feminist perspective has enabled readers to become aware of this inequality and, consequently, generated much scholarly interest in women's studies. In the last ten years alone, the body on and about women and its criticism has been relatively vast. In the Philippines there are: (1) individual collections of poetry, essays, and fiction by women, including the novel; (2) anthologies of women's writings; (3) critical reviews of women's writings; and recently, (4) the collections of women's works from the different regions and provinces. All these truly boast of an impressive and rich heritage of creative writing from the Filipina.

However, surprisingly, previous to known Filipina writers in English, Filipino, or the various vernacular languages, no research is found on the Filipina writers of Spanish. Although the society was decidedly more patriarchal then, it seems impossible that no works were written by our "foremothers."

It is, thus, the intention of this study to make known the foremost Filipina writers of Spanish. For instance, not many are familiar with the names Evangelina Guerrero-Zacarias, Nilda Guerrero-Barranco, and Adelina Monasterio Gurrea. They were considered important and major writers of their time yet in the study of the country's literary history, they remain silent and unrecognized. They wrote in Spanish, with significant literary contributions, but they are not even included in the roster of women writers in Philippine literature classes. Who were they? What did they write? Did their writing reflect the social, political, and moral issues and concerns of their time? Did their literature develop with the times and with their male counterparts?

Example: Nutritional status of migrant Mainland Chinese children in Auckland (extract from MA thesis)

Introduction

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. The New Zealand Ministry of Health has emphasised the importance of nutrition and physical activity to the growth and development of children in New Zealand. Children living in New Zealand come from a variety of different countries, with their own natural traditions and beliefs about food and health (Ministry of Health, 1997).

The number of migrants in New Zealand arriving from Mainland China has increased in recent years (Statistics New Zealand, 1997). While migrant Mainland Chinese families bring their original food habits and food beliefs to their new country, the culture of the new country also influences their food choices strongly at the same time. Food habits changes as the culture changes...

Childhood diet influences the long-term health of the child. An understanding of the food habits of migrant Mainland Chinese children, their cultural background and the transition in their dietary practices and lifestyle is important when making nutrition recommendations, designing nutrition education materials, and counselling immigrant Mainland Chinese families about nutrition. However, a question arises: what do we know about the nutritional status of Mainland Chinese children?

At present, limited data are available on children including migrant Mainland Chinese school age in New Zealand with regard to their dietary intake and nutritional status (Ministry of Health, 1997). The only study that has been done was on a small sample of 17 pre-school Chinese children in Dunedin (Soh et al., 2000). Nothing is known about the determination of food choices and dietary acculturation among migrant Mainland Chinese children in older age groups in New Zealand.

The objectives of this survey are:

- To assess the food and nutrient intake, activity levels and body composition of 50 migrant Chinese children aged between 7 to 10 years of age, who were born in Mainland China.
- To compare the results with data from European children of the same age in New Zealand.
- To assess the accuracy and applicability of a food frequency questionnaire designed to assess nutrient intake in New Zealand European, Maori and Pacific children when used in New Zealand Chinese children.
- To suggest, if necessary, dietary and lifestyle modifications that could improve the long-term health of migrant Mainland Chinese children living in New Zealand.

3. Hypothesis/es:

- Prediction
- Assumption
 - Rare for a study that does not involve some hypothesis
 - One or more may be generated through analysis of background of the research problem
 - Shrewd guess, assumption, informed judgment or inference → to explain observed facts or conditions

4. Delimitations of the Study:

- Your choices
- Boundaries of the study that are imposed by the nature of the problem being studied
- Integral to the research design: sets the parameters and tells reader what will and will not be included, and why

Literature review

- Reviews the written work on and around your topic
 - Identifies your study's contribution to the field of knowledge
- Shows the relationship of your research to other local and international researches in the field
- Discuss improvements in the field and what is already known
 - Point out gaps and weaknesses in previous studies

Research design vs. methodology

Research design:

- The ***overall plan*** for collecting, handling, and analysing data in order to provide sufficient and suitable evidence to answer your research questions, accept/reject your hypothesis, or fulfil your aims and objectives

(Manalo & Trafford, 2004, p. 82)

Methodology:

- ***Describes*** not only the way in which data is collected (practical), but may include the ***discussion*** of theoretical issues (research methods)

Methodology & Research design

- Tells the reader 'how' you will be doing your study
- Tells the reader 'why' you are doing it that way (e.g. justifying your choices regarding methodology and design)
- Demonstrates the reasons behind your choice of:
 - Methodological standpoints
 - Methodological approaches
 - Techniques for data collection and analysis
- Justify your choice of one approach over another and its consequences for the research

Methodology & Research design

- Your research questions guide the inquiry process:
 - Instruments or tools to gather data?
 - Show link between your research question/s and the tools you will use
- Include practical/theoretical/conceptual framework you will employ

Example:

Procedure

Ten people participated in a pilot study. These people were employed in management and administrative positions in the education, law, and religious sectors. The purpose of the research was outlined, and each individual completed the questionnaire in their own time, and returned it to the researcher at their convenience. All participants in the pilot study completed and returned the questionnaire to the researcher. After receiving the completed questionnaires, and oral and written feedback from these individuals, the questionnaire was modified before distributing it to the main group of voluntary participants... Subsequently the research questions and pre-brief were substantially modified by the researcher and researcher's supervisor so that participants felt free, at their discretion, to answer as much, or as little of the questionnaire as they determined. As well, the researcher stressed in the pre-brief that participants were simply to leave any question 'blank' where they chose not to complete the question.

Data analysis:

- Break down of data for understanding
- Indicates how you will presenting results
- Statistical tests you will use
- Methods used to prove your hypotheses
- Tip: deal with each hypothesis separately and mention the analysis that will be conducted

The Methodological Logic of Research Design

Methodological traditions (epistemology)

Positivism Post-positivism Interpretivism Phenomenology
Critical inquiry Post-modernism Etc.



Methodological approaches and cultures

Experimental Quasi-experimental Non-experimental
Phenomenological Grounded theory Action research
Ethnographic Ethno-methodological Hermeneutic Structuralist
Symbolic interactionist Critical inquiry Feminism Historical
Quantitative Qualitative Etc.



Methods (techniques) for data collection and analysis

Questionnaires Interviews Life history Content analysis
Case study Semiology Observational Conversation analysis
Discourse analysis Document analysis Concept mapping
Nominal group technique Comparative analysis Etc.

Ethics section

- Covers specific ethical issues of your research and how you intend to conform to the relevant ethical codes
- “Code of Ethical Conduct for Research and Teaching Involving Human Subjects”
- Protect confidentiality, anonymity, and the physical and mental well-being of participants
- Other codes of conduct (e.g., relevant governmental/committee codes) also need to be mentioned

Timeframe of study & budget

- Timeline for the study
 - Times and dates of each step of your research process
 - Be as specific as possible
- Budget estimate of costs involved in your study (need not be too detailed)
 - Costs that will be incurred
 - Indicate source of funds

Research proposal sample timetable

Month:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Literature search								
	Literature review		Review updated/refined						
	Specify guide questions		Analyze ethical issues		Data analysis				
	Select strategy & methods		Pilot research tools		Data collection				
	Start writing sections				Summarize findings			Interpretation & conclusions	
		Draft sections		Construct chapters			Final draft & finishing		

Primary references

- Highlight appropriate texts cited in your proposal
- Supervisor guidance for other essential texts
- *Never* underestimate the value of a good reference list

Writing the Research Proposal

- Well-structured → well written
- Clear, concise, and to the point
- Consider:
 - Paragraph organization
 - ✓ Follow T – Topic sentence/controlling idea
 - ✓ E – Explain, elaborate, or define
 - ✓ E – Evidence, examples, or illustrations
 - ✓ Between 100-150 words
 - ✓ Avoid long paragraphs of 250+ words
 - ✓ One main idea = one paragraph

Writing Checklist

Sentences

- Have you conducted a grammar and spell check?
- Have you defined words correctly?
- Is there one idea per sentence?
- Have you avoided overly long sentences?
- Have you read it out loud to pick up errors?
- Have you written a complete sentence?

Writing Checklist

Paragraphs

- Is there one main idea per paragraph?
- Is your paragraph relevant to the topic?
- Have you used topic sentences?
- Have you avoided short or overly long paragraphs?
- Is there a progression of ideas from one paragraph to another?
- Have you linked paragraphs together?
- Have you read it out loud to pick up errors?

Writing Checklist

Sections

- Is there a logical progression of ideas?
- Are sub-sections clearly labelled or sign-posted?
- Does it relate to an understanding of the thesis topic?

(Fenton, 2002)

Writing Checklist

Style

- Is correct referencing style used?
- Is there appropriate use of evidence?
- Have you avoided clichés?
- Have you excluded emotive language?
- Is it the appropriate tone and level?
- Have you avoided slang or jargon?

The Proposal is more than a Plan...

- It provides the supervisor and the staff → information
- A highly explicit proposal ensures a higher possibility of the final thesis being accepted

(Auckland University, 2005)

Save frequently

Make print outs for easy reference

Always save multiple back up copies



What we covered:

- What is a research proposal?
- Organizing a research proposal
- Writing a research proposal

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