PROPOSAL WRITING FOR MASTER'S STUDIES

MPEMS91, MPEMS92, MPEMS93, MPCAS92

Prof IM Ambe
Department of Entrepreneurship, Supply Chain, Transport, Tourism & Logistics Management
Email: ambeim@unisa.ac.za

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Open Rubric

The purpose of this session is to…

- Guide students on how to write an excellent research proposal

What is *'not'* Research?

- Just collecting facts or information with no clear purpose.

- Reassembling and reordering facts or information without interpretation.

What is Research then?

- Something that people (Researchers/scientists) undertake in order *to find things* out in a *scientific* and *systematic way*, there by increasing their knowledge'.

What is a research proposal?

- .. ..a blue print of future activities in a research project
- …..some sort of preconceived framework for starting the activities
- …..deals with ideas of researcher on what research he/she wants to do, what objectives and methodology he/she has set, how much time and resources are required to complete it, how the research finding are to be reported, and so on.

Choosing a research topic

- The first concrete step in writing a research proposal is finding a research topic.
- The topic will assist you in identifying a problem.
- This information will form part of your preliminary literature review.

Attributes of a good research topic

Capability: is it feasible?

- Are you fascinated by the topic?
- Do you have the necessary research skills?
- Can you complete the project in the time available?
- Will the research still be current when you finish?
- Do you have sufficient financial and other resources?
- Will you be able to gain access to data?

Attributes of a good research topic

Appropriateness: is it worthwhile?

- Will the examining institute's standards be met?
- Does the topic contain issues with clear links to theory?
- Are the research questions and objectives clearly stated?
- Will the proposed research provide fresh insights into the topic?
- Are the findings likely to be symmetrical?
- Does the research topic match your career goals?

Research topic – contribution

- Will you
  - Uncover new facts or principles?
  - Identify new relationships?
  - Challenge existing truths?
  - Explore the understanding of phenomena?
  - Suggest new interpretations of known facts?

Research topic – Key questions

1. Is there an **existing problem** that I can investigate in this study?
2. Does this problem come from credible sources such as an accredited academic journal articles? (You cannot build a study on a shaky foundation)
3. Will a solution to this problem make a real contribution to the academic discourse?
4. Can the topic be **dealt with meaningfully** within my field of study?
5. Does the topic provide me with a **substantial intellectual challenge**?
6. Does the topic interest me enough to devote much of my time and precious energy to it?
7. Do I have some **basic knowledge of the topic**?
8. Have I always been interested in studying this topic but never had enough time to study it in depth?

Research topic – Key questions

9. Is **sufficient information available** on the topic?
10. Has **other research been done on the topic elsewhere or in South Africa and is it freely available**?
11. Can I obtain access to the people or organizations that I will be doing research on?
12. Has too much research been done on the topic, or do some questions in the field remain unanswered?
13. Can I approach this topic from a different perspective?
14. Can I complete the research within the allowed or available time?
15. Is the topic perhaps too comprehensive or **too limited**?
16. Does the topic **warrant specific investigation**?
17. Is it possible to say **something new on the topic**?

Assessing the research proposal

Because of the unique requirements of each discipline the various academic departments may use different templates for the assessment of research proposals.

Kindly consult the myUnisa “additional resources” folder or contact your research supervisor, or your departmental M&D coordinator to obtain the specific assessment criteria which they will use to assess your research proposal.

GENERIC STRUCTURE OF A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

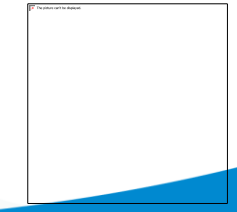
- Title
- Introduction: context and background to the problem
- Problem statement
- Research purpose/objectives, questions, hypotheses
- Preliminary literature review
- Research design & methodology
- Expected outcome/signifance
- Scope
- Limitation/delimitations
- Ethical issues
- Overview of chapters
- Plan of work
- Budget (optional)
- References

TITLE

- A brief, clear, concise description of the content of the proposal
- Summary of the research question
- Includes the main constructs/variables of the research
- Avoid unnecessary phrases eg ‘
  - “A study to explore …”
  - “An investigation into …”
  - “An analysis of ……”

- Not longer than 15 words maximum
- Make sure to choose a title that truly interest you!

- WORK EXAMPLES



INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

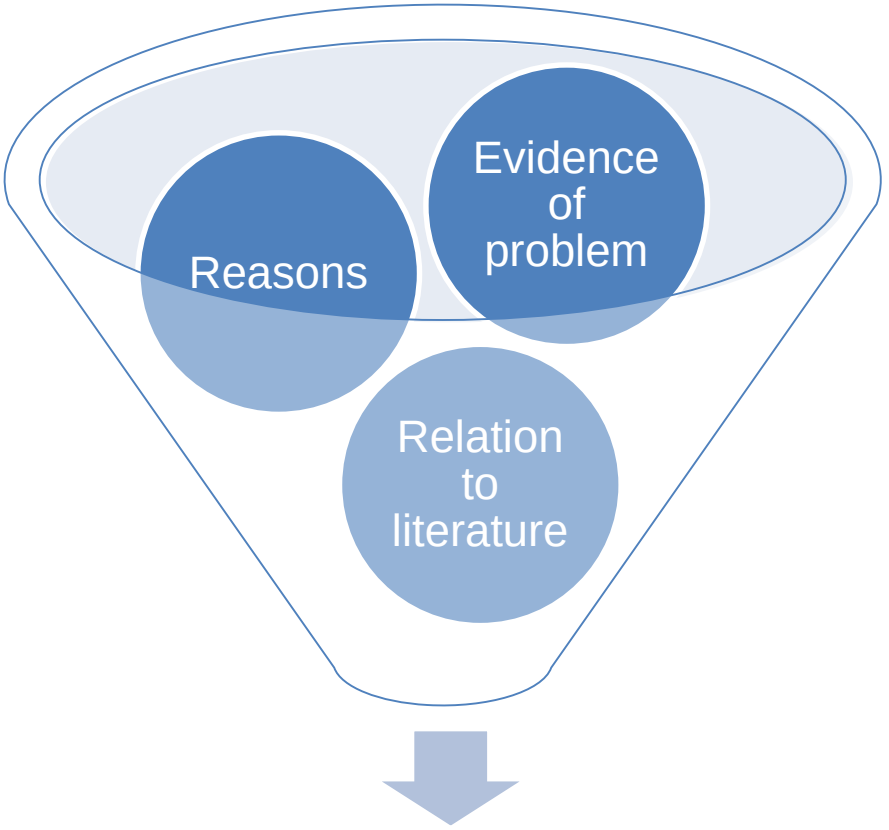
The introduction (context and background) must include the following:

- A statement describing the broad theme or topic of the study.
- A summary of the essence of the relevant literature in context (derived from your preliminary literature review about the topic)
- An indication of the most important gaps, inconsistencies and controversies within the literature studied (derived from preliminary literature review).
- A description of the context in which the study will be conducted.

It leads the reader from general subject area to a particular field of research.

"This is why my topic is worthwhile studying"

RESEARCH PROBLEM



Research problem

Defining the problem

To define a problem correctly, you must know:

- what the Knowledge GAP is?

Writing the problem statement

- Start with a general statement of the problem or issues
- Make sure the problem is restricted in scope
- Make sure the context of the problem is clear
- Cite the references from which the problem was stated previously.
- Provide justification for the research to be conducted
- Motivates to conduct the proposed research
- Highlight the problems/demerits of the available techniques

Problem statement!

- Conclude on the research problem by writing a problem statement!
- Problem statement – a specific, definitive statement that specifies the question or issue to be investigated in a research study.
- The problem statement should be a single sentence that describes the problem.

“This is what we don’t know and what is important enough to research”

Research questions

A research question is a **clear, focused, concise, complex and arguable** question around which a research is centered on.

- Research questions follow from the problem statement and should contribute to collectively answering the problem
- Main question plus investigative (sub) questions
- Investigative questions address the different variables/constructs
- Questions should include forms of measurement (either quantitative or qualitative)
- Purpose – to focus the research – guides discussion

Writing a research question

- Descriptive questions
  - What, when, where, who, how, how much/many
- Evaluative questions
  - How effective, to what extent,
- Explanatory questions
  - Why?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

A declarative statement describing an outcome-based goal investigating facts, theories or methods.

- When describing your objectives use operational verbs like:
  - To explain..,
  - To investigate…,
  - To identify…
  - To analyse…,
  - To evaluate….,
  - To determine…, or
  - To explore…..

"This is what I want to investigate in order to address the research problem I have identified"

- Your study objective must be clear and well-articulated.
- You start with the main overall objective and then come down to specific issues.
- In stating your research objectives always remember that they should be specific, measurable (of your study is quantitative), attainable, realistic and time bound.

Research objectives

- Define the main and the secondary meaningful research objectives
- Align the problem statement, the research questions and research objectives

Research problem	Research questions	Research objectives
The problem is …	Main question =	Main objective =
	Investigative/Sub ? =	Sub objective =
	Investigative/Sub ? =	Sub objective =
	Investigative/Sub ? =	Sub objective =

Characteristics of research objectives

- The research objectives should be:
  - Closely related to the research question
  - Covering all aspects of the problem
  - Very specific
  - Ordered in a logical sequence
  - Stated in action verbs that could be evaluated e.g. to describe, to identify, to measure, to compare, etc.
  - Achievable, taking into consideration the available resources and time
  - Mutually exclusive, with no repetitions or overlaps

SMART objectives

- S ⇒ Specific
- M ⇒ Measurable
- A ⇒ Achievable
- R ⇒ Relevant
- T ⇒ Time-bound

Research hypotheses

Hypotheses: intelligent hunches, guesses, or predictions that assist the researcher in seeking the solution or answer to the research question.

- Hypotheses are often not stated explicitly in a research article
- Hypotheses flow from the problem statement, literature review, and theoretical framework
- Each hypothesis represents a unit or subset of the research problem
- Hypotheses are formulated before the study is conducted because they provide direction for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data

Rationale/justification/significance of the research

To write a rationale, the most important thing to remember is the purpose of a rationale, which is ***justification*** for doing the research.

Key questions:

- Why did you conduct the research?
- What purpose does it serve?
- What good could possibly come of it?

The answers to these questions will be your rationale.

PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed should:

- Be relevant to the theoretical core of your proposed research.
- Majority of your sources should be credible academic journal articles or textbooks (within 5 years).
- Critically evaluate, re-organise and synthesise the work of other researchers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).
- Be logically organised under relevant headings and sub-headings. Link the different sections of work together (the 'golden thread').
- Use the 'funnel approach' – start with wider context and then focus your discussion on your particular topic.
- Should be done in a concise, logical and reader-friendly manner.

What should you include in the literature review?

- Brief discussion on how the topic fits into the bigger picture.
- Define key concepts when used for the first time.
- Discussion of relevant previous research findings and how other authors have approached similar studies
- A background to and motivation for the objectives that guide the research.

How do I integrate sources and identify main points?

- Choose from the following two methods:
  - Print out relevant articles. Sit in a quiet environment and as you read, mark up different points using highlighters. For example, in a literature review on the fundamentals of ecotourism, use different colours to highlight authors work on the environment, local community, the tourist and the tourism industry. Return to your computer and begin to type the work under the relevant main points (headings). At this point, you start to identify sub-headings.
  - Use the reference matrix table as a starting point.

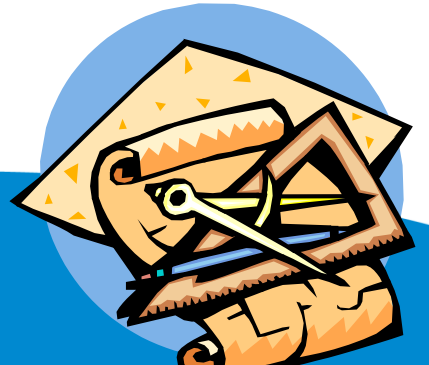
Tips on drafting a literature review

- Categorise the literature into recognisable topic clusters:
  - stake out the various positions that are relevant to your project,
  - build on conclusions that lead to your project, or
  - demonstrate the places where the literature is lacking.
- Only information relevant to the research problem/subject.
- Avoid polemics, praise, and blame.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

- Research design is a plan or blueprint for answering the research questions and fulfilling the objectives of the study.

- Described as the “logical structure that guides” the researcher.
- It focuses on the end-product.
  - “What kind of study is being planned and what kind of results are aimed at?
  - What kind of evidence is required to address the research question adequately?
- Research methodology focuses on the research process and the kind of tools and procedures to be used.



Difference between design & methodology

Research design	Research methodology
The final product is the centre point. **What are the results that you hope for?**	The main focus is on the research process. What are the tools and procedures that you will use?
The research problem or research question is the starting point.	You start with specific tasks such as the method of data collection or the sampling method.
The focus is on the evidence that is needed to answer the research question.	The focus is on the most objective individual steps needed to carry out the procedure.

Research design & approach

- ***Three traditional categories of research design:***
  - **Exploratory** - “discovery”
  - **Descriptive -** “relationships”
  - **Causal -** “cause-and-effect”
- *The choice of the most appropriate design depends largely on the objectives of the research and how much is known about the problem and objectives.*

The research approach can be classified as either:

- **Qualitative research –** exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.
- **Quantitative research** – testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables.
- **Mixed methods research –** an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms.

Deduction vs induction

In deductive reasoning (or for deductive arguments), it is supposed to be that:

- the premises *logically entail* the conclusion
- the truth of the premises *guarantees* the truth of the conclusion
- it is *impossible* for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false.

In inductive reasoning (or for inductive arguments), it is supposed to be that:

- the premises *support* (without logically entailing) the conclusion
- the truth of the premises *makes likely* the truth of the conclusion
- it is *improbable* for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false

Examples of qualitative research

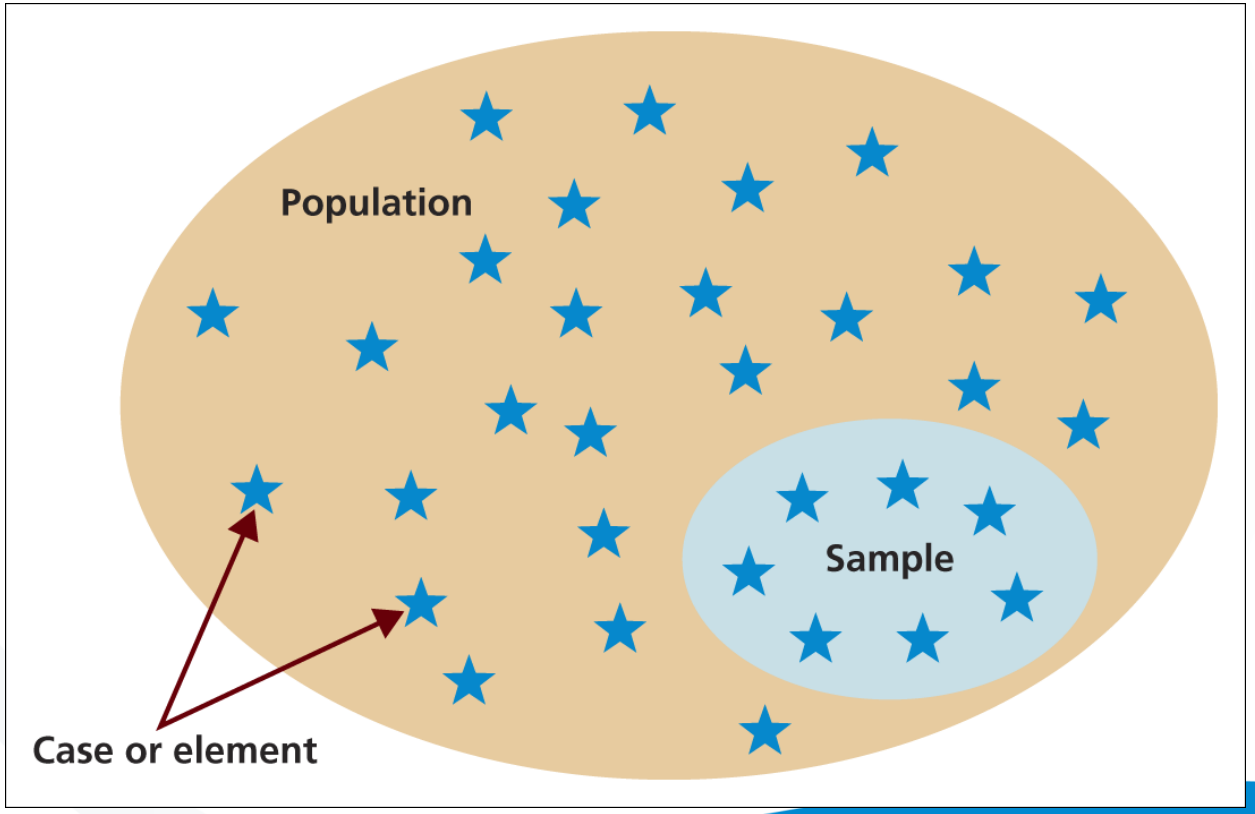
- In-depth interviews
- Focus groups
- Ethnography/field research
- Historical-comparative research
- Discourse analysis
- Narrative analysis
- Media analysis
- Observation
- Case studies

Examples of quantitative research

- Experiments
- Social surveys
  - Cross-sectional
  - Comparative (cross-national)
  - Longitudinal
  - Questionnaires
- Content analysis
- Secondary statistical analysis
- Official statistics
  - Demography
  - Epidemiology
- Field stimulations
  - Structured interviews and observation.

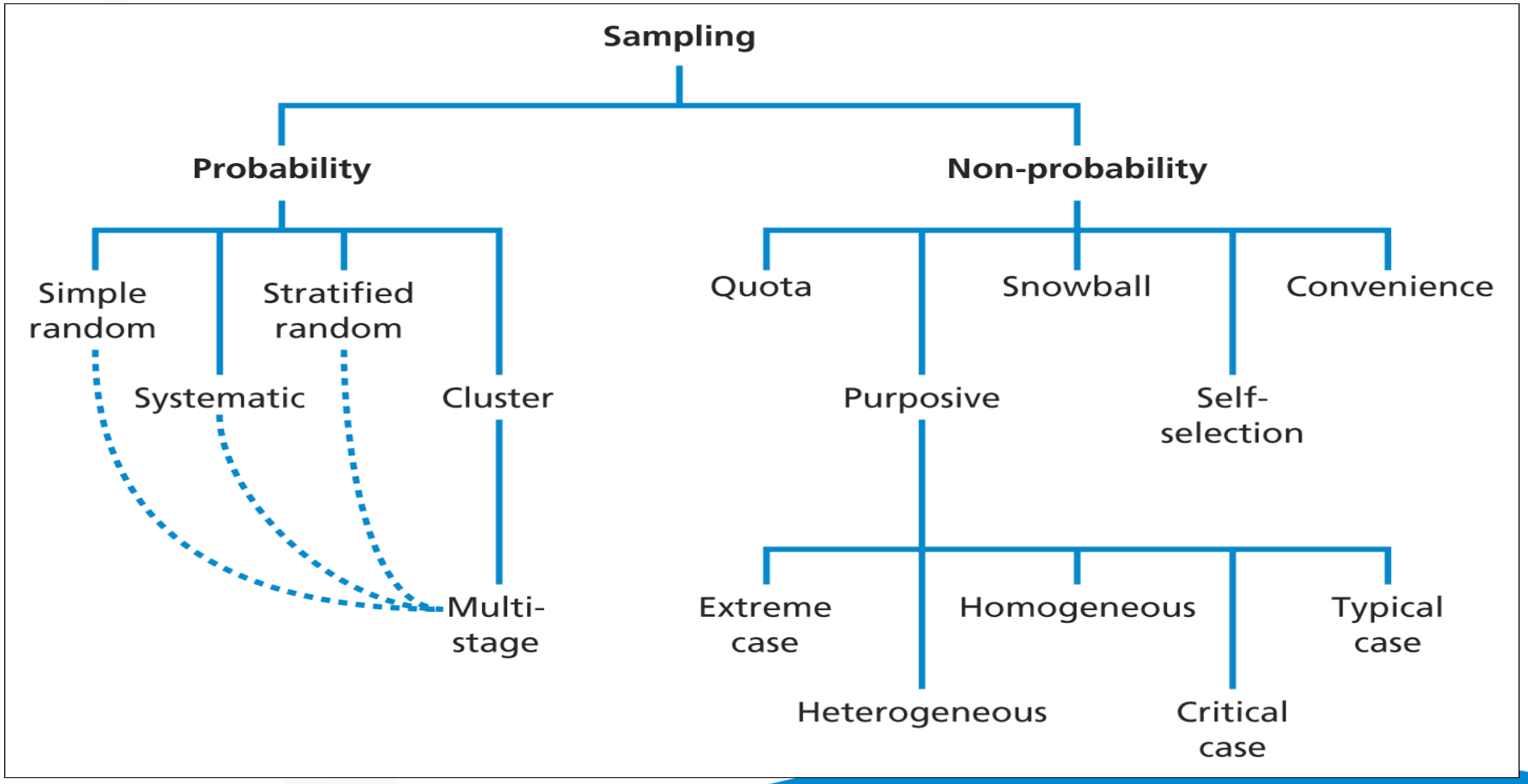
Population and sample

Population, sample and individual cases



Overview of sampling techniques

Sampling techniques



Data collection techniques

‘What type of data do I need?’

- Using secondary data
  - What? Where is it located? Access secured?
- Collecting primary data
  - Who? Where are my intended participants?
  - Participant observation
  - Structured observation
  - Interviews -Forms of interviews – next slide
    - Structured, semi-structured and unstructured
  - Questionnaires
    - do not have to included in proposal

Measuring instrument/data gathering and capturing

- Primary vs secondary data sources
- Describe the instruments will be used to gather data (tests, techniques, surveys, etc)
- Provide reliability and validity information to show techniques are valid for the study
- Describe how the variables will be measured
- Provide justification for selection of instruments based on theory, research question, subject characteristics, etc.
- Provide published reliability of instrument and plan to establish reliability
- Trustworthiness in qualitative research

Analysing and interpreting quantitative data

- Quantitative data is presented in a numerical format and collected in a standardised manner
  - e.g. surveys, closed-ended interviews, tests
  - analysed using statistical techniques
- Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the basic feature of a data set through
  - measures of central tendency (mean, mode, and median)
  - dispersion (range, quartiles, variance, and standard deviation)
- Inferential statistics allow researchers to assess their ability to draw conclusions that extent beyond the immediate data, e.g.
  - if a sample represents the population
  - if there are differences between two or more groups
  - if there are changes over time
  - if there is a relationship between two or more variables

Analysing and interpreting qualitative data

- Qualitative data is thick in detail and description.
- Data often in a narrative format
- Data often collected by observation, open-ended interviewing, document review
- Analysis often emphasizes understanding phenomena as they exist, not following pre-determined hypotheses

There are a number of paradigm and discipline based strategies for qualitative data analysis including

  - content analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, conversation analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, grounded theory

Microsoft Word Document

Scope

Scope

- Boundaries of the research
- Aspects and issues addressed

Limitations and delimitations

- A **limitation** is a factor that may affect the study but is not under your control such as a lack of generalisability.
- Shortcomings of the research – resource and time constraints

- A **delimitation** is a factor that is under your control. You might choose to look only at teachers in a particular state or county.

Ethical issues

‘The appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of or are affected by your work’

Data protection legislation requires researchers to comply with legal requirements. **Issues during data collection:**

- Privacy of possible and actual participants
- Voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw partially or completely from the process
- Confidentiality of data provided y individuals and their anonymity
- Reaction of participants to the way in which you seek to collect data
- Effect on participants of the way in which you use, analyze and report your data
- Behaviour and objectivity of the researcher

Ethical issues

Ethical issues during the data collection stage

- Right to privacy
- Netiquette
- Confidentiality and anonymity
- No chat rooms with the results
- Careful with the observations – be objective and not subjective
- Habituation
- Debriefing

Overview of chapter/outline

Standard outline:

- Chapter one: Introduction
- Chapter two: Literature review
- Chapter three: Research methodology
- Chapter four: Results and interpretation
- Chapter five: Summary, conclusion & Recommendations

Time schedule/work plan

- Realistic
- Do not forget to include pilot
- Estimate length of interview according to pilot
- Reflection at half-time
- Prepare local presentation of research findings

Budget (optional)

- The budget translates project activities into monetary terms
- It is a statement of how much money will be required to accomplish the various tasks

Major items

- Salary Travel
- Purchase of equipment
- Printing / Xeroxing
- Consultancy charges
- Institutional overheads

References

- **References** (must be in appropriate format)
- All sources cited must be referenced

Reasons why research proposal are unsuccessful

- The problem is of insufficient importance
- Purpose or demonstrated need is vague
- Problem is more complex than the propose realizes
- Research is based on hypothesis that is doubtful or unsound
- Proposed research based on conclusions that may be unwarranted
- Assumptions are questionable; evidence for procedures is questionable
- Approach is not rigorous enough, too naïve, too uncritical.
- Approach is not objective enough
- Validity is questionable, criterion for evaluation are weak or missing
- Approach is poorly thought out; methods poorly demonstrated

Reasons why research proposal are unsuccessful

- Application is poorly prepared or poorly formulated
- Proposal is not explicit enough, lack of details, too vague or too general
- Rationale is poorly presented, logical processes not followed
- Methods or procedures unsuited to stated objectives
- The design is too ambitious or otherwise inappropriate
- Some administrative or practical problems are unsolved
- Unethical or hazardous procedure will be used
- The procedure is not well enough organized, coordinated or planned

Finally….

- The proposal can be used as first few chapters in the thesis
- Change the tense from future tense to past tense and then make any additions or changes so that the methodology section truly reflects what has been conducted
- A good proposal should:-
  - begin with a statement of the problem/background information (Chapter 1)
  - A review of the literature (Chapter 2)
  - Defining of the research methodology (Chapter 3)

Thank you

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