

Writing a research proposal

Aim

The aim of this workshop is to teach the skills of designing and formatting a research proposal.

Purpose of a proposal

What is the difference between a research proposal and a research report?

You've been asked to do a research proposal as an assignment. Why are research proposals done by academics?

- Their purpose is to help you (the researcher) to focus and define your research plans. These plans are not binding, in that they may well change substantially as you progress in the research. However, they are an indication to your lecturer/supervisor of your direction and discipline as a researcher.
- They also help you to prepare your presentation for the Ethics Committee.
- Another use of the research proposal is as a submission for funding for the actual study.

The proposal is expected to:

- Show that you are engaging in genuine enquiry, finding out about something worthwhile in a particular context;
- Link your proposed work with the work of others, while proving you are acquainted with major schools of thought relevant to the topic;
- Establish a particular theoretical orientation;
- Establish your methodological approach, and
- Show you have thought about the ethical issues

Tone of writing

Write your proposal in formal academic language. Imagine that the reader isn't a specialist in your field, but an educated member of the community. Reference where appropriate just as you do in essays.

Structure of a research proposal

1. Title page
2. Table of Contents
3. Introduction
 - 3.1 opening sentence
 - 3.2 define the area under study
 - 3.3 previous research
 - 3.4 method
 - 3.4.1 participants
 - 3.4.2 design
 - 3.4.3 materials
 - 3.4.4 procedure
 - 3.4.5 ethical issues
4. References
5. Appendices (if any)

In detail:

1. Title page

It's important that the Title you create for your research should reflect the essence of your research question. Others need to know what it's about just by reading the Title. If you can, include the dependent and independent variables. Following are two examples of Titles from Findlay's '*How to write psychology research reports and essay*'.

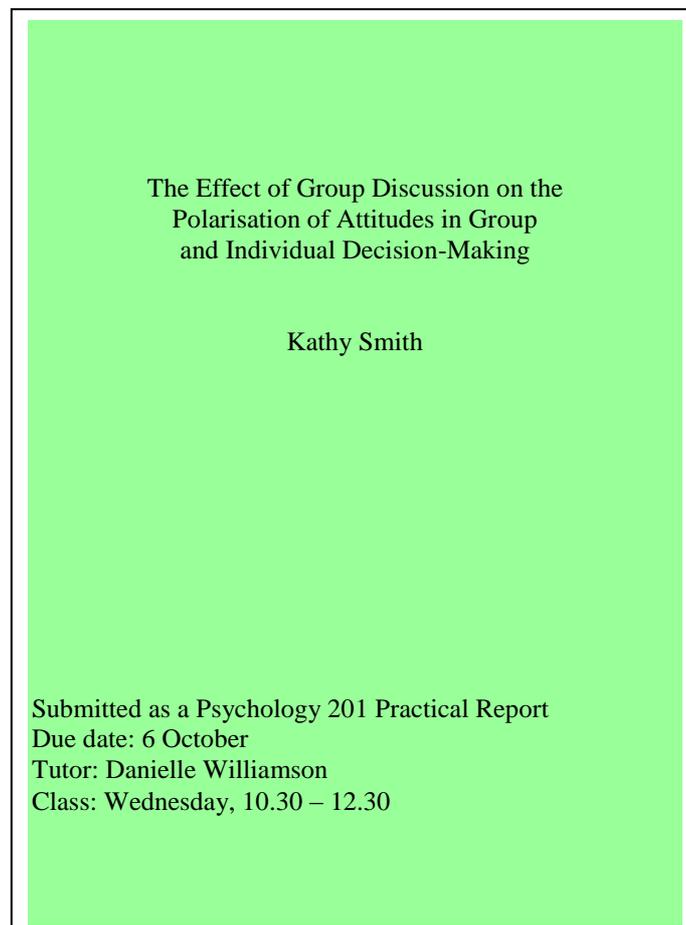
Adult Attachment Variables predict Depression before and after Treatment for Chronic Pain. (Meredith, Strong & Feeney 2007)

International Students' Acculturation: Effects of International, Conational, and Local Ties and need for Closure. (Kashima & Loh 2006)

Format of Title:

- The research title is centred horizontally on the page, and about a third of the way down the page.
- Major words should begin with a capital.
- Your name should also be centred, about two lines below the title.
- Your tutor's name, your subject name and code, the due date, and the day and time of your class should be at the bottom of the page, flush with the left margin.

An example of a Title Page follows. It is taken from Findlay's '*How to write psychology research reports and essays*' (2009)



2. Table of Contents

Sections of your proposal are numbered hierarchically. For example:

1	Reasons for Writing Research Reports and Essays	1
1.1	Why Write Them?	2
1.2	What is a Research Report?	3
1.3	Writing Essays at University	4
2	Writing Research Reports and Essays	7
2.1	The Collaboration/Copying Distinction	8
2.2	...etc	

3. Introduction

The Introduction must explain your ideas step by step, being sure to start from the beginning. i.e. First, you need to explain why you've chosen the particular topic for your study, which, in turn, leads to you why you hypothesize as you do. The Introduction has the following sub-headings:

3.1 Opening sentence

The opening sentence or two needs to be a statement about the general topic. You need to state the importance of this area of study. Let's look at an example of an opening sentence, again from Findlay:

Most relationships eventually encounter conflict of some nature, where one party perceives that the other has behaved in a hurtful or unjust manner. In some instances, transgressions can lead to strong grievances that interfere with the relationship. (Hodgson & Wertheim 2007, p. 931)

You can see that this is a general statement about a particular area of human behaviour. We can assume that the author has identified this particular area because that's the topic he's chosen for his study. We can guess that his area of interest is conflict and/or grievances.

Another example:

Patients' mental health is an integral dimension of palliative care, as defined by the World Health Organization. Depression is a serious mental health problem in palliative care. It is both prevalent and long lasting in this population. (Robinson & Crawford 2005, p. 278)

What do you think this author's study is about, generally?

3.2 Define the area under study

You now need to be specific about your chosen topic and the sub-topic. You need to give an outline of the theoretical framework which this study encompasses. Relate a theoretical framework to real life. This is an outline only, which means you won't give a lengthy statement. Include definitions of technical terms if necessary. (Remember your audience is not an expert in your particular topic.)

3.3 Previous research

You need to research literature on your topic. In this section, it's not enough that you give a summary of what each text is about. You actually have to critically analyse it, which means you first understand the point the author is making, and you draw a conclusion from it.

The reason a researcher discusses previous research is to justify his/her hypotheses. Previous research may have supported similar hypotheses, or you use the data researchers have produced in order to deduce certain predictions. Use examples to illustrate the concepts/theories you refer to.

Don't use lengthy quotes. That simply tells the reader that either you don't understand what the author has written, or you can not be bothered paraphrasing. You write essays and reports in order to show your lecturer that you understand the topic, that you've given it some thought, and that you've got an opinion on it.

3.4 Introduction of proposed study

You need to show how the previous research leads to the topic you've chosen. Maybe a piece of research stopped at a particular point, and you can see that some other interesting questions remained unasked.

Present the aim of your study. This brings you to the point of presenting your hypothesis. The aim and the hypothesis should connect smoothly. Following are some examples of possible Aims and Hypothesis. Note the connection between them.

Aim:

The aim of this study is to verify that a conformity effect occurs during group discussion.

Hypothesis:

It is predicted that the range of opinions would be reduced after group discussion, compared with the pre-discussion range of opinions.

Can you see that the hypothesis specifically refers to the process in your study, i.e. the reduced range of opinions? That's the measurement you've chosen to talk about the extent of conformity.

Another example:

Aim:

The present study aims to measure the differences in the ability of participants of varying ages to recall lists of digits.

Hypothesis:

It is hypothesised that for children and adolescents the number of digits able to be recalled would increase with the age of the participant.

3.5 Hypotheses

Finally you need a concise, specific, concrete hypothesis. It is an explicit statement of what you expect to find. It is your guess about the outcome of the research. Your expectations should be justified by what you have already said about previous research. The variables should be defined in words that describe how they are actually measured. Remember to write your hypothesis in the future tense, because the study has not yet been done. Therefore, say 'it is predicted that participants will ...' or 'it is hypothesized that respondents will ...'

Good and poor examples of hypotheses

Poor: Older adults will be less able to ignore the interspersed irrelevant material than younger adults. (The dependent measure is not clear.)

Better: It is anticipated that adults older than 45 years would be less able to ignore the interspersed irrelevant material and, as a result, would read more slowly and show poorer comprehension than adults younger than 25 years.

Poor: Perceived positive social support in personal relationships will be negatively associated with anxiety and mood disorder episodes. (How are these constructs measured?)

Better: Scores on the XYZ scale of perceived social support are expected to be negatively correlated with the number of anxiety attacks reported and also with the number of mood disorder episodes.

Poor: The hypothesis is that student willingness to take a psychology course will depend on the gender of the instructor and the type of course being taught. (It is not clear what is actually being measured. The prediction is too general.)

Better: It is hypothesised that student willingness to take a psychology course from a feminine, masculine or androgynous instructor will vary with the type of course being taught. Feminine and androgynous instructors would be preferred for clinical courses, which tend to emphasise personal/social skills. Masculine and androgynous instructors would be preferred for experimental courses, which tend to emphasise analytic/objective skills.

3.6 Method

In your first draft of the proposal, it is easier to write the Method first, because this section describes what will be done and to whom. There are three reasons for having a method section. One is to allow your reader to judge if your results are applicable to any other groups about which the reader is interested. In other words, will the results of your piece of research be transferable? The second reason is to allow someone else to repeat your study if they so desire, and that someone else would be confident that by following your instructions they would be carrying out an identical experiment. The third reason is to allow a reader to judge whether your study really does test the hypothesis you claim that it tests.

3.6.1 Participants

You should state the number of participants expected to take part in the research; how they will be selected; how they will be rewarded; and any relevant demographic variables that you expect to find such as age, sex, education, ethnicity, occupational status, or others.

3.6.2 Design

The purpose of the Design section is to lay out the basic conditions of the experiment and define dependent and independent variables.

3.6.3 Materials

If you intend to use equipment it must be described in sufficient detail so that anyone wishing to replicate the study can acquire identical equipment. If you intend to use a questionnaire, say that at this point, and say what will be included in the questionnaire. Discuss the validity and reliability of the information that the questionnaire will produce.

3.6.4 Procedure

Describe in detail how you will carry out the study. Again, it needs to be confidently replicated. For example, instructions given to participants should be quoted in full if they are fairly brief, or overviewed and referred to in an Appendix. Describe how procedures will be administered and by whom.

3.6.5 Research ethics

Any substantial study would need to be approved by your university's ethics committee. As you are not actually doing a study, but only proposing one, you won't need an ethics clearance. In later years when you are expected to design and run your own research, your research plan will have to be submitted to the ethics committee for approval. The purpose of this is ultimately to protect the participants of the study and you.

The four main ethical issues are:

- Participants should be informed of what is expected of them, and should freely give their consent to participate.
- Participants should be told that they can withdraw from the study at any time.
- Information obtained from participants should be kept confidential, and individuals should not be able to be identified.
- Participants should suffer no ill effects from taking part in the study.

4. References

Provide a reference page as usual in academic writing (separate page).

5. Appendices

This is where you would append your questionnaire for example, or any other document that you intend to use in your proposed research.

We've looked at a research proposal. If indeed you were to proceed and do the research, you would then write up a research report which would include much of the above, plus more. You would add the results of your study/research and analyse them. You'd include a summary and recommendations. So a research proposal normally pre-empts a research report.