Qualitative Research Proposal

• Qualitative methodology is used when: little is known about a topic, the research context is poorly understood, the boundaries of a domain are ill defined, the phenomenon under investigation is not quantifiable, the nature of the problem is not clear, or the researcher suspects that the phenomenon needs to be re-examined.

• Researchers need a clear picture of the issues and questions that they want to investigate, as well as ideas of how they are going to go about investigating them, but always with an openness of mind to improvise, revise and adjust.

• Writing a proposal for a qualitative study is therefore a challenge, as the qualitative researcher "designs studies by conducting them - as opposed to conducting studies by design".

• Quantitative researchers generally believe they know what they do not know (i.e. knowing the type of knowledge they expect to obtain by doing a study, then striving to obtain it).

• A qualitative researcher, by contrast, enters the study "not knowing what is known" (i.e. not knowing the phenomenon that will drive the inquiry forward).

• The qualitative proposal writer can only anticipate how the study will proceed.

• Qualitative research begins by accepting that there is a range of different ways of making sense of the world (that the truth is only valid in a specific context) and is concerned with discovering the meanings seen by those who are being researched and with understanding their view of the world rather than that of the researcher.

Process of the qualitative proposal:

• Qualitative researchers often find themselves in a "catch-22" situation. They have intentionally selected a qualitative research design, as little is known about the phenomenon to be studied; yet it is expected to write how data analysis will be done when the data is not known.

However, it is imperative that the researcher must convince the proposal evaluation committee or funding agency reviewers to be allowed to proceed with the study.

• "Clearly, developing a rigid plan for a qualitative project, including detailed plans for data collection and analysis, becomes impossible when writing qualitative proposals". Unlike positivist research, there is no single accepted framework for a qualitative research proposal.

• To present an acceptable proposal means shifting away from one's own concerns and thinking about the questions that the reader(s) or reviewer(s) of the research proposal will be asking.

• These questions do not necessarily differ from the questions asked in quantitative research, but will alert one to the possible questions that will be asked.

• The questions a research proposal must answer, are: (i) Why should anyone be interested in my research? (ii) Is the research design credible, achievable and carefully explained - in other words, is it logical? (iii) Is the researcher capable of doing the research?

• This can be achieved by focusing on the following guidelines: be practical, be persuasive, make broader links, aim for crystal clarity and plan before you write.

Be practical:
• Indicate to the members of the proposal evaluation committee or funding agency reviewers how your research will address the identified research problem or solve an issue, for example, staff morale الروح المعنوية or patients' perceptions of quality of care.

Be persuasive:
• "the first principle of grantsmanship (and for that matter approval of your proposal) is to recognize that a **good proposal is an argument**, the proposal must take a case to the proposal evaluation committee or funding agency that the research question is interesting and that the study is important. Thus, the proposal must be written persuasively."
• As a researcher you must be balanced, with a realistic understanding of what you can achieve.
• To be persuasive implies that "you must convince other people, like other researchers, research funding agencies, educational institutions, and supervisors that your research is worth spending scarce resources on.
• You convince people of the value of your work by showing them how your research will make a difference to the world, or by identifying a dilemma in existing theory which your research will help resolve".

Make broader links:
• The researcher should demonstrate in the proposal the understanding of the broader implications of the proposed research.
• One way of achieving this is to "**place the problem in context to show**, for instance, that when we understand this, we will be able to work on that".
For example, indicate how your research will improve practice or influence policy.

Aim for crystal clarity:
• The aim of the researcher should be for clearly stated, in simple language that describes the research **in a way that non-specialists can comprehend**.
• Morse (1994:227) argues that the researcher should resist the temptation to lapseزلة into pure jargon, as "some of the reviewers will be from other disciplines, and the proposal writer should assume nothing and explain everything".
• The **proposal should be concise, using short, simple sentences.**

Plan before you write:
• Remember the saying "**If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.**"
• It is important that the writer plans the process, as the proposal should not only demonstrate that it is based on an intelligent understanding of the existing literature, but it must also show that the writer has thought about the **time** needed to conduct each stage of the research.
• **Time management** is embedded in the planning process.
• The proposal will also be judged on the researcher's account of how time will be used.
- Arber (1993:35) notes that one needs "to adopt a systematic and logical approach to research, the key to which is the **planning and management of your time**".

<u>Structure</u> of the qualitative proposal:
• <u>Cover page</u> • Abstract • Introduction • Review of the Literature.
• Research problem and research questions. • Research Objectives
• Research Methods • Ethical considerations. • Dissemination plan.
• <u>Timeline</u> • <u>Budget</u> • <u>Appendices</u>.

● Cover page:
• **Formal** documents usually have a **cover** page.
• <u>The format of the cover page is often provided by the proposal evaluation committee or the funding agency</u>.
• If no format is provided, create a cover page and include the following:
• <u>Title</u> of the proposal.
• <u>Name</u> and affiliation of the researcher (principal investigator) & coinvestigators.
• The <u>affiliation will include the **type of degree**</u>, for example Master in Public Administration, **& the name of the university** where the study will be conducted.
• Lines for the **signatures** of the researcher as well as the university authorities.
• **Contact detail** information - address, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail address.

● Abstract:
• The abstract is a synopsis of the proposal; yet it is important that it is <u>comprehensive enough to inform the evaluators or reviewers, and to introduce the project</u>.
• It should include a <u>short introduction</u> to the research <u>problem</u>, the research <u>question</u>, research <u>purpose</u> and <u>objectives</u>, followed by the research <u>design</u> and research <u>method</u>.
• The abstract is usually **250- 300 words** long, but this is often dictated by the committee guidelines or the funding agency.
• First impressions count, and this is also true for **the abstract**, as this <u>will be **the first part that the reviewers read.**</u> It is advisable to <u>leave the writing of the abstract until the end</u>, as it will be easier to write after you have clarity of the research process.
• The inclusion of **no more than 5 keywords** is advisable at the end of the abstract.
• Structure can be given to the abstract by adding <u>headings</u>, i.e. Background, Aim (Purpose and specific objectives), <u>Data Source</u>, <u>Method</u>, followed by <u>Keywords</u>.

● Introduction:
• **Begin with something interesting** that immediately catches attention.
• <u>Introduce the **question** and what it is that you want to know or understand</u>, and explain the interest in the topic.
• The introduction <u>must get the attention of the reader</u> and <u>convince him</u>/her of the value of the study, or, <u>it must "**set the stage**"</u>.
• At the beginning of the proposal the **significance of the study** should be stated and it must be made clear <u>**why** there is a need for the study</u>.
• Questions that can be used to assess the significance of the study:
(i) <u>Who</u> has an <u>interest</u> in the domain of inquiry?
(ii) <u>What</u> do we already <u>know</u> about the topic?
(iii) <u>What</u> has not been answered adequately in <u>previous</u> research and practice?
(iv) <u>How</u> will this research <u>add</u> to knowledge, practice, & policy in this area?

• Furthermore, the <u>introduction sets the scene and puts the research in context</u>.

● <mark>Review of the literature:</mark>
• Relevant literature should be cited that **demonstrates the need** for the research study in such a manner that it **convinces** the evaluators or reviewers that the study is worthwhile. "Literature consists of <u>all written sources relevant to the topic</u> you have selected" [or the phenomenon under investigation].
• It is often a challenge to include all relevant or most supportive literature as data, knowledge and information availability expand daily in the digitally enhanced knowledge environment, doubling every eighteen months in 2008.
• It is therefore suggested that the researcher <u><mark>critiques</mark> نقد previous research, and demonstrates how the present study will <mark>clarify</mark> or compensate for shortcomings</u> العيوب in previous research <u>and how the study will <mark>add</mark></u> to the existing body of knowledge.
• The literature review <u>provides a theoretical context for the study</u>, **but is not a conceptual framework, as it does not drive the study or provide an outline for the analysis**.
• Apart from simply offering an account of the research that has been carried out previously, the author should **describe how he or she searched the literature**.
• This **involves describing the computer search engines used** & **the keywords entered into those engines**. For [example](#):
"Searches were performed using the following resources: Nexus database, South African journal".
• <u>The literature review is not necessarily a separate heading</u>, it could be integrated in the introduction, providing a rationale for the planned study.

● <mark>Research problem (& research question):</mark>
• In this section the researcher answers the question: "<u>What is the problem?</u>"
• As research is a logical process, **the research problem is a synthesis of the introduction and literature review**; in other words, **it is a "<mark>diagnosis</mark>" of the problem**. The problem can be broad, but **must be <mark>specific</mark>** enough to convince the reviewers that it is worth focusing on.
• The <u>section on the research problem must conclude with the research question to be answered</u>.
• Example: How is the primary health care policy implemented by different health professions? What happens to the system o f relations when the activity' takes place? Example: What happens to the quality o f care of patients from a low income status if they cannot access health care?
• **In summary, the research questions clearly <mark>delineate</mark> the research (sometimes with sub-questions), and the scope of the research questions(s) needs to be manageable within the time frame and context of the study.**

● <mark>Research purpose and objectives:</mark>
• The research purpose (or goal, or aim) gives a broad indication of **what** <u>the researcher wishes to achieve in the research</u>.
• The research **purpose** is <u>a concise, clear statement of the specific <mark>goal</mark></u> of the study.
• The purpose usually <u>indicates the <mark>type</mark> of study to be conducted</u>, i.e. identify, describe, explain, or predict.

Example: "The aim of this research is to develop best practice guidelines for counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy.
• This aim is achieved by means of the following objectives:
• • To explore and describe the factors that influence pregnant women s decision to be tested for HIV in selected antenatal clinics in the North West Province;
• • To explore and describe the factors that influence the counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy according to counsellors who practice in selected antenatal clinics in the North West Province;
• • To describe the current practices regarding counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy in selected clinics in the North West Province; and
• • To describe the evidence regarding counselling for HIV testing during pregnancy by means of systematic review

● Research method:
• 4 Steps: population & sample, data collection, ensuring rigor & data analysis.

1) Population & sample:
• "**Population:** all the elements (individuals, objects or substances) that meet certain criteria for inclusion in a given universe".
• They further indicate that the definition of the population **depends on the sample criteria** and the **similarity** of participants in the various settings.
1• Describe the composition of the population (N) in your study.
2• Explain how you will select participants and gain entry into the research context.
3• Then continue with a description of the sample, and sampling technique.
• A sample is a subset of the population that is selected for a particular study.
4• Name the sampling technique you will use and defend its use, Example: motivate why you would use purposive sampling.
5• State the inclusion & exclusion criteria,
6• lastly, project the size of the sample (n).
• Example "The population consisted of community health centres, health professionals in these centres, and the surrounding communities, in the different community settings in the Ethekweni health district".

2) Data collection:
• Researcher describes **what** he/she is aiming to find out **& how** the data will be collected.
• It is important that the researcher **describes** the kind of data that will be collected, e.g. examination of existing documents, field notes, audiotapes, focus groups, videos, internet-based data, etc); and how data will be collected e.g. interviews, discourse analysis, etc. The method **must be described in detail**.
• It is inadequate to simply refer to data that will be collected using "participant observation, field notes or diaries".
• A description with the justification of each method and how the method contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon under study **must be presented**. If an interview guide will be used, include the questions in the proposal or attach as an appendix.
• **Explain in detail** how interviews will be conducted, i.e. include how focus groups will be

conducted, inclusive of the role of the facilitator and moderator, and how responses to questions will be elicited.

• Example: "Observation & questioning were preferable data collection methods. For the main study, the researcher was assisted by an experienced expert clinical accompanist who was purposively selected for data collection. The researcher and the assistant used the developed instrument and its related manual, to evaluate the competence of newly qualified registered nurses "

3) Rigor (Soundness of the research)
• Rigor must be reflected throughout the proposal.

4) Data analysis:
• Describe the intended data analysis procedure (coding, sorting, etc.).
• In explaining data reduction the researcher provides detail of write-ups of field notes, transcription procedures and the use of computer programmes (if planned).
• For the description of data analysis, relevant methods with citations must be included.

● Ethical considerations:
• Qualitative research introduces special moral and ethical problems that are not usually encountered by other researchers during data collection; perhaps due to the unstructured conversational tone of interviews and the intimate nature of the interaction between the researcher and participants.
• It is therefore very important that the researcher take special care in ensuring that ethical standards are met.
• Ethical considerations refer to: the protection of the participants' rights, obtaining informed consent and the institutional review process (ethical approval).
• The researcher needs to provide adequate information on each of these aspects.
• Protection of participants' rights include: the right to self-determination, right to privacy, right to autonomy and confidentiality, right to fair treatment and the right to protection from discomfort and harm.
• Informed consent needs to be obtained from the participants, as well as the research site and the relevant authorities

● Dissemination plan:
• The researcher should provide a condensed description of the plan that will be utilised to disseminate results, i.e. publication in peer-reviewed journals & paper or poster presentations at conferences.

● Timeline:
• The timeline is: a schedule or work plan for the completion of the research.
• The plan includes: all the research activities to be completed, the predicted length of time that each activity will take to complete and when it will be performed.
• The plan can be described as text, but as several tasks may be conducted concurrently, it is often presented as a table or graph.
• A possibility is the use of the Gantt chart.

• A Gantt chart is: a **standard tool** that can be used by the researcher to structure the timeline of the project, i.e. specific activities with target dates.

• Qualitative researchers are often very optimistic about the time to be allowed for the research activities, but they can experience numerous delays, for instance; delays with interviews & the time-consuming process of qualitative data analysis.

• The researcher should estimate how long each activity will take and then triple the time. Such leeway is important when **funds** are requested, to ensure that there is adequate funding for staff & for the completion of the project.

● Budget:

• A notion which interferes with the positive perception of qualitative inquiry is the idea that qualitative research is inexpensive to conduct.

• This is a mythخرافة. Qualitative research is **not predictable**; hence when the researcher prepares a research budget, he/she should predict and cost all aspects of the research, and then add an additional allowance for unpredictable disasters, delays and rising costs.

• Aspects that should be included in the budget:

1) The **number** of participations cannot be predicted, because data will be collected until saturation, but an estimation must be included;

2) **recording** of data (audiotapes, recorder, batteries, microphone);

3) **transcripts** of interviews (on average, a fast typist will need three hours to transcribe a clearly recorded 45-minute interview);

4) **equipment**;

5) **personnel** budget (include employee benefits);

6) **supplies** (telephone, stationary);

7) **travel**;

8) cost of attending a **conference** for dissemination.

- All items in the budget should be justified.

● Appendices:

•Are documents that **support** the proposal and application.

• The appendices will be **specific for each proposa**l, but documents that are usually required include:

1) informed **consent** form;

2) telephone **consent**;

3) verification of **ethical approval**;

4) letters of **approval** from research site;

5) letters of **support** (in case of **funding** application);

6) curricula **vitae of researcher** (principal investigator)

7) **other** members of the research team.