

HIT4410: Writing a Research Proposal (Qualitative)

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Please find below brief details of how you might approach the task of writing your research proposal. These notes are drawn from a number of sources, all but one of which are referenced at the end of the document. Robert Galliers was my lecturer many years ago, and he was very influential in shaping my thinking about how to approach this task.

A research proposal serves to provide insights into a proposed piece of research which you intend to undertake. It is essentially a summary of your proposed research and a plan for implementing that research. There are many acceptable structures: below I will detail just one way you could structure your proposal.

1. Abstract

The abstract is really a short summary or synopsis of your research. In a few sentences you are attempting to summarise your project – and should touch on just about every section that I detail below. So you should attempt, in literally a few sentences to talk about:

- Your research ‘problem’ and its significance
- Aims and objectives & research questions
- Research method, research design (including approaches to data collection & analysis)
- Expected outcomes, the benefits derived from your research

My tip: write this section last!

2. Introduction & Significance

Why is your proposed research important? What is the ‘problem’ you are trying to solve? Why is this problem important? What gaps in our understanding will it fill? What theory will be developed/tested? What practical significance does your research have? In what ways will your research help to address the problem? Who will benefit from your investigation?

I also suggest your final paragraph in this section should tell the reader the overall structure of your proposal (*This research proposal is structured as follows:....*).

3. Background & Literature Review

In this section you are trying to justify the importance of your research and to detail what we already know on this topic. What is the broad area of interest of your research? What prompted you to decide to undertake this research? Use already published related research to analyse what we already know on this topic, but also to identify gaps...where are their limitations in our existing knowledge? In this

section, you must demonstrate familiarity with the major strands of relevant literature, and you should be critiquing that literature, weighing up the ideas presented, etc. What is excellent about previous studies? Where are they limited? Learn to critique previously published work (not all published papers are good!). You MUST do more than simply report previous studies. Often in doctoral studies, you are actually working across more than one strands of literature, and thus a part of your literature review may also involve 'weaving' these ideas of these strands together. From this analysis of the literature, you become more and more focused until the main purpose and objectives of your research become evident.

If you have developed a research model, then this would also most likely be presented and discussed in this section.

Finish the section with a clear statement of your research aims and objectives (clear statements of what you will achieve in your study). Where appropriate, show how it links to other previously published studies.

My tip: Think of a funnel – start broad, gradually become narrower, and then your research questions should just about “drip” out of the bottom of the funnel!

4. Research Questions/Objectives

Your RQs should almost “drop out” from your purpose and objectives. You can repeat the objectives for clarity, if necessary, before you list your RQs.

In qualitative research, you often have an overarching objective, and then a series of questions through which you will achieve your objective.

Objectives are worded “To determine...”, “To identify...”, “To consider...”, etc. RQs literally take on the structure of a question (Why....? How....? In what ways...?)

When developing your RQs, think about:

- How researchable/do-able is this topic/RQs?
- Are your RQs grounded in previous literature (i.e. our existing knowledge base in this area)?
- Will the research deliver useful knowledge for our discipline (including our practice)?

5. Research Methodology

This section contains details on your choice of research paradigm, and your chosen research method(s). In RISO, most of us undertake interpretive research (but you certainly do not have to do this!) The critical thing in this section is to show a clear link between your research objective(s) and RQs, your choice of paradigm, and your choice of method. These MUST be consistent.

- What paradigm is implied by your RQs? Justify why this is the case.

- Given the choice of paradigm, what research method(s) will you be using? Why? Why not other methods? You must show your method is feasible, and appropriate to your RQs and paradigm.
- How do you intend to operationalise your RQs?

This means showing how you intend to “measure” or “assess” some of your key concepts. For example, say your research question is “How effective are project management methodologies?”.

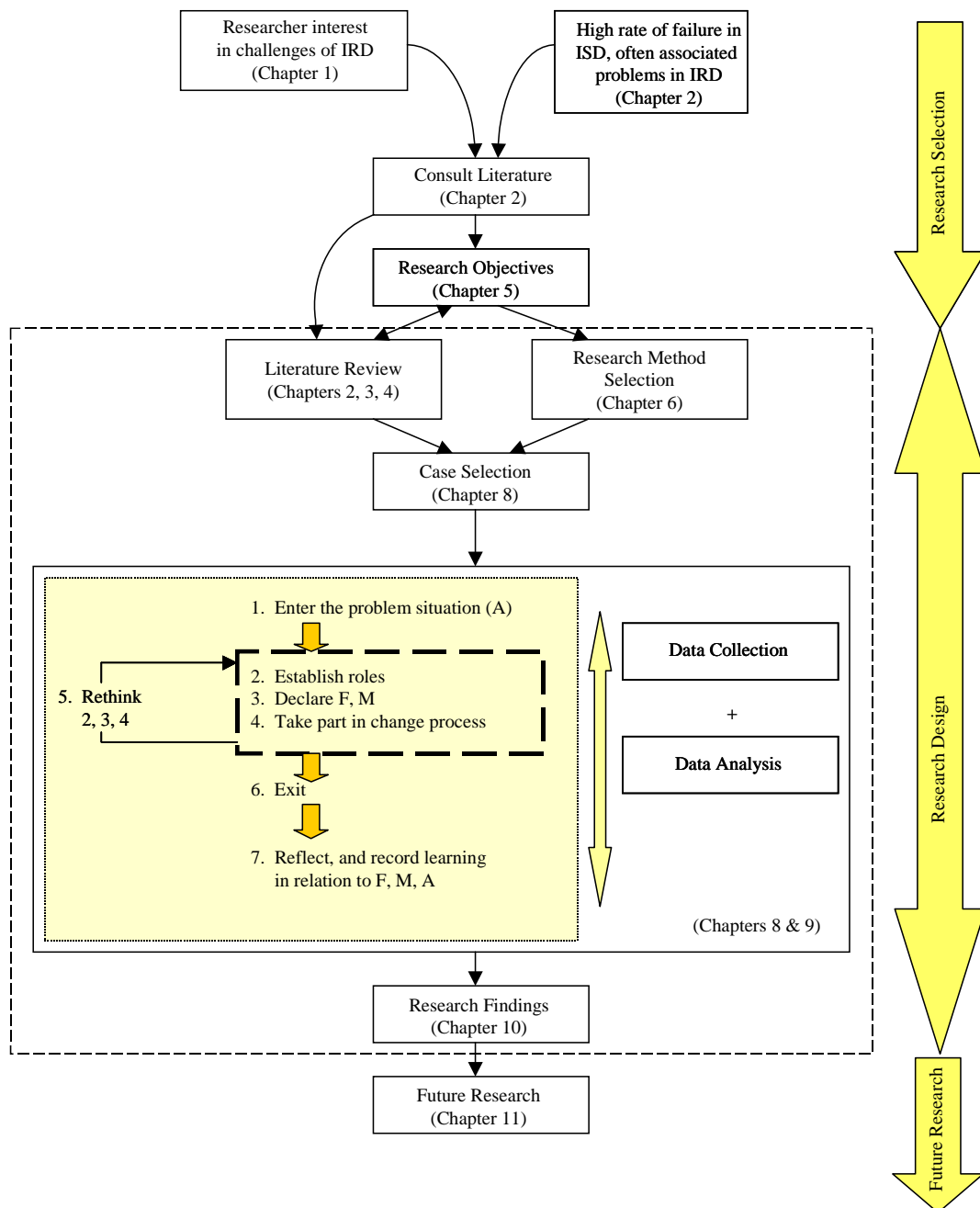
Operationalising means that you clearly define firstly what is/isn't a project management methodology. Secondly, in this case, how will you determine whether or not a project management methodology has been effective? Both of these need to be grounded in relevant literature. You cannot, for example, say “It is effective if I think it is.”!!! If you are using some sort of conceptual framework for your research, then operationalisation should also show the links between the data collected and this conceptual framework.

You may not go deeply into issues of operationalisation in your proposal, as this clarity often develops later in your research, but you should acknowledge that you may need to operationalise some of your key concepts.

6. Research Design

In this section you develop an overall plan to implement your research project. Diagrams are often a helpful way of doing this. The diagram below is from my PhD and shows the overall roadmap of the research. Note that all the sections within the dotted box are briefly discussed in research design. In your proposal these may be briefly done. In this section therefore you need to cover:

- How will you ‘find’ answers to your research questions? What is your research strategy?
- What stages will there be in your research?
- Data collection and analysis details –
 - Site selection/sample details – how many? Who? etc
 - What approach(es) to data collection will you use?
 - How will the data be analysed?
 - How will this enable you to answer your RQs?
- What is your timeframe (helpful to include a gantt chart, or some other simple diagram here). Make sure your reader can easily follow what you will be doing, when. Be realistic. For example, your write-up of a PhD will take at least a year full time!
- What resources do you need? (Include a simple budget for things like a digital voice recorder, transcription costs for your interviews, travel to conference, any software you may require, any training you may require, etc.)
- Ethics clearance



At the end of this section, it should be clear to your reader that:

- You are clear on **what** you are doing
- You are clear on **how** you are going to do it
- You are clear on the **location** (field, maybe the type of organisation you are studying, how many interviews, etc.)

- You have a realistic time frame
- You are aware of the ethical implications of your study
- You are realistic about required resources

7. Contribution

You need also to describe and reflect on the possible outcome(s) and the contribution of your research. This is a critical component of your proposal. If your work is to be publishable in top journals, then it needs to make a substantive contribution to our discipline, either through increased understanding, new knowledge, new theories build or tested and so on. It is not adequate to write “The outcomes of my research will improve project management.” Be more specific, and link the contributions to your research objectives and questions. Assume that all goes well during the research – and if it does, what will you be adding to our knowledge base at the end of your research?

In an applied discipline like IS, it is likely that your work may make two different kinds of contribution: to theory (what knowledge will result from your research? What theoretical advance will result?), and also to practice (how will this research make a difference to IS practitioners in industry?).

8. Publication Strategy

You should include a short section where you detail a realistic strategy around producing conference and journal articles from your PhD research. There is an expectation that every full time PhD students should publish with their supervisors at least 1 refereed paper, preferably 2 or more, each year of their candidature (i.e. approximately 6 refereed publications before competing your Phd).

9. References

Include all references referred to throughout the research proposal.

Additional references on writing proposals:

Punch, K. (2006) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. Sage, London.

Locke, L.F., Spiduso, W. and Silverman, S.J. (2007) *Proposals that Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals*. 5th ed. Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Liamputtong, P. (2009) *Qualitative Research Methods*. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Your textbook