Crafting a research proposal

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This paper provides a guide for students, their supervisors, and researchers in general, to developing a research proposal. Drawing on insights provided by Baker (e.g. 2000a) and other authors (e.g. Hart 1998; Krathwohl and Smith 2005) and on our own experience as lecturers, this article addresses the concept and importance of a research proposal. It discusses the process of producing a research proposal and the sections appropriate for such a document. Additionally, it raises some questions that will help researchers to assess the quality of their proposals. The article concludes by presenting a table summarising the main problems found in the various stages of developing a research proposal, and ways to deal with them.

Keywords Research proposal, Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, Assessing a research proposal, Selecting a topic

Introduction

Writing a research proposal is a source of anxiety for most students (see Onwuegbuzie 1997) who may feel lost in face of the novelty of the process, pressured by time restrictions and stressed by the forthcoming evaluation of their work. However, it is a crucial step in the development of a research project since the success of such a task is largely dependent on the quality of the original proposal (Baker and Foy 2008). This notwithstanding, little attention has been devoted to this essential first stage of a study (Baker 2000a). Although frequently addressed in students' textbooks on research in social sciences, there is a surprising dearth of scholarly articles offering an overview of the process. One noteworthy exception is Baker (2000a), who also addresses different parts of the research process in a series of articles published in *The Marketing Review* (e.g. Baker 2000b, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b).

This paper uses insights provided by Baker and other authors (e.g. Hart 1998; Krathwohl and Smith 2005) and draws on our own experience as lecturers and researchers to provide an integrated source of advice for students and social researchers in general, who intend to develop a research proposal.

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It also addresses common mistakes and problems students encounter in this process. Furthermore, this paper should function as a useful source for supervisors.

This article first introduces the concept of a research proposal, discusses its importance and suggests some issues that require careful thought when beginning the process. It then outlines the sections appropriate for such a document, raises some questions that will help researchers to evaluate the quality of their proposal and concludes by presenting a summary (in the form of a table) of the main problems found in the different stages of developing a research proposal, while suggesting ways to deal with them.

Developing a research proposal

What is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a "*formal written plan which communicates ideas about a proposed study in order to obtain approval to conduct the study or to seek funding*" (Onwuegbuzie 1997, p. 5). Through this plan the researcher aims "*to learn something of real or potential significance about an area of interest*" (Krathwohl and Smith 2005, p. 5). As well as serving as a work plan, the proposal offers a justification for the study, indicating why the research is worth doing and how it will be carried out (Krathwohl and Smith 2005; Matthews 2006). Additionally, the exercise of producing a proposal is a useful discipline for clarifying early ideas and thoughts and drawing them together into a coherent document (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003). Even if adjustments are made at a later stage in the research (which, quite rightly, they usually are), the proposal still represents a first step on the process, providing an initial foundation for the whole study. It serves as a blueprint that can be consulted during the research process (Baker and Foy 2008), and as a reminder of what has already been accomplished and what still needs to be done (Riley, Wood, Clark, Wilkie and Szivas 2000). It is also a benchmark against which the final research may be assessed (Baker and Foy 2008). The importance of the research proposal is increased further when it is used to seek funding for one's project or to apply for a scholarship.

Where does the researcher start from?

Several issues must be addressed before starting the process of writing a proposal. To begin with, and before undertaking any work, students should study their institution's dissertation guidelines (Gould 2008). By knowing what is required and expected of them (Baker 2000a), they are in a better position to undertake their project successfully. Additionally, early in this process, the researcher has to consider the subject or topic to investigate. This is a task viewed by many as the most difficult of all (Baker 2000a) and is crucial for the overall success of the research. This stage calls for creativity and an open mind, but also good judgment to select a topic that is interesting, and on which the candidate can reasonably expect to usefully further the extant knowledge.

Researchers can find ideas for research topics from various sources, such as talking with experts in the field, including potential supervisors; searching in the 'recommendations for further research' sections of books

and academic papers; consulting published theses, dissertations, conference proceedings, practitioners journals and other reports; discussing with colleagues; or listening to the media (e.g. Mauch and Park 2003; Baker and Foy 2008). In some cases, prospective supervisors may provide a list of topics of interest to them (Baker and Foy 2008). Alternatively, students may wish to develop further a topic that they have investigated beforehand, which offers the advantage of some background knowledge of the topic and relevant sources of reference.

It is most important that students feel motivated by the subject chosen, since they will spend a substantial amount of time and effort exploring it. This can be a rewarding challenge when the subject interests them and a very difficult, tedious or stressful task otherwise. They should also consider whether the subject chosen may (or may not) attract the interest of a potential supervisor and should allow themselves some flexibility to make adjustments after discussing the proposal with him/her. Lee with Lings (2008) draw attention to the importance of this aspect, noting that however busy the supervisors may be, they will be more likely to engage with a topic that interests them. Additionally, students should expect that supervisors will be in a better position to offer informed and topical advice in a field that they have previously researched. Consultation of the research publications from a potential supervisor offers some insights into how well informed they are in the area (Lindgreen, Palmer, Vanhamme and Beverland 2002).

Furthermore, in selecting the topic of research, students should consider both the potential for a novel contribution of a thesis developed around that topic and the feasibility of conducting that research. The former means that researching an existing topic, in the same way and employing similar methodologies as previous studies will not be sufficient to constitute a novel study. On the other hand, engaging in the research of a novel topic with new methodology might be overly demanding, if not impossible.

It is important for students not to put off their topic selection during the taught part of their degrees (when this applies) but rather that they should keep notes on dissertation possibilities throughout their course (Gordon 2003). This awareness will help them to build on different ideas, develop confidence in their work and reduce the stress of composing a research proposal.

At this initial stage, as in later stages of the process of writing the proposal (e.g. when starting to write the literature review), researchers might find tools such as mind mapping useful for supporting their reflection upon the issues involved in their project (see e.g. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2008). Modern mind mapping was developed by Buzan in 1970 (Buzan and Buzan 1996) and has since proved a useful approach to generating visualising, structuring and classifying ideas, thus facilitating analysis, problem solving and creative thinking (see e.g. Mento 1999; Zampetakis, Tsinoris and Moustakis 2007). The technique facilitates visual presentation of concepts and ideas on one page, thus illuminating relationships amongst them, and assists reflection upon the subject of research in a global and holistic sense (Mento 1999). Appendix 1 contains an example of a mind map showing the tasks involved in undertaking a research proposal.

Content of a research proposal

Regardless of whether the proposal is for an honours or a master's dissertation, a doctoral thesis, or for a higher-level project, there is broad agreement that its content and structure is largely similar (see e.g. Baker 2000a; Baker and Foy 2008). Possible sections include the following: title, outline, introduction, literature review, research problem or question and aims, methodology, work schedule and bibliography. Some authors suggest a section called background (e.g. Saunders et al. 2003), which can replace the introduction and the literature review.

Title and outline

The title is the first indication of the content of the proposal and thus *"should summarise, succinctly and precisely what the research is about"*, reflecting the nature and scope of the work (Baker and Foy 2008, p. 47). It might be helpful to try to synthesise the core of the proposal in one sentence and from this progress to produce a title which, if necessary, can be modified as the work progresses (Saunders et al. 2003).

The outline provides an indication of how the work is presented as listed in a table of contents (Baker and Foy 2008).

Introduction

A good, sharp introduction sets the reader's mood and arouses his/her interest in the project. Students should avoid the temptation of adding too much information in the introduction to maintain focus and relevance. This section should be short (about one or two pages) but useful, setting the stage for what comes next (Mauch and Park 2003). A useful guide at this stage is to answer what Baker (2003, p. 38) called the "*Kipling Test*", that is, to answer the questions from Rudyard Kipling's (1902) poem "The Elephant's Child":

I keep six honest serving-men,

(They taught me all I knew);

Their names are What and Why and When

And How and Where and Who.

Highlighting the importance of first impressions, Krathwohl and Smith (2005) discuss how the first sentences of a project can have a decisive impact on the reader. It is often the case that students present a long description of a topic before giving any clear idea about the subject matter or rationale for the research. Although contextualisation is important, the opening statement should convince the reader that that project is worthy of attention (Krathwohl and Smith 2005), presenting the best arguments justifying the intended research and specifying why it is worth studying. An introductory section should then succinctly present the main problem or issue, indicate where the gap lies for that research, what the research aims to achieve (Hart 1998), and how it proposes to achieve it. The rationale for the research should be clear

and convincing, stating the main reason(s) why the research is needed (Hart 1998), the potential value of the study and why it is particularly needed at the time of the proposal (Mauch and Park 2003). To add credibility to the proposal, it can be supported with references to other studies, which have approached the broad area of the problem in some way (Hart 1998) and suggested the relevance of further research.

In some cases, it is also expected that the researcher indicates his/her motivation for undertaking that research. This can stem from personal reasons, such as the relevance of the topic for the researcher (e.g. because of his/her experience or background) and/or from a prior investigation that the researcher has developed on the field. Such an indication can contribute to establishing one's credibility as a competent person to write about the topic, which Hart (1998) claims, is one of the main components of an introduction. Finally, to "signpost" the structure for the reader the introduction should contain a one-paragraph overview of the different sections of the proposal. It is easier to write the final draft of the introduction when the research proposal is nearly completed, since at this stage the researcher will have a global picture of their project and a broader and more detailed understanding of the problem and rationale for the research.

Literature review

A good proposal should persuade its readers both that there is an issue worthy of research and that the researcher is sufficiently familiar with the key existing literature to do so in a meaningful way (see Baker and Foy 2008). The review section should show that the proposal is solidly grounded on past work, indicate command of key studies and elucidate the extent to which the proposed research will move the field forward (Krathwohl and Smith 2005). The length and level of detail of a literature review for a research proposal are not expected to be as great as in an actual thesis or dissertation. Still, it should provide an overview of the key sources (Saunders et al. 2003), and should be guided by the same underlying principles and methods. In the following, we will consider common problems found in literature reviews and the purposes of undertaking a review at this stage.

Although commonly viewed as a relatively easy task, the quality of reviews produced by research students is quite variable (Hart 1998). The main problems that we have encountered in these documents include: failure to identify key studies and definitions on the topic; lack of a logical flow between the arguments and theories; lack of critical analysis regarding the main theoretical debates in the field, including the presentation of the competing ideas and arguments as unrelated, independent and sequential paragraphs, rather than attempting to contrast and relate them; insufficient explanation of the claims made; and deficiencies in citations and in the use of quotations. The absence of references is particularly problematic since failure to acknowledge the authors of the sources used may be considered plagiarism.

A literature review can be defined as:

> *the selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views*

> *on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed*
>
> (Hart 1998, p. 13).

The "selection of available documents" involves looking at credible literature including "*Edited Books, Journal articles, Monographs, Databases, Conference Proceedings, Dissertations, Newspapers, Empirical studies, Government reports, Historical records, Statistical handbooks, Policy guides*" (Gabbott 2004, p. 412). Baker and Foy (2008, p. 87, 88) list some of the main electronic, journal article databases for business and management, including: ABI/INFORM, Academic Search Premier, Blackwell Synergy and Wiley Interscience, Emerald, Informaworld, IngentaConnect, HighWire Press, JSTOR, Oxford Journals, Sage Journals and Science Direct. The search engine *Google Scholar* can be a complementary, useful tool to become acquainted with relevant sources of material to review. Students should also be aware that they are unlikely to have free access to all the papers or databases they need and that they may need to pay for some papers.

Undertaking a literature review at the proposal stage allows the researcher to gain a solid knowledge of the field of inquiry (Mauch and Park 2003), offering the foundation for the research (Hart 1998). Indeed, in order to define and develop his/her own study, the researcher needs to be acquainted with existing empirical and theoretical knowledge in the field (see e.g. Onwuegbuzie 1997; Baker 2000b) and demonstrate familiarity with state-of-art developments (Hart 1998). While becoming aware of the history of and debate around the subject, the researcher can also acquire appropriate vocabulary, identify areas of current interest (Hart 1998), ascertain who the eminent scholars are (Mauch and Park 2003), and uncover gaps, omissions or inconsistencies in what has been published (Hart 1998, Gabbott 2004). Importantly, such a review helps the writer to avoid "*re-inventing the wheel*" (Gabbott 2004, p. 413) by repeating work due to ignorance. Research aims "*to extend and improve both our knowledge and understanding*" (Baker 2001a, p. 373) and, as such, it should complement rather than duplicate other studies (Przeworski and Salomon 1995).

Additionally, the review allows the researcher to gain knowledge about the methodologies that have been used in the field and about their usefulness and appropriateness (Mauch and Park 2003). This may suggest innovative ways of approaching the topic to the researcher, which can contribute novelty to his/her project (see e.g. Hart 1998). Moreover, the literature reviewed will be useful throughout the research, assisting the analysis and discussion stages (Gabbott 2004).

The process of undertaking a literature review

First of all, researchers ought to identify what they need to investigate. This means that they need to have identified the broad subject and should have a fair idea of the research question to guide the process of collecting information (Gabbott 2004). Then, they will start retrieving relevant literature. This is likely to continue throughout the whole study (Gabbott 2004) but more focused attention is devoted to it at this stage. Baker (2000b) recommends beginning this process by consulting those topical sources that are most

likely to contain a summary or overview of the key issues related to a subject, including textbooks, encyclopaedias and reference books. Recent issues of important journals are a particularly good source to start understanding the current thinking and ideas in the field, the main investigators and the references that are most often cited (Mauch and Park 2003). Review articles can also be useful to become acquainted with the literature in the field. Attention should be paid to the quality of the work cited, ensuring that papers which are crucial to framing the argument or proposed methodology come from robust and well conducted studies. Students should learn to develop their own skills in judging research studies and the papers in which they are presented, but advice should be obtained from supervisors and the rankings of the journal in which the paper is published offers a useful proxy. One useful journal ranking list is published by the Association of Business Schools (2009).

Hart (1998) draws attention to the differences between reading for the purpose of reviewing and reading for pleasure. While reading for the purpose of undertaking a literature review, the researcher aims to produce a product, which is an analytical evaluation of the research on a topic (*ibid)*. Hence, this should not be passive reading but extracting the crucial issues (e.g. standpoints, evidence, concepts) from the text (Hart 1998) and undertaking a critical reflection (see e.g. Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 1999) upon it.

Researchers writing proposals should also learn to use time efficiently (Gabbott 2004). They should not rush to read the whole text of a book or a journal article in one go, at least not before ensuring that it is relevant. When reading a book, they should begin by reading the title and the write-up on the cover, before glancing at the contents list and preface, and then looking at the introduction (Hart 1998) for more detail; in the case of a journal article, they should begin by reading the abstract to decide how closely the sources match their own research questions (see Baker 2000b). While reading, it is important to be systematic about keeping referenced notes (electronically or hand-written) of anything for inclusion in the final document (Baker 2000b; Gabbott 2004; Baker and Foy 2008). These notes should be concise and focused on relevant issues avoiding the unproductive temptation to write long summaries of articles which are time-consuming to produce and ineffective when seeking to track specific issues for the review.

Having gathered the information, it is then time to organise the relevant material (Baker 2000b), to produce a cohesive review with a clear line of argument (see Gabbott 2004). The decision to take a break from reading and write the review is often difficult for students who may feel more comfortable continuing to read, while postponing the moment when they will need to start producing a document.

While undertaking the process of organising the notes and writing a review document, researchers will need to analyse and synthesise the information (Baker 2000b, Hart 1998). Analysis [Greek: *"breaking up"* (Barnhart and Steinmetz 2008, p. 32)] involves a *"methodological examination"* where one breaks up, or divides, some complex whole into its constituent parts (Spiggle 1994, p. 492), and describes *"how they relate to each other"* (Hart 1998, p. 110). Analysis is based on thinking in various ways about what one is reading (Hart 1998). By doing so, one is able to *"dig beneath the surface of an argument"* (Hart 1998, p. 111), gaining a better knowledge of the different

aspects of the subject being researched, and enhancing its understanding (Baker 2000b; Hart 1998). Synthesis [Greek: *"put together" (*Barnhart and Steinmetz 2008, p. 1107)] is *"the act of making connections between the parts identified in analysis"* (Hart 1998, p. 110). It involves *"rearranging the elements derived from analysis to identify relationships or show main organizing principles or show how these principles can be used to make a different phenomenon"* (Hart 1998, p. 111). Therefore, this reorganisation can illuminate relations or patterns that have not been identified before (Hart 1998), and produce new explanations of the phenomenon under research (Baker 2000b).

A well-argued literature review should present the various or competing views and definitions regarding the topic under investigation (Hart 1998; Gabbott 2004). This discussion should point out relationships, differences and similarities amongst the views and concepts rather than simply describing them. As Gabbott (2004) claims, the researcher needs to *"write about the literature, not just report that it exists"* (p. 424). In so doing, the researcher should be able to take a critical stance and offer a coherent argument, always supported with appropriate evidence (Gabbott 2004; Hart 1998). Skills of critical thinking are highly valued by academics in evaluating students' work (Hackley 2009) and will help the process of writing the review. Critical thinking involves a high level of intellectual activity that goes beyond merely descriptive work (Hackley 2009); it demands accuracy, argumentation, clarity, logic, and fairness (see e.g. Dehler, Welsh, and Lewis 2001; Roy and Macchiette 2005).

In writing a review, it is also important to build a unified structure for the document. The review should have a clear beginning, middle and end (Baker 2000b). Poor reviews often contain paragraphs that seem misplaced, as if they have been "cut and pasted" from various documents without a logical, underlying order. It might be that the information presented has a clear structure for the researcher but if the reader cannot perceive that logic, the review needs re-writing.

Citations

Researchers need to keep in mind that they are using the work and ideas of other people, who must be correctly and consistently cited (Hart 1998; Baker 2000b). This emphasises the importance of reading primary sources, rather than relying upon second-hand interpretations of them (see e.g. Baker 2000b; Gabbott 2004; Krathwohl and Smith 2005). A related issue is the use of quotations and other claims found in one source but originating in another. We have observed cases in which students use both quotations and interpretations of other authors' arguments that they find in a third-party source (for example, a review article) as if they have read those authors and found those quotations in the original source themselves, which is considered dishonest (Mauch and Park 2003). The same applies, perhaps even more strongly, to the use of summaries or interpretations taken from other authors. Even if the researcher searches for the original source it is a matter of professional and academic courtesy to acknowledge the original author(s) (Mauch and Park 2003).

Finally, it should be pointed out that a literature review should not be a list of quotations but one's interpretations of other people's work (Baker 2000b). It is relatively common for students to quote a considerable number of passages, without any apparent reasoning. While important, *verbatim* quotations should be used sparingly, only when the researcher intends

> *to communicate the precise viewpoint of your source to act as a peg on which to hang similar arguments, as an endorsement or reinforcement for a particular line of argument, or as a counterpoint to an alternative school of thought*
>
> (Baker 2000b, p. 232).

Note that in the quotation above, our intention was to acknowledge Baker's precise stance on the use of citations. Additionally, one should be complete in the citation of a quotation, including its page number (Baker 2000b).

Concluding a literature review

The review should clarify the nature of the gap in existing knowledge in the field (Hart 1998; Mauch and Park 2003), and define what additional information is required to fill that gap (Baker 2001b), thus contributing to the rationale of the research. The review should, then, conclude by communicating how the proposed project will address the existing gap (Mauch and Park 2003).

Researchers should also note that the final version of a literature review is not completed in one go, rather it is an iterative process. It is essential to revisit and revise the review several times during the course of the study, until the final document is ready (Gabbott 2004). This is another reason why students should not become stuck at the literature review stage; they can, and most likely will, revisit it at later stages.

Research problem or question and aims of research

Drawing on the literature review, researchers should now produce a clearly stated research problem (Baker 2000b; Hart 1998) or research question, which should emerge "smoothly" from the previous section (Saunders et al. 2003). This problem (or question), which has already been referred to at the introductory section, can now be restated in a more precise and detailed way, grounded in the additional understanding provided by the review (Krathwohl and Smith 2005). Researchers are also in a more informed position to detail the objectives or aims of the proposed research. These should be precisely written (Saunders et al. 2003) and describe what exactly the researcher intends to achieve (Baker and Foy 2008), using clear and succinct statements (Hart 1998).

We add a word of caution about the need to be realistic in defining one's objectives. It is often the case that students present objectives that are not feasible in the time, and with the resources, available to conduct the project. Overstating one's possible contribution not only does not impress the reader but rather suggests that the student lacks a mature understanding of the problem and of the research process itself.

Methodology

After defining the research problem and establishing the aims of the research, based on existing literature, it is time to explain how those aims are to be achieved. How the researcher addresses the problem and answers the attendant questions constitutes the methodology of a study (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Understood as a "*system of methods and rules to facilitate the collection and analysis of data*" (Hart 1998, p. 28), the choice of a methodology is one of the most important decisions in an academic investigation since it will guide how the data will be collected, how it will be analysed and interpreted, and it is a major influence upon the outcomes of the study (Mauch and Park 2003).

Students should be aware that methodological decisions should be matched to their research purposes (see e.g. Reichardt and Cook 1979; Silverman 2004) and this should be clear in the proposal. Indeed a list of research methods and tasks is not enough to define a methodology; an argument must be given as to why those methods are the best feasible approach (Przeworski and Salomon 1995) in light of the defined objectives (Saunders et al. 2003). At this stage, students are expected to decide whether they are going to follow a quantitative or qualitative research strategy (sometimes both can be usefully combined). As the name indicates, a quantitative piece of research emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman 2004). Hence, quantitative methods, such as surveys, structured observation, or experiments tend to be preferred for collecting data within the quantitative paradigm (see e.g. Reichardt and Cook 1979; Deshpande 1983; Bryman 2004). Additionally, this paradigm often entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research (Bryman 2004). It is often considered to incorporate a positivist orientation and a view of reality as an external and objective reality (e.g. Bryman 2004), which should be apprehended taking an *"outsider's"* perspective, distant from the data (Deshpande 1983, p. 103). On the other hand, a qualitative study emphasises words rather than quantification (Bryman 2004) and, accordingly, tends to prefer qualitative methods (Deshpande 1983), such as in-depth interviewing, focus group and ethnography (see e.g. Bryman 2004). Qualitative research follows a predominantly inductive, and discovery-oriented, approach (Bryman 2004; Deshpande 1983), embodying a view of social reality as a constantly changing property of individuals' perceptions (Bryman 2004), and aiming to get an "insider's" perspective (Deshpande 1983, p. 103) of the phenomena under study.

As the aforementioned descriptions of quantitative/qualitative strategies hint, researchers' assumptions are likely to influence them towards different methodologies (e.g. Hudson and Murray 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Baker 2001a). Although an account of one's philosophical assumptions is not essential at the research-proposal stage before finalising the methodological choice, it is important for researchers to be aware of their stance. This is especially the case for PhD students who are expected to reflect upon such matters and to incorporate a related section in their theses. This awareness will help in guiding research strategies and in reaching sounder and better informed decisions regarding the consistency of the methodology chosen with researchers' beliefs and research objectives

(see e.g. Morgan and Smircich 1980; Hudson and Murray 1986; Lutz 1989; Goulding 1999). On this matter, Anderson (1986) regrets the lack of explicit connection made by most researchers between *"abstract philosophical issues"* and *"concrete research practices"* (p. 158), arguing that considerations in this respect should be primary for any discipline that has scientific pretensions and that epistemological issues *"underwrite all of the knowledge claims of a discipline"* (p. 158). In a similar vein, Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue for a more reflective attitude towards understanding the link between favoured techniques and methods of research, and the underlying assumptions of the researcher. They warn that a

> *preoccupation with methods on their own account obscures the link between the assumptions that the researcher holds and the overall research effort, giving the illusion that it is the methods themselves, rather than the orientations of the human researcher, that generate particular forms of knowledge*
>
> (Morgan and Smircich 1980, p. 499).

Hudson and Murray (1986) and Hudson and Ozanne (1988) provide a thorough discussion of the predominant approaches to gaining knowledge in social sciences. Although there is a tendency to categorise schools of thought in a way that they seem independent and mutually exclusive (Deshpande 1983), *the researcher's approach often belongs to a place in* a *continuum*, which can range from an objectivist approach to a subjectivist one (see Deshpande 1983; Hudson and Murray 1986). It is not the purpose of this paper to describe in detail these philosophical approaches. Nevertheless, to support our present discussion, we are going to introduce two major theoretical approaches that have dominated social science research – positivist and interpretivist (Taylor and Bogdan 1998; see also Baker 2001a). According to Hudson and Ozanne (1988) positivists tend to assume a "*realist position*" and that "*a single, objective reality*" exists independently of what is perceived by the individuals, while for the interpretivist there is no single reality - reality is "*essentially mental and perceived*" (p. 509). These ontological assumptions have consequences on the kind of research that scientists assume as valid (Hudson and Murray 1986). Positivists defend the use of the methods of the natural sciences to study social phenomena (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Bryman 2004). In accordance with their ontological stance, they emphasise explanation (Bryman 2004; Murray and Ozanne 1991), search for causes and are likely to adopt data-collections methods such as questionnaires, which produce data amenable to statistical analysis (Taylor and Bogdan 1998).

Interpretivism or phenomenology holds that "*the important reality is what people perceive it to be*" (Taylor and Bogdan 1998, p. 3), and is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perspective (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Accordingly, an *emic* approach, where the interpretation relies on the participant's own terms and understanding (rather than on the researcher's) is argued for (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989; see also Kvale 1983). The phenomenologist strives for understanding or Weber's concept of *verstehen* (Deshpande 1983), and is more inclined towards qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviewing, that yield descriptive data (Taylor and Bogdan 1998).

With Morgan and Smircich (1980) we hold that the *"dichotomization between quantitative and qualitative methods is a rough and oversimplified one"* (p. 499) and that the appropriateness of a qualitative (or quantitative) approach is related to the nature of the phenomena under study and is shaped within the assumptions and the world view to which the researcher subscribes (Morgan and Smircich 1980; see also Hudson and Murray 1986). Furthermore, like Reichardt and Cook (1979), Deshpande (1983) and Silverman (2004), we believe that quantitative and qualitative methods are not inherently incompatible but that when used together within the same research paradigm and for the same purpose, the two can build upon each other and offer insights that neither one alone could. Triangulation, that is the use of more than one method, theory, investigator or source of data in research can provide more confidence in the findings, and compensate the weaknesses of some methods with the strengths of others (Denzin 1989; Deshpande 1983). It can combine a qualitative and a quantitative methodology, but also triangulate two or more qualitative, or two or more quantitative, methodologies. We would like to add a note here that we reject the view that qualitative methods should be used in an exploratory stage of a research only, as a mere antecedent for a quantitative methodology that is considered to represent the main part of a student's work. Qualitative research is still considered by some to be of worth only as a "necessary" but secondary step that the researcher needs to take before embarking in the "real", quantitative study. We believe that this mode of thinking of and doing research stems from a logical-empiricist view of social reality that has dominated the marketing science (see Deshpande 1983). This paradigm was successfully challenged in the eighties (Morgan and Smircich 1980; Deshpande 1983), particularly in the field of consumer research, where there has been a growing use of qualitative, interpretive research (Goulding 1999; Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Finally, we note that the methodology section should also include reference to how data will be analysed, interpreted and how this relates back to the questions or problem posed (see Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

Work schedule

A proposal should also include a realistic work schedule (Hart 1998) or work plan (Krathwohl and Smith 2005). Such a plan, which can be summarised in a timetable, identifies and sequences the several tasks of the research and the time projected to each of them. A *Gannt* chart offers a useful and simple framework for the researcher to organise the tasks of the project against a time line (Saunders et al. 2003). Outlining such a schedule helps both the researcher and the reader of the proposal to assess its viability (Saunders et al. 2003) and is useful to keep the research on due course, encouraging a disciplined use of time (Mauch and Park 2003). It is common for students to outline this schedule for the purposes of filling a research proposal and then forget about its existence. To be valuable, students should print their work schedule out, have it nearby their working space and refer to it frequently "*so that they are continually aware of how your (their) current work fits into the overall time allocated*" (Phillips and Pugh 1994, p. 85).

Bibliography

The correct identification of all published material used is essential in all scholarly research (Baker and Foy 2008) and accordingly, a list of all the sources used and cited is a necessary part of the proposal.

Researchers should consistently use a standard form for citations (such as the Harvard format or that advised in their university's guidelines) and they should include complete entries so that the work cited can be found (Mauch and Park 2003). This also applies to material retrieved from the internet, which citation should include the full web page reference together with the date of access. We have noted with surprise the reference to www.google.com (when the material was on a different site found via the search engine Google) in some students' assignments. Bibliographic software tools such as 'Endnote' can be an important aid in keeping track of all references and maintaining consistency in citations.

It is also important to be selective about the references employed, citing only those references actually used in the document (Mauch and Park 2003). To cite lengthy bibliographies that do not relate directly to the proposal (Krathwohl and Smith 2005) does not give the reader the impression that the writer has done an extensive review but rather raises doubts as to what he/she has actually read and understood. If any idea is taken from a source, that source must be properly acknowledged, otherwise students are guilty of plagiarism. This highlights the importance of keeping referenced notes while reading the sources retrieved for the proposal. Moreover, the reliability and rigour of the source research also needs to be considered before its use and citation. This is especially important with the increasing use of the internet for educational purposes (see Baker and Foy 2008, pp. 79-108). There is, for example, no guarantee of the accuracy of the information posted on Wikipedia (Baker and Foy 2008), although, if used carefully, it can be a useful initial source of an overview.

Rather than valuing an extensive list of references, we agree with Krathwohl and Smith (2005) that the choice of a selected and appropriate bibliography, the competence in evaluating the different contributions and the originality displayed in synthesising the conceptual bases of existing literature and proposed work are what will impress the readers.

Assessing a research proposal

In the following, we propose a series of criteria that can work as a checklist for students to evaluate the quality of their own research proposal.

Are all parts of the proposal rigorously constructed?

Rigour, understood as an ongoing commitment with strict accuracy and honesty (Mauch and Park 2003), is a crucial attribute of a sound research proposal. Lack of rigour alerts the reader to potential problems in conducting the actual research, gives an image of the candidate as sloppy, and discourages possible supervisors. Rigour is demanded in all parts of the proposal. In the title, which should accurately reflect the nature and the scope of the proposal (see Baker and Foy 2008); in the literature review, which should be precise in

the concepts and theories presented, show critical thinking, have solid and sound arguments, be logically structured and correctly referenced (see Hart 1998; Gabbott 2004); in the definition of the problem and objectives, which should be explicit, feasible, clear and unambiguous; in the methodology section, which should be justified, appropriate and well defined (see Baker and Foy 2008); and in the bibliography, which should be complete, detailed and consistently presented (see Baker and Foy 2008). Rigour is also important in the overall presentation, which should be consistent (Baker and Foy 2008), clear and carefully constructed.

Are the claims made in the proposal well founded?

Also contributing to the rigour of one's research proposal is a consistent concern with *supporting* one's *claims* with credible sources and appropriate evidence. Sometimes students set out unsupported claims that they feel to be justified by "common sense". On this topic, it is relevant to refer to Lee with Lings' (2008) note on the differences between "*common sense*" and "*knowledge*" (p. 11), which emphasises that claims that do not rest on a "*body of evidence*", nor on a "*reliable theory*" are not considered "*knowledge*". Even when discussing their beliefs about, for instance the relevance of a topic of research, or the adequacy of a certain methodological approach to the problem at hand, students are expected to justify their views.

In a similar vein, the use of unnecessary adjectives and vague qualifications such as "very" (Hart 1998) or expressions such as "this topic is more and more important" should be discouraged, unless students are certain of the veracity of their claims and can back them up with proper sources. Above all, students should seek to avoid what the Princeton philosopher Frankfurt (2005), in his much-discussed essay on the phenomenon, identified as *bullshit*; that is statements made to give a certain impression without regard for their truth. Apart from any moral concerns, it should be noted that those assessing the proposal will typically be academics and, as such, well practised in detecting this form of deception. The integrity of the investigator in writing the proposal, manifested by developing every part of the document with scrupulous honesty (Mauch and Park 2003), is a basic foundation stone of all the work developed. That includes not being intentionally ambiguous in claims presented.

Is the rationale for the research clear and convincing?

The proposal should show unambiguously that there is a gap in the literature and it should convince the reader of the theoretical and/or practical relevance of filling that gap with the proposed research (and methodology). If possible, the *relevance* of such a study should be further supported with references to authors in the field that have referred to it, for example in a "further research" section of their work.

Is the proposal well-written and logically constructed?

The writing of the proposal also needs to be carefully considered. The *skill* with which a proposal is written will influence directly how it will be assessed. Clarity, consistency and coherence are essential in communicating one's argument (Hart 1998). On this matter, researchers should also be wary

of repetition of ideas and arguments in different parts of the text, without any apparent logic underlying it. Sometimes, however, it might be relevant to go back to a particular idea or argument in different sections of the proposal, to add something to it, relate it to other issues or to stress it in the particular context of the new section. In such cases, expressions such as "as previously mentioned", should be used to alert the reader that the material is being revisited.

A well-written proposal is concise, but still complete, with ideas built logically upon one another (Onwuegbuzie 1997). Saunders et al. (2003, p. 33) refer to "*the extent to which the components of the proposal fit together*" as a criterion for evaluation a research proposal. Indeed, it is most important that the proposal flows logically and that its different pieces read as a unified text, with a clear connecting thread underlying it, rather than as disjointed fragments. Accordingly, and as this article has argued, the rationale for the research should be supported by relevant literature. This literature should inform the research problem or question and objectives, and the proposed methodology should be adjusted to align with the objectives, the nature of the problem and the researcher's assumptions. Finally, the time allocated to the different parts should reflect the methodology chosen and the resources available (see Saunders et al. 2003).

In the interest of good use of language, researchers should avoid the use of overly long sentences, which can be ambiguous and cause the attention of the reader to wander. These sentences should be rewritten and broken down in shorter ones (Hart 1998). Care with a consistent and sound use of grammar (Hart 1998) should also be high amongst researchers' concerns, especially when preparing the final draft of their proposals. The rigorous use of language should be a particular concern for students who are writing in a language that is not their native one. In this case, it may be advisable to have the final draft proofread by a native speaker.

Does the researcher show the ability to conduct the proposed research successfully?

Besides convincing the reader that the research is worth doing, the reader also needs to trust the *ability* of the researcher to address the problems raised effectively. Part of this confidence will depend on the candidate's *curriculum vitae* and/or on a possible conversation with him/her in an interview. However, the intellectual capability of the student to justify decisions, his/her skills in summarising key ideas, presenting alternative viewpoints, demonstrating critical awareness, the capacity to understand and present coherent arguments, together with his/her library and searching skills (see Hart 1998; Przeworski and Salomon 1995) are all apparent in the proposal and will influence the assessment made of the student's potential. Finally, as discussed earlier, the researcher may have previous experience in the field, which can contribute to an impression of competence.

Final considerations

To write a good research proposal is a demanding task and requires high calibre writing skills, organisation, and the intellectual capacity to critically

analyse and evaluate research, both other people's and one's own. It also requires intellectual curiosity on the part of the candidates, together with an intrinsic motivation to enhance their knowledge of the topic. Creativity and an open mind further help in looking at the research topics from novel and relevant angles.

Developing a good proposal takes time, usually longer than was anticipated by the researcher. The sooner one starts, and the more time and thought one puts into it, the more chance there is of producing a satisfactory document (Baker and Foy 2008). It is a wise plan to have a first draft ready well in advance of the deadline, and to discuss it with other people (Przeworski and Salomon 1995). It is especially important to do this with those than can contribute to the document, such as supervisors, colleagues and even relatives, who can point out relevant and unexpected questions or problems with the proposal. Criticism is sometimes unwelcome, especially when one has spent a long time developing such a document and feels emotionally involved with it (see Gordon 2003). In this regard, we support Gordon's (2003) contention that the student should not become defensive but rather believe that all observations are meant as well intended and constructive. After writing a first draft, it might be also helpful to interrupt the process and go back to it a few days later (if the deadline allows). In so doing, the distance created between the proposal and the writer, allows him/her to revisit the work with a fresh, critical look. In any case, researchers are expected to revise their drafts extensively until they communicate the intended proposal as effectively as possible (Przeworski and Salomon 1995). During the whole process, researchers might find it helpful to keep a diary where they can write down notes and ideas as they spring to mind, at different times of the day, even when they are not working on the proposal. It is sometimes in those occasions that the best ideas arise.

It is our hope that this article can help researchers to write a research proposal and that it signals common problems they might face in this process. Table 1, offers a summary of the most common problems we have encountered in students' proposals and suggests ways to overcome those problems. It should be clear that the process of undertaking a good research proposal demands rigour, integrity, consistency, creativity, critical thinking, discipline and hard work. We finish by noting that much of the same can be said about the process of doing good research.

Table 1 Research proposal: common problems and solutions

Stages	Common problems	Things to remember
Choosing a research topic	• Lack of ideas (or too many ideas) • Ideas not feasible to research or that will not add to existing knowledge	• Keep an open mind • Read recommendations for further studies • Talk with supervisors and other knowledge people in the area • Keep notes of possible topics well in advance • Consider potential for a novel contribution of a thesis developed around that topic • Consider the feasibility of researching that topic • Consider how the topic chosen motivates you and your potential supervisor • Drawing a mind map might be useful
Title	• Too generic, vague and/or long • Does not reflect the essence of the proposal	• Be succinct and precise • Reflect upon the scope and the core of your proposal
Introduction	• Confusing • Overly long • Not clear, or not explicit about what the major problem or issue to research is • Not clear, or not explicit about what the rationale for the research is • Identification of the problem or issue to research too late in the text	• Focus • Be concise • Consider the impact of the first statement • Do not leave too long before introducing the major problem or issue to research • Be clear about the novelty of and the rationale for the research • Present the structure of the proposal • Rewrite the final draft at the end of the proposal
Literature review	• Failure to identify key studies and concepts • Lack of a logical flow • Insufficient explanation of the claims made • Lack of integration of contributions on particular themes • Lack of critical analysis • Unclear identification of the gap • Use of other authors' ideas without proper references • Overuse of quotations • Too much time reading before starting to write	• Remember rigour and integrity • Devote special attention to key articles, review articles and be aware of ranking of journals • Read with a purpose and take notes when reading • Adopt a critical thinking • Relate (rather than just list) and contrast ideas and theories • Support your statements • Produce a structure to deliver the review in a unified and logical manner • Conclude by clarifying the gap in the field • Be precise and consistent in citations • Use time efficiently

Cont'd...

Stages	Common problems	Things to remember
Definition of problem and aims of the research	• Lack of explicit link with the literature and with the gap identified • Lack of detail and justification • Not feasible (too ambitious for the time and/or resources available)	• Draw on the review and on the gap identified • Be precise and detailed • Be realistic: consider the time and resources you have available
Methodology	• Not properly justified • Not suited to aims of research and/or nature of the research problem • Not enough detailed	• Show appropriateness of methodological decisions to aims of research and nature of the problem • Consider consistency between the methodological decisions and your assumptions • Be complete in justifying your choices (but still focused) • Consider methods for collecting data, analysing and interpreting the findings
Work schedule	• Incomplete • Not realistic • Tends to be forgotten (after submitting the proposal)	• Carefully consider all the tasks of the project and estimate the "real" time you have available • Have it nearby when undertaking the research project
Bibliography	• Incomplete entries and absence of references cited before • References listed but not cited • Inconsistencies in citing	• Check all your references in the text and see if you have listed them all in the bibliographic section (and no more than those) • Check if your entries are complete (e.g. lack of volume number of a journal article, lack of page numbers) • Check for consistency • Use bibliographic software tools such as Endnote
Overall	• Lack of justification and unfounded claims • Lack of focus • Lack of integration of ideas and arguments • Lack of critical analysis • Problems with citations	• Remember rigour and integrity • Be consistent • Support your claims • Relate ideas and arguments • Have an open mind and welcome criticism • Think critically • Remember writing skills • Remember organisational skills • Star soon and rewrite several drafts

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Appendix 1 - see p. 168

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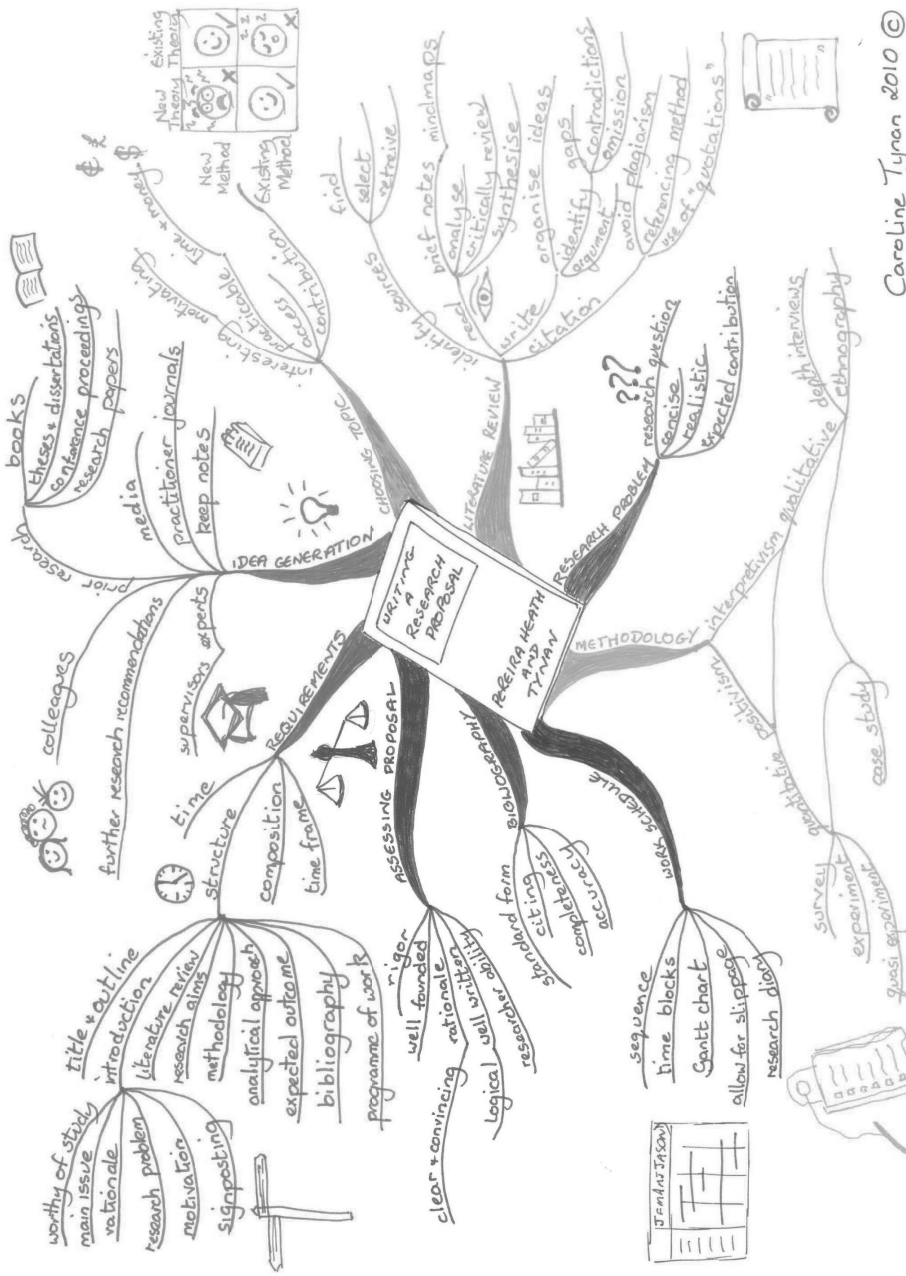
Appendix 1 Crafting a research proposal mindmap



Note: A colour version of the mindmap is available on the journal website at: www.themarketingreview.com.

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