

How to write a research proposal

**Good Practice in Action 020
Fact Sheet**

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with BACP's current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of research.

Using Fact Sheet resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. The Fact Sheet resources are not contractually binding on members but are intended to support practitioners by providing general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication, in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided.

As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends discussion of practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consulting a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy.

The terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care.

Introduction

If you have been asked to write a research proposal in the context of the counselling professions, it is likely that you are a student preparing to undertake research at undergraduate or postgraduate level, or you are a researcher applying for a grant from a funding body such as a research council, charity or the NHS. Whether you have written a research proposal before or it is your first time, it can be a daunting process so this resource aims to alleviate some anxiety by guiding you through the process step-by-step. It starts by exploring what a research proposal is, why they are important and the criteria they are evaluated on:

1. So, what is a research proposal?

A research proposal is a concise and coherent summary of your proposed research. More specifically, it outlines why the research should be done and how it will be done. The aim of a research proposal is to demonstrate to the reader that the intended project is feasible within the constraints of time and resources available to you, and that you have the ability to successfully undertake and complete the research (Donati, 2015).

2. Why are research proposals so important?

There are a multitude of reasons why writing a research proposal is so important, however the main two are:

- the process of writing a research proposal is a very effective way of getting to know your research – it identifies which parts of your project you are clear and confident about and which areas require more exploration
- it is an opportunity for you to demonstrate originality of your research and that you have the aptitude to undertake this research. In some cases, the proposal also helps to match your research interest with an appropriate supervisor.

At this stage, it may help to consider the criteria used to evaluate a research proposal in order to aid your understanding of what a research proposal should entail (adapted from McLeod, 1999):

- a. Does the proposal give a clear and concise account of what is intended to happen and why?
- b. Is the proposal informed by relevant literature and methods previously used within the field?
- c. Do the proposed methods and analyses enable the research question to be appropriately answered?
- d. Is the study ethically sound and does it follow ethical guidance?

- e. How does the research add to previous knowledge on this topic? Is it innovative?
- f. Is the study good value for money? (if applying for funding).

3. What should I include in my research proposal?

TOP TIP: Before you begin, know what your institution/funding body are looking for in a research proposal. Each institution/funding body will be slightly different so do not lose marks by not following their criteria.

As mentioned above, the exact content, structure and length of a research proposal are likely to vary depending on the purpose for which it is written and different research panel requirements. However, most research proposals incorporate the following areas:

- Title
- Abstract
- Research question and rationale
- Background literature and theoretical framework
- Methodology and sampling
- Ethical considerations
- Data analysis
- Resources and costs
- Dissemination.

TOP TIP: Keep it simple. Do not overcomplicate your research or use jargon, aim to keep the reviewer's attention.

3.1 Title

A good title should be simple and informative. It needs to clearly convey the topic and nature of the research. To start off it may help to identify some 'key words' that relate to your research and the key questions it aims to explore. It may be difficult to determine your title before you conduct the research but articulating what your research is about in a succinct way is a good test of how clear and focused your thinking is at this stage.

REMEMBER: If you are finding it challenging to identify a title, you can always modify it at a later stage.

3.2 Abstract

An abstract is a short summary of a research paper/thesis. The function is to highlight key content areas such as research context, question and rationale; as well as briefly describing the research participants, the methods used to gather and analyse data and the proposed contribution to the literature.

TOP TIP: Typically, an abstract is expected to be between 150 – 250 words in length, however, check the guidance from your institution/funding body as the expected word count often varies.

3.3 Research questions and rationale

REMEMBER: This is your research. Don't be put off by the proposal process – instead use this opportunity to firm up your research question, how this will be answered and why this is so important.

Research question:

The research question clearly outlines the precise objectives and focus of your research. It must be a question that can be investigated constructively, taking into account the time and resources available. Research proposals can often be too broad, especially if the question is self-generated, so be sure to reflect on your research question in order to ensure your project is narrow and feasible.

TOP TIP: If you are responding to a call or tender from a particular funder ensure that the research question fits the theme of the 'call for research'.

Research rationale:

Once you have outlined your research question you need to explain the justification for your research; in other words, why are you doing this research? At this stage it may help to consider the following (Donati, 2015):

- a. What is the gap in the current knowledge base?
- b. Does this gap have significant implications for the topic area and/or professional practice?
- c. Will the research you are outlining contribute to addressing this gap?
- d. How will the findings from your research make a valuable contribution to theory and/or practice within this field?

TOP TIP: A common pitfall in research proposals is not outlining (in clear and concise terms) a coherent and persuasive argument for your proposed research, so keep your reviewer's attention by having a clear research question and rationale.

4. Review of the literature on the topic

Your proposal will need to describe the literature that already exists in your topic area. Further, this section should discuss the most important theories, models and previous research that surround and influence your research questions. The aim here is to place your project in the larger context of the topic area, whilst demonstrating that your work is original and innovative. Do not be afraid to challenge the conclusions of prior research. Assess what you believe is missing and state how previous research has failed to adequately examine the issue that your study addresses, as this ultimately justifies and provides the motivation for your project.

It may help to think of this section as providing the foundation for your research i.e., what does previous research suggest in this topic area and how does that relate to your research question?

TOP TIP: For further information and guidance relating to undertaking a literature review please see Good Practice in Action 015 Fact Sheet: *How to do a literature search*.

5. Methodology and sampling

It is important to present the proposed research methodology to outline how the research will be conducted but also *why* this is the most appropriate methodology. In this section you need to outline the type of research and data you will be using to answer your research question. It may be worth including samples of questionnaires or interview schedules in the appendices. As well as describing *how* the data will be collected, your proposal should be clear *why* the approach you have chosen is the best one for answering your question. For instance, there are a variety of research methodologies so why have you chosen this particular method? Describe the overall research design by building upon and drawing examples from your review of the literature.

Consider not only methods that other researchers have used but methods of data gathering that have not been used but perhaps could be.

TOP TIP: The key here is to demonstrate your research is feasible and that you have chosen the most appropriate methodology to collect and analyse your outcomes.

Once you have explained your methodology, it is also important to consider where you will get your data from. For instance, will you be seeking research participants, or will you be retrieving data from naturalistic observations or previous research? If you are using research participants, it is worth outlining your inclusion and exclusion criteria i.e. if you are interested in self-reported outcomes in males over 50 years of age, an inclusion criteria would be males aged over 50. Further, it is important to define your recruitment method for participants. If you are affiliated with an institution who has agreed to provide you with access to participants then this must be mentioned, with evidence of agreement if possible.

Along with defining your proposed research methodology it is also important to consider how you will analyse your data. Be specific with the methods you intend to apply (i.e. quantitative and/or qualitative analyses) and a brief rationale for why these methods are the most appropriate for your data.

6. Ethical issues and considerations

REMEMBER: Most institutions will have their own guidelines or codes of conduct for undertaking research – make sure you are familiar with the content of these guidelines and recognise the relevance to your work.

Your proposal will need to show that you are aware of the ethical dimensions of your research project and how these will be addressed (Donati, 2015). It will also need to be written in accordance with BACP *Ethical Guidelines for Research* which you can download here: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/research/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-research-in-the-counselling-professions/>. It is necessary to give careful consideration to ethical issues at all stages of the research process. In particular, it is vital to outline how you will maintain the wellbeing and confidentiality of your participants. Prior to your research there are four key questions to consider (adapted from McLeod, 2003):

- a. What harm might possibly occur to any of the participants in the study, or to those excluded from the research?
- b. What procedures can be established to minimise harm and also to respond appropriately to distress or needs stimulated by participants in the study?
- c. How can the confidentiality of information gathered during the research be safeguarded and maintained?
- d. What are the broader ethical and moral implications of the study?

If you are unsure whether you require ethical approval for your study visit the Health Research Authority's decision tool which helps to determine if your study requires ethical approval (Health Research Authority, 2017). Most research carried out in institutionalised settings will usually have guidance on ethics which the research should comply with. Those working within the NHS will be required to have ethics committee approval. Further information regarding research ethics and conducting research in counselling and psychotherapy can be found in Bond (2004).

TOP TIP: If you have a supervisor at this stage it is advisable to consult with them to discuss any ethical processes your research may involve.

7. Resources and costs

In order to give the reader a detailed overview of your proposed research they will require an itemised resources list, as well as any financial costs required to complete your research.

At this stage, it is best to list all anticipated costs (i.e. equipment, facilities, stationery and travel costs). Where there is a cost implication, provide a realistic cost estimate and indicate who will be paying for this.

REMEMBER: To include the cost of supervision. Depending on your institution/funding body this may be included; however, double-check as supervision is paramount in the research process and it will need to be considered in the costing.

TOP TIP: It is easy to under-estimate this section, but resourcing and costing are particularly important as they not only set out the budget, but they also show the potential funding institution how the money invested will be spent.

8. Timetable of research

A timetable of your proposed project will be essential in a research proposal as it will give the funder (and you) a realistic idea of how long the research is going to take. Against the subheadings of each stage of your research indicate when that part of the research will be happening, and how long it will take. It is important to consider a variety of factors when completing this stage such as unexpected difficulties in the research process, personal commitments, whether you will be writing up as you go along or all at the end and the amount of input from other members of the research team.

TOP TIP: The duration of each stage depends on the size of your project and context of your research – discuss this with your supervisor in order to provide realistic estimates.

The key here is to break down the research project into small chunks, with interim deadlines, to help manage the overall process, sustain motivation and keep on top of the research project (Donati, 2015).

9. Dissemination of results

Dissemination involves communicating the findings of your research to the communities within your topic field. There are a variety of dissemination routes, some of which may not be relevant, but can include presenting at a research conference, publishing a paper in a peer-reviewed journal, internal seminars and reporting to stakeholders. There are a number of benefits of dissemination, both personal and professional, which can often be overlooked. It not only contributes to the evidence-base but it provides an opportunity for critical evaluation which enhances the validity of findings, creates opportunities for new perspectives leading to new research ideas and enhances possible implications for practice (Reeves, 2015).

Many researchers undertake research but do not disseminate it further than required, which can often lead good quality research to become meaningless. If you have gone to the difficult lengths of writing a proposal, possibly securing funding and submitting a thesis, it follows that your research will only make a contribution in your field if others get to hear about it.

TOP TIP: Don't overlook dissemination, if you are required to submit a thesis, think about other routes you can explore to disseminate your research and findings.

10. Conclusion: Summary and keeping 'cool'

The conclusion provides a brief summary of your entire study, whilst reiterating the importance and significance of your proposed research. This section should be only one or two paragraphs long, emphasising why the research problem is worth investigating, why your research study is unique, and how it should advance existing knowledge.

11. What else do I need to consider in my proposal?

Whilst the key subheadings outlined above provide the reader which a detailed overview of *what* your research aims to address, *how* the research will be conducted and *why* your research is important there are some other factors which may be relevant depending on your proposal criteria.

First of all, it may be useful to provide some information about the research team detailing clinical and/or research experience and any previous disseminations. The qualifications and experience of the research team; as well as the tasks of each researcher and time commitments, will further provide the reader with a detailed overview of how this research will be undertaken and the level of experience involved.

Second, the proposal should include a short reference list identifying the research cited in your proposal and the most relevant research to your topic. Referencing is absolutely essential so don't lose marks by not including a referencing list or referencing incorrectly. Check which referencing style your institution/funding body uses and adopt that referencing style.

TOP TIP: It is usually APA or Harvard – see the referencing list for links to these guidelines.

Finally, some proposals may require details of referees. Again, check with your institution/funding body before you submit and consider the most appropriate referee to list.

Submission

Before you submit, it is absolutely essential you have checked the guidelines of the institution/funding body, if your proposal does not follow their guidelines it is likely you will lose valuable marks – as well as the reader's attention. Additionally, it is equally as important to proofread your work, it is easy to miss errors, especially when you have been immersed in your proposal so as well as proofreading your work, get others to check it too.

Finally, well done on completing your research proposal. This marks an important step in your research journey and transitions you from initial planning to the active stage of carrying out your research. Further, having your proposal reviewed and approved by other academics and researchers will give you confidence in the value of your research (Donati, 2015).

TOP TIP: Before you submit get the proposal reviewed and commented on by others – the more diverse opinion and criticism you receive on your proposal the better suited it will be for a multi-disciplinary audience.

Summary

In order for your research proposal to be considered, it is essential you have outlined or at least given thought to each heading noted above. Each section adds a new layer to your research and helps to develop a detailed understanding of your research question and how that adds to the current research literature. As stated above, give plenty of time and consideration to your research literature, this will help to identify how your research is innovative. Finally, be sure to know exactly what your institution is looking for and how they expect proposals to be formatted – you don't want to lose marks or their interest.

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Leah Drewitt is currently a Senior Assistant Psychologist at St Andrews Healthcare, Northampton. Prior to this role Leah was a Research Intern and Research Officer at BACP. In this role Leah undertook a mixed-methods piece of research exploring practitioner's experiences of learning and implementing Counselling for Depression in routine practice settings. More recently, Leah has completed and presented research on the use of outcomes to tackle complex cases in psychiatric intensive care units. Leah has extensive clinical experience in adult mental health, including but not limited to, borderline personality disorder, psychosis and working in psychiatric intensive care units.

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