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How to write an undergraduate marketing dissertation proposal

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HOW TO WRITE
AN UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

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Contents

Why should I write a proposal?

If this is the first time you have undertaken a dissertation, you may feel a little intimidated (White, 2000) at the idea of producing a proposal. As such, you may be asking yourself 'Why do I need to write a proposal?' The first and obvious reason is that it is part of the summative assessment of the dissertation, and carries a weight equal to 20% (this may be different at other universities), of the overall grade for the dissertation module. The second reason is that it is a very important process, which "makes you think carefully about what you want to do." (White, 2000). Therefore, it allows you and your supervisor the opportunity to appreciate what it is you are attempting to accomplish with your research. As Walliman (2005: p. 69) writes:

> Not only is this the main opportunity to crystallize your thoughts before you embark on the project, it is also a sober consideration of how much you will be able to actually achieve within the few weeks/months allowed.

What is a proposal?

It is basically a considered description of what it is you wish to accomplish with your research, and "…how you intend to carry out the work involved till [sic] its completion." (Walliman, 2005: p.68). Therefore a proposal is:

> …a summary of the work you have to do for the dissertation. It outlines the aims, methods, and other features of the work…It includes a statement as to the nature and purpose of the study, together with some account of the background of the subject. (White, 2000: p.68)

Remember at the undergraduate level you are not expected to produce the same discussions that a masters or PhD student would. However, you are expected to produce useful insights into your chosen subject area, by the careful and relevant application of research theory and methods. The proposal is relatively condensed, that is, it is only 1,500-2,000 words in length. As such, a great deal of thought needs to be put into its production in order to cover the necessary elements required to convey what it is you are attempting to accomplish. The elements of a proposal may include:

- Title
- Rationale for study
- Aim and objectives
- Literature review
- Methodology
    - Philosophies to be adopted and why;
    - Whether the research is qualitative, quantitative, or a mixed-method approach;
    - Sampling method(s) and sample size;
    - Questionnaire design – structured; semi-structured, or unstructured;
        - Postal, electronic, or undertaken by the research face-to-face with participant.
    - Interview schedule design
    - Offer an indication on the reliability and validity of the research to be undertaken;
    - Give an indication of how you intend to reduce research bias;
    - Data analysis – how the data will be analysed, PASW or Excell;
    - Possible limitations to the study;
    - Highlight the research ethical guidelines you intend to comply with (identify that you are aware of any ethical forms you need to have completed and signed by your supervisor before you commence your primary research); and
    - Suggestion of the time-frame for the study – usually in the form of a Gantt chart.
- Bibliography
- Appendices

Title

Here you will need to be succinct (See Quinlan, 2011), and use only a few words to summarise your entire study, e.g. "*The Effects of New Media on the Future of Television Advertising.*" Remember this will remain flexible, and will only be a ‘working title’ until you have finished your research, upon which, you will be able to finalise your title that reflects your completed study. This is ***important***, the ‘working title’ should be one that keeps you interested, and motivated for the period of the study.

Rationale/Background

You should not assume that the reader of your proposal knows the subject area you are researching; by the same token you should not insult their intelligence. Therefore, your rationale/background should inform the reader about “…the context of the project and where it fits in with current thinking.” (Walliman, 2005: p.71). A good rationale/background will also evidence to your supervisor that you have read around your subject area. You will also need to provide a reason/justification for your study, that is, who may be interested in your research, and why.

Defining the research problem

This will largely be dependent on the issues you have highlighted in your rationale/background section of your proposal. Therefore, “…you should be able to identify the particular part of the subject that you wish to investigate.” (Walliman, 2005: p.72). It is crucial that you recognise that any subject you choose to study, could in fact, be researched for a number of years, or even a lifetime. Subsequently, you need to isolate one key area of the subject that you can manage; especially given the length of time you are given in which to undertake your study. But, it should still be able to take you out of your ‘comfort zone’ in order to stretch you, and give you the opportunity to evidence your new found knowledge and skills that you have gained from undertaking a piece of unique research. Yes! Unique, because, even if a fellow student undertakes a similar study to yours, it will still be completely different, as they are not you. Therefore, they should have a very different way of approaching the study, and observe things differently to you; so do not get upset or stressed if you learn that another student is undertaking research on a similar subject area. A word of caution needs to be given here. Do not be tempted to share you work with a fellow student, as you may find that software programmes like ‘Turnitin UK’ (a national database of all theses and assignments submitted at any university or college in the UK), may find a match, and your supervisor may then suspect collusion, or copying; do not be tempted. This is ***your*** chance to shine, and show what you have learned; do not let this unique opportunity pass you by.

Aim and Objectives

The aim will provide a succinct summary of the study, which should be general and all encompassing (Quinlan, 2011).

The research objectives must have a measurable outcome. They allow you to break your research down into questions you want to answer. You can then turn these questions/areas of study in ‘**action**’ statements, and ensure that they achieve a specific ‘outcome’. When setting objectives, they need to be set out as bullet points, and should consist of no more than five (you can go to six, if needed), bullet points, and no less than four bullet points. Good words to use when setting measurable objectives are:

- To identify…
- To determine…
- To create…
- To establish…
- To illustrate…
- To analyse… (Jackson, 2009)

Literature review

This is the foundation of any research undertaking and where you will identify the key areas, you wish to study. It is from undertaking a literature review that allows you to narrow down your chosen subject area, and identifies any areas for further study.

The literature review is where you will compare and contrast different key authors' views on the subjects/concepts/theories under discussion, before applying them to your study. However, you will not be able to undertake this fully in the proposal due to the limit placed on the word count. But it should still be able to give enough of a flavour of the different views on the subject(s) you are discussing and, just has important, of your ability to write academically. Do not worry about this too much as you will make initial errors until you progress further with your studies. Nevertheless, this important exercise allows your supervisor to gauge where you are at, in terms of academic writing. Your supervisor will guide you on how to improve your academic writing, and it may also be prudent to see the academic skills tutor(s). This will not just benefit you for your proposal/dissertation, but also for any other written pieces of work, you may have to submit. The work you produce here can be used in the main dissertation, but obviously, it will need expanding up on and self referenced to avoid self-plagiarising – this means you reference both yourself and your proposal in the dissertation.

As with any academic pieces of work, one should always provide an introduction; you should do this for each chapter in the main dissertation. However, for the proposal, I would suggest that you write an introduction to give an indication of the subject areas to be covered in the main dissertation and highlight your understanding of what a literature review is. Further, you should then select one of these subject areas you have indicated you will be reading around, to formulate your discussion for the proposal. You will need to be reading widely, and it is highly recommended that you use journal articles to formulate your discussion, as they tend to be both current and/or contemporary. Avoid the use of 'Wikipedia', as this is frowned upon by both academics, and the university (this may not be the case for other universities).

Methodology

The methodology is similar to a system or procedure, in that it is a blueprint (plan) or framework on how you will go about collecting your data. This sounds a relatively simple task to undertake, however, it is (from my experience) one of the main areas where many students lose valuable marks. The methodology should be approached with the same rigor as the literature review, as it can be viewed, in essence, like a literature review of research design, where you use key authors to support your discussions, and to help justify the reasons for one adopted approach over another. A key model to use here is Sanders *et. al.*(2009) Research Onion, which will help keep you focused on what you have to incorporate within your methodology. Areas that you should include are:

Introduction – What is a methodology; only one or two sentences are needed here. It should say what a methodology is, and why it is undertaken.

Philosophies – This is where you will choose one or more philosophies, for example interpretivism and positivism, and why you have chosen these. You should highlight the advantages and disadvantages of the philosophy(ies) adopted and why you have adopted them.

The quantitative v qualitative debate - There are two schools of thought on research design, one is the quantitative school, the other is the qualitative school. Some researchers believe that you should adopt one research approach or the other, and there are those that vehemently argue that only quantitative approaches are viable, as qualitative research is too subjective. However, you need not worry too much about this at undergraduate level, *but you do need to be aware of it*, as your supervisor may fall into one of these schools of thought. It may be prudent to ascertain which school your supervisors prefers (if any) and then discuss with your supervisor why you wish to adopt a particular approach.

Having said this, remember that, this is your project, not your supervisors; your supervisor is there to guide you, not undertake the work for you. Whilst on this point, it is important that you make, attend, and keep to scheduled meetings with your supervisor. However, as long as you can substantiate and validate your approach to your supervisor for your research, you should be ok. As I indicated previously, if you feel comfortable adopting a particular philosophy or philosophies, that is fine, but you will need to say why you have used this approach over those not selected, and how and why it fits with your research (Quinlan, 2011).

Research design – here you will consider the practicalities of the research:

Sampling – you need to show your intended sample size – 100 is the norm for the use of quantitative questionnaires/surveys in an undergraduate piece of research. In addition, whether you are using non-probability sampling or probability sampling, and the number of interviews/focus groups you may be planning to use. You may need to agree the number of interviews needed with your supervisor, but 6-10 is usually acceptable for this level of study (Robson, 2002).

Questionnaire design/Structure – Is the questionnaire going to be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured? You will need to indicate the types of questions that you are going to use, e.g. 'Likert scales', opinion questions, closed questions, or open-ended questions.

Piloting – you will need to pilot the questionnaire in order to ensure that it is collecting the necessary data needed to answer the set research objectives for the study. Walliman (2005; p.168) writes "If you can, test it on people of a type similar to that of the intended sample to anticipate any problems of comprehension, or other sources of confusion."

Pre-coding/Post-coding – this is where you will pre-code the data for entry into SPSS – the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Robson, 2002: p.392), which is now known has 'Predictive Analytics SoftWare (PASW), or Excel when the questionnaire comes back. For example for a question that asks about gender may look something like the following: "Please indicate your gender": Male ☐$_1$ Female ☐$_2$; the numbers are the pre-coding. This can be undertaken on questions that are closed, or scaling in nature. However, with open-ended questions you will have to wait for the data to come back before you can start coding it. You will need to look for similarities in the answers provided, give them a category, and then post code them. For example, suppose one of your questions asks the respondent to indicate their official job title, you then start to compile the different categories, i.e. manager, account manager, marketing assistant etc., and then post-code them similar to the pre-coding method above.

Interviews – these tend to be viewed as qualitative research as you are endeavouring to gain people's views/perceptions/opinions on the subjects you raise for discussion, in order to answer all or part of your research objectives. You will need to design an interview schedule, which is for your use, and not the participant's use. It is a kind of an 'aide memoir'. One way to do this is to set it out in table (see Table 1).

Table 1:

In this section you would place the script that you would read to the participant. It basically will lay out the reason for the research, why it is being undertaken, and the ethics employed, e.g. seeking permission (informed consent) to tape record the interview. Also about the participant's rights to anonymity etc.	
Q1. Just to get the interview started, how long have you being in marketing?	If answers just one or two years, ask them to elaborate on what they have done
Q2. What do you think of the comments that advertising is dead?	If gives just one answer, probe participant further. Ask him/her to elaborate on interesting points raised.
Q3.	
Q4.	

(Feather, 2009)

You can see from the table that you will have your questions in the left-hand column, and in the right-hand column you will have comments to remind you to probe for a deeper understanding by asking the participant to elaborate on interesting points that they raise. You can also use the right-hand column to make notes on points raised that you may wish to revisit once the participant has finished talking, so you do not disrupt their train of thought, and the flow of the interview.

There are many data collection techniques, and you can find these in any good research design books. The university also has a website that aids students to understand the different research methods and tools available to researchers; this can be found at http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/. Remember, you will need to justify why you have adopted one technique over another, and the advantages and disadvantages of the different techniques to be used.

Data analysis (Quantitative) – in this section you will need to establish which software package or analytical technique you are going to employ. For example, you may decide to use PASW (SPSS) or Excel to analyse your quantitative data. Most students opt for PASW, because it reproduces the calculations in tablature format, which is the advantage over Excel as this only shows the graphs, but not necessarily the calculations.

Data analysis (Qualitative) – there is also software available for the analysis of qualitative data, this is known as NU:DIST – Non-numerical, Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing (Robson, 2002: p.456). It allows you to look for similarities in the transcripts you have entered into the programme, and then to produce different data to either support or formulate your discussions in the 'findings and analysis' section of your main dissertation.

Reliability and Validity – you need a short statement here about the reliability and validity of your research. Walliman (2005: p.133) writes, "It is…a rash researcher who insists on the infallibility of his or her data, and of the findings derived from them."

Data can be misleading because it is elusive and ephemeral (Walliman, 2005). You are capturing data at a point in time, and therefore if you asked the same people the same questions in a day, a month or in a year's time, it is highly likely that you would acquire different data to that collected earlier. This is because people, their environments, and other factors change. For example, you may have interviewed a person on a particular day, where earlier they had been praised for doing a good job, and received a promotion. A month later, you may go back and interview the same person, and find that the answers you are receiving are out of kilter with the ones you gained earlier; what you may not have been aware of prior to your interview is that they had just been made redundant. Therefore, you are going to obtain data from a person in different 'mind sets', one positive, the other negative.

Concerning validity Walliman (2005; p.123) writes "The validity of deductive arguments is determined only by their logical form, not by the content of the statements which they contain." He goes onto say "When the premise or premises of such an argument are related to the conclusion in such a way that the conclusion must be true if the premises are true, then the argument is said to be 'valid'. Any argument where this is not the case is called invalid." (Walliman, 2005: p.123).

Bias – Again you should have a short statement on how you are going to manage this and the different types of bias that may influence your research. For example, you are stood in a shopping precinct, and you have stated in your sample section that you are going to use your questionnaire on every fifth person that passes you. Four people walk past, and you look at the fifth person walking towards you. You find that he is a big burley man, with long hair, tattoos all the way up his arms, and has metal chains hanging from his nose to his ear. He looks like he has not had a wash in weeks, and he is talking to himself. During this summarisation of this person, you quickly decide to let him walk past, and you look to the floor so you do not make eye contact; the man passes you by. You have just practiced what is called 'selective bias' (Torgerson and Torgerson, 2003).

Limitations – In this section, you should identify the limitations you foresee having a possible impact upon your research. For example, sampling identification, or access to people you need to interview. Time limitations could be another factor, remember you will have other assignments to undertake whilst you are trying to conduct your research; you even may be holding down a full- part-time job. Resources also need to be considered as your research is self-funded, that is, you will have to produce questionnaires, print them off, post them etc.

Ethical considerations – **All** research will have some ethical considerations, for example, participant anonymity; the person taking part in the interview or completing the questionnaire have rights, and these must be upheld. If you are considering interviewing children, this could be problematical, as there are CRB (Criminal records Bureau) checks to consider; these are costly. Alternatively, you would have contact the parents to gain parental consent, or the head teacher of the school, but again, this can be time consuming, and not without some cost, therefore probably best avoided. However, this is where your supervisor will be of help as she or he will be able to offer up alternative solutions, and guide you in the right direction. You may also need to reflect upon possible moral dilemmas, or health and safety issues in regard to both yourself, and that of your participants. A good start concerning research ethics is to check out the policies set by professional bodies such as the:

'British education Research Association (BERA) at www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php or the,

'Market Research Society' at www.mrs.org.uk/code.htm

Time Frame – In this section, you will identify when you are going to start and finish the different tasks needed to complete the dissertation. A simple way to do this is via a 'Gantt Chart', (see Appendix A for an example).

Assessment

You will need to submit two hard copies, one electronic copy to 'Turnitin UK'; you will find this in the 'assignment' section of the module on Blackboard – check your module booklet for updates on this. This needs to be done before 10am (for the University of Huddersfield) on the date set for handing in the proposal.

The hard copies must have attached the official school assignment covers, which can be downloaded from the university website or unilearn. The electronic copy you upload to 'Turnitin UK' will be scanned as part of the university's plagiarism check. This will also allow your supervisor to check the adherence to the set word limit for the proposal.

Criteria that may be looked for in a dissertation proposal:

First class grade:

- In addition to the criteria set for upper second class grade, there also must be:
- Evidence of extensive reading, and use of literature to substantiate arguments.
- Critical evaluation.
- Depth of insight.
- Originality in exposition.

Upper second class grade:

- Evidence of wide reading.
- Quality and depth of analysis to support sections in the proposal.
- Demonstration of critical evaluation.
- Evidence of good linking of objectives, literature review and methodology.
- Justification of research practicalities adopted, along with advantages and disadvantages of each practicality.
- A well presented report.

Lower second class grade:

- Evidence of a report that indicates NO collusion or collaboration with others in the writing stage.
- Evidence of understanding the research methods and the research practicalities.
- Clearly articulated.
- There may be some evidence of the advantages and disadvantages of one or two research practicalities.
- Demonstrate that the research proposal is relatively sound, and contains a clear description of what the student intends to do.

- Report is clear and well written.
- Some referencing will have been attempted.

Third class grade:

- Proposal is sparse with little or no evidence of wider reading.
- Research practicalities are not fully addressed.
- No discussion around the quantitative or qualitative approaches.
- Little understanding is demonstrated.
- Arguments are not substantiated; little or no references.
- Poor presentation of report, large number of typing errors, and spelling mistakes.
- Insufficient information to reproduce the study.

Fail:

- Report is sparse, no evidence of reading or understanding of research methods, and subject under discussion.
- Numerous errors, omissions or irrelevances.
- No evidence of comparing or contrasting of key authors' views in the literature review, and in the methodology.

Plagiarism

This is an important point ***you must*** consider. The researcher (you) must reference any author's idea or work you use within your own thesis. Your work **must** be your own, and be original; it must not be plagiarised (Jankowicz, 2007, Gray, 2009). Plagiarism is:

> …'copying from someone else's work…Very occasionally, tutors encounter deliberate plagiarism, where an entire project report [or thesis], or a significant section, is taken from another person's work. If they [the tutors] can prove it, the

> consequences are ruinous and terminal for the student concerned. (Jankowicz, 2007: p.56)

SO DO NOT DO IT!

In reality there is more to plagiarism than just copying, therefore, ensure you totally familiarise yourself with your institution's format for referencing (Gray, 2009), and their policies on what they consider to be plagiarism. Today, many institutions are using software to identify and alert the tutor(s) to the possibility of plagiarism (Gray, 2009) within a submitted piece of work. Make sure this does not happen to you. Discuss your referencing with your supervisor, submit regular drafts so they can see how you are using referencing within your work, and make use of the learning development group/academic skills tutors; they are there to help you.

Conclusion

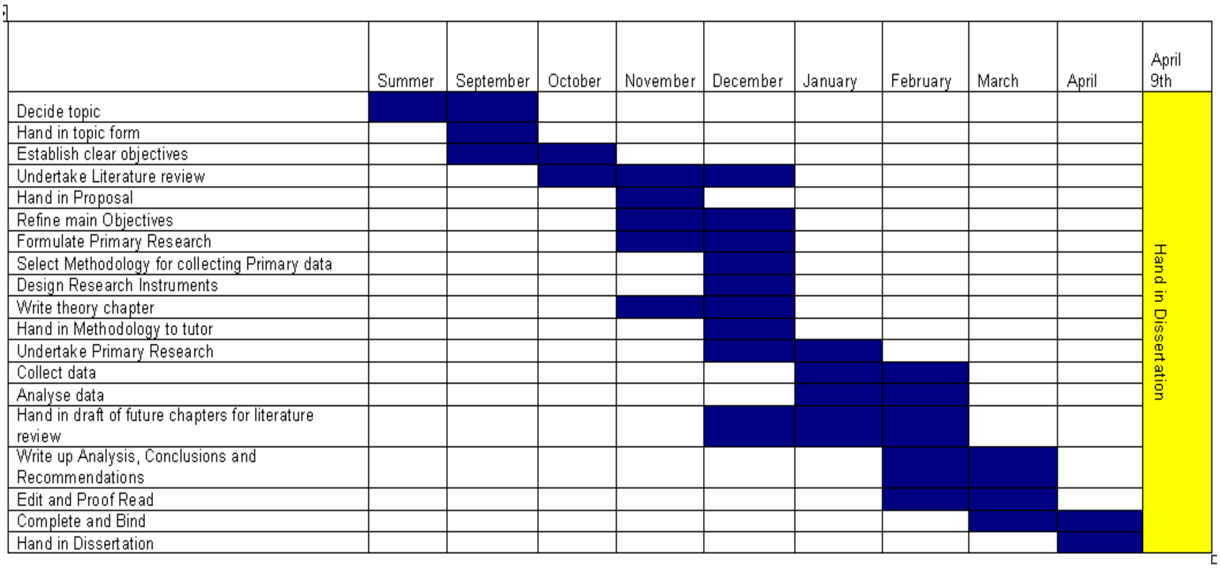
Keep this paper on how to prepare and write a dissertation proposal, or indeed a management project (both must follow the rules and regulations of conducting research) at hand, you may find that you may need to refer to this and other texts regularly.

Make yourself familiar with what is required of you when undertaking the dissertation and the writing of the proposal. This piece of work is very important, it allows you to evidence to employers that you can both work with people and on your own on a major project. It is a unique piece of work, because it is a part of **<u>you</u>**. You designed the research, conducted the research, interpreted the data, and wrote up the findings and analysis. Therefore, enjoy it, and learn the new skills and theories you come in to contact with, you will find them of considerable use in any career you choose to undertake.

I wish you all the best with your studies – your future is before you, take the step.

Appendix A

Gantt chart



Source: Hilton, K. (2008)

It is important to note that this is only a simple pictorial example; your own Gantt chart may vary considerably.

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