Research Guidelines

First Considerations

When presenting a proposal for funding of a research project, the applicant must convince the funding source that he or she is knowledgeable about the topic, able to implement the study as proposed, and competent to carry out all aspects of the research design. Applicants also need to establish gaps in previous research that the proposed study will inform.

The AHNA research proposal, which limited to 3-5 pages, must provide a brief review of the current research literature on the topic, identify the limitations of existing knowledge, succinctly describe the study methods, use standard research terminology to describe the research process, and indicate how the data obtained from this research could advance the science and/or practice of holistic nursing.

Guidelines for writing a research proposal are given here in two parts: Part 1 concerns quantitative research, and Part 2 concerns qualitative research. Also included are some of the common problems that reviewers have seen in previous proposals.

PART 1: Elements of a Quantitative Research Proposal

- **Title and Introduction of the Topic:** Use a title that indicates the focus of the proposed study. The brief introduction (possibly only one paragraph) should include a purpose statement of the proposed research and why the proposed study is needed to advance holistic nursing practice.

- **Literature Review:** Present a brief summary of prior work on the topic, indicating what the next step in research should be and how it specifically supports conducting the proposed study. This section lays out the background and significance of the problem to be studied. The literature review in a proposal does not have to be exhaustive, as it would be in a published final paper, but there has to be enough to demonstrate knowledge about the topic and related issues. This review can be done in a few paragraphs, depending on the topic, and should clearly identify limitations of current research.

- **Statement of Purpose and the Research Question/Hypothesis:** State why the research is being conducted and list the research questions or hypotheses for the proposed study. These should flow from the literature review and be congruent with the study’s design.

- **Research Method:** State what design will be used for the proposed research (e.g., pre-test/post-test, quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups, or a descriptive survey of a defined population to solicit attitudes about the topic). The method must be consistent with the stated research question. For example, if you state that the question is to evaluate the effect of a modality on pain, you should plan an
experimental design; however, if you are looking for relationships between variables, the research should have a correlational design.

- **Conceptual Framework:** Clearly delineate a conceptual framework for the subject of interest and suggest relationships among concepts or variables. If the study is designed to test a published theory (e.g., Pender’s Health Promotion Model), it should be referred to as a Theoretical Framework. This framework should delineate the variables of the study.

- **Research Variables:** Define the variables of interest for the study and provide both conceptual and operational definitions. Explain why you believe the tools used to measure variables are valid and reliable.

- **Study Sample:** Define the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria for your sample. State how you will recruit participants to be in the study and whether you have a random, stratified, convenience, or other type of sample. In most quantitative studies, you also need to state how the sample size was determined. Conducting a power analysis, based on data to be collected and statistical evaluation of that data, is the best way to determine adequate sample size. Remember that you need to account for participants who drop out of a study when establishing a sample.

- **Research Protocol:** Tell the proposal reviewers exactly what you are going to do.

- **Institutional Review Board (IRB):** Report if the proposal already has IRB approval. If not, discuss how you will obtain IRB approval for the study. Address the risks and benefits of the study and how you will protect the participants’ confidentiality.

- **Data Collection:** Explain exactly what data will be collected, how they will be collected, who will collect them, and how they will be analyzed. Describe the statistical tests planned and the probability level set for statistical significance. There must be consistency between the data obtained and the statistical tests used (i.e., parametric statistics require interval level data, whereas non-parametric statistics can be used for nominal and ordinal data). There also should be a consistency between the research questions and the statistical tests used to answer those questions. Many researchers consult with a statistician at the proposal stage, and this is recommended in cases where you have any questions about data analysis.

- **Conclusion:** Make a coherent argument that the study helps to build knowledge and answer important questions. Explain how the data could provide important information to the field of holistic nursing.

**Six Common Problems to Avoid in a Quantitative Research Proposal**

1. Lack of consistency between research question and stated research design.
2. Lack of a conceptual framework, poorly described study sample, and limited description of inclusion/exclusion criteria.
3. No information to indicate that an adequate study sample exists.
4. Use of instruments that are not congruent with the conceptual framework and do not have evidence of validity and reliability.
5. Lack of a description of research protocol.
6. Poorly detailed statistical analysis or use of statistics not consistent with the study's stated purpose

PART 2: Elements of a Qualitative Research Proposal

- **Title and Introduction**: Use a title that indicates the focus of the proposal study. The introduction should be a brief (one paragraph) statement of the research topic and why it is of interest to nurses.

- **Review of the Literature**: Present a brief summary of what is known and the prior research on the topic in order to indicate why the proposed study is needed (many qualitative research designs do not require an in-depth literature review prior to starting the study) and to establish your expertise and knowledge about the topic and the specific qualitative research method being proposed.

- **Sensitizing Framework**: Acknowledge the theoretical framework, particular philosophy, or body of literature that has sensitized you to the need for additional study in this area (e.g., symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, cultural sensitivity).

- **Research Purpose and Research Question**: Tell the reviewers why the proposed study needs to be conducted and what question(s) will be answered by your investigation.

- **Research Method**: Identify which qualitative method, (e.g., Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnographic or Historical methods, etc.) – will be used in the study. For example, if the research method is phenomenology, state if it is descriptive or interpretive (hermeneutic).
  - Research methodology and method must be congruent with the research purpose/question.

- **Research Process**: Describe in detail how you will conduct the research. How will informants/participants be identified and recruited? How will data be gathered (interviews, participant observations, etc.)? How will data be recorded and transcribed (tape recordings, field notes, etc.)? How will you know when enough data are gathered?

- **IRB**: Report if your proposal already has IRB approval. If it does not, tell the reviewers the process for obtaining IRB approval for your study. Address the risks and benefits of the study and how you will protect the participants' confidentiality.

- **Data Analysis**: Describe the planned method of data analysis and how data will be collected, transcribed, reviewed, categorized, and summarized. Of the several standard methods of analyzing qualitative data (e.g., for grounded theory: Strauss, Corbin, Fetterman, Glaser; for ethnography: Eisinger, Mead; for phenomenology: Colazzi, VanManen, Ray, Diekelman), state what method you have selected for the proposed study. Often software packages can assist in organizing data and themes (e.g., Ethnography©, Martin©); if you will utilize software, describe how it will be used. Note: The more detail you provide, the easier it is for reviewers to understand the value of the proposed research. Regarding rigor of the study: discuss the initial research findings with some of the study informants in a phenomenological study; use
key and general informants in an ethnographic study, including a validation of their statements in light of directly observed behaviors; use multiple data sources in historical work; use two researchers to analyze qualitative data in efforts to ensure reliable accounts of interview data where applicable; use bracketing before interviews are conducted; and that rigor is consistent with the methodology and method used.

- **Conclusion**: Explain how the data could provide important information to holistic nursing and make a coherent argument that your study helps build knowledge/science as well as answering important questions.

**Four Common Problems to Avoid in a Qualitative Research Proposal**

1. Lack of congruence between the research purpose/question, methodology and method selected.
2. No identification of research method using standard research terminology.
3. Not enough detail about data analysis.
4. Lack of statements on the general issues of rigor (e.g., credibility, fittingness, and auditability) of the research OR lack of statement addressing why one should believe the data generated will truthfully and accurately describe the phenomena of interest.

While many nurses have not had the opportunity to write research proposals, we hope these guidelines assist you. As a researcher, your goal is to present a well-balanced and sound proposal that clearly defines your study and why it is important to the field of holistic nursing.

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