Writing Winning Proposals for Nurses and Health Care Professionals
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Together, Dr. Funk and Ms. Tornquist have taught proposal writing courses and grant-writing institutes; been awarded grants from the National Institutes of Health, the Division of Nursing, and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; developed a research utilization model; published a dozen refereed articles and edited six books (five of which were honored with AJN Book of the Year awards and two of which were republished in other languages).
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Sandra G. Funk, PhD, FAAN

Elizabeth M. Tornquist, MA, FAAN
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Whether you are evaluating a new solution to a health problem or trying to move a solution into practice; whether you are interested in training health professionals to work more effectively; or whether you want to show professionals how to implement effective solutions, you must know how to write a successful proposal. And you need to do that throughout your career. This book is designed to help nurses and other health professionals develop compelling proposals for PhD dissertations; National Institutes of Health (NIH) research grants, fellowships, and career development awards; and proposals for education, translation, evidence-based practice, and demonstration projects, including those for the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) capstone project.

Our focus is on giving readers the tools to present the work they are proposing with clarity and conviction—and to show others its importance and potential. This focus comes out of our many years of offering workshops and courses on proposal writing, and editing zillions of proposals. In all those years we have found that students and new investigators often want to do more than can be done in one project and they must learn to think about what’s possible, and condense and clarify. At the same time, seasoned investigators sometimes want to just tweak what they have already done, and they must learn to expand. We have also found that investigators often don’t understand that a proposal needs to be written over and over again, not put together in one shot and sent off. Therefore, throughout the book we emphasize the importance of thinking, thinking, and thinking; revising and editing; and always asking others for suggestions.

Essentially, our approach is designed to help people think through what they want to do and describe it clearly and succinctly for others. This is the sort of book that nearly all graduate students and young faculty members
need in order to build their careers. It also will be useful to practitioners who are interested in developing evidence-based practice. The book can be helpful not only to students but also to their instructors who often struggle with teaching methods while also trying to teach writing about methods. This is not a research-methods text but a book about writing proposals; it can be used as a supplement to research-methods texts in master’s level, DNP, and PhD research courses and doctoral seminars.

In Section I: Preparing a Proposal, which we recommend to all readers, we take you through all the parts of developing a proposal, selecting a problem; showing the significance of the problem; describing the work already done on the problem and the need for further work on the problem or its solution; describing your preliminary work, when relevant; and detailing your design and methods. Our aim is to help you think through, organize, and present your ideas, and we include worksheets to aid you in taking the general information we provide and adapting it to your particular project.

In Section II: Types of Proposals, we offer innovative ideas for writing a dissertation proposal or a proposal for a DNP project or other type of evidence-based practice project. Since older models of writing PhD dissertation proposals are not useful when one is seeking funding or real-world approval for evidence-based practice projects, we suggest a more streamlined model for writing PhD or DNP proposals. We provide detailed instructions on how to synthesize relevant literature to make a concise argument for a study and give examples to serve as templates. Then we suggest ways to present methods that are doable and can be carried out in less than a lifetime.

In describing proposals for NIH funding, we give detailed instructions on what content to include and how to organize the Specific Aims section (which is perhaps the most important section of the proposal and is often poorly done), and we provide similar details on writing the Significance, Innovation, and Approach sections. This chapter (Chapter 5) contains in-depth information on writing about the research design and methods. In the chapters on fellowship and career development proposals, we provide clear instructions for developing and presenting your training plan in addition to describing your research plan. And in the educational training grant proposal chapter (Chapter 9), we help you understand what needs to be included in such a proposal, and how to organize and format the information.

In the last two sections, which will be useful to all readers, we offer guidance in composing a title and abstract, preparing the additional materials needed for a proposal, and developing a budget. We also address the processes of writing proposals, submitting a grant proposal, the review, and a possible resubmission.

In sum, over many years we have found that our suggestions have helped people write winning proposals. Thus, for all those who want to change the world, we recommend that you use this book as a guide to proposing change throughout your career.

Sandra G. Funk
Elizabeth M. Tornquist
SECTION I: PREPARING A PROPOSAL
The purpose of this book is to explain how to write proposals. Unlike most guidelines and similar books, we primarily discuss how you get to the final product rather than what it should look like once you get there (because different proposals “look” different). How do you work with all the literature that is out there to make a concise and coherent argument for your study? What aspects of designing and operationalizing your study should you be thinking about and presenting in the proposal? What do you say about yourself when such information is requested? We tell you. This is not a research methods or statistics book, so be sure to take the courses you need to prepare yourself for what you are hoping to do; this book supplements those courses and your experiences, building on what you have learned.

YOUR GOALS

Your immediate goal in writing a proposal is either to meet a requirement for graduation or to seek funding for your project. Both are important goals, but don’t stop there. You also want to use the experience to enhance your credentials—the degree you obtain, the money you are awarded, and the project you conduct all give you opportunities to enhance your résumé (biosketch). The learning itself might not show up on the résumé (e.g., learning to work with others on a project, learning a method or technique, learning an analytic approach) but they can be part and parcel of things that you can put on your résumé: things such as getting the degree, successfully competing for funds, making presentations, and writing papers for publication. So don’t only write the proposal. Follow up by doing the
proposed project and then writing articles, making presentations and, of course, competing for additional funding to extend the work.

Also use what you propose to do to build the science upon which your project is based. Perhaps no one has applied the intervention you are studying to a particular minority group and you are going to do so. Perhaps there is no pain measurement tool for the demented patient, and you are going to develop one. Perhaps no one has examined ways to help rural patients with diabetes learn about their illness and you are going to evaluate a new approach to meet this need. The degree or funding you receive is designed to enable you to make contributions to the science that will move it forward.

This will also enhance practice, because in the health sciences, the ultimate goal is to help people thrive—to live healthy lives, cope with chronic illness, survive hospitalization without additional illness or re-hospitalization, and so forth. Your goal might be to improve the training of health professionals either while in school or once they are in practice, or perhaps you want to help organize the care that is provided by health professionals in better ways. Whatever your goal, be sure to share your outcomes with the intended population, for only then will your work have the impact you desire.

Remember also that in addition to general goals described previously, some funding opportunities are designed to meet specific goals. For example, the National Institutes of Health’s (NIH) Academic Research Enhancement Award (AREA [R15]) is designed to stimulate research in institutions that are less research intensive. The NIH is interested in funding small projects in which students can be involved and get excited about research. With an R15, you become the trainer of others. So in addition to your personal goals and goals to extend the science, there may be other goals you need to keep in mind.

Funding Trajectories

If you are seeking funding, what sort of funding trajectory might be right for you? Everyone differs, but if you are just starting out, you might want to consider fellowships during your predoctoral or postdoctoral studies, or training opportunities as you transition to your next role (e.g., as a faculty member). Why? Because usually these funding opportunities provide support for you and also help to cover insurance, tuition and fees, and minor research expenses. While they tend not to be large amounts, they do support you during a critical time in your development. Another option is small grants that can help in covering some research expenses (some even help pay your salary and insurance). Some people move from a predoctoral fellowship to a postdoctoral fellowship to a training grant to small grants and then on to larger funding—this can be an excellent trajectory for
those who need training and wish to do foundational research. Whether you opt for one, some, or all of these funding possibilities, they allow you to show that you can successfully compete for funding, you can manage funds and conduct a project, and you can move through to publication. They also allow you to conduct pilot or preliminary work in order to develop interventions or measures, determine the feasibility of your intervention or research methods, or obtain preliminary estimates of efficacy or estimate effect sizes.

From these types of projects, some people move on to exploratory or developmental projects that will allow them to finish the preliminary work they need to accomplish before conducting definitive studies. Perhaps your fellowship, training, and/or small grant funding enabled you to collect data that guided your development and feasibility testing of an intervention but didn’t allow you to obtain preliminary estimates to support its potential efficacy; the developmental/exploratory project might enable you to do this.

After these earlier funded projects, we hope you will move on to larger funding to conduct more definitive studies. Such funding will allow you to support a team of investigators and staff to conduct your project with a larger sample over multiple years. While earlier funding might have enabled you to develop an intervention or measures and obtain preliminary estimates of efficacy, larger funding should be used to test hypotheses about the efficacy of the intervention (or perhaps, subsequently, to determine its effectiveness when put into practice). These larger studies might enable you to explore mediators, moderators, tailoring, and all sorts of additional questions that you could not explore with the smaller samples of the preliminary work. You want a lifetime of funding so you can continue contributing to the science that undergirds practice.

Finding Funding

There are lots and lots of funding opportunities out there. Where and how do you look for ones that might be right for you? Fortunately, today, most of the opportunities are available on the Internet and any search engine you use can probably find them. There are so many opportunities that organizations have been established just to help sift through them (see, e.g., the Community of Science and the Foundation Center listings in Table 1.1). Your institution may have an office that is designed to help you identify funding sources. They might focus on all types of funding or have people with expertise in particular types of proposals: for example, predoctoral or postdoctoral fellowships, training grants, educational grants, or research grants. Be sure to use the resources at your disposal.

Do not ignore intramural funding that might be available from your institution. Many institutions have competitive programs for all types of funding ranging from a variety of doctoral fellowships to travel awards,
TABLE 1.1 Links to a Selection of Funding and Agency Websites

**Funding Databases**
- Community of Science (via ProQuest Pivot) (http://www.cos.com)
- The Foundation Center (http://foundationcenter.org)

**Federal Agencies**
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (http://www.ahrq.gov)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (http://www.cdc.gov)
- Health Resources and Services Administration (http://www.hrsa.gov)
- National Institutes of Health (http://www.nih.gov)
- National Science Foundation (http://www.nsf.gov)

**Foundations/Organizations**
- Alzheimer’s Association, The (http://www.alz.org/index.asp)
- American Association for Colleges of Nursing (http://www.aacn.nche.edu)
- American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (http://www.aacn.org)
- American Association of Neuroscience Nurses (http://www.aann.org)
- American Cancer Society (http://www.cancer.org)
- American Diabetes Association (http://www.diabetes.org)
- American Heart Association (http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG)
- American Medical Association (http://www.ama-assn.org)
- American Nurses Foundation (http://anfonline.org)
- American Pain Society (http://www.americanpainsociety.org)
- Arthritis Foundation (http://www.arthritis.org)
- Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (http://cff.org)
- Eastern Nursing Research Society (http://www.enrs-go.org)
- The Kellogg Foundation (http://www.wkkf.org)
- Midwest Nursing Research Society (http://www.mnrs.org)
- National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners Foundation (http://www.napnapfoundation.org/home)
- Oncology Nursing Society (http://www.ons.org)
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (http://www.rwjf.org)
- Sigma Theta Tau International, Inc. (http://www.nursingsociety.org/default.aspx)
- Southern Nursing Research Society (http://www.snrs.org)
- Western Institute of Nursing (http://www.winursing.org)
- W. T. Grant Foundation (http://wtgrantfoundation.org)

publication grants, small project grants, and so on. Specialty and regional organizations are also active in funding smaller projects, so don’t forget to see what your specialty or regional organization has to offer. Foundations and health organizations typically fund projects in their interest areas, which might be obvious from their titles (e.g., the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, the American Heart Association, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation) or may require you to learn their current interests (e.g., the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W. T. Grant Foundation). Federal agencies such as the NIH, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), the Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention (CDC), and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) are big funders of health-related research and education. Indeed, even the National Science Foundation (NSF) funds the science that supports many health topics. All of these agencies can be accessed electronically via the links in Table 1.1, and your institution may have experts in writing proposals for the agency and in reviewing their grants, and perhaps even has sample proposals that you can use to guide your writing.

You should also be creative in thinking about possible funding sources. Who funded the project behind the article you like so much? Check the article—most indicate who funded the project. Don’t forget mentors and colleagues. Mentors have a wealth of knowledge about their areas of interest and expertise that (with luck) are in the same area in which you are interested. Colleagues might have heard of something about which you have not heard. Conference presenters usually have a slide that indicates funding sources and so on. Be creative; seek funding wherever you can find it.

Learn About the Funder

As soon as you have identified possible funders, you want to learn what you can about them. Their websites usually have a wealth of information about the agency. Read the mission statement to try to find out what they are generally interested in funding, or what they are currently interested in funding. Perhaps they have an annual report or a direct link to prior grants that will tell you what they have funded in the past and the topics covered. Have they funded folks like you, or are all the funds devoted to people from one discipline, or perhaps to people further along in their careers than you, or perhaps in a topic area that is not a fit for what you are interested in? Do not waste your time trying to convince funders that you or your topic should be something in which they are interested. You will end up doing a lot of work but, when push comes to shove, you probably won’t be funded.

Some agencies, especially the federal ones, are huge and there is more than one mission statement in which you might be interested. For example, the NIH is currently made up of 27 institutes and centers, each of which has its own mission. So while you want to go to the overall NIH website to start your search (see Table 1.1), you’ll also want to click on the link that says “Institutes at NIH,” view the listing of institutes, and then click on the link for each institute that might be relevant for you. Read that institute’s mission statement; for example, if you are particularly interested in alcoholism among elders, you might wish to check out the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute on Aging, both of which are part of the NIH. Neither may be interested in your particular project, but it would behoove you to check.
Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)

When you have found a funding opportunity of interest, it is time to read the entire announcement (in NIH parlance, this is an FOA). First print it, save it, or at least bookmark the link so you can get back to it (or you may never find it again). If you don’t print it, write down its identifying information (e.g., number, title, release date). Check to make sure that you have the most recent announcement—you don’t want to do a lot of work for something that is no longer current. Then start your reading. You want to read it at least three times: First, skim the highlights to see if you are eligible to apply for the grant (e.g., if you are a DNP student who wants funding for a capstone project, what does it say about your eligibility?). You can save yourself a lot of reading if you first eliminate the grants for which you are not eligible (but you might want to save them if you think you might be eligible in the future, should the opportunity still be available). Then read the entire FOA to get the details and, finally, reread it because you will have missed more than you thought on the second read.

Now that you have fully absorbed the FOA, look for the fit between you and the funding opportunity. Yes, your eligibility is part of this, but “fit” goes beyond that. You also want to be sure that your institution is eligible. For example, some grants are only for less research-intensive institutions, certain states, or minority-serving institutions. Next, make sure the focus (or one or more of the foci, if there are multiple ones in the FOA) is a fit with your focus. It is critical that your topic fit the funding opportunity. If the funder is only interested in, for example, cancer, you are wasting your time if you prepare a proposal for that funder that is not on cancer. Also, be sure to determine what the due date is for the proposal and whether you can meet it (as outlined in Chapter 15, you may need 3 to 6 months to prepare a proposal). And make sure to check the earliest possible start date for the FOA. For example, some grants may have a 9-month review cycle. Is that okay for you? Do you need to be done with your project before then so that you can graduate? Typically the funder cannot change its review cycle, so you may need to move on to another opportunity or perhaps do the project without funding. Check whether the time period covered by the award and the amount that will be funded are appropriate for your project. These may also help you determine whether the opportunity is a fit with your needs.

Next, note who the contact person is for the FOA and make a list of any questions you have. Ask people locally who might know the answers to your questions—perhaps your mentor, team members, consultants, colleagues, chair, or your institution’s grants office. What you cannot get answered locally, hold until you get in touch with the contact person at the funding agency.
Contacting the Agency

What if you just don’t know whether the agency (or institute) would be interested in receiving your proposal? Even if you are pretty sure that they are interested, we’d recommend that you contact the agency (or institute) and talk to someone who is knowledgeable about their funding programs. Before you make the contact, however, get your ducks in a row: learn what you can about the funder and know what you would like to do. Help yourself by writing out what you would like to do, but be concise and make sure your mentor, if you have one, or another person has read what you have written. Why? It is very hard for the person you contact to help you if you ramble on and on about your project. Be clear about where you are in your career, what kind of support you are seeking, and what the topic area is. Usually you can set up a phone conversation with the agency person, but you might want to email her or him your brief summary in advance of the conversation. You may want your mentor, if you have one, the appropriate associate dean or a knowledgeable colleague, to sit in on your conversation.

Your goal for this conversation is to find out whether the particular agency (or institute) is interested in your topic or perhaps a variant of it. Thus, the contact you make can be very useful to you. Take notes and ask questions, but don’t try to convince the person that your project is “just right” if she or he really isn’t interested. These people can be excellent at guiding you or perhaps shaping your topic into something in which the agency would be interested. That shaping may be important to you. Do not work on a topic about which you are not passionate, for that passion will sustain you in difficult times. But if a minor variation of the main topic is more fundable, and you are also passionate about that, great. If not, say “thank you” and move on.

Read the Proposal Guidelines

How do you know what to write in your proposal? For each type of proposal, there are guidelines. If you are a student preparing a proposal for perhaps a PhD or DNP program, either your school, your mentor, or the chairperson of your dissertation committee or capstone project provides the specifics needed. If you are applying for funding, the agency to which you are submitting tells you exactly what you need to prepare for your proposal. The NIH has done an exceptional job of detailing what they want for each proposal type (typically using the SF424 [R&R] guidelines). The details they provide can guide you in thinking about many different types of grants, so we place a lot of emphasis on the NIH guidelines in this book. Don’t ignore them just because you are not submitting to the NIH at
the time. Reading the content may be helpful to you as you prepare other grants. But also be sure to read the guidelines for whatever grant program you are applying to. As with the FOA, you will want to read them multiple times, keep them close by, and refer to them often.

AIDS

The Internet is rife with advice on writing proposals for PhD and DNP work, postdoctoral fellowships, traineeships, research and educational projects, and so forth. Use what is helpful to you, but we recommend that you (a) use this book, (b) consider using any help offered by the funder, and (c) use the help available at your institution (or other institutions) from people with experience submitting to, being funded by, and reviewing grants for the agency in which you are interested. The NIH, in particular, offers a lot of advice and help with respect to preparing successful grant proposals. If you go to the main web page at www.nih.gov, you can play around by clicking on links that look interesting or entering terms in the search engine. Clicking on the “Grants and Funding” link on the header takes you to a lot of resources. Once you click on it, on the left side you will see topics such as “Grant Process Overview,” “Grant Application Basics,” “Types of Grant Programs,” and “How to Apply.” All of them have very useful information, so explore. However, we offer a tip: Use the back key if you want to get back to the place from whence you came. The NIH’s website is huge and can be quite intimidating. After you click on “Grants and Funding,” in the center of the page you will see a section about the “NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts.” Through this guide, which is issued weekly, the NIH announces new FOAs and policy and rule changes. If you click on “Funding Opportunities and Notices” and scroll down, you will even find a listserv to which you can subscribe to receive weekly emails with links to the newest information. On the right side of the “Grants and Funding” page, you will find the very useful “Rock Talk” (which you can sign up for) and “Latest News,” as well as other useful links.

Several of the NIH’s institutes and centers have developed and posted on their websites useful aids to proposal writing and submission. For example, the Center for Scientific Review (CSR) has wonderful videos and information for applicants and reviewers that are useful to proposal writers. Also take a look at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). You will find grant tutorials and sample applications, along with their reviews. Please note, however, that there is a difference between more biologically driven and more behaviorally driven proposals. At the current time, all of the proposals available on NIAID’s website are “hard science” proposals, which might be very different from what you would write for a more behaviorally oriented proposal (i.e., the former often has a set of experiments, each of which is presented in its entirety...
before moving on to the next one; behavioral proposals, on the other hand, follow the logic presented in this book with a more global presentation of the significance and innovation followed by an approach section.

On the HRSA website (www.hrsa.gov), click on “Grants” to see many useful links about application basics and how to apply. Under its “Funding and Grants” link, AHRQ (www.ahrq.gov) also has useful information on application basics. Even foundations provide guidance and advice on how to successfully apply for their grants. For example, the American Heart Association has a document, Grant Writing Tips, available on their website (my.americanheart.org/idc/groups/ahamah-public/@wcm/@sop/@rsch/documents/downloadable/ucm_426709.pdf).

As noted previously, there are lots of resources at your disposal. One of the presentations we like most is the “How to Fail in Grant Writing” article that appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education some years ago (Jacob, 2010). The article is both hilarious and right on track. Don’t forget to read the comments people have added; they offer many additional insights into what works and what doesn’t for proposals. Use resources such as this if they facilitate your work; also, you may wish to use them as an adjunct to what you read here.

Best of luck!

REFERENCE

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

The essential reasons for writing a PhD dissertation proposal are: first, you want to learn how to write a research proposal, so that you can later write winning proposals for funding or, if not funding, approval; second, you want to propose research that you will conduct in coming months that is useful in itself and also provides a basis for later, larger studies. Many schools and departments of nursing and other health professions use a three-chapter traditional format for writing a PhD proposal: Chapter I presents the rationale for the study, Chapter II is a review of the literature, and Chapter III describes the proposed study methods. However, there are some problems with this approach. If you have to follow it, it is useful to understand these problems.

First, the traditional dissertation proposal is often quite long, with Chapter II running 50 or more pages. Yet the proposals you write for funding are much shorter. As we have noted in the chapter on National Institutes of Health (NIH) proposals, R03 and R21 proposals are usually seven single-spaced pages (one page for Specific Aims and six pages for Research Strategy), and R15 and R01 proposals are 13 pages (one page for Specific Aims and 12 pages for Research Strategy). Proposals for foundations are also short. Thus, to succeed in gaining funding, it is important to learn to write succinct proposals. Writing a lengthy dissertation proposal doesn’t help you develop the skill. Further, the lengthy dissertation proposal (and dissertation) is one reason why doctoral study in nursing tends to be longer than in many other disciplines. There is increasing interest in
making doctoral study in nursing move faster, and writing a shorter proposal would help in that regard, both for students and faculty members who advise them and must read all those pages.

Further, the traditional format often contains a great deal of overlap between the first two chapters and does not give you practice in making a coherent argument for a study. In any dissertation proposal, as in other proposals, the argument for the study is the standard argument described earlier in this book: There is a problem, some work has been done on the problem, but the work has not gone far enough or been done right, and therefore this study takes the work further or does it right. Logically, this rationale is based on the literature: Building on what has already been done, the study extends the work to a new population or problem, or it delves deeper into a problem we already know about, or uses more rigorous methods or more appropriate interventions to solve the problem. Thus, literature forms the basis for the argument. You want to make this argument in your first chapter of the proposal, but the traditional format puts the literature in a different chapter, so that you either have to say the same things twice or try to make the case for your study without referring to the literature that is the basis for the study. That is one reason why Chapter I is so hard to write.

Also, the traditional Chapter I often contains sections that are unnecessary or confusing and these make the chapter choppy. For example, frequently there is a section called Problem Statement in addition to the Purpose, but this problem statement is really a different way of stating the study purpose, not a description of the problem. The first chapter may also include a section called Significance, but that is redundant: The significance of the proposed work should already be clear from your description of why the study is needed. Chapter I may also include a section called Assumptions and one on Limitations. But your assumptions should be clear in your description of the conceptualization of your work, and the limitations of your proposed methods should be mentioned where they are relevant. For example, if there are limitations to the sampling methods you use, they need to be discussed with the information on sampling in the chapter on methods. Here they are meaningless because there is no context for them.

Many of these proposals also include sections on definitions and a list of abbreviations. Any word that needs to be defined should be defined in text the first time it is used. That is when readers want to know its meaning, not 10 pages later in a separate section. For example, if you are going to study cancer survivors, say right away what you mean by survivor. Is a survivor anyone who has had a cancer diagnosis and is still alive? Is a survivor a person who has finished treatment? Or lived for a certain number of years posttreatment? Readers want to know this before going further.

Readers also want to know the terms you are using right away; if you are going to use an abbreviation, always spell out the word the first time it appears, with the abbreviation following in parentheses. Readers
don’t want to have to look it up on a list to find out whether you are talking about advance directive or Alzheimer’s disease when you use AD. (In the PhD proposal, or any other proposal, don’t abbreviate the names of groups of people: It is dehumanizing to use AA for African Americans or KA instead of Korean Americans. If you need to save space, you should do it another way.)

Finally, the traditional organization makes it hard to write articles reporting the dissertation research. Graduates find it enormously difficult to cut and focus the literature review in Chapter II. As a result, many do not publish their dissertation work—a great waste—and those who do publish often follow an outdated organization based on the dissertation format. That is, their articles often begin with an Introduction making the case for the study and giving its purpose, followed by a section called Background or Review of the Literature that doesn’t seem to have much to do with anything, and then perhaps a description of the theoretical framework, which may or may not be relevant, and finally the purpose again. That comes from the organization of the proposal and dissertation: Chapter I, Argument, Chapter II, Literature Review, and Chapter III, Methods. Most biomedical journals now include only a short introduction in research articles that briefly makes the case for study, and many other health care journals are moving in that direction as well. This Introduction is almost like the specific aims page for an NIH proposal; it is not like the dissertation proposal. Thus the organization of a dissertation proposal teaches you to write in a way that not only makes it hard to get funded for your research, but also makes it hard to get published after you have done the research. There is something wrong with this picture.

You may need to follow the traditional format, but it is useful to your thinking to understand its illogicalities, even if you have to conform to them. One way to understand these is to recognize that some of the traditional requirements are really not requirements for a standard proposal, but exercises to make sure you show that you know what you are doing. In other words, your proposal is not designed to inform readers (your dissertation committee), but to inform readers that you are informed. For example, Chapter II is designed to show your committee that you have conducted a comprehensive review of the literature in your area. If you must include a section on definitions, that section is designed to show that you know the meanings of the terms that you are using, and if you have to include a section titled Significance, that is designed to make sure you understand why this study is important. The more you think about the rationale for your study, the more you will be able to provide sophisticated rather than simplistic information for your committee, whether you use the traditional format or a different approach. We suggest three different approaches to help you write a more coherent, concise dissertation proposal, which you might try. If that is not possible, think, think, and
think again about what you are doing in the traditional proposal and why, and write it in the most concise, clear way you can.

THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The National Research Service Award Proposal

The first suggestion is to ask your advisor or dissertation chair to allow you to write your dissertation proposal in the form of a National Research Service Award (NRSA) fellowship proposal to the NIH. The NRSA proposal is for both research and training so you must include a training plan in addition to proposing a study, but the NRSA is well suited to doctoral study and dissertation work. We give specific suggestions for writing any NIH proposal in Chapter 5 and for writing an NRSA proposal in Chapter 6. Writing this proposal helps you build the skills you need to gain funding later, and if you submit the proposal and are funded, the fellowship supports your dissertation study. The NRSA proposal also looks extremely good on your résumé, and if you don’t get funded, you will get very helpful critiques from reviewers, which will enable you to strengthen your work. Finally, writing this kind of proposal may not make your writing time any shorter (writing a proposal for funding can take several drafts), but it will cut your dissertation committee’s reading time and help prepare you for a career as a researcher.

The Traditional Proposal in Two Chapters

The second suggestion is this: If you decide to write a traditional dissertation proposal, ask your advisor to let you try doing it in only two chapters; that is, develop the rationale for your study in Chapter I and describe your proposed study methods in Chapter II. You might title Chapter I “Background and Purpose” or “The Rationale for the Study.” Follow the suggestions for developing the rationale for your study that we provided in Chapter 2. Start with a description of the problem you are addressing, and cite the literature to provide evidence of its importance. It may be helpful to put this description under a subheading such as “The Prevalence of Asthma in Children,” or “Heart Failure in the Elderly.” Begin with the big problem—asthma or depression or diabetes or delirium or whatever the overall issue is. Remember, however, that the better known the problem, the less literature you need to cite to convince readers of its importance.

After you have presented the overall problem, move on to the specific aspect of the problem you will be studying. You may need another subheading here: “Asthma in Low-Income Children,” “Pain in Nursing Home Residents With Dementia,” “Depression in Adolescent Victims of Dating Violence,” or “Self-Management of Diabetes by American Indians,” or
“Delirium in the Elderly Following Orthopedic Surgery.” Here again, use the literature to document the specific problem you will address.

Next, describe what has been done about the problem. We provided suggestions for synthesizing the literature in Chapter 2, and these will be helpful to you in organizing this section of the proposal. You might use a subheading here, “Studies of Diabetes in American Indians” or whatever the problem is for your population, or “Interventions for Reducing Risky Sex Behaviors in Hispanic Early Adolescents.” This is where you give more details about the literature in order to show what you are building on and why more work is needed. First, describe the general literature in a few sentences, with references (e.g., in a sentence such as this: “Numerous studies have documented the high prevalence of diabetes in Hispanics [reference, reference, reference]”), then move on to studies that are directly related to what you are planning. You don’t need to go into detail about studies that are not directly related to your work and you don’t need to summarize every study. For example, if you are planning to try a new approach to providing HIV testing and counseling to prostitutes working around army bases, talk briefly about general approaches to reach the hard-to-reach for HIV testing with several references, then focus on studies reporting efforts that have been made to provide testing and counseling for the specific group you are interested in. Then discuss the extent of success of those efforts and, finally, point out why a new study is needed. Perhaps no one has focused on this particular group and you will need to extrapolate information from other groups, or perhaps the methods tried with this group were not appropriate. You might want to review the suggestions in Chapter 2 for making these points, and remember, you want to credit the achievements of the work that has already been done but also make clear its shortcomings.

Most dissertation committees want to make sure that students have done a comprehensive review of the literature, but the rationale for a study is not designed to be a comprehensive summary of the literature. If your committee members wish to see evidence of your full grasp of the literature in your area, you can construct a table showing everything you have read, giving author, title, publication date, purpose, methods, findings, and conclusions for each study. You can attach that as an appendix to the dissertation proposal or you can write a state of the science paper that reviews the literature in your area. We make suggestions for this in the section on the “Three-Chapter Approach” that follows. If no one has published such a review in the last few years, you will certainly be able to publish it. Remember that if we want evidence-based practice, the best way to get the evidence to practitioners is to publish review papers.

Your analysis of the literature should lead logically to the purpose of the study you are proposing. We recommend that you use a subheading here: “Purpose, Aims, and Hypotheses” (or “Research Questions”). State
the purpose, and if you have specific aims or objectives, state those under the purpose. Then state your hypotheses and/or research questions. However, check the suggestions in Chapter 5 on NIH research grant proposals so that you don’t mistakenly propose hypotheses when you won’t have a sample big enough to test them.

Also, don’t state aims and questions or hypotheses that are identical. For example, our first aim is to determine whether individuals with HIV infection are more likely than others to suffer fatigue; our hypothesis is that those with HIV infection are significantly more likely than other individuals to suffer fatigue; and our research question is, do individuals with HIV suffer more fatigue than other individuals?

After you have given your purpose, specific aims, and hypotheses and/or questions, describe the conceptual framework for the study if you have a conceptual framework. We made some suggestions for presenting a conceptual framework in Chapter 2. This discussion should end the chapter.

You are ready now for Chapter II, “Study Methods.” This chapter will be similar whether you use the traditional format or the two-chapter format or the different three-chapter format we are suggesting. We made detailed suggestions for presenting your study methods in Chapter 3. Follow those suggestions and use the worksheet included at the end of the chapter to develop Chapter II. Be as rigorous as you can, but remember that this is a dissertation proposal, not a major study, and you want to finish it in a reasonable amount of time. Think of this as an exploratory or feasibility or pilot study, with limits on what you can expect to achieve. For example, you may have learned a lot about power analysis in your research courses, but if you need to collect data from 150 families in order to test hypotheses and that is unreasonable in the timeframe you have, don’t test hypotheses. Work with your advisor or dissertation chair to develop reasonable methods, and seek help from other experts in your area. Be clear about what you will do and show that the study will provide a foundation for more definitive work. Above all, don’t promise more than you can deliver in a reasonable time, or you will be doing this forever—or you won’t finish.

A Different Three-Chapter Approach

If your program or advisor requires the three-chapter approach, first write Chapter I as we have suggested previously, making the case for your study and leaving out unnecessary little sections. (Remember that your advisor wants you to be aware of the need to define your terms, understand your assumptions, recognize what the problem is, etc., but you can show this knowledge without having to put it in little boxes.)

In the traditional dissertation format, Chapter II is the review of the literature. However, if you have made a compelling argument for your
study in Chapter I, you have already used the literature. So you need to do something different in Chapter II. Instead of writing a lengthy comprehensive literature review for Chapter II, try writing a review paper synthesizing the work you have examined and drawing conclusions about the state of the science and the work that remains to be done. You can still call it Chapter II. This may give you a publication that shows your grasp of the literature in the area both to your committee as well as to general readers, and that publication will be useful when you seek funding for further research.

This review paper should report current research in your area; it is designed to show the state of the science. To write a review paper, you must read a great deal, but when you write the paper, don’t summarize everything you have read. Most review papers are no longer than 15 to 18 pages. (As we noted previously, if you feel you must show your committee that you have a grasp of all the literature, you can do a summary table of all the studies you examined and attach this as an appendix to the dissertation—but don’t include that in the paper to be submitted for publication; in that paper you may include a table, but only of the work that you have included in the review.)

If you write Chapter II as a review paper, you need to be clear that this paper is different from a review of the literature designed to develop the rationale for your study. When you use the literature to develop the rationale for a study, you are focusing on the need for that particular study. But a review paper is not about the rationale for a particular study: It is about what we know about a problem or its solutions. There are basically two types of review articles: When a good deal of work has been done on solutions, the review is designed to tell readers what can be concluded from research and put into practice now. This type of paper may also note areas about which we do not know enough to draw conclusions and may suggest more research in those areas. Review papers like these are extremely helpful in getting research into practice. Thus, they are frequently published in practice journals, such as nurse practitioner journals, though they may not be called review articles.

When research is more exploratory, a review paper is designed to show what research has been done on the problem, what it has accomplished, and what questions still need to be addressed. The review is not designed to lead to practice but to further research. Thus, research journals may be more interested in this type of review article. These articles are also more difficult to write because you have to be very clear about the research to date—and that may mean looking at literature from multiple disciplines. You cannot assume that because nothing has been done in your discipline, nothing has been done.

Before beginning your article, think about what type of review article it is and what your conclusions are from reading the literature. Then, in your article, organize the literature in a way that leads readers to draw
the conclusions you have reached based on the findings of the studies you reviewed and the adequacy of their methods, and thus the credibility of the findings.

Always begin the review paper (Chapter II) by presenting the problem. However, don’t go on and on about the problem; quickly summarize general descriptions and then focus on the aspect of the problem you are interested in. For example, if the review paper is about the influence of low health literacy on the failure of African Americans to follow treatment regimens for heart disease, first briefly describe the high burden of heart disease among African Americans and then point to studies showing that one reason for their poor outcomes is failure to follow treatment regimens. Note that, in order to effectively intervene, we must understand why African Americans do not follow treatment regimens, and conclude the discussion by saying that one possible reason is low health literacy in this group. Provide references for all these statements, and say that this paper discusses studies that have examined the effects of low health literacy on African Americans’ failure to follow these regimens, or whatever your focus is.

Then describe the search methods and criteria you used for including studies in the review. Begin by indicating what databases you used and what search terms. Then list the criteria for inclusion; for example, you reviewed studies that included African Americans with advanced heart disease, looked at level of adherence to medications, and looked at health literacy. You included only studies published in the last decade, in English. You did not include opinion pieces or anecdotal data. Make your reasons for these criteria clear. Why only advanced disease? Why only studies in the previous decade? What about studies that included both African Americans and Caucasians? Why no anecdotal data? Did the studies have to give a definition of health literacy?

Indicate how many studies you retrieved and how many met the criteria for review. Then give an overview of the findings of the studies, starting with the most general and moving toward those more specific to the area of interest, the influence of health literacy on adherence or whatever your specific topic is. It is important to summarize the most important findings of the studies; don’t just say they had findings, but don’t summarize everything the authors say either. You want to report what matters, both from the authors’ perspectives and from yours. The concluding discussion of a study report should indicate what the authors think is important, though as noted in Chapter 2, authors sometimes fail to indicate their conclusions, concentrating instead on their limitations. One way to check their view of importance is to look at what findings the authors note in the abstract, though that too can be vague. Thus, you need to think about what is important. Also, if studies have had conflicting findings, point this out; if they overlap, point this out. Include a table or matrix showing the
details of the studies (authors, journal, publication date, sample, methods, including the intervention if they were intervention studies, findings, and conclusions).

Next, give an overall evaluation of the quality of the evidence provided by these studies (don’t describe the methods study by study; that will be in the table). Do this evaluation carefully, not by checklist. For example, if some of the studies did not have a theoretical framework, you cannot simply say that these studies were therefore inadequate; rather, you need to look at the conceptualization of the studies and decide whether a theoretical framework was needed. Note that the more physiological a study is, the less likely it is to have a labeled theoretical framework. You cannot simply say that some studies had a small sample, and therefore were not adequate. Suppose the studies were examining ventilator-associated pneumonia in patients in intensive care. What kind of sample is possible for these patients? The key is to use your common sense in deciding what flaws are important in studies and what flaws are not fatal. Finally, say what we can conclude for practice, if this is the first type of review, and point out what remains to be done. If it is the second type of review, point out what we now definitively know and what remains unclear and needs more study.

In writing a review paper, especially if this is your first, it is helpful to make an outline of your points to be sure that your review is logical and coherent. It is also helpful to find a published review article that you like and use it as a template. Carefully examine the authors’ organization and emphases and use those to guide your own organization. But make sure the article you follow is one that makes sense to you; don’t try to follow an organization that you think is incoherent. Because you will be thinking about publication, after the first draft cut out peripheral work and condense to 15 to 18 pages.

DEVELOPING THE PROPOSAL

Whether you use the two- or three-chapter approach to a dissertation proposal, these suggestions should guide you. If you do an NRSA proposal for the dissertation, follow the same guidelines but make your rationale more concise, following NIH guidelines.

As noted, your chapter on methods will be more or less the same whether you use the two- or three-chapter approach. Much of your work in developing the proposal will be working on methods. Developing the argument for the study is a relatively solitary task, but you will want to confer frequently with your advisor or chair about the methods. We made detailed suggestions for methods development in Chapter 3, and there is a worksheet at the end of the chapter to help you specify your methods. Also, Chapter 5 on NIH research grant proposals contains additional

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details about methods. However, it is important to remember that this is a pilot study or an exploratory study; it is not the definitive work in your area. You need to think carefully about what you can do in a limited amount of time and with limited resources. But don’t conclude that doing a qualitative study will be the easiest thing to do. Qualitative work does not require a big sample, but it requires extremely careful thinking and it is not easy to do well. So think, think, and think about what you want to do before beginning to write.

When you know what your purpose is, it is helpful to write the first chapter of the proposal while you are still working out your methods. If you have developed a clear rationale for your work, it is easier to figure out how to do what you want to do. Your committee chair may want to see Chapter I early, and may also want to see Chapter II if you follow the traditional format or our suggested new approach to Chapter II. Whether you use a traditional or new approach, every chapter should be as clear and as coherent as possible before you hand it in. So, when you have finished a first draft, don’t send it off immediately; instead, wait a day or two, then look at it again and revise and edit before you send it to your chair. It is particularly important to make sure that your sentences are clear and grammatically correct: This shows that you are paying attention and editing, not just throwing something together and shipping it off. Remember that the more work you do before submitting materials, the less work you will have to do later.

While the chair is reviewing the opening chapter or chapters of the proposal, develop your methods, using the worksheet at the end of this book’s Chapter 3 to help you think through issues and make notes for discussing them with the chair. You will probably need to revise the early chapters based on the chair’s review. Work on developing methods as you revise, then send a draft of methods to the chair. Remember that once you and your chair are clear about methods, you may need to again revise early chapters to make them consistent with your plans. When you have a complete draft, it will go to the committee and you will get further suggestions. If some of these critiques seem contradictory or unclear, discuss them with your chair so that you can figure out the best way to resolve issues, and then rewrite again.

Indeed, writing a proposal involves rewriting and editing, again and again. For the dissertation, you do that under the supervision of your chair, but the process of revising, editing, revising again, and editing again is the same for any proposal you write, so think of this as one of the most important learning experiences of your doctoral program.