

Tips on how to write a competitive research proposal

Background

Until recently, African eye care workers did not take research seriously because of the misconception that the burden on blindness in Africa is too high and resources should not be “wasted on research” but directed to provision sight-restoring eye care services. On the contrary, the situation is rapidly changing due to growing emphasis on evidence based medicine where scientific data is needed to inform medical interventions and policy formulation. Consequently, both governments and non-governmental development partners are in need for scientific data to inform implementation of projects such as the VISION 2020, “The Right to Sight” global Initiative.

Recently, the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA) region has experienced stiff competition for research grants between national, regional and international research institutions as they scramble for available resources and opportunities. To avoid being displaced from the “research market”, the African eye care worker has no option but to wake up and learn how to write competitive research proposals.

A good research proposal is one that convinces the prospective sponsor/funder that the proposed research is important (likely to change policy/practice), interesting, novel (provides new information) and doable within available resources (time, funds, personnel and technology). Moreover, a good research proposal hastens the ethical review and simplifies writing of reporting/publication of findings.

Develop writing skills and persevere

Writing is not easy. It requires training and perseverance. As the old adage says: “practice makes perfect”. Most students breathe a big sigh of relieve after they hand in their thesis or dissertation and say goodbye to scientific writing. Thereafter, the only things they write are “mini-skirt” patient’s notes and mobile phone short text messages (sms). No wonder when a research project accidentally falls on the way one may write the proposal using the “sms format and jargon”!

If you intend to undertake research as a career, you should continue practicing how to write proposals after you leave college. Initially, what you write may not be satisfactory but you should not lose hope since the drafts can be improved or revised at a later date. A short course on word processing is fundamental. It is amazing how you can save time on editing of documents if you knew how to format the styles in word, insert automatic tables, captions, spacing and so on.

Search for new knowledge and create time to think

To be able to write a competitive proposal you must be conversant with the new developments in the research area you are interested in. This requires detailed literature search, making enquiries from and interaction with experts. Some research publications have recommendations on further studies. Besides, you should create time to think (thinking hour) and write down the new ideas that pops in your mind. Some people think best in the morning, others in the evenings and others in peculiar environments such as loud music or when travelling. The environment does not matter, what matters is you think; even if it means buying a super-coach ticket to the coast or driving round town with music full-blast as long as you return with new ideas!

Be organized and back-up

When you start literature search and enquiry, reference materials such as project reports, notes, articles, references and data accumulate very quickly. Retrieval may be challenging. It is therefore critical that you make a filing system for both hard and soft copies and frequently back-up the soft copies in a different secure site in case your computer crashes or it is lost. Storage and retrieval is more efficient if you learn how to use bibliographic management software such as Endnote and Zotero. Learn to use computer software such as SPSS and Stata for data storage and management.

When you start to write, ask yourself?

When you finally commence to write the research proposal, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **Who am I writing to?** The jargons, technical terms and acronyms you use depends on the person you are writing to. In case you are a project manager writing a proposal to be read by non-ophthalmic sponsors you should avoid technical terms as much as possible. For example they may confuse the term AC to mean that the eye has an “air-conditioner”! On the other hand, technical terms are needed when writing a proposal for a postgraduate research degree which is addressed to academic examiners and peers. Those who would like more details on how to write academic research proposals can buy the book entitled “How to Write a Better Thesis” by David Eevans, Paul Gruba and Justin Zobel. Moreover, there are plenty of online resources you can access using most search engines including Google.

- 2. What is the purpose/objective(s) of the research project?** The objective(s) form the foundation of the entire study and it should therefore be stated upfront. Research methods are meant to answer the objectives. Results, discussion and recommendations should be in line with the objective. In case you are contracted to conduct a research project, the first thing you should ask for is a terms of reference (ToR) document with clear objectives. If the objectives are revised during the study you will be forced to revise the entire

proposal and re-submit it for ethical approval. When you commence to write the report, you should stick to the objectives and resist any push to add information which was not included in the ToR and research proposal.

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