

# How to Write a Strong Research Proposal in Education and TESOL/TEFL Studies: Practical Guidelines

By

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## Abstract

*A well-crafted research proposal is a cornerstone of successful academic inquiry, particularly for Master of Arts (MA) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidates in fields such as education and TESOL/TEFL (Locke et al., 2010; Punch, 2016). This comprehensive guide provides practical, detailed, and rigorous guidelines for novice researchers at institutions like Assiut University in Egypt, aiming to equip them with the necessary knowledge and strategies to develop a strong, proper, and effective research proposal or outline for degree registration (Grix, 2004; Phillips & Pugh, 2010). Drawing extensively from the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 7th edition (American Psychological Association, 2020), and various research methodology textbooks (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2016), this article elucidates the essential components of a research proposal, including the title, abstract, introduction (problem statement, research questions, objectives, significance, and literature review), theoretical framework, methodology (design, participants, data collection, and analysis), and ethical considerations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Locke et al., 2010). Furthermore, it offers practical writing strategies, discusses the importance of academic style, and details the application of APA Style guidelines for formatting, headings, in-text citations, and reference list construction (American Psychological Association, 2020; Murray, 2003). By synthesising insights from authoritative sources (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2016), this guide aims to demystify the proposal writing process, enabling researchers to articulate their scholarly contributions with clarity, precision, and adherence to established academic conventions.*

**Keywords:** Research proposal, education, TESOL, TEFL, APA Style, academic writing, methodology, literature review, ethical considerations, MA, PhD.

## **1. Introduction: The Foundation of Scholarly Inquiry**

Excellence in writing is paramount for success in academic pursuits (Murray, 2003), and the research proposal stands as a critical initial step for Master's and doctoral candidates (Phillips & Pugh, 2010). It serves as a "blueprint" or "road map" for a research project (Locke et al., 2010, p. 5), guiding the researcher and allowing committees to evaluate its worth. For novice researchers, particularly those in fields like Education and TESOL/TEFL (Borg, 2006; Duff, 2008), understanding the intricacies of proposal writing is essential for a successful academic journey and eventual publication. This guide aims to provide a comprehensive, practical, and well-structured approach to crafting such proposals (Punch, 2016), specifically tailored to assist researchers in preparing for their MA or PhD degree registration.

The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) is the authoritative resource for scholarly communication (American Psychological Association, 2020), widely adopted across psychology, nursing, social work, communications, education, business, and engineering. The 7th edition, published in 2020 (American Psychological Association, 2020), offers updated guidance to reflect changes in scholarly writing and publishing, with increased support for students. While this manual originated as a guide for authors seeking journal publication, its principles are broadly applicable to student papers, dissertations, and theses. Adherence to a consistent style, such as APA Style, is crucial for clear and precise scholarly communication (Madigan et al., 1995), ensuring ideas flow logically, sources are credited appropriately, and papers are organized predictably and consistently (American Psychological Association, 2020).

This article will break down the process of writing a strong research proposal into manageable sections (Locke et al., 2010), drawing extensively from the provided sources (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2016). It will cover the fundamental nature of research, the detailed components of a proposal, crucial ethical considerations, and practical strategies for effective academic writing and strict adherence to APA Style (American Psychological Association, 2020). The goal is to provide a rigorous and well-argued guide (Punch, 2016) that goes beyond mere summary, offering explanations, details, and insights to enhance understanding and facilitate the creation of high-quality proposals.

Understanding the fundamental nature of academic research is the first step in crafting an effective proposal (Punch, 2016). A proposal outlines "what you will do, why it should be done, how you will do it and what you expect will result" (Punch, 2016, p. 5). It represents a commitment to a "sustained, original research" project (Phillips & Pugh, 2010, p. 63).

### **1.1. The Nature of Academic Research**

Academic research, particularly at the postgraduate level (MA and PhD), is a structured, original inquiry designed to contribute to knowledge (Dunleavy, 2003). It is not merely a summary of existing literature but involves a "systematic pursuit of a consistent line of inquiry" (Dunleavy, 2003, p. 46).

For MA dissertations, the expectation is for students to demonstrate the ability to work in a scholarly manner and be acquainted with the principal works on their subject (Murray, 2003). MA theses typically involve pieces of sustained research, often between 10,000–15,000 words, and frequently include an empirical case study, particularly in social science topics, unless the focus is purely theoretical (Murray, 2003). Key characteristics of a solid MA dissertation include:

- A clear presentation of the problem.
- Clear research questions or hypotheses.

- An assessment of the current literature around the topic.
- A discussion of the methods, methodology, and sources employed.
- A section attempting to address the posed research questions.
- A clear evaluation of the findings (Murray, 2003).

PhD research is distinguished by a "distinctive contribution to the knowledge of the subject" and evidence of "originality shown by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power" (Phillips & Pugh, 2010, p. 65). It is an apprenticeship in the art of research, requiring a high level of self-discipline due to minimal guidance compared to undergraduate or MA levels (Dunleavy, 2003). While PhDs are generally substantial works (80,000-120,000 words), they are rarely a "magnum opus" intended to cover all studies on a topic. Instead, they are seen as a learning process where students develop mastery of established paradigms and acquire essential research tools (Phillips & Pugh, 2010).

## **1.2. Research Approaches: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods**

Research designs are plans for a study, encompassing philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and specific research methods (Creswell, 2014). The choice of approach—quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods—is a preliminary consideration before designing a proposal, and it is largely influenced by the research problem, the researcher's personal experiences, and the target audience (Creswell, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

**Quantitative Research:** This approach is commonly used in behavioural and social sciences, where observed outcomes are numerically represented and typically analysed using statistical methods (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative articles often present novel hypotheses and data analyses. A standard format usually includes distinct sections: Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (American Psychological Association, 2020). Quantitative research questions

inquire about relationships among variables and often take the form of predictions (hypotheses) about expected outcomes (Creswell, 2014).

**Qualitative Research:** This involves scientific practices to generate knowledge about human experience and action, often through the analysis of natural language, researcher observations, and participants' expressions, rather than numerical data (Levitt et al., 2018). Qualitative approaches tend to be iterative, self-correcting, and produce original knowledge situated within place and time (Levitt, 2019). They typically involve researchers' reflexivity about their own perspectives and how they might influence the research process (Levitt et al., 2017). While qualitative articles may also have an Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (or "Findings"), their internal structure can be more varied than quantitative reports (Levitt et al., 2018). Qualitative studies tend not to identify hypotheses, but rather research questions and goals (Creswell, 2014).

**Mixed Methods Research:** This approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). It allows for additional insights not gleaned from either approach alone, leveraging the strengths of both (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Mixed methods designs involve considerations of timing (sequential or concurrent), weight (priority given to one method), mixing (how integration occurs), and theory (inductive, deductive, or both) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

### ***1.3. Importance of Planning and Organization***

Effective planning is paramount for developing a strong research proposal (Locke et al., 2010). It helps to focus research ideas, ensure clarity, and prevent problems later in the research process (Punch, 2016).

**Key aspects of planning include:**

- Sketching a research outline or project proposal: This helps to clarify the overall project and its potential organization (Locke et al., 2010).
- Drafting a schedule: Knowing the time available allows for realistic planning of activities, month by month or week by week, with flexibility for unforeseen issues (Punch, 2016).
- Identifying key concepts, issues, and contexts: A preliminary list helps to define the scope of the research (Creswell, 2014).
- Considering a preliminary overview/prospectus: A one-to-two-page overview for an advisor can help confirm the direction of the proposed study, addressing the research problem, purpose, central questions, data source, and significance (Locke et al., 2010).

A well-organized structure in scholarly writing is key to clear, precise, and logical communication (American Psychological Association, 2020). Headings, in particular, play a crucial role in identifying the topic and purpose of content within each section, helping readers navigate the paper (American Psychological Association, 2020).

## **2. Key Components of a Research Proposal**

A research proposal comprises several essential parts that logically interlink to present a cohesive picture of the entire project (Locke et al., 2010). While formats may vary by institution or discipline, common components ensure thoroughness and clarity (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.1. Working Title**

The title is the first impression of your research and should summarise the main idea of the paper simply and engagingly (American Psychological Association, 2020). For research papers, it should be a concise statement of the main topic, identifying variables or theoretical issues and their relationship (Creswell, 2014).

**Key considerations for a strong title include:**

- *Clarity and Conciseness*: While there is no prescribed limit, focused and succinct titles are encouraged, as research suggests they correlate with higher article downloads and citations (Jamali & Nikzad, 2011).
- *Inclusion of Essential Terms*: The title should contain keywords that enhance discoverability in databases and aid abstracting and indexing (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Avoidance of Unnecessary Words*: Phrases like "a study of" or "an experimental investigation of" should typically be avoided as they increase length and can mislead indexers (American Psychological Association, 2020). Similarly, "method" and "results" are generally omitted (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *No Abbreviations*: Spelling out all terms ensures accurate indexing and comprehension. An exception might be field-specific terms like "meta-analysis" or "fMRI study" when they convey important information (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Reflecting Content and Main Discoveries*: The title should clearly indicate the content and main findings (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Aims at Specific Audience*: Consider the target readership when crafting the title (Creswell, 2014).
- *Working Title Concept*: For proposals, a working title is an excellent starting point, serving as a "major road sign" that can be refined as the project develops (Locke et al., 2010). Try completing the sentence: "My study is about..." to help frame it simply (Punch, 2016).

## **2.2. Abstract**

The abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of your research, typically placed at the beginning of the proposal (American Psychological Association, 2020). It allows readers, including review committees, to quickly grasp the

essential elements of your project (Creswell, 2014). Its quality is often used to judge the clarity of thought preceding the document (Locke et al., 2010).

### **Key functions and characteristics of an abstract:**

- *Miniature Story*: It should present the "story" of the research in miniature and be readable as a standalone piece (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Concise Overview*: A good abstract is concise yet representative, summarising the topic and aim of the research (Creswell, 2014).
- *Content Elements*: For empirical articles (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), the abstract should describe:
  - The problem under investigation (if possible, in one sentence). For quantitative analyses, include main hypotheses, questions, or theories.
  - Participants or data sources, specifying pertinent characteristics.
  - Essential features of the study method.
  - Main results/findings.
  - Main implications/significance of the results.
- *Keywords*: Identify three to five keywords describing the content for indexing in databases. These should be listed below the abstract, indented, in lowercase (except proper nouns), and separated by commas (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Length*: Typically, abstracts are 150-250 words (American Psychological Association, 2020). Some universities or publishers may have specific requirements (Locke et al., 2010).
- *Style*: Abstracts should be accurate, non-evaluative, coherent, and readable (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Placement*: The abstract appears on its own page after the title page, before the main text (American Psychological Association, 2020).



### **2.3. Introduction/Overview of the Topic**

The introduction opens the body of the paper, creating reader interest and establishing the context for the study (Creswell, 2014). It provides a succinct description of the issues being reported, their historical antecedents, and the study objectives (American Psychological Association, 2020). In academic writing, the introduction serves to "establish a research 'territory', establish a research 'niche' and occupy the niche" (Swales, 1981, p. 140).

Key elements of a scholarly introduction often follow a "social science deficiency model" (Swales, 1981):

#### **1. Establishing the Research Problem (Narrative Hook):**

- *Problem Statement*: This is a crucial element that sets the direction for the research (Creswell, 2014). It should be limited enough in scope to allow for a definite conclusion (Locke et al., 2010). The problem should describe the relationship between two or more variables, take the form of a question, and be capable of empirical testing (Creswell, 2014). It should be written in specific, clear-cut words (Punch, 2016). For TESOL/TEFL, this might involve identifying a specific difficulty language learners face, such as oral communicative competence (Abu Bakar et al., 2019).
- *Relevance*: Explain why the topic is interesting and important (Creswell, 2014).
- *Framing*: Ensure the problem is framed consistently with the chosen research approach (exploratory for qualitative, examining relationships for quantitative, or either for mixed methods) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Consider if there's a single or multiple problems (Punch, 2016).
- *Context/Rationale*: Provide the background and motivation for the proposed study, linking it to broader issues (Creswell, 2014). Avoid turning this into a historical account or an autobiographical essay (Locke et al., 2010).

**2. Reviewing the Literature about the Problem:** Briefly summarise large groups of studies that have examined the issue, without conducting a full literature review at this stage. This helps contextualise the work within existing literature (Creswell, 2014).

**3. Identifying Deficiencies in Past Literature:** This is a critical component, as your study aims to address these gaps (Swales, 1981). Point out what needs to be done based on existing research, clearly indicating your "gap" (Creswell, 2014).

**4. Targeting an Audience and Noting Significance:** Discuss the audiences who will profit from your study and the practical implications or contributions of your research (Creswell, 2014). This includes contributions to academic knowledge, public policy, or professional practice (Locke et al., 2010).

**5. Stating the Purpose of the Proposed Study:** The introduction culminates in a clear statement of the study's purpose or intent (Creswell, 2014). This is arguably the most important statement in the entire proposal (Locke et al., 2010, p. 12). It sets the objectives or major idea of the study, building on the identified problem and leading to specific research questions (Creswell, 2014).

## **2.4. Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Objectives**

From the broad purpose statement, researchers narrow their focus to specific questions to be answered or predictions based on hypotheses to be tested (Creswell, 2014). These serve as major "signposts" in a project (Punch, 2016).

### **2.4.1. Research Questions:**

- Purpose: Guide and centre your research, directing the flow of inquiry (Creswell, 2014).
- Clarity and Specificity: Questions should be clear, concrete, and to the point, enabling concrete answers (Creswell, 2014). Vague questions hinder navigation through information (Punch, 2016).

- Feasibility: Consider whether sufficient data or information exists or can be generated within the timeframe to answer the questions (Locke et al., 2010).
- Originality: For PhDs, research questions should signal the expected contribution to the literature and reflect the potential originality of the proposed work (Phillips & Pugh, 2010).

**Examples:**

- Quantitative questions inquire about relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014).
- Qualitative questions are often open-ended, using verbs like "describe," and focus on phenomena, processes, or experiences (Creswell, 2014). Makram's proposal (as cited in Hadi, 2016) includes questions such as "What are the core discourse concepts for prospective EFL teachers?" and "Is there a correlation between developing English as a foreign language student-teachers' oral communicative competence and their discourse concepts?"
- Mixed methods studies require both qualitative and quantitative questions to narrow the purpose statement (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

**2.4.2. Hypotheses:**

- Definition: Predictions the researcher makes about the expected relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014). They are numeric estimates of population values based on sample data and are frequently used in experiments (Creswell, 2014).
- Role in Formal Projects: Advisers often recommend their use in dissertations or theses to state the study's direction (Creswell, 2014).
- **Characteristics (Checklist):**
  - Clearly stated.
  - Clearly specify variables that might be related.

- Appropriate for the theoretical framework.
- Testable given the adopted methods.
- Potentially lead to generation of additional hypotheses for subsequent research.
- Distinguishing from Objectives: While objectives state goals, hypotheses are predictions that are tested statistically (Creswell, 2014).

#### **2.4.3. Research Objectives/Aims/Goals:**

- *Purpose*: Indicate the specific goals or objectives for a study (Creswell, 2014). They often appear in funding proposals and articulate the specific motivation for the study (Locke et al., 2010).
- *Clarity*: State the purpose(s)/goal(s)/aim(s) of the study (Creswell, 2014).
- *Rationale*: Provide a rationale for the fit of the design used to investigate the purpose (e.g., theory building, explanatory, developing understanding, social action) (Creswell, 2014).
- *Target Audience*: If specific, state the target audience (Creswell, 2014).
- *Relation to Prior Work*: If relevant, explain the relation of the current analysis to prior articles/publications (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Examples*: Makram's proposal (as cited in Hadi, 2016) lists objectives such as "identifying the effectiveness of a suggested program based on differentiated instruction in teaching conversation in developing prospective EFL teachers' oral communicative competence".

#### **2.5. Significance of Research/Contribution**

This section articulates why your project is a wonderful idea and how it will contribute to knowledge (Locke et al., 2010). It is crucial for committees to understand the value and impact of your proposed work (Punch, 2016).

##### **Key aspects to address:**

- *Filling Knowledge Gaps*: Explain how your research will address deficiencies identified in the literature (Creswell, 2014).

- *Original Contribution*: Particularly for PhDs, clearly outline the potential original contribution(s) to academic knowledge (Phillips & Pugh, 2010).
- *Broader Impact*: Discuss its significance for non-academic parties, such as other practitioners, businesses, economy, society, or public policy (Locke et al., 2010). For TESOL/TEFL, this might involve contributions to pedagogical practice, curriculum development, or teacher self-esteem (Alagözlü, 2016).
- *Theoretical/Practical Implications*: Explain the implications of your findings for future research, programs, or policy (Creswell, 2014).
- *Value and Significance*: Emphasise how the research will make a valuable and significant contribution to the literature or practice in a particular field (Locke et al., 2010). Mohammad Makram's proposal (as cited in Hadi, 2016) highlights contributions such as shedding light on communication, communicative competence, and discourse notions, and providing a suggested instructional programme and instructor's manual.

## **2.6. Literature Review**

The literature review is a systematic, comprehensive, and exhaustive search for relevant studies that establishes the foundation of academic inquiries (Creswell, 2014). It is a critical component for demonstrating your knowledge of the field and justifying your research (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.6.1. Purpose and Scope:**

- *Contextualisation*: Explains the context for the research, detailing findings, strengths, and weaknesses of previous studies (Creswell, 2014).
- *Knowledge Acquisition*: Familiarises the researcher and reader with what is known and unknown, avoiding replication of prior work (Creswell, 2014).

- *Justification*: Provides a rationale for the study by identifying gaps, issues, debates, or theoretical frameworks in the relevant literature (Creswell, 2014).
- *Theoretical Foundation*: Helps in formulating hypotheses and deciding on methodology (Creswell, 2014).
- *Critical Evaluation*: Should be critical and evaluative, setting forth an argument for why and how the study should be conducted (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.6.2. Conducting the Literature Review:**

- *Systematic Approach*: Involves clearly defined steps, including specifying inclusion/exclusion criteria (Xiao & Watson, 2019).
- *Database Search*: Utilise online databases such as ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), PsycINFO, EBSCO, ProQuest, and Google Scholar (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Identify appropriate descriptors (keywords) for your topic to maximise relevant results (Creswell, 2014).
- *Prioritisation of Sources*: Focus on journal articles first, then books (Creswell, 2014). For dissertation proposals, faculty guidance on the appropriate style manual (e.g., APA) is crucial for consistent referencing (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Literature Mapping*: Design a visual picture or figure of groupings of the literature on the topic (Creswell, 2014). This illustrates how your study contributes to the literature and positions it within the larger body of research (Creswell, 2014). Major topics lead to subtopics and sub-subtopics, with references to major citations in each box (Creswell, 2014).
- *Summarising and Abstracting*: Draft summaries (brief abstracts) of the most relevant articles, extracting key information such as the research problem, questions, data collection and analysis, and final results (Creswell, 2014). For non-empirical studies (essays, opinions, typologies), extract the problem, central theme, and conclusions (Creswell, 2014).

- *Operational Definitions*: Define important terms within the literature review or a separate section to ensure clarity and allow for replication (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.6.3. Synthesising and Critiquing:**

- *Ordering Citations*: Citations can be ordered chronologically (latest first), or grouped by approach, or from general to specific (Creswell, 2014). Consistency in ordering is important (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Identifying Agreements and Disagreements*: Conclude the review by commenting on areas of agreement and disagreement in findings (Creswell, 2014).
- *Argumentation*: The literature review forms a critical argument for why the current study is necessary (Creswell, 2014).

## **2.7. Theoretical or Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical or conceptual framework provides the overarching philosophical term concerned with the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge. It dictates the researcher's choice of research strategy and forms the critical study of research methods and their use (Creswell, 2014).

### **Key aspects to include:**

- *Definition*: Define the key concepts that will guide the research, including how they are contested and where they are located within the broad theoretical paradigm (Creswell, 2014).
- *Connection to Study*: Explain how the framework informs your research questions, conceptual approach, methods, and data sources (Creswell, 2014).
- *Placement*: Some researchers integrate the theoretical framework within the literature review, while others prefer a separate section to ensure clarity (Creswell, 2014).

- *Justification*: Explain the rationale for choosing a particular theory or framework, showing how it illuminates the study's objectives (Creswell, 2014).
- *Types of Theory*: In quantitative studies, theories explain relationships between independent and dependent variables. In qualitative research, theories can be used inductively (generating theory from data) or deductively (testing existing theories) (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods research may use theory inductively, deductively, or both (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

## **2.8. Methodology**

The methodology section describes how the study will be conducted in detail, providing enough information for other researchers to potentially replicate it (Creswell, 2014). It's a critical part of the proposal, detailing the plan of action (Locke et al., 2010).

### **2.8.1. Research Design:**

- *Choice and Justification*: Clearly state the chosen research design (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) and provide a rationale for its selection, explaining why it is appropriate for the proposed study (Creswell, 2014).
- *Specific Design Types*: Identify the specific type of design (e.g., experimental, survey for quantitative; phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, case study, narrative research for qualitative; concurrent, sequential, transformative for mixed methods) and provide references to literature discussing the approach (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).
- *Visual Representation*: For mixed methods designs, reference and include a diagram of procedures to clarify the complex interactions and phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).



### **2.8.2. Participants/Sample:**

- *Description:* Indicate the number of participants, their characteristics (e.g., gender, age, proficiency level, L1s and L2s for TESOL/TEFL), and any other demographics relevant to the study (Creswell, 2014). Mohammad Makram's proposal (as cited in Hadi, 2016) specifies "EFL student-teachers".
- *Recruitment:* Explain how participants will be recruited, including any incentives offered (Creswell, 2014).
- *Sampling Procedures:* Describe the sampling approach used. For qualitative studies, purposeful sampling is common (Creswell, 2014). In the context of TESOL/TEFL, this might involve specifying universities, departments, or schools, and language proficiency levels (Duff, 2008).
- *Ethical Considerations:* Details about the protection of human participants and informed consent should be included (American Psychological Association, 2017a).

### **2.8.3. Data Collection Methods and Instruments:**

- *Detail and Clarity:* Provide sufficient detail about the methods to allow replication (Creswell, 2014).
- *Types of Data:* Specify what data and information are needed (qualitative or quantitative) (Creswell, 2014).
- *Methods:* Describe how the data will be gathered (e.g., questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations, tests) (Creswell, 2014). Makram's proposal (as cited in Hadi, 2016) implies use of instruments for assessing communicative competence and self-esteem.
- *Instrument Description:* Provide details of questionnaires, tests, or observation instructions (Creswell, 2014). Questionnaires or interview schedules are usually given in an appendix (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Data Recording Protocols:* Indicate the types of protocols that will be used (e.g., transcribing interviews, typing field notes) (Creswell, 2014).

- *Accessibility*: Discuss whether the data is available and accessible, or how it will be generated (e.g., fieldwork) (Punch, 2016).

#### **2.8.4. Data Analysis Procedures:**

- *Systematic Process*: Explain how the data will be processed and analysed, often presented as a series of steps (Creswell, 2014).
- *Quantitative Analysis*: If applicable, state the statistical analysis adopted (Creswell, 2014). This may involve methods (statistics, data analyses, and modelling techniques) that rely on numerical properties (Appelbaum et al., 2018).
- *Qualitative Analysis*: Describe the iterative process of analysis, including:
  - Organising and preparing the data (e.g., transcribing interviews, cataloguing visual material) (Levitt, 2019).
  - Initial reading through the information (Levitt, 2019).
  - Coding the data (e.g., for topics readers would expect based on literature, unexpected findings, or contradictions) (Levitt, 2019).
  - Developing descriptions and thematic analysis from codes (Levitt, 2019).
  - Using computer programmes (e.g., Atlas.ti for qualitative data) (Levitt, 2019).
  - Representing findings in tables, graphs, and figures (Levitt, 2019).
- *Methodological Integrity*: Highlight procedures that support methodological integrity throughout the paper or summarise central points in a separate section (Levitt et al., 2017). This includes demonstrating that claims are warranted, findings are grounded in evidence (e.g., using quotes), contributions are insightful and meaningful, and consistency in analytic processes (Levitt et al., 2017).
- *Linking to Research Questions*: Ensure the analysis directly contributes to answering the research questions or testing hypotheses (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.8.5. Validity and Reliability/Methodological Integrity:**

- *Importance:* Crucial for demonstrating the soundness and trustworthiness of your findings (Creswell, 2014).
- *Quantitative:* Address how validity and reliability will be achieved (Creswell, 2014).
- *Qualitative (Methodological Integrity):* Highlight key features such as:
  - *Adequacy:* Assessing data to capture relevant diversity (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Researchers' Perspectives:* Describing how researcher perspectives were managed to limit their effect on data collection and analysis (Levitt et al., 2017). This is also known as "reflexivity" (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Groundedness:* Demonstrating that findings are grounded in evidence (e.g., using quotes) (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Meaningfulness:* Showing contributions are insightful and meaningful (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Context:* Providing relevant contextual information (e.g., setting, participant info) (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Coherence:* Presenting findings coherently, making sense of contradictions (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Consistency:* Commenting on consistency in analytic processes (e.g., interrater reliability) (Levitt et al., 2017).
  - *Member Checking:* Taking data and interpretations back to the source to increase internal validity (Creswell, 2014).
  - *Rich, Thick Description:* Providing detailed descriptions to ensure external validity (transferability) (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.9. Expected Outcomes/Contribution**

This section should clearly state the anticipated findings and their broader implications (Locke et al., 2010).

**Key aspects include:**

- *Anticipated Results:* Describe what you expect to find (Punch, 2016).
- *Implications:* Discuss the likely impact of your findings on future work, other research areas, or professional practice (Creswell, 2014). For TESOL/TEFL, this could involve illuminating processes of language learning, informing pedagogical practices, or impacting policy (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019).
- *Agenda for Further Research:* Suggest new research questions raised by the study or what will be needed to answer the original question more satisfactorily (Punch, 2016). This helps to see the implications of your work in a wider context (Creswell, 2014).

## **2.10. Timetable**

Including a project timetable or schedule is highly useful for keeping the study on track (Punch, 2016). It demonstrates feasibility and planning to the review committee (Locke et al., 2010).

**Key elements:**

- *Activity Breakdown:* Sketch out what activities will be done, month by month or week by week (Punch, 2016).
- *Flexibility:* Remember to allow for flexibility and "free time" for when things do not go exactly as planned (Punch, 2016).
- *Time Frame:* Consider the typical time frame for MA (e.g., 2 years) and PhD (e.g., 3-5 years) programmes at your institution (Phillips & Pugh, 2010).

## **2.11. Appendices**

Appendices are used to include supporting material, data, statistical tables, and/or transcripts that are essential for evaluation of the main text but would interrupt the flow of the paper if included in the body (American Psychological Association, 2020).

**Examples of what to include:**

- Test instruments, interview schedules, directions to subjects, criteria for selection of experts, pilot test data (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Coding frames, code books, questionnaires, and transcripts of interviews (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Detailed information (e.g., parameters used in a simulation) if necessary for readers to understand major points (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Raw data summaries (raw data generally not needed if summary analysis provided) (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Timelines and proposed budget (Locke et al., 2010).
- Supplementary materials on a separate website for journals to save space (American Psychological Association, 2020).

### **3. Ethical, Legal, and Professional Standards in Publishing**

Adherence to ethical, legal, and professional standards is paramount throughout the research process, from planning to reporting findings. These standards ensure the integrity of scientific findings and protect the rights and welfare of participants (American Psychological Association, 2017a).

#### **3.1. General Ethical Principles**

- *Competence*: Individuals conducting, analysing, or reporting research should possess the requisite skills and experience (American Psychological Association, 2017a).
- *Scientific Integrity*: Standards safeguard scientific integrity by ensuring transparency in reporting (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Anticipation of Issues*: Researchers should anticipate and describe potential ethical issues in all phases of the research process in the proposal (American Psychological Association, 2017a).

- *Conscientious and Respectful Conduct:* Authors are encouraged to be conscientious and respectful toward both the people about whom they are writing and their readers (American Psychological Association, 2020).

### **3.2. Protecting the Rights and Welfare of Research Participants**

- *Informed Consent:* Participants must be adequately informed about the research and their rights (American Psychological Association, 2017a). This is an essential step in obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (American Psychological Association, 2017a).
- *IRB Approval:* Research protocols, especially those involving primary data collection through interviews or questionnaires, often require ethics approval from an IRB or human subjects ethics committee (American Psychological Association, 2017a). Protocols act as a "roadmap" and checklist, helping to anticipate problems and ensure uniform data collection if multiple individuals are involved (Creswell, 2014).
- *Confidentiality and Anonymity:* When presenting quotations from research participants, care must be taken to format them appropriately and ensure anonymity where promised (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Sensitive Data:* Anticipate sensitive ethical issues related to personal connections to the research site or participants (Creswell, 2014).

### **3.3. Protecting Intellectual Property Rights: Plagiarism and Self-Plagiarism**

- *Plagiarism:* It is unacceptable to present the work or ideas of others as your own (American Psychological Association, 2020). Always provide credit for the work of others (American Psychological Association, 2020). Quotation marks must indicate exact words taken from others, and even paraphrased material requires citation of the original source (American Psychological Association, 2020). Undercitation can lead to plagiarism (American Psychological Association, 2020).

- *Self-Plagiarism*: This occurs when authors present their own previously published work as new (American Psychological Association, 2020). Duplicate or piecemeal publication of data should be avoided (American Psychological Association, 2020). The goal is to make an original contribution to knowledge (Phillips & Pugh, 2010). If using data from previous publications (e.g., dissertations or conference papers), this must be acknowledged (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Copyright Attribution*: For reprinting or adapting certain materials (figures, images, lengthy quotations), a more comprehensive copyright attribution is required, and explicit written permission from the copyright holder may be necessary (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Reference List and In-Text Citations*: Each work cited in the text must appear in the reference list, and each work in the reference list must be cited in the text (American Psychological Association, 2020).

### **3.4. Bias-Free Language Guidelines**

Authors must strive to use language that is free of bias, avoiding implied or irrelevant evaluations of groups (American Psychological Association, 2020). This promotes scientific objectivity and accuracy and avoids perpetuating demeaning attitudes (American Psychological Association, 2020).

#### **General guidelines include:**

- *Appropriate Specificity*: Describe at the appropriate level of specificity.
- *Sensitive Labels*: Be sensitive to labels. For example, "sexual orientation" should be used instead of "sexual preference".
- *Affirming and Inclusive Language*: Use language that affirms the worth and dignity of people and avoids prejudiced beliefs based on age, disability, gender, participation in research, racial or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other personal factors.

- *Gender-Neutral Writing*: Where possible, use gender-neutral language (e.g., "the learner," "they" instead of "his or her") (American Psychological Association, 2020).

## **4. Writing Strategies and APA Style Guidelines**

The way a proposal is written profoundly impacts its clarity and effectiveness (American Psychological Association, 2020). Adherence to a consistent writing style, particularly APA Style for education and social sciences, is crucial (Madigan et al., 1995).

### **4.1. General Writing Principles**

Good scholarly writing requires specific skills and forms of organisation (American Psychological Association, 2020).

- *Clarity and Conciseness*: Present ideas and findings directly and straightforwardly. Eliminate unnecessary words and "fat."
- *Continuity and Flow*: Ensure ideas flow logically within and between sentences and paragraphs. Use transitions effectively. The "hook-and-eye" technique ensures coherence, where the end of one sentence connects to the beginning of the next.
- *Voice and Tense*: Use the active voice as much as possible to create direct, clear, and concise sentences. For example, "the patients took the medication orally," not "the medication was taken orally by the patients". The passive voice is acceptable when focusing on the object or recipient of the action. Proposals are usually written in the third person (he, she, or investigator) and in the present or future tense (Creswell, 2014).
- *Professionalism and Formality*: Use language that conveys professionalism and formality, avoiding slang, contractions, or pop culture references. Criticisms of other researchers' work should be professional and non-combative.



- *Writing as Thinking*: Begin putting words down on paper early to clarify ideas (Murray, 2003). Writing and research should proceed simultaneously, as arguing ideas in writing helps to think more constructively and refine research questions (Murray, 2003).
- *Habit of Writing*: Develop a regular writing habit (Murray, 2003).
- *Proofreading and Revision*: A well-written paper undergoes multiple revisions. Check for logical development, unity, cohesion, grammar, spelling, and usage.
- *Word Choice*: Choose words carefully. Avoid complex or colloquial words when simpler alternatives exist. Define terminology to avoid confusion (Creswell, 2014).
- *Vary Sentence and Paragraph Lengths*: This can improve flow and engagement. Avoid overlong paragraphs (American Psychological Association, 2020).

## **4.2. APA Style Guidelines (7th Edition)**

APA Style provides comprehensive guidelines for writing scholarly papers, ensuring consistency and clarity (American Psychological Association, 2020). It helps readers focus on content rather than presentation (Madigan et al., 1995).

### **4.2.1. Overview and Levels of APA Style:**

- *Primary Purpose*: To facilitate scientific communication by promoting clarity of expression and standardising the organisation and content of research articles (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- *Three Levels*:
  - *Overall Organisation*: The general structure of an article with distinct sections in a fixed order (Title page, Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, References).
  - *High-Level Style*: Guidelines for clear expression of ideas, emphasizing formal tone, avoiding bias, and hedging conclusions to reflect the tentative nature of scientific knowledge.

- Low-Level Style: Specific guidelines for spelling, grammar, references, numbers, statistics, figures, and tables (American Psychological Association, 2020).

#### **4.2.2. Page Format:**

- Title Page:
  - Student Papers: Includes paper title, author name(s), author affiliation (university), course number and name, instructor name, assignment due date, and page number (American Psychological Association, 2020). All elements are centred (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - Professional Papers: Includes title, author names and affiliations, and author note (American Psychological Association, 2020). The running head is simplified for professional authors and is not required for students (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Page Header and Numbering: All pages should contain the page number, flush right, in the header (American Psychological Association, 2020). The title page is page number 1 (American Psychological Association, 2020). Use automatic page-numbering functions (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Font: A variety of font choices are permitted, including sans serif (e.g., 11-point Calibri, Arial) or serif (e.g., 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Georgia). Use the same font throughout the text (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Line Spacing: Double-space all elements of the manuscript, including the title page, abstract, text, headings, block quotations, tables, figures, and reference list (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Margins: Set margins at 1 in. (2.54 cm) on all sides (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Paragraph Indentation: Indent the first line of every paragraph 0.5 in. using the tab key or automatic formatting function. Exceptions include

titles, headings, block quotations, table/figure numbers, titles, and notes, and reference list entries (which use a hanging indent) (American Psychological Association, 2020).

#### **4.2.3. Headings and Subheadings:**

Headings are essential for clear organisation and navigability, helping readers understand the paper's structure (American Psychological Association, 2020).

- **Levels:** APA Style has five possible levels of heading. All topics of equal importance should have the same level of heading with parallel wording (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- **Format:**
  - Level 1: Centred, Bold, Title Case. Text begins as a new paragraph.
  - Level 2: Flush Left, Bold, Title Case. Text begins as a new paragraph.
  - Level 3: Flush Left, Bold Italic, Title Case. Text begins as a new paragraph.
  - Level 4: Indented, Bold, Title Case, Ending With a Period. Text begins on the same line and continues as a regular paragraph.
  - Level 5: Indented, Bold Italic, Title Case, Ending With a Period. Text begins on the same line and continues as a regular paragraph.
- **Usage:** Use only the number of headings necessary for distinct sections; short student papers may require none. Do not label headings with numbers or letters. Ensure headings are clearly distinguishable from the text (American Psychological Association, 2020).

#### **4.2.4. In-Text Citations:**

APA Style uses the author–date citation system, where a brief in-text citation directs readers to a full reference list entry (American Psychological Association, 2020).

- Correspondence: Each work cited in the text must appear in the reference list, and vice versa.
- Formats:
  - Parenthetical Citations: Author name and publication date appear in parentheses (e.g., (Luna, 2020)) (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - Narrative Citations: Information is incorporated into the text as part of the sentence (e.g., Luna (2020) argued...) (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Number of Authors:
  - One or Two Authors: Include all author names in every citation (e.g., (Salas & D'Agostino, 2020) or Salas and D'Agostino (2020)) (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - Three or More Authors: Include only the first author's name plus "et al." in every citation, including the first (e.g., (Martin et al., 2020) or Martin et al. (2020)), unless ambiguity arises (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - Group Authors: For group authors with abbreviations, spell out the full name and abbreviation on first citation, then use the abbreviation thereafter (e.g., National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2020, then NIMH, 2020) (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- Date: Use only the year in the in-text citation, even if the reference list entry has a more specific date (American Psychological Association, 2020). Use "n.d." for no date and "in press" for accepted but unpublished works.
- Citing Specific Parts: Always provide page numbers for direct quotations (p. for single, pp. for multiple) (American Psychological Association, 2020). For works without page numbers, use other locators (e.g., paragraph number "para.", chapter, table, figure, slide, time stamp for audiovisual).

- **Repeated Citations:** In general, repeat the entire citation. The year can be omitted from narrative citations only when multiple narrative citations to the same work appear within a single paragraph. Reintroduce the year in the first narrative citation of a new paragraph. However, if citing multiple works by the same author(s) across different years, include the year in every citation to prevent ambiguity (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- **Multiple Works in One Citation:** Place citations in alphabetical order by the first author's surname, separated by semicolons (e.g., (Author, 2018; Other, 2019)) (American Psychological Association, 2020). To highlight specific works, place them first, then use "see also" for additional citations (American Psychological Association, 2020).
- **Direct Quotations:**
  - **Short Quotations** (fewer than 40 words): Incorporate into the text within double quotation marks. Always provide author, year, and page number. Punctuation (periods, commas) goes *\*inside\** closing quotation marks (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - **Block Quotations** (40 words or more): Start on a new line, indent the whole block 0.5 in. from the left margin. Do not use quotation marks. If multiple paragraphs, indent subsequent paragraphs an additional 0.5 in. Double-space the entire block. Cite the source in parentheses after the final punctuation, or include author and year in narrative before the quotation and only page number in parentheses after (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - **Modifications:** Use square brackets to enclose inserted material or explanations within a quotation. Use italics for emphasis, followed by "[emphasis added]" (American Psychological Association, 2020). Ellipses are used for omitted material, not at the beginning/end unless in original.

- Quotations with Embedded Citations: Include embedded citations within the quotation; do not add these works to your reference list unless cited as primary sources elsewhere.
- Paraphrasing: Cite the work on first mention. If the paraphrase continues for several sentences in the same paragraph, it is not necessary to repeat the citation as long as the source remains clear. Reintroduce the citation in a new paragraph or if incorporating multiple sources (American Psychological Association, 2020).

#### **4.2.5. Reference List:**

The reference list at the end of a paper provides the information necessary to identify and retrieve each work cited in the text. It is a crucial part of crediting previous scholarship (American Psychological Association, 2020).

- Purpose: To enable readers to locate works cited, document and substantiate statements, and place research in context.
- Format:
  - New Page: Begin the reference list on a new page after the text.
  - Label: Label it "References", capitalized, in bold, and centred.
  - Line Spacing: Double-space the entire reference list (within and between entries).
  - Hanging Indent: Apply a hanging indent of 0.5 in. to each entry (first line flush left, subsequent lines indented). Use your word-processing programme's function for this.
- Order of Works: Entries are listed in alphabetical order by the surname of the first author.
  - Alphabetization Rules: "Nothing precedes something" (e.g., Loft precedes Loftus) (American Psychological Association, 2020). Disregard spaces or punctuation in two-word surnames and anything in parentheses or square brackets.
  - Multiple Works by Same First Author:

- One-author entries are arranged chronologically (earliest first) (American Psychological Association, 2020). References with no date precede those with dates, and "in press" are last.
- One-author entries precede multiple-author entries with the same first author, even if the multiple-author work was published earlier.
- Multiple-author entries with authors in the same order are arranged by year of publication.
- Multiple-author entries with the same first author but different subsequent authors are arranged alphabetically by the second author's surname (or third, etc.).
- Same Author and Same Date: Add a lowercase letter (e.g., "2020a," "n.d.-a," "in press-a") after the year in both in-text citation and reference list entry. First, compare specific dates chronologically; then, if dates are identical, alphabetise by title (disregarding "A," "An," "The").
- First Authors with Same Surname: Arrange alphabetically by first initial(s).
- Reference Elements (Author, Date, Title, Source):
  - Author: Invert all individual authors' names (Surname, Initials). Use commas to separate authors and an ampersand (&) before the final author's name for two to 20 authors. For 21 or more authors, include first 19, use ellipsis, then final author's name. Do not include titles or positions (e.g., PhD, Dr.). For authors with one name or username, provide the full name/username without abbreviation (American Psychological Association, 2020).
  - Date: Enclosed in parentheses (American Psychological Association, 2020). Includes year, and sometimes month, season, or day. For online works, include updated or reviewed dates (American Psychological Association, 2020). Retrieval dates are

used only when a retrieval date is also needed (e.g., for Twitter profiles).

- Title: The title of the work is presented. For books/reports, include edition, report number, or volume number in parentheses after the title, without italics or period between title and parenthetical information.
- Source: Provides information about where the work came from (periodical title, publisher, website name) (American Psychological Association, 2020). Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) and URLs are presented as hyperlinks. The label "DOI:" and words "Retrieved from" are no longer used before a DOI or URL, unless a retrieval date is also needed. Database information and/or database URLs are generally not included, with few exceptions (e.g., Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews).
- Special Cases: Guidelines exist for translated works, reprinted/republished works, religious/classical works, interviews, classroom/intranet sources, and personal communications.
- Consistency: All references should be consistently formatted according to APA Style to aid readability and indexing (American Psychological Association, 2020). Some journals may have their own "house styles" that vary slightly from APA, so always check journal guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2020).

## **Conclusion: Crafting a Successful Proposal**

Writing a strong research proposal is a multifaceted endeavour that lays the groundwork for a successful academic career (Locke et al., 2010). It is a skill that can be learned and refined with practice and adherence to established guidelines (Punch, 2016). For novice researchers in Education and TESOL/TEFL, particularly those embarking on MA or PhD studies at institutions like Assiut University, this guide has sought to demystify the process by providing comprehensive, practical, and rigorous insights (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2016).



By carefully developing each component - from a clear and concise title to a detailed methodology and adherence to ethical considerations - researchers can present a coherent and compelling plan (Locke et al., 2010). Mastering APA Style for formatting, in-text citations, and the reference list ensures that your proposal meets international academic standards for clarity, consistency, and scholarly communication (American Psychological Association, 2020). Remember that the proposal is a dynamic document; while an initial plan is essential, it is normal for aspects to evolve as your knowledge and understanding expand through critical analysis and research (Punch, 2016).

### **Key takeaways for a strong proposal include:**

- Planning is paramount: A well-considered proposal increases the chances of acceptance and provides a solid foundation for your research journey (Locke et al., 2010).
- Clarity and precision: Every section, from the problem statement to data analysis, must be articulated with unambiguous language (Creswell, 2014).
- Justification: Every choice, from research design to theoretical framework, must be justified and linked logically to your research questions (Creswell, 2014).
- Ethical responsibility: Researchers must anticipate and address ethical issues, protecting participants and ensuring scientific integrity (American Psychological Association, 2017a).
- Adherence to APA Style: Consistent application of APA guidelines demonstrates professionalism and facilitates readability for your academic audience (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Finally, I encourage any aspiring researcher to view the proposal writing process not just as a hurdle, but as a valuable opportunity to sharpen his/her critical thinking, hone his/her communication skills, and give shape to his/her

project from its earliest stages (Murray, 2003). Researchers should embrace the process of drafting and refining, seek feedback from your supervisors, and strive for the excellence in writing that is the hallmark of impactful scholarly work (American Psychological Association, 2020).

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