

Book Review: Developing Research Proposals

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*Writing a research proposal can be one of the most important tasks facing academics, researchers and postgraduate students. Yet there is a good deal of misinformation and a great lack of guidance about what constitutes a good research proposal and what can be done to maximise one's chances of writing a successful application. **Pam Denicolo and Lucinda Becker** aim to help readers understand the context within which their proposal will be read, what the reviewers are looking for and will be influenced by, while also supporting the development of relevant skills through advice and practical activities. Reviewed by **Andreea Moise**.*

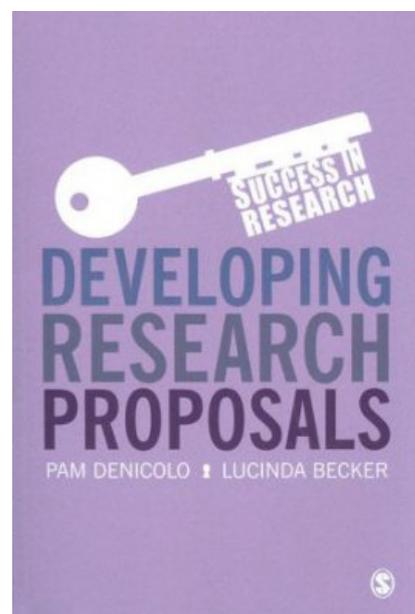


Developing Research Proposals. Pam Denicolo and Lucinda Becker. Sage. January 2012.

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Far from being only a routine part of an academic career, applying for research funding can be a life-changing experience, fostering progress and innovation in one's area of expertise. Plenty of information has been published on the subject of developing successful research proposals, but due to its often questionable practicability, applicants may still struggle in securing funding for research.

Developing Research Proposals is a very accessible and authoritative guide, and part of Sage's informative [Success in Research Series](#). Structured in 10 chapters, the book addresses common concerns experienced by early career researchers, and covers all steps in the journey through the often repetitive process of proposal writing. The book also has extensive appendices directing the reader to a selection of specific resources and would appeal to those interested in gaining more insight into the issues discussed in the book, such as guides to gaining funding, general research methods books for different disciplines, writing specific sections of the proposals.



The authors, [Pam Denicolo](#) and [Lucinda Becker](#), are both academics based at University of Reading who share a strong commitment to improving learning and teaching in Higher Education and a remarkable passion for supporting students and early career researchers to develop their expertise. Most impressive about their down-to-earth guidance are the authors' pragmatic reflections and their ability to keep the reader motivated, engaged, and positive, regardless of any difficulties experienced. The book doesn't offer any quick routes to getting the task done, but supports a rather balanced view that facing your own flaws and understanding how to use the information available more productively and persuasively are the keys to success.

The first three chapters of the book provide an overview of what the research proposal is and general advice related to the appropriate writing style and content of title, abstract, body of the proposal, and of the supporting documents. The following chapters are more likely to appeal to a more experienced readership as the authors discuss in more detail the preparation of more problematic and lengthier proposal components: the literature review, the methodology section, and budgeting aspects pointing out potential difficulties.

The importance of the candidate's suitability for undertaking the proposed project is strongly emphasised throughout, in a reassuring tone. Before any work is started, they recommend undertaking a frank self-assessment using the [Researcher Development Framework](#). This will help to identify attributes already possessed by candidates, as well as areas which need polishing such as research skills, qualifications, and experience.

The authors give valuable advice on the mis-attribution of concepts not only in the methodology section of proposals but also in theoretical books (Chapter 6). The use of "quantitative" and "qualitative" terms when describing research methods for data collection (e.g. interview, survey etc.) can lead to the wrong assumption that data can be either numerical or non-numerical but not both, and in which case mixed methods can be incorrectly considered problematic. This is because although data can be either quantitative or qualitative, in reality any approach can use either or both to answer a research question. In order to overcome this, the authors suggest referring to "positivist" and "interpretivist" approaches when assuming data which are either qualitative or quantitative in nature. This chapter also lists the main concepts that can be used with each of the two approaches and draws to a set of general ethical considerations towards the end.

The authors argue throughout the book that even though idiosyncratic requirements such as restrictions on word length and protocols for section headings can vary across funding bodies and disciplines, all funders are seeking proposals demonstrating the uniqueness of the topic combined with conformity to rigorous and ethical research practice. While this may at first sound a little vague, plenty of concrete examples and practical advice have been included to illustrate this important idea.

Despite various strengths, when discussing issues related to rejection, building resilience, and responding to feedback, *Developing Research Proposals* does not consider a positive outcome of the proposal application and therefore the authors miss the chance to give the readers a flavour of what is yet to come (e.g. viva, presentation preparation etc.). It is unclear if this is because the authors consider it an unrealistic result for early-career researchers or simply because for somebody reaching this stage, what happens next should not be at all problematic. I would also have expected to see some discussion around academic interviews for prospective research students which are very often part of the selection process for a funded PhD place. Of course, this may be considered a separate topic and I presume the content of the book is to a certain extent limited by the authors' expertise and views gathered from other sources.

Overall, the authors have written a book providing a wealth of information and advice that would come in handy not only to those interested in maximizing their chances to get a research degree place or funding for project in a complex and demanding environment, but also to those interested in their personal development as researchers.

Andreea Moise has recently completed a master's degree in social research methods and social policy at the London School of Economics. She is currently working as a policy research intern at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She has also collaborated on the Impact of Social Sciences Project. She also tweets at [@moise_andreea](#). [Read more reviews by Andreea](#).