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For Business Students

Writing a Research Proposal

A mini book



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असतो मा सद्गमय, तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय, मृत्योर्मा अमृतंगमय
ॐ श्री गणेशाय नमः

Started: 11th April 2016

Writing a Research Proposal

By

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Associate Professor, Faculty of Business, Sohar University, Sohar
Sultanate of Oman



Boy: "We have to start our Research Project." **Girl:** "Let's start thinking about it."

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***Dedicated to my lovely daughters Karnika & Aarna and my wife Dr. Shweta
Belwal and to all the students in the Sultanate of Oman***

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Preface

Dissertation or Research Project is now a part and parcel of every undergraduate or postgraduate business degree. In following their Bachelor's program in management, quite often students seem confused about their research projects. Initially, they find it difficult to understand what is expected and what they need to do. Although most of the time, they receive clear guidelines from the institution, still they have many queries puzzling their minds. At the first instance, they struggle in picking up a right topic and then they get stuck with an initial idea for drafting their proposal. They are expected to develop and present this draft proposal to their supervisors or the evaluation panel before they start working on the research project. This booklet is intended to help such students who suffer from this dilemma. The intention is to help students in taking the very first step in the area of research, which entails writing of research proposal and refining it further to meet an acceptable level of standards. However, students' conversation with their supervisors about the proposal and supervisors' feedbacks are essential to succeed in this process. In this particular booklet my effort would be to introduce to the students the aim of the research project, the research process itself and what is expected from a good proposal, different elements of a proposal, and how to sketch, structure and develop a proposal. Some templates, links to websites, and examples given in the different places would help a student in developing an informed proposal which student would find it easier to work on in pursuing their research work and writing of the dissertation. Although in writing this booklet, I have written straight from my experience, I gratefully acknowledge the hidden knowledge that I have gained from the writers of different texts over the period of time. I hope that this booklet will help the students in taking their first step in the area of research.

Let's start thinking about it

I know that you want to write your proposal in an easiest, simple, and convenient way. To help you develop a meaningful proposal, I would like to introduce you to the important elements of a proposal. Here, I will follow a different approach than the one followed by the regular books, which define research and explain the related contexts in a systematic and detailed way. Although these books offer the best insights, most of you find them complex and hard to follow at your level. Here, I lead you through some key concepts which do not trap you within the formidable walls of texts or disenchant you with long narrations. Rather I make it easier for you to understand the process of research and encourage you to keep on learning and writing your proposal at the same time. This way, you will realize your initial draft in a faster way. You can further refine the initial draft by discussing it with your supervisor and by visiting libraries and reading textbooks or others' proposals in detail, and by seeking feedback on different elements of your draft. So, my aim of writing this booklet is to support you with my advice in your research projects, keep you aligned with your research aim, and help you in developing the first draft of the proposal at the same time.



Girl: "I wonder how I should structure my project proposal."

Structure of a proposal

Let's start with the content or the structure of the proposal now! What does it contain or what it expects from the students to write on? So when we talk about a

proposal. First of all, you need to think of some topic. It is not necessary that you finalize the topic at the same time. Research is a process in which you keep on researching and refining things. So whether it is a topic, or approach, or analysis, or conclusion you can take your time to revise it. The box below contains the important items in your proposal. Open a blank MSWord document and copy and paste these ten heads on it. As you go through rest of the booklet, slowly and slowly start filling words under these heads. You will find the prototype of your proposal ready within a short time.



Figure 1. The main contents of a research proposal

Topic or Title

So, a Topic! What should be your topic? It depends on your interest and your motivation. What interests you in your studies or work? Such topics can be varied but it depends on you how you will choose one. For example, the topic might be in the area of students' access to facilities (labs, libraries, canteen etc.) on the campus, which might have attracted you to study it in a systematic way. It can be about the performance of some business organization on certain indicators (say market share, profitability ratio etc.), which you want to analyze as a case study or as a comparative analysis of firms. It can be in the area of any of the business functions, which you are studying within the program: Marketing, HR, Accounting, MIS, Operations, general business management or any area of your choice. Let me list some topics that have been taken by some students in our faculty for your understanding:

- Impact of performance appraisal system on employees' motivation in Majan Electricity Company, Sohar
- A Study to examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the banking sector of Oman
- Application of Total Quality Management in Higher Education: A Case study in Shinas College of Technology
- Perception and Attitude of Employees towards Training Programmes in Public Establishment for Industrial Estates

- The Impact of ERP system on the academic performance in Sohar University
- Factors affecting the adoption and usage of online services in Oman
- Why shipping line companies prefer Port of Jabil Ali rather than Port of Sohar: A comparative study between Sohar and Jabil Ali

You can browse the graduate dissertation/thesis titles in the areas of Marketing in The University of Auckland website here:

<http://www.business.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/od-our-departments/od-marketing/our-research-16/postgraduate-dissertation-and-thesis-titles.html>

Similarly, you can search the same website for topics in other functional areas like Accounting, Information Systems, and Management to have a better understanding of identifying and finalizing a topic.

How to assess the feasibility of a Topic

It is well said that “Well begun is half done.” If you spend some time in choosing your topic, you will not face unexpected problems later.

You can check the initial feasibility of the topic with the 5Ws and 1 H (What, why, where, who, when and How). Rudyard Kipling described them as the six servants in his book *Just So Stories* published in 1902:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are **What** and **Why** and **When**
And **How** and **Where** and **Who**.

Once you subject your topic to these six questions, the possible answer can give you further ideas about designing your research project and drafting your proposal. The questions here would typically be like:

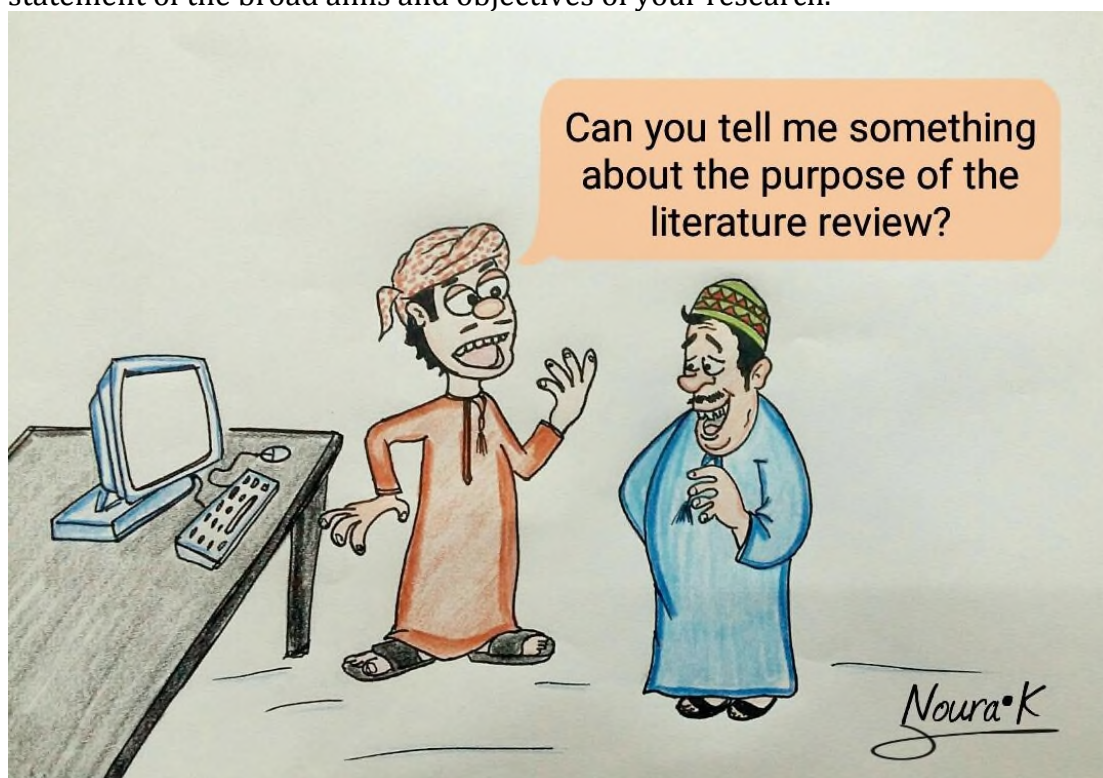
- *What* are you going to do/ going to achieve? → aims and objectives
- *Why* is this topic important? → relevance and your contribution
- *Who* will you include in that? → respondents, secondary data, and content
- *Where* are you going to do that? → scope and limitations
- *When* will you do that? → timeline
- *How* will you do that? → methodology

You can ask these questions every time to yourself. If you get answers (or decide something at your own temporarily to answer these questions) then things will be easier for you, and you will be able to write them down in the form of a proposal.

Introduction

So after deciding the topic, which is open to refining, and even to changing in extreme circumstances, you need to start working on your proposal. You start

with writing an introduction – the very first section of your proposal. Here you will build a basic discussion about the topic using some background information, without engaging much with the literature. Just on the basis of some common understanding, you need to define what you intend to do in this study. The writings here should elaborate and justify, in some way, your choice of the topic. This information will also help you in introducing the topic to your supervisor, the first opportunity to sell your idea. I would recommend writing a brief but meaningful introduction, confined to a maximum of two pages, leading to the statement of the broad aims and objectives of your research.



Literature Review

After the introduction, you attempt the second part that is the literature review. Now you have got some idea about the topic, what you intend to do, and what your broader aims are. Now you need to look for the sources of information from where you can know more about this topic. You have access to these sources in a variety of ways say books, journals, periodicals, newspapers, blogs and other internet based content. Usually, internet-based searches are quicker and faster than visits to traditional libraries where you need to spend much more time. So in this part of your research, you try to gain more information about the subject and you come to know about what other researchers have done in this area. This review gives you a clear insight whether the proposed research will add some value. Here comes a question why do we do research. The aim of the research is to contribute to knowledge, by adding what we don't know to the existing pool of what we know. Or sometimes to support or challenge the existing view or sometimes to see the existing knowledge in the light of new changes... say the change in time, place, technology, or anything for that matter. So by now you know why we do research.

Tips: Focus on contribution!

You review of the literature highlights what did you observe in the existing pool of research and what your research is going to add. So the knowledge or insights that you gathered (that were not known earlier) and added to the existing pool of knowledge is called a contribution.

Statement of the problem Or Purpose statement

This is a simple narration of the problem that you aim to solve in your project. We express the ‘Statement of the problem’, in one paragraph mainly after the review of the literature. Additionally, we lay out a set of research questions that come out from our statement of the problem. Answering these questions would help us in solving the research problem. And these questions then lead us to some specific objectives that we aim to achieve (purpose) in our research effort.



Research questions/ Hypotheses

Under this head, you need to write down the questions (in both qualitative and quantitative research) that you would need answering to solve the stated research problem or the specific hypotheses (in quantitative research) that you would test to complete your research. Now you would ask what the difference between the

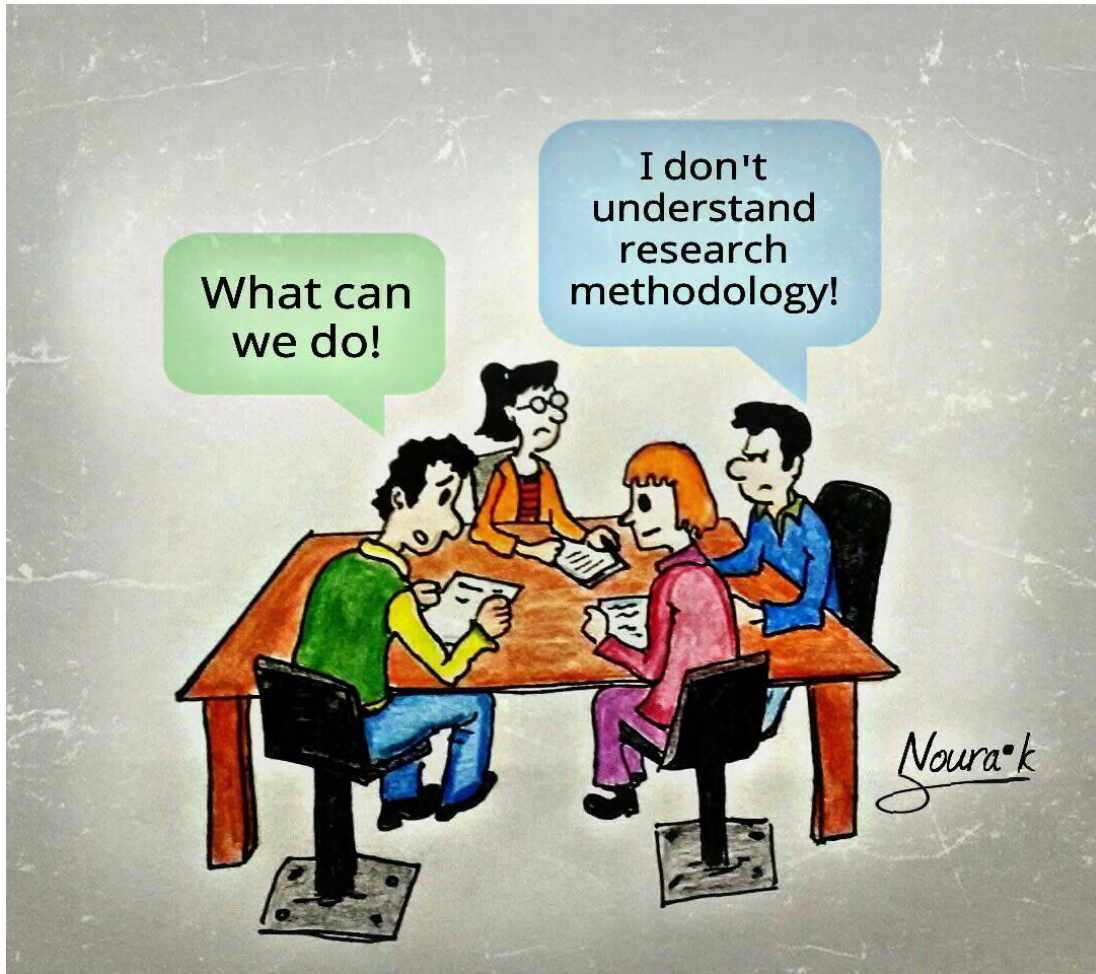
research questions and the hypothesis is. I would say that these are two different approaches to conducting the research. While in the case of the former you aim to find the answers to the questions, in the case of the latter you need to test the hypothesis (plural: hypotheses) using appropriate statistical tests. The hypotheses are stated in null and alternative forms. The null form assumes no significant relationship or difference between groups on a dependent variable. For example:

Null Hypothesis – H_0 : There is no difference between male and female students in their monthly mobile phone expenditure.

Alternate Hypothesis – H_1 : Male students spend more than female students monthly on their mobile phone expenditures.

A hypothesis is a statement or claim that you make about the population of your interest. The hypothesis you make at the beginning might be true or false, but you test them in your research by conducting statistical tests on sampled data drawn from the population. The testing of hypothesis needs some advanced understanding of sampling theory, parametric and non-parametric tests, and measurement methods. It is not necessary to have hypotheses in your research. You can simply frame research questions and find answers to them.

In the rest of your project, you find answers to these questions or test your hypotheses to meet your research objectives. This is one of the most critical areas which needs more efforts on your part – some precise thinking, some hours of reflection and critical review, like what happens if I put it this way or put it that way sort of. So let's stop for a moment and think.



Research Methodology

The next section that you write in your proposal is the methodology. Methodology or more appropriately research methodology describes the steps or procedures that you will follow to achieve your objectives. So what should come here? Most simply, you will write whom will you study in your research, how will you select them, how will you collect and analyze data to present the findings. It is the most important area, which needs some concentrated efforts right from the beginning. If you are very clear from the beginning how it is to be done, you will save time and energy, and you will not encounter any surprises later. It would require some extra reading, or discussions with your group, research supervisor, some searches (online/ offline), etc.

So, how should you approach the research methodology section in your proposal? Start focusing on the topic and see what you are going to do and what aims and objectives you have defined already. More specifically, you will have to write how you are going to conduct your research using the following sub-heads:

Research Design: Exploratory, Descriptive, or Causal. The exploratory design is followed mostly in qualitative research where a researcher a topic where the variables of interest are unknown and there are not much-established theories explaining the variables. Descriptive or Causal designs follow

quantitative data analysis in order to describe the variables of interest or establishing some cause and effect relationships between them, respectively.

Population: You need to describe your targeted population, which you want to study. For example, if you want to study the mobile usage behavior of university students in a particular region, then the total number of university students in that region will be your population.

Sample size: How many samples will be appropriate to study that population is determined by sample size calculation. In a qualitative analysis based research, researchers keep on collecting data from samples till they find a saturation in responses and believe that no additional (new) information can be gained further. Quantitative researchers believe on the statistical calculation of sample size. You too can calculate sample size using online sample size calculators. Visit <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm> . For example, if you fill in the population size (say 10000), the confidence level (say 5%) and confidence interval (say 10%) and determine sample size, you will get 95 as an answer. However, the procedure expects that you will choose your samples randomly.

Sampling: This means how will you chose the samples. There are two broad group of approaches: Probability sampling (Simple random, systematic, cluster, stratified etc.) or NonProbability sampling (Convenience, quota, purposive, snowballing etc.) See a quick explanation in the following web link: http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/qmss/samples_and_sampling/types_of_sampling.html

Research instruments: How you will record and measure the data. The popular methods are observations, questionnaire (self-administered means respondent will fill it), and interview schedule (a questionnaire that is filled by you). These days, students can use Google Forms or Survey Monkey sort of online questionnaires too.

Method of Analysis: These could be Quantitative or Qualitative or Mixed Method. Qualitative methods use subjectivity where researcher needs to find the answers to the research problems by claims, reasons, evidence, and their interpretation. They use unusual creativity, the formation of themes, and convincing arguments to present the answers (narration) to the research problems, which contributes to the establishment of theories in the long run. Quantitate methods use objective assessment of variables of interest (dependent and independent), describe those using basics of statistics or assess the relationship between variables or test existing theories. The mixed method approach uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches, where any one approach may or may not dominate. They help in balancing between the objectivity and subjectivity. In methodology section of your proposal, you just need to explain which method of analysis you will follow in your research project.

Scope and Limitations

This section of your proposal should describe the scope of study as well as the situations and circumstances that may have influenced or constrained your research mainly due to your selection of a particular methodology. The scope and limitations help the reader in taking precautions in generalizing the conclusions of your research, after recognizing the shortcomings, conditions or influences that you could not control. However, if you have set your own boundaries by excluding some regions, items in population, methodological procedure, you can mention them too as delimitations.

Timeline

In this section, you present sequentially the expected start and completion of each and every research activity down till the completion of the project. It is usually written in a tabular or diagram form. A sample timeline table is presented below:

TIMELINE: RESEARCH PROJECT

ACTIVITIES	DURATION (Month)									
	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	
Topic selection	■									
Literature review	■	■	■							
The first draft				■						
Proposal presentation				■						
Data collection				■	■	■				
Data entry and analysis						■	■			
Report writing							■	■	■	■
Project report submission										■

Figure 2. An example of the research project timeline

Bibliography

This is the final section of the research proposal. Here you present the detailed references of the secondary data that you have referred in your research work. You follow a particular style of referencing. A separate section on how to do 'in-text' referencing and 'bibliographic' referencing is given in the appendix.

Literature Review and Referencing

Literature review and referencing are two important aspects of proposal or dissertation writing. A good understanding of these two aspects will help you in maximizing the impact of your research work. Here I discuss in detail about literature review and how to refer it 'in-text' as well as in 'bibliography'. A patient reading will help you in understanding the merit of literature review and referencing. Please read it before attempting the literature review.

Literature Review

What is a review and why do we review literature are two important questions to ask yourself. In a literature review, the researcher looks at the work done by previous researchers in the area of your research. A literature review is performed using the secondary sources of information. The purpose is to gather more information and knowledge on the topic and to understand what is already known and to determine the contribution or difference that your research will make. During literature review, you refer to multiple data sources and you try to document them, categorized them, and present them logically and consistently. The aim to synthesize some key points in the area and identify, differentiate, or support your proposed research. The review usually follows a desk research process which means sitting at your desk and doing research, finding relevant information while referring to different publications.

You access journals, periodicals, and books in home or libraries or you do search on the Internet to collect data or take notes, sometimes by typing directly on your laptops or tabs. Whenever you find some important information, it is advisable that you save all those sources particularly the internet sources and the date of access as it is possible that you might not remember later from where you took this information. You do it using 'in text' referencing and 'bibliographic referencing'. 'In text' referencing expects you to write a short reference of the source within the text, while 'bibliographic' referencing needs the detailed account of the 'in-text reference' at the section called 'Bibliography,' which is placed at the end of the dissertation. A detailed note on referencing is given below.

Books and Journal articles are the most credible sources of information. One important source of online journals is your institutional access to data sources like Ebsco. If you don't have access to Ebsco there are open access journals which provide free access to research articles (visit <https://doaj.org/> and search). Additionally, [Scholar.google.com](https://scholar.google.com) and [ResearchGate](https://www.researchgate.net) are increasingly becoming popular sources among students for downloading the research papers. Additionally, you can review some reports produced by government agencies and organizations from time to time. You can also review the research projects undertaken by past students.

So, coming back to the review of the literature. It is a systematic search in your area of study. The aim is to search on the topic. You occasionally deviate while searching for information but come back to the main track or issue and keep on searching till you feel satisfied that you have acquired enough information on your topic. This information gives you a direction or knowledge to which side you should take your research. After choosing a topic, as you start preparing your draft proposal, literature review provides you a new knowledge to refine your proposal further and bring some more clarity to it.

While taking the notes during the review, you are not supposed to copy and paste the stuff directly from the source document. You are advised to read the source document, refer to the part which is in line with your research, paraphrase it (write in your own words), refer to the source, and give credit to the author(s) of the work that you refer. There is a formal way to do that, which is called referencing. So whenever you do review or picking an idea from someone else's work you document it by referencing. Suppose we took some information from an article written by two people so how we are going to refer to it. There are two things that you need to do: In-text referencing and bibliographic referencing. At the first, you give the basic reference to the persons within the main document by writing a brief reference (example) and second, you give a detailed (Complete) reference of the same work at the end of the research report in a section called bibliography.

The bibliography contains all the sources of data that you have referred in your project work. So, in the bibliographic details, every in-text citation has to be given a full reference. Bibliographic references are long as they list the complete source of the secondary data that you have referred. It needs details such as the surname, first name of authors, year of publication, the title of publication, year, volume, and page numbers in case of the journal or books. In the case of internet data, some differences exist and the referencing changes for a particular source. For example, books need different information, journals need different information, which differs further in cases of single, dual, or multiple authorships. Furthermore, there are different styles of writing the reference. For example, there is a style known as Harvard style which we use mainly in the universities. There are others like Chicago style, APA style, author-date format and much more. Universities generally prescribe students to follow a particular style of referencing. Accordingly, you need to comply with the requirements while completing your report. If not clear, you can always seek advice from your research supervisor as to which style your institution follows.

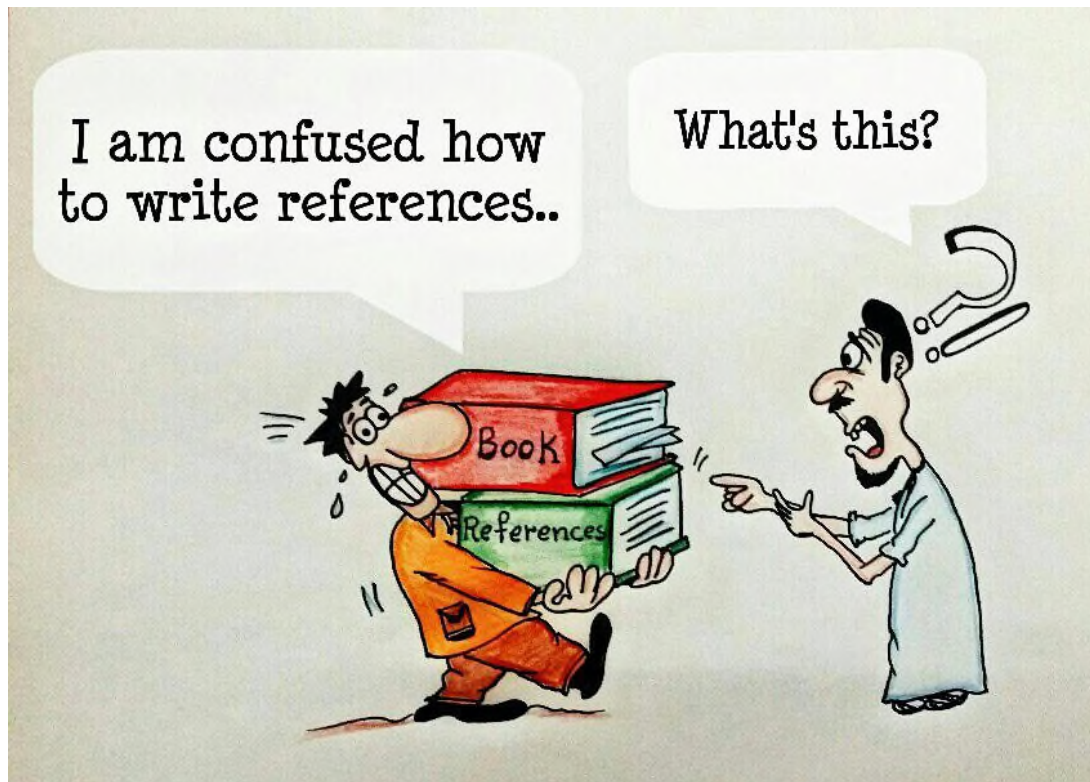
Referencing

So, let's go into a different direction. That was about referencing. What is refereeing and what do you need to comply while picking up the information from secondary sources? Why we need to do all this. Suppose, someone reads your report and finds some information in your work interesting and you have referred that information from other sources. By following the 'in-text' citation and its detail in the bibliography, the person can reach the original work to get a more

detailed account of that work. Similarly, when you do secondary data research, it is usually difficult for you to find the exact topic. However, within some sources, you might find a citation to a research which very closely resembles your proposed work. If the earlier researcher has not given full details how can you access to that source which he/she has mentioned? So referencing is one of the key processes of promoting and facilitating research. By references once can know the sources that one has mentioned and one can leave the traces for others so that others can follow them in the process of research. And this makes research an everlasting phenomenon.

However, you should not review everything, for it leads to a sheer waste of time and energy. Rather you need to be focused. For that, you need to be careful in picking up the resources as well as the sources of information. Earlier peoples used to go to the libraries and used to find books using catalogs (the manual index of information) and access material. These days a wide variety of information is available in the online form and it becomes easy to be lost if you are not focused.

As advised earlier whenever you come across any source which is important you need to save its bibliographic reference for easy access and retrieval in future if you want to read more from it for a better understanding. You can save it to your hard disk or some sort of online storage like a cloud which the current internet word offers to you. These days technology helps researchers very much. Use Dropbox, Google Drive, or other cloud storage to save your documents, which can be retrieved from anywhere without a threat of losing information.



How to write 'In-text' and 'Bibliographic' references

An easy way to learn referencing

To understand it in an interactive way, I would recommend you to visit the Quick@ite section of The University of Auckland website using the following link: <http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/index.php?p=quickcite&style=3>. Select the style which you want to use, the type of source, and then a number of authors to know specifically. For example, APA6 style, Print Articles, Journal two authors will give you the output as presented in Illustration x below. The site also gives references to the complete APA reference manual. Harvard and APA styles are close and you need to do some adjustments if you need to cite in Harvard. If you need Chicago style you can select accordingly.

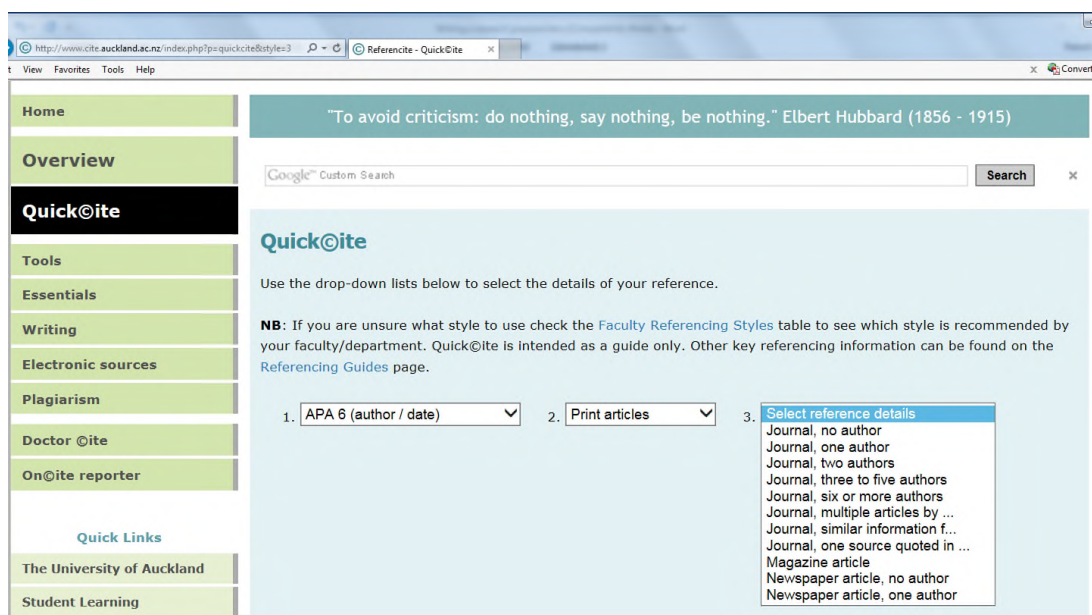
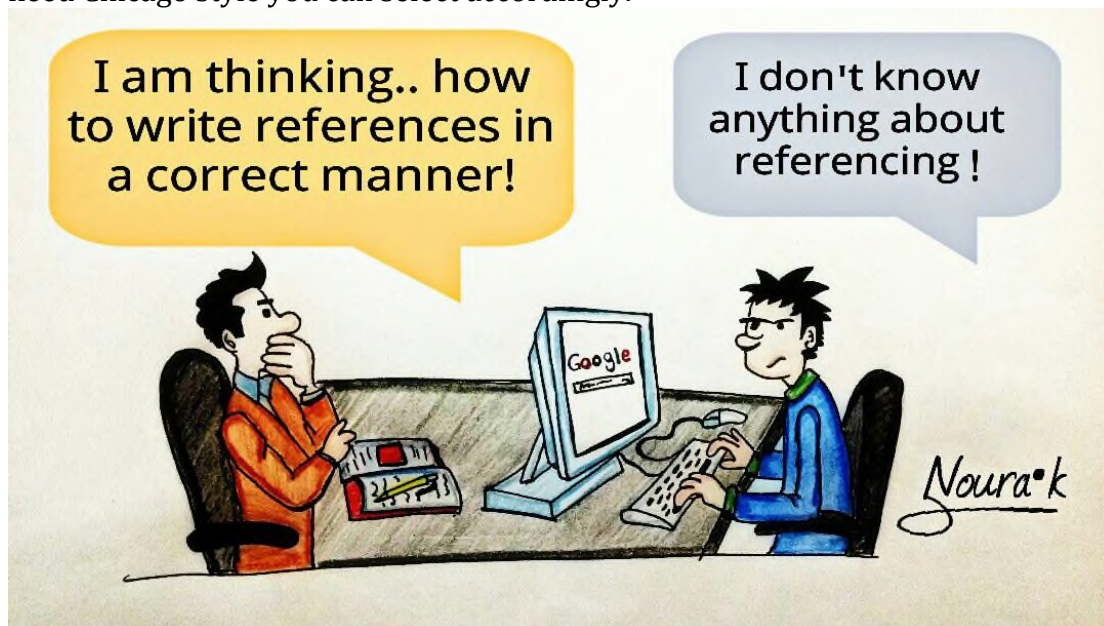


Figure 3. The Quickcite website of the University of Auckland

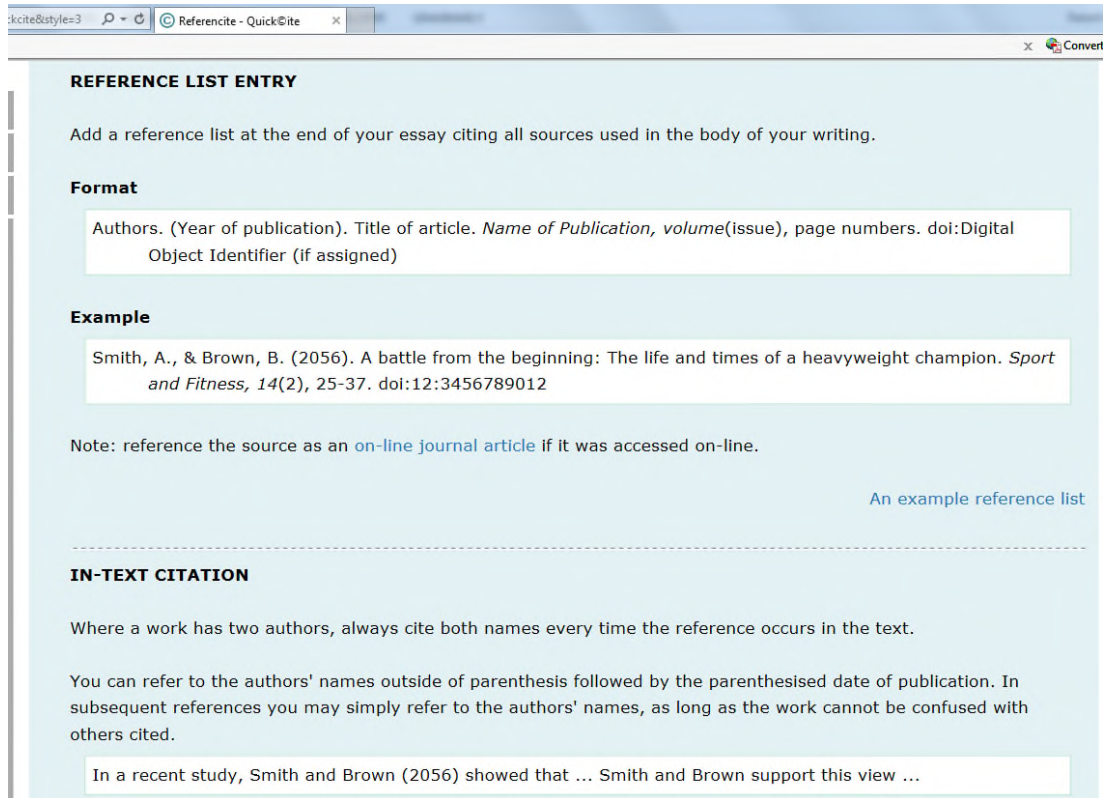


Figure 4. In-text and Bibliographic citations examples from The University of Auckland Website.

Another quick way to cite bibliographic reference is Google Scholar (scholar.google.com). Here you can type the title of the research paper/ book/ conference paper in the search bar and then click the 'Cite' link associated with it and you get the bibliographic reference in all the styles that you can copy and paste directly in the bibliography section of your dissertation. However, MBA students can use advanced reference managers like [Mendeley](#) and [Endnote](#).

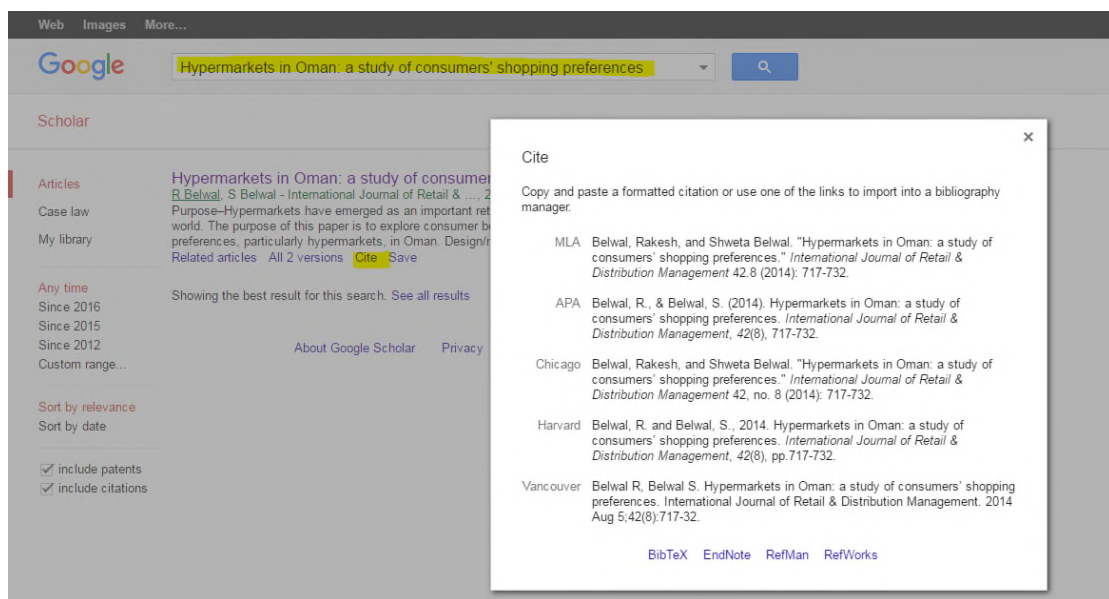


Figure 5. Citing references using Scholar.google.com website

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What should be the purpose and the title of my research?

Your research should answer to some business problem or advance the understanding of a business process or phenomenon. You can give this business problem or purpose a suitable heading, which becomes the title of your research.



What should I focus next on my research proposal?

After identification of the business problem or title, you should focus on identifying an appropriate methodology and an underlying theory (theoretical framework) to find a solution to the problem. You need to identify the data collection and data analysis methods to draw meaningful conclusions out of your work.

What typical heads I need to consider in my research proposal?

You should arrange your proposal under the following heads: Title or Cover Page, Table of Contents, Abstract or Summary, Introduction (or Background), Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework, Research questions, Research Methodology, Timeline, Structure of your dissertation (chapter plans), Significance, implications, and delimitations of your study, Bibliography (References), and Appendices (if any which include draft questionnaire, ethical compliance form etc.).

What should I fill in the above heads to develop a good proposal?

D. R. Rowland from the University of Queensland has developed following annotated sample proposal. You can try filling this annotated proposal in order to develop a good proposal in a quicker way: <http://uq.edu.au/student-services/pdf/learning/research-proposal-sample-v2.pdf>

Is it necessary to have a hypothesis (hypotheses) in my research?

It is not compulsory to have hypothesis/es. You may plan either hypothesis/es or research question/s in statement or question forms, respectively, in line with the purpose of your project and its scope. Research questions can be used for both the qualitative and quantitative analysis for exploratory and descriptive purpose.



How long should be the research proposal?

Although it depends on the institutional requirements and guidelines, in order to cover the above-suggested heads you might need 10 A-4 size pages at the most. However, small is always beautiful.

What should I focus in the methodology section?

Here you need to describe the methods you intend to use to collect data and give a brief justification of the concepts and theories on which they are based. Your methodology section should express how you are going to address the research questions and/or hypotheses.

