

Using the grant-writer's toolkit to write the case for support

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4 Writing, the Case for Support.

4.1 Key Principle: Stability of the Schema

In the previous section we saw that the key to achieving the objectives of the case for support is developing the different sections in such a way that the schema is presented repeatedly, clearly and consistently, always with the themes in the same order. Here we shall see how we can exploit the thematic structure in order to simplify the writing task. In thinking about how to exploit the thematic structure we represent the schema as a linear list of themes:

1. the general research question;
2. why the question is important;

3. the general approach to answering the question;
4. First sub-question
5. Second sub-question
6. Third sub-question
7. Fourth sub-question
8. how the answers will be disseminated.

4.2 Writing the case for support.

The ideal case for support deals with each of the eight themes in order in each of its three sections as follows.

1. Summary
 - 1.1 Brief statement of main research question
 - 1.2 Brief statement of the reason the main research question is important
 - 1.3 Brief statement of the general research approach
 - 1.4 Brief statement of the first research sub-question
 - 1.5 Brief statement of the second research sub-question
 - 1.6 Brief statement of the third research sub-question
 - 1.7 Brief statement of the fourth research sub-question
 - 1.8 Brief statement of the dissemination approach
2. Background
 - 2.1 Development of the main research question
 - 2.2 Development of the reason the main research question is important
 - 2.3 Development of the general research approach
 - 2.4 Derivation of the first research sub-question and WNTK
 - 2.5 Derivation of the second research sub-question and WNTK
 - 2.6 Derivation of the third research sub-question and WNTK
 - 2.7 Derivation of the fourth research sub-question and WNTK
 - 2.8 Brief statement of the dissemination approach.
3. Plan of Investigation

- 3.1 Brief restatement of the main research question
- 3.2 Brief restatement of the reason the main research question is important
- 3.3 Full development of the general research approach
- 3.4 First part of the research programme, TWTU and resources
- 3.5 Second part of the research programme, TWTU and resources
- 3.6 Third part of the research programme, TWTU and resources
- 3.7 Fourth part of the research programme, TWTU and resources
- 3.8 Statement of the dissemination approach.

Although the summary is usually a separate document from the case for support, we show it as a part of the case for support here because it presents the same set of eight themes in the same order as the background and the plan of investigation.

Writing the case for support in the same order in which it will be read is a very difficult task. In order to simplify the writing task we shall consider two questions.

- What is the easiest way to get the case or support written?
- Can we get started on the case for support even when we haven't worked out the details of the research project?

This latter question is particularly important for two reasons.

- If we can start writing a case for support without working out all the details of the project, it may be possible to use the process of writing the case for support to finalise the details.
- If writing the case for support can be used as a way of working out the design of the research project, it may be possible to save a great deal of time.

4.3 Using the development of the themes to make writing easier

Each section of the case for support, the summary, the background and the plan of investigation, deals with all the themes in the same order. This structure helps the reader to build up a coherent and stable schema.

Although the logical, section-by-section structure shown in Table 2.1 may be the best way to read the case for support, it is actually very difficult to draft the case for support section-by-section. It is much easier to take advantage of

the thematic structure and to write the subsections from the different sections related to a single theme. If we re-order the subsections so that they are grouped by theme, we get the following.

Theme 1 Main research question

- 1.1 Brief statement of main research question
- 2.1 Development of the main research question
- 3.1 Brief restatement of the main research question

Theme 2 Reason the question is important

- 1.2 Brief statement of the reason the main research question is important
- 2.2 Development of the reason the main research question is important
- 3.2 Brief restatement of the reason the main research question is important

Theme 3 Research Approach

- 1.3 Brief statement of the general research approach
- 2.3 Development of the general research approach
- 3.3 Full development of the general research approach

Theme 4 First Research Sub-question

- 1.4 Brief statement of the first research sub-question
- 2.4 Derivation of the first research sub-question and WNTK
- 3.4 First part of the research programme, TWTU and resources

Theme 5 Second sub-question

- 1.5 Brief statement of the second research sub-question
- 2.5 Derivation of the second research sub-question and WNTK
- 3.5 Second part of the research programme, TWTU and resources

Theme 6 Third sub-question

- 1.6 Brief statement of the third research sub-question
- 2.6 Derivation of the third research sub-question and WNTK
- 3.6 Third part of the research programme, TWTU and resources

Theme 7 Fourth sub-question

- 1.7 Brief statement of the fourth research sub-question
- 2.7 Derivation of the fourth research sub-question and WNTK
- 3.7 Fourth part of the research programme, TWTU and resources

Theme 8 Dissemination

- 1.8 Brief statement of the dissemination approach
- 2.8 Brief statement of the dissemination approach.
- 3.8 Statement of the dissemination approach.

The subsections are relatively self-contained, so they can be written in any order, but they also have a very clear relationship with each other, so that once one of the subsections is written, it becomes easier to write the other subsections in that theme. In order to develop this point we shall consider some different possible starting points.

4.4 Writing the themes from different starting points

Up to now we have tacitly assumed that a writer will have a fully worked-out research project in their head before they start to write a grant proposal. Although this may be ideal, in the real world we may have to deal with other circumstances. Here are some examples.

- Often the research project will be partly worked out and writing the proposal will be a way of finalising it.
- Sometimes a writer will know the problem they want to work on, but will not have worked out how to attack it.
- Sometimes a researcher knows what research they want to do, but hasn't worked out what problem it solves, or thought about how to present it in a grant proposal.

The problems faced by writers starting from different possible starting points are much easier to resolve if, instead of thinking about how to write a whole proposal, the writer thinks about how to use their starting point to begin writing one of the subsections of the background or of the plan of investigation.

We shall consider how to do this for the starting points listed above. They break down into two approaches:-

- starting with the background and developing a research subquestion through to a 'We Need to Know'.
- or
- starting with a component of the research project and developing it through to a 'This will tell us'.

4.5 Start with a (sub)question

The typical conception of a research project begins with the definition and development of the main research question in subsection 2.1. However, it is dangerous to devote too much effort to this subsection too soon. Many research grant applications are stillborn because the writer gets bogged down in subsection 2.1 and finds that they have turned their research proposal into a full-blown literature review.

For this reason, unless your proposal is very clearly worked out in your head, I would not try to complete more than the hastiest draft of the research question in subsection 2.1 before seeking to define the project in more detail by working up themes 4, 5, 6 and 7. One way to do this is by defining sub-questions that contribute to the big question and writing one of the subsections 2.4, 2.5, 2.6 or 2.7.

Once you have written one of those subsections you will have a 'We Need to Know'. This gives you the task of designing a piece of the research programme that will tell us exactly what we need to know. Once you have done this you can write the corresponding section of the plan of investigation. On the other hand, if you are unable to design a piece of research that will give us the answer to the subquestion you will have to modify the subquestion until you can.

4.6 Or start with a piece of the plan of investigation

Curiously, the writer who knows only what research they want to do probably has the easiest starting point. If this is your situation you can develop a piece of research into one of the sub-sections of the plan of investigation, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 or 3.7. In order to do this it will be necessary to work out what the piece of research will tell us (the TWTU) and what resources it needs.

One reason that it is good to start with the plan of investigation is that the research content determines the resources required for the project, and it is often important to keep the resource requirements within some limit. Many funding schemes have limits for particular types of proposal, many funding panels have preferences about the size of proposals they like to fund. This information can

be gleaned from looking at the panel's funding history or by making informal enquiries of the staff who service the grants committee.

Once you have written a subsection of the plan of investigation, you can work backwards from it to write the corresponding subsection of the background. It is possible to work backwards in this way because the 'This Will Tell Us' has to be matched exactly by the corresponding 'We Need To Know' and its associated subquestion in the background.

Once you have written a matching subquestion and its associated component of the plan of investigation it may be possible to work back and write the corresponding subsection of the summary. Alternatively you can leave the summary until the background and the Plan of Investigation are complete.

4.7 Then keep adding sub-questions and their corresponding research sub-projects until you have a full set.

A second theme can be added either by picking a second sub-question that goes well with the first, or by picking a second piece of research that forms a natural extension, or precursor, to the first one. The process can then be repeated until all the content themes in the background and plan of investigation (2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7) have been written. Because of the correspondence between each 'This Will Tell Us' in the plan of investigation and its 'We Need to Know' in the background, it is possible to start writing a content theme with either of its major subsections.

It may be necessary to try several different formulations of sub-questions in order to come up with a set of four that fit together well and can be answered by definable research sub-projects. It may also be necessary to generate more than four research sub-projects before coming up with a set of four that will go together to make a tractable research programme that has a coherent set of subquestions that lead up to it¹. However, once you have done this and developed the major parts of themes 4-7, themes 1-3 and the dissemination theme will be much easier to write because they are constrained by the subquestions and the components of the research project.

4.8 The First Three themes

Once the project has been defined by detailing the sub-questions and the research that answers them, writing the first three themes is largely a matter of coming up with a question that encapsulates the four subquestions, a reason that it is

¹Do not discard any superfluous subquestions or subprojects. They may come in handy for generating follow-on proposals.

important, and a way of summarising the general research approach. Needless to say, if this turns out to be impossible, it will be necessary to modify the subquestions until it can be done.

4.9 The Dissemination Theme

Finally, once you have defined the project and written the second theme, you will know what you expect to discover and why it is important that you do discover it. This should make it possible for you to deal with the issue of dissemination.