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## A task-based approach to proposal writing

### Principles:

1. Begin with expressive writing – insert only authors whose work comes to mind as you write.
2. Try not to interrupt your writing with ‘checking authors’ – it breaks the flow of your writing. Just make a note where you are unsure with (XXXX). Come back to it later.
3. Write different loose pieces, which you can integrate later. Don’t ignore them when they come to mind, but also don’t let them interfere with your flow.
4. Writing is not a linear process, although the product appears in linear format.

### Reasoning:

Most students cannot see the bigger picture and do not yet realise that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, which in turn cannot be fully determined until the parts have been completed. The “snowball” effect of doing small parts becomes apparent once a student digs really deeply into a part’ - a single component of the study and of the proposal itself.

#### 1. Preparation tasks – before you start writing the document

This is a good way of warming up for the writing of your proposal.

Task 1: What did you wish to find out? **One sentence** – for yourself only.

Task 2: Why would this be important for readers? **One sentence**.

Task 3: From which theoretical position are you looking at the issue? Do not make blanket statements (e.g. “sociocultural perspective”, or “social constructivism” or “constructivism”). Use a specific component of a theory or theories. Keep in mind that theories are focused and clear and pertain to a *specific field of study*. **Half page**.<sup>1</sup>

Task 4: What are authors in the leading journals in the *field* saying about this and related topics (use only five article citations from five different journals)? Write **one page** only on main themes you have identified in your reading – (see the table below).

Task 5: How will you find out what you wish to find out? **Half page** with specific methods for data collection and analysis. Do *not* write extracts from methodology textbooks. Make sure you know the authors’ work. Do not quote authors unless you use a truly salient and suitable quote. Be wary of clichés, such as, “I will employ a case study in the qualitative paradigm”. Write with

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<sup>1</sup> An example: Vygotsky’s ‘social constructivism’ is not a theory. His theory, postulated when he was writing in the 1930s, is cultural historical (human activity) theory.



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a clear emphasis on the actual methods of data collection and analysis and name the *design type*.

Task 6: Take care with paragraphs and sentences so that they link. Yes, one idea/point per one paragraph. Paragraphs follow in an order with cohesion.

Task 7: Write your main *knowledge claim* in two sentences. This is also your argument. You are arguing that there needs to be more (empirical) knowledge about the topic of your study because: 1) there is no data about the topic in the persons/documents/artefacts that you wish to study, 2) there is data but not in the setting/context where you will do your research, or 3) there is no systematic review of the topic in the context where you will do your study.

Task 8: Write the argument for the study and show which theoretical position you are going to adopt for the study.

NB: refrain from using generic terms like, “I used a qualitative approach.” Do not state the obvious, for example, “This is contextual research,” or, “this is descriptive and exploratory.” In short, write with **precision and concision**.

## **2. Literature review writing**

Task 1: Prepare the reference list of 10 recent journal articles plus two classic and often-cited books on the topic or a related topic. You will know you are on the right track if you find cross-referencing of salient authors. Use books, but no textbooks. Use reference works sparingly. Use only reliable internet sites such as scholar google. Consult authors’ ORCID IDs.

Task 2: Summarise the findings or main points of each article in your own words without any quotes.

Task 3: List the main themes that you have identified – no more than five. Then, use this table to capture what you have read. The themes can be anything you noted while reading. You just fill in what you think is important in the ‘theme’ columns. Write in shorthand. Put in citation if you like it *very much*.

Theme table

My themes		Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
My authors				
<b>Author A</b> (Bibliographic details plus page numbers where needed for quotes) DOIs	<b>Object of inquiry:</b> What was studied? E.g. coaching of teachers of early reading	Brief summary of how the study turned out, notes, quotes. Results, findings, conclusions drawn.	Findings showed that grade 3 learners in a sample of rural Eastern Cape schools benefitted from teachers' adapted pedagogy when teachers were coached by literacy specialists on site	Findings are relevant to my topic, e.g. my study is about coaching for initial reading. I will study the coaching processes and feedback to teachers. So, these finding are important for me.
	<b>Research design</b> What sort of design and which methods of data collection and analysis? Are these acceptable methods?	Noteworthy tools, methods, or theory	The methods used to monitor the teachers' progression is relevant to my study because the teachers were monitored in their classrooms and in reflective feedback sessions. These were transcribed and analysed in qualitative content modality.	The methods are also important for me. The analysis process was visible and systematic and I think the research process was reliable
<b>Author B</b>	<b>Object of inquiry</b>	?	?	?
	<b>Research design</b>			
<b>Author C</b>	<b>Object of inquiry</b>			
	<b>Research design</b>			
<b>Author D</b>	<b>Object of inquiry</b>			
	<b>Research design</b>			
<b>Author E</b>	<b>Object of inquiry</b>			

	Research design			
Author F	Object of inquiry			
	Research design			
Author G	Object of inquiry			
	Research design			

Task 4: Write about the first theme and apply it to your topic, referring to as many sources as possible. All in your own sentences (words). Debate an issue where needed. Disagree (with evidence and logic).

Task 5: Do the same with the other themes.

Task 6: Collate the themes to see where they cohere. From the table (matrix) of themes you will be able to compile a 'scattergram' or frequency chart that shows what recent (and classic) publications have in common, and where the disagreements and the gaps are.

Task 7: From this table you will be able to identify the author that you regard as a leading expert in the field and write a section about her or his work. Do not identify more than two.

Continue systematically along these lines until you have enough literature reviewed to scaffold your study. Apply your writing to your topic all the time. Vary your focus from findings to design to context as the publications vary. You will find that you work incrementally. When you have read 'enough', in other words, when you find nothing new comes up in your reading, you are ready to write up the literature section of the proposal and also for the literature chapter in your dissertation.

Tasks 8: At last - now write a *signposting* and argumentative introduction to the literature review. You now know what to emphasise.

Task 9: Award suitable headings for each section and ensure that these headings cohere across the sections. These headings usually emanate from the themes you have identified.

Task 10: Write a conclusion in which you DRAW a conclusion and do not simply summarise what you have already said.



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Talk to your readers and introduce them to the literature that has guided you. If you work on the principle of “snowballing” you will have more freedom to explore.

You may want to have a ‘complete’ plan drawn up at the outset if that is how you study. Feel free to abandon it if you are ‘stuck.’ How will you know when you are ‘stuck?’ As soon as you are deeply unhappy with your study. It is an epistemological condition and you need to be aware of it. Try to avoid it by reading and writing about things that really speak to you personally as researcher of a topic.

### **3. Research design and methods**

This section of a research proposal is dependent on what you already know about methods in the social sciences. The components of your research plan constitute your ‘contract’ with the participants, including the owners of documents and artefacts.

Task 1: Identify the sample, explaining how the sample was identified and why.

Task 2: State the unit of analysis, which is the core of your research construct. In the example I have used in the table, the unit of analysis will be the adapted pedagogy, which will be observed in the unit of sampling, namely the teacher.

Task 3: Describe the methods of data collection, the timeline for implementation, and the recording and management of data.

Task 4: Describe the full, planned process of analysis – the entire envisaged journey from ‘raw’ data to results and the findings.

Task 5: Indicate how you will respond to the empirical findings with the literature evidence that you have or anticipate to have.

Task 6: Set out the full process of application for ethical clearance for the study.

Task 7: Make sure that all references are aligned and complete.

I suggest APA. <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/>

Discuss the suggestions in this task-based approach (TBA) with your supervisor.