

Rhodes University (East London)

PRU

THE POPULATION RESEARCH UNIT

RHODES UNIVERSITY EAST LONDON CAMPUS

Box 7426, 50 Church Street,
East London, 5200

E-mail: rshell@dolphin.ru.ac.za; rshell@iafrica.com

Phones (Office): 043-704-7100, or 704-7071; (Home): 043-781-1030
fax: 043-704-7104



How to write a research proposal for peer review

prepared by the late Prof Kobus Oosthuizen, Centre for Population Studies, University of Pretoria
and Dr Robert C.-H. Shell, Population Research Unit, Rhodes University
with the assistance of Rebecca Zeitlin, Population Research Unit, Rhodes University.
for the DEMSA Annual meeting at the Military Academy, Saldanha Bay, July 4-7th

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development (CSD)
towards the research of the PRU is acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this report/ paper/ publication/thesis/script and
conclusions arrived at, are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development

East London ○ Eastern Cape Province ○ South Africa

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HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PROPOSAL FOR A PEER REVIEW

Introduction

This outline presents some guidance on preparing a research proposal with a South African theme and for a South African peer review audience.

The proposer must bear in mind the country's general demographic situation and population characteristics so that the analysis will be understandable and relevant to a general academic and policy-making audience who will be among your referees. For example, to write a demographic research proposal for a technical project such as “South African mortality” without mentioning the HIV/AIDS pandemic would be suicide for your proposal. NEVER underestimate the peer review of your proposal nor, on the other hand, overestimate the panel by assuming that the panel will be composed purely of demographers.

The proposal's style will depend primarily on the purpose of the proposal and the researcher's own preferences. Insofar as possible, the proposal should keep technical and non-technical aspects separated. The main text should always be non-technical, so non-demographers can easily understand it. On any peer review panel there might well be someone from a government department who does not know what a population pyramid is. Bear that person in mind.

Some general elements of expository style

Generally, South African proposers do not write well. There are a set of stylistic shortcomings which are so universal that a list of the most egregious seems useful.

- Be prepared to revise. An proposal might require five or more drafts.
- Mark Twain claimed the difference between the right word and the nearly right word is the same as the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.
- If any paragraph is too long (over one page), your agenda and data may have overwhelmed you. The paragraph must be carefully constructed. The paragraph form is the same as the overall form of the paper, *viz.*, initialization of topic, elaboration of argument, presentation and marshaling of evidence and the conclusion. In addition, the paragraph must have allusive, transitional links to the previous paragraph. Watch out for “cut-and-paste” clumsiness, one of the pitfalls of the computer age. Do not boilerplate. Miss any one of these elements and you will fail to achieve good paragraphing style.

- In expository prose the paragraph is the equivalent of the sonnet. Treat the paragraph with the same respect.
- Avoid long “laundry lists” of points at the beginning of your project.
- Do not over use “it” constructions: “it” is usually a personal pronoun and refers to an antecedent. Too many “its” in a single paragraph, let alone a sentence, make it excessively difficult to remember the antecedent of the last “it”. Excessive “its” therefore usually result in turgid prose. “It” is also used in impersonal constructions (which have no antecedent) and are also passive in construction, e.g. “It is to be avoided if it is at all possible.”
- Avoid the passive voice. “The passive is never used by demographers” is passive; “Demographers never use the passive” is active. Which is more direct?
- In expository prose avoid **all** first person constructions, “I,” the “royal we,” the “editorial we” and so on. Such constructions are invariably pretentious and are used in conjunction with jargon (see below) to puff up a poor proposal.
- Avoid all contractions e.g., “can’t”, “don’t”, “won’t”, “isn’t”.
- To split or not to split infinitives? Even though Geoffrey Chaucer, the *New York Times* and even CBS split infinitives, avoid this practice if you can (e.g., StarTrek: “to **boldly** go where no man....”).
- Avoid hidden gender-specific words, e.g. StarTrek: “to boldly go where no **man**....”).
- Adverbs and adjectives leach the nouns and verbs of their power. Consider the following: “they **always** leach the **powerful** nouns and **picturesque** verb of their **natural** power.” *Always* be ~~very~~ careful of the word “very”. It can creep in ~~very~~ nearly everywhere. Moreover, the excessive overuse of unnecessary adverbs and unneeded adjectives is ~~very~~ juvenile and sophomoric.
- Avoid crossed or mixed metaphors, e.g., “Gold was the bedrock on which this mighty empire bloomed.”
- Avoid elliptical logic.
- Avoid tautology, verbiage, verbosity, circumlocution, rambling, elegant variation, padding and saying the same thing over and over again; in short, every form of repetition. Avoid repetition.
- The Modern Language Association (MLA) in the USA has now suggested that all Latin citation forms, for example, *loc. cit.*, *cf. infra*; *supra.*, *etc.*, and all Roman enumeration schemes, e.g. *I*, *ii*, *iii*, *iv*, *I*, *II* and *III* are not needed and moreover are intimidating, so use English (preferably Anglo-Saxon words), short titles and always Arabic numerals. The use of *ibid.* and *passim* in the word processing age is dangerous, since “cut-and-paste” operations, which move text *and* footnotes, may result in fatally erroneous and laughable *ibid.* citation antecedents.
- Never rely on the spell checker. Many words are homophones, but are incorrect *in situ*, e.g. “their” and “there.” If a word is not in your spell checker (say “autochthonous”), do not guess: use a dictionary! If English is not your home language acquire an English-speaking editor. Pay them if need be. Afrikaans-speaking, Xhosa-speaking and Zulu-speaking etc. are disadvantaged in the international world of

demographic research proposals. There are few SA panels which do not include some international authority. Bear that person in mind.

- Watch out for malapropisms which your spell checker might not catch, e.g. “the discovery of the Witwatersrand resulted in much revenue streaming through the imperial coiffures” (Anon., 1994); “The silent trade was characterized by the movement of bouillon across the Sahara and into Europe, from where it spread east” (Anon, 1995). “How to write a demographic research proposal for a population studies pier review” (Anon, 1999).
- Master and use the little book, Strunk & Whyte, *Elements of Style*. Every time you read this short book your style will improve. This book is now online under the trade name “Grammatik,” currently bundled with WordPerfect 8.1. It is useful but you must learn how to use it. Properly configured, it will be an extra editor.
- Avoid all jargon always. The poorest proposals are invariably cloaked in excessive jargon, demography is a prime candidate for excessive jargon. Such jargon is sometimes dismissed by peer reviewers as “technicist” or “deadly”. If you cannot make your point without jargon it is probably not worth making.
- Avoid double spaces in your text. Use left justification to spot them (see spaces before the word “them”)

Writing the Introduction

The introduction should discuss the previous and current estimates of the particular variable (or quality of the age structure from different censuses) including graphs of historical trends which would alert your peer reviewers to the circumstance that you really have done your homework. It should follow with a brief evaluation of earlier estimates, a brief but accurately cited literature review, a discussion of the quality of the information used, and/or the techniques or procedures used. Finally, it should mention the data and techniques used for target estimates.

Reliability of the data

This section provides a technical discussion of the evaluation of the new and previous data revealing possible errors in collecting the information or in the areal representation of the data. If data pertain to samples, standard errors of data could be given.

Methodology

This section should mention the techniques that could have been applied to the available information and those that might be applied during the estimation process. It should include:

A brief discussion about why a particular technique was selected.

Possible data errors and their impact on the estimates.

Biases that estimates may have because the data used did not match the assumptions required by the techniques.

An explanation of why a particular estimate was selected, if the technique offers more than one result.

The actual presentation of the demographic research proposal

Proposals must be typed. Avoid all borders and any fancy fonts. Be conservative and precise in matters of presentation.

Each page with the exception of the cover page must be numbered, top right. Bottom centre, the default in most word processors, gets mixed up with footnotes.

The demographic research proposal should have a cover page showing the following:

First name and surname of writer

Affiliation of proposer

Exact title and subtitle

Deadline and submission date

Name of funding body and their full street address and fax number

Citation schemes, footnotes and endnotes

Citations stop us lying to each other. Do use them. Citations have a different function from a bibliography or “select sources” (see below). An endless confusion for students is the proper form for citations. Moreover, each discipline seems to insist on a different system.

It is important that you provide proper source citations preferably within the text, using the author-date system(see below), or at the foot of the appropriate page (called footnotes), or at the end of the proposal (called endnotes).

Some proposal writers label their endnotes “Bibliography”! Footnotes or endnotes indicate the exact sources of your information. The bibliography, on the other hand, indicates the field of literature you have consulted. Proposals without citation notes at once raise suspicions. So get into the habit of footnoting. You do not, of course, need to footnote every sentence that you write. But it is desirable to use footnotes in the following circumstances:

whenever you refer to unusual information;

whenever you use an exact quotation, paraphrased material or statistical data;

whenever you refer to an interesting idea or data which is not yours.

These points may seem pedantic, but proper form allows for consistency and shows scholarly maturity.

TECHNICAL FEATURES OF DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Research proposals should be ordered systematically: It should contain headings and subheadings and pages should be numbered clearly. The pages should only be typed on the one side and the document should be bound in an inexpensive file. Aspects deserving special attention are the following:

Title page
The title page should contain the following information:

First name and surname of the proposer
Affiliation of the proposer
Exact title and subtitle of the proposal
Deadline and submission date
Name of the funding body and its full street address and fax number
Table of contents
Give a complete list of all the headings and subheadings, with the number of the page on which each begins. The same applies to tables and figures which must be listed separately under the headings "List of Tables" and "List of Figures". Numbering
Headings and subheadings should be numbered as follows:

1. INTRODUCTION (Heading)

1.1 Statement of the problem (first sub-heading)

1.1.1 Theoretical perspectives (second sub-heading)
Etc.
Footnotes
Footnotes should be kept to a minimum and should only be used to provide very important information that do not form an integral part of the text.
Tables and figures
Tables should be numbered chronologically, starting with table 1. Table headings should be placed above the table. If the table is not drawn up by the proposer, the source must be given below the table. Figures should be numbered in the same way and the titles of figures should appear directly below the figure.

As with tables, sources must be given if the figure is not the original work of the proposer. If figures are adapted, this should also be mentioned. It is preferable to place tables and figures in the text and not in separate appendices.
Quotations
The following guidelines pertain to quotations:
Quotations of one to three lines should be placed in double quotation marks " " and run in with the text. Where quotations are longer than three lines they should be double-indented and have no quotation marks.
The spelling, grammar and punctuation of quotations must be identical to the wording of the original text. Additions to the text are signified by an editorial insertion of square brackets, e.g. if there were a mistake in the quote this should be noted by [sic]. Round brackets are reserved for use of the original author.
Where part of a quotation is omitted, the omitted words should be replaced with an ellipsis - 'dot-dot-dot' (...).
Words not appearing in the original text should be enclosed within square brackets [].
If the original text does not contain italics but you wish to emphasise part of the quotation by using italics, the words [emphasis added] should be placed within square brackets after the italics in the quotation or at the end of the quotation, unless the quotation is long.
A quotation may be translated into the language in which the proposal is being written. The translation can appear as usual in the text in quotation marks, while the original is supplied in a footnote at the foot of the page. Alternatively, the original quotation may be placed in the text and the translation given in the footnote.
References to sources from which quotations are taken, should appear within brackets directly after the quotation (see below).
References in the text

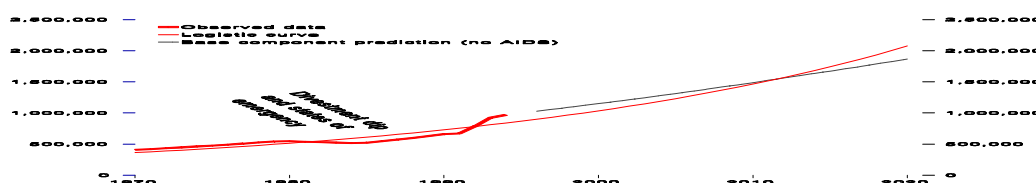
Please note that although there are several ways to site sources in the text, the following “author-date” system is recommended by the Chicago Manual of Style, which is the most widely used reference system in all scientific journals. Original sources (books, articles, reports, etc.) should be mentioned when: a direct quotation is taken from such a source; specific views or opinions of authors are given. References to sources should be placed within brackets in the text. The following particulars must be supplied: the surname(s) of the author(s) if not supplied in the text; the year of publication, followed by a comma; the page number(s);

a semi-colon if more than one work is cited. Examples: One author: Yaukey (1985, 33) noted that ... As one author (McDaniel 1995, 45) said ... Two or more authors: As Lucas and Meyer (1994, 95) wrote ... Some authors (Kok and Gelderblom 1994, 34) hold that ... Speare, Liu and Tsay (1988, 40) argued that ... Please note that "et al." means "and others" and it is incorrect to use this abbreviation when referring to two authors. It should be used only in the case of three or more authors, for example: (Mostert et al. 1998, 84) describe ... (a publication by Mostert, Hofmeyr, Oosthuizen and Van Zyl). Reference to a publication as a whole: Zopf (1984) emphasises that ... Series of references: ... (Yaukey 1985, 33; McDaniel 1995, 45; Lucas and Meyer 1994, 95). Institution: ... (Department of Labour 1995, 45-48). Sources A research proposal must contain a list of all the sources referred to. The list of sources must appear at the end of the proposal and must be compiled as follows: All sources referred to in the text must be listed in alphabetical order according to the author's surname. Publications by the same author must be listed chronologically according to the year of publication. Publications by the same author published in the same year must be listed alphabetically according to their titles and the letters a, b, etc. added after the year, e.g. 1982a, 1982b. The abbreviation "anon." must be used if the author of a publication is unknown and "n. d." if the year of publication is not available. Note the use of capitals, punctuation marks and italics in the following examples. Examples: One author McDaniel, A. 1995. *Swing low, sweet chariot: The mortality cost of colonizing Liberia in the nineteenth century*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Two authors Kok, P. and D. Gelderblom. 1994. *Urbanisation: South Africa's challenge*. Volume 1 & 2. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. Collection Lutz, W., ed. 1994. *The future population of the world: What can we assume today?* London: Earthscan Publications. Article in collection Davis, K. 1963. *Social demography*. In *The behavioural sciences today*, edited by B. Berelson. New York: Basic Books, 204-221. Journal article Bongaarts, J. 1997. *Trends in unwanted childbearing in the developing world*. *Studies in Family Planning* 28(4): 267-277. Thesis/dissertation Ferreira, M. 1988. *A sociological study of the decision making of coloured women in the Cape Peninsula regarding their adoption of contraceptive sterilisation*. D. Phil. dissertation. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. Unpublished manuscript Simkins, C. E. W. 1999. *How large is South Africa's population? Contemporary problems and puzzles in quantitative demography*. Unpublished paper read at Arminel Roundtable Meeting, Hogsback, Eastern Cape April, 9-11. Newspaper report Sunday Times. 1982. Johannesburg, October 17, p.11. Personal communication Shisana, O. 1995. Interview by author. Department of Health, Pretoria, July 27. Official documents Republic of South Africa. 1983. *Report of the Science Committee of the President's Council on demographic trends in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer. P.C.1/1983. EXAMPLE: LIST OF REFERENCES References Bundy, C. 1988. *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*. Cape Town: David Phillip. IDASA. 1991. *A harvest of discontent: The land question in South Africa*. Cape Town: IDASA. Marcus, T., K. Eales, and A. Wildschut. 1996. *Down to earth: Land demand in the new South Africa*. Durban: Land and Agriculture Policy Centre. Manona, C. 1988. *The drift from farms to town*. Ph D dissertation. Grahamstown: Rhodes University. Mostert, W.P., B.E. Hofmeyr, J.S. Oosthuizen and J.A. Van Zyl. 1998. *Demography: Textbook for the South African Student*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. Mostert, W. P. and Lötter, J. M. 1990. *South Africa's demographic future*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. Republic of South Africa. 1997. *RSA Statistics in brief*. Pretoria: Statistics SA. South Africa Foundation. 1994. *South Africa*. Cape Town: Galvin &

Sales.Steyn, A. F., H.G. Strydom, S. Viljoen, and F. J. Bosman, eds. 1990. Marriage and family life in South Africa: Research priorities. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
 Ziehl, S. C. 1994. Social class variation in household structure - the case of a small South African city. *South African Journal of Sociology* 25 (1): 25-34.

In short, always present well.

Proper observance of citation protocols always demonstrates the maturity and professionalism of any proposal *although reviewers might be reluctant to even verbalise such*



nitpicking details when they talk among themselves about your proposal, or refer to such shortcomings when they write their rejection report.

Text presentation of population characteristics should be supported by graphics and tables presenting the most significant findings.

Graphics

The presentation of this non-technical section should include simple and elegant graphics, so the levels and trends of the estimated variables may be easily and quickly grasped. Let the values and variables do the talking. Frames and unneeded lines are graphical tautology. Make sure the lines and patterns you do use will survive xeroxing. Keep the graphic simple and always use in-line graphics, that is to say, have the graphic follow the text at the point of being mentioned as in the next visual space after the expressed thought or adjacent to it, as in this example.

The importance of the non-technical element of the proposal

The proposal should be clear and concise throughout. It should start with a summary of the main themes and specific objectives considered in the proposal (mortality, fertility, migration, etc). It should include the impact of the target demographic characteristics on population growth and age structure, with references to social aspects such as urbanization, the potential number of students, size of the labour force, and other pertinent population issues.

This section should not include too many numbers nor any large tables; only the figures required to present a general overview should be presented.

A short section could present the degree of the estimated reliability of the information on population characteristics sought for in the proposal. For instance, one paragraph could

discuss possible errors in previous estimates because they were based on data that may not have been collected properly, because they pertained to small samples, or because they were calculated indirectly. A full discussion of such problems should be included in an appendix.

Another section should compare the estimated demographic characteristics with similar estimates for other dates during the past. This section may include an analysis of trends and the meaning and consequences of such trends. It may include a comparison of the country's levels with those of other countries in the same region, or better still, with other areas of the world. The perspective within the proposal should work from the global, comparative aspect to the local or parochial microstudy. Proposals which try to do too much nearly always fail. The student is advised to do a manageable topic over which they can obtain total mastery.

Finally, if the country has a policy related to population issues, a comparative analysis of the estimated levels with those targeted in the policy should be made. Some mention should be made specifically to the South African population policy document.¹ Any demographer should be seen to be working for the people if not the state. But if the proposal does imply that this might result in policy being revised this should be politely (not scornfully) stated.

The appendix: technical aspects of the proposal

Technical discussion and methodologies used, as well as detailed data tables, should always be presented in an appendix. The technical sections of the proposal (covering population age and sex structure, mortality, etc.) may each follow a similar format.

A final bibliographic section on “select sources”

A list of books and articles that you have consulted should be presented alphabetically according to author's surname at the end of your proposal. Since the word “bibliography” refers to books you should use a broader term which can incorporate interviews and such non-book items.

¹National Population Unit, Department of Welfare and Population Development, “Population Policy for South Africa” (April 1998). Can be obtained free of charge from Private Bag X901, Pretoria 0001.

Tables

Follow the form of an authority like Shryock et al, *The Methods and Materials of Demography* use for their tables, e.g.

Table 1. Example of Shyrock's table form

Given ordinates	Popu- lation	Computational stages			Proportionate parts (desired abscissa =1935)
Date		-1	-2	-3	
1920.....	16321	1920-1935= -15
1930.....	30567	37690	1930-1935 = -5
1940.....	52108	43161	40426	1940-1935 = +5
1950.....	87724	52022	41273	40002	1950-1935 = +15