

## Forty Rules of Proposal and Dissertation Writing

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### BACKGROUND

Increasing attention is being paid to the integrity of scientific research proposals and dissertations in the fields of medicine and other healthcare or allied medicine fields. Therefore, it is vital for researchers, trainee resident doctors, undergraduate and postgraduate students in any healthcare field to be confident that the research methods and outcomes of their proposals and dissertations be trusted, reproducible and transparent. It appears that the number of unpublished output of dissertations is increasing and often constitute gray literature. [1] In one study, the publishing rates of dissertations in general surgery was low, with only 22% being published in Science Citation Index Expanded journals.[2] This may be due to low overall quality of the proposals and dissertations owing to poor preparation. This has led to failure rates in examinations and often led to prolonging the duration of postgraduate studies. Therefore, preparation of proposals and dissertations is often a challenging process that requires considerable effort and time.[3] Proposal and dissertation writing must continue to update and refine their processes in order to protect against examination failures and publication failures. It is of confidence that identifying these well-articulated 40 rules of proposal and dissertation writing will help to cement the easiness of the proposal and dissertation writing processes among undergraduate and postgraduate students. Although these rules are not exhaustive, the available 40 are based on experiences gathered over the years on supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students in proposal and dissertation writing. The rules could be general or specific.

### GENERAL

1. The abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology sections, e.t.c., must have the same font sizes, font shapes and font colours.
2. The proposal or the proposal of the long commentary must be submitted to the Ethics committee of the relevant institution for ethics committee approval, before commencing the study.
3. Proposals or dissertation proposals must be written in future tense, eg 'will' should be seen frequently throughout the proposal. Do not use present tense or past tense in proposal writing.
4. When doing research on obstetrics (not gynaecology), do not call your research subjects patients, rather use the term participants or subjects.
5. The candidate or researcher for part 2 fellowship examination should prepare and submit his or her dissertation for journal publications within 6 months of passing part

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-2 Fellowship exam.

6. The candidate or researcher for part 1 membership examination should prepare and submit his or her long commentary for journal Publication within 6 months of passing part 1 (membership) exam. Those on Master or PhD programme should publish the manuscript before final master's thesis or PhD dissertation defense.
7. Avoid using the word or phrase: developed countries or developing countries. Rather, use the words high-income countries or low and middle-income countries, respectively.
8. A candidate or researcher should avoid repeating the same mistake already corrected by his or her supervisor in an earlier review. Never overburden your supervisor. Researchers should always try to download reviewed articles using a laptop to ensure that all track-changes review comments are seen.
9. A figure should not start a sentence, rather start a sentence in words. E.g., Do not write: 120 participants consented. Rather write: One hundred and twenty participants consented.
10. Avoid the phrase: 'Justification of the study'; rather write: 'Justification for the study'.
11. When writing methodology sections or results or discussion sections, the researcher should avoid the personal 1st person expression such as "I" or myself. Third person pronouns or the expression "we" is preferred.
12. A paragraph is a collection of sentences. Researchers should avoid writing only one sentence per paragraph. A paragraph should contain at least 2 sentences.

### **Title**

13. The title of the proposal should follow a PICOS or CoCoPopS principle. PICOS means population, I (intervention), C (comparator or comparison), O (outcomes) and S (study design). CoCoPopS means Co (condition), Co (context), Pop (population), and S (study design).
14. Do not put a period or full stop after a Title of a manuscript or dissertation proposal.

### **Abstract**

15. Abstract should not have citations. Do not cite references in the abstract.
16. In the method section of the abstract, the inclusion criteria plus or minus exclusion criteria should be included. Also, candidates or researchers should ensure that they include the outcome measures (both primary and secondary) in the method section of the abstract.

### **Keywords**

17. Below the Abstract, there should be 4 to 6 key words. The keywords should be arranged alphabetically and separated by semicolon. Note that keywords chosen should not be any exact word(s) that appeared in the title of the manuscript.

### **Introduction**

18. When writing an introduction or background or literature review, try to avoid plagiarism. To avoid it, ensure that you do not repeat up to 5 words per sentence when you lift the sentence from previous published write-ups.
19. You cannot mix American spellings and British spellings. For e.g.: if you are using British spelling, 'labor' should be 'labour' and 'color' should be 'colour' and 'randomized' should be 'randomised'.
20. Do not write an abbreviation or acronym without first defining the full meaning, then you put the acronym or abbreviation inside the bracket. E.g. Intensive care unit (ICU).
21. While writing the introduction or background of your long commentary or introduction or background of a manuscript for journal publications, the penultimate paragraph of your introduction should contain sentences consisting of the justification for the study.
22. When writing an introduction, the last sentence in the last paragraph of the introduction should contain a statement containing the overall objectives of the study.

### Literature Review

23. Avoid repeating sentences already stated in the introduction in the literature review section. Even if you desire so, such sentences must be reworded completely to avoid undue repetition or self-plagiarism.
24. Avoid writing: Eleje GU *et al* in Nnewi, Nigeria revealed.... Rather, write Eleje *et al* in Nnewi, Nigeria revealed....So, always avoid initials, only write surnames, when writing what authors said or published in prose form in in-text.
25. When doing critical appraisal for a literature review section of the dissertation proposals, candidates should for each study cited or quoted: a) identify gaps in knowledge of the subject brought about by the limitations of the methods employed in those previous studies cited, b) examine the pros and cons of the methods used in the cited or quoted studies, as well as the impact of these pros and cons on the authors' findings and conclusions, c) state the strengths and limitations of the cited/quoted studies, d) state how these cited/quoted studies relate to the candidate's study.
26. When writing literature review, it will be very helpful for the candidates or researchers to structure the components of the literature review according to the specific objectives of the study for clarity.
27. Only original local or international research studies published in peer reviewed local and international journals should be included in the literature review. Therefore, literature review should rely more on journal articles, rather than on information from textbooks. Reason: Textbooks are usually very old, even the newly published ones.

### Aim and Objectives

28. The aims, specific objectives and research questions should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). The aim is for completion of objectives to result in specific, measurable outcomes that directly contribute to the achievement of the project goals.
29. If a researcher is doing a study on retrospective review of cases, the researcher can only state that

one of the objectives of the study is to determine the prevalence of the condition, not incidence. Incidence is the rate of new occurrence. The researcher can only determine incidence in a prospective study design.

### Materials and Methods

30. Researchers should ensure that they get the necessary information in their proforma or questionnaire eg: if you need to calculate the socioeconomic status of the participants, you should get the highest educational level of the woman and occupation of the husband or other parameters depending on the method used.
31. Similarly, to get body mass index (BMI), the researcher must ensure that their proforma contains the weight of the participant and height of the participant, so that he or she can calculate BMI.
32. Those working on clinical trials or randomized clinical trials (study) must get approval from public trials registry such as Pan African Clinical Trial registry (PACTR) available at <https://pactr.samrc.ac.za/> before commencing the study. Those working on RCTs or controlled clinical trials (CCTs) for West African College of Surgeons (WACS) or West African College of Physicians (WACP) or National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria (NPMCN) proposals must apply for PACTR approval at <https://pactr.samrc.ac.za/> within one week of getting college approval to commence the study. Thus, clinical trials must be registered prospectively in a named public trials registry (with registration number and URL provided). However, those working on Systematic Reviews of research should prospectively register their proposals in PROSPERO available at <https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/>
33. The sample size will be calculated based on the primary outcome measure stated in the proposal. If the researcher has more than one primary outcome measure, they will all be used for the calculation, i.e. sample size calculations per primary outcome. The researcher then uses the

highest sample size among all the different calculations. The researchers should note that primary outcome measures should not be more than three. However, there should be no limit in the number of secondary outcomes.

34. Candidates or researchers working on RCTs can generate their randomization table which is available at: <https://mahmoodsaghaei.tripod.com/Softwares/randalloc.html>.

### Results

35. Ensure that you attach the appropriate flow chart in the result section of the manuscript depending on the study design, available at: [equator-network.org/reporting-guidelines/strobe/](http://equator-network.org/reporting-guidelines/strobe/) e.g. STROBE flow diagram for observational studies, and CONSORT flow diagram for randomized trials, STARD flow diagram for diagnostic accuracy studies. The flow chart must indicate how many participants that were assessed for eligibility, how many were recruited, how many were excluded, and reasons for exclusion and how many were analysed, e.t.c.
36. In studies involving two groups (study or test or experimental group and controls), the study or test or experimental group should be stated on the left (not right) of the control group when plotting or drawing the tables or flow chart or writing the comparison results in prose form.

### Discussion

37. In the discussion section, if the candidate or researcher has 5 specific objectives, he or she should have 9 paragraphs in the discussion. The first paragraph of the discussion could be the motivation for the study plus the summary of the principal findings of the study. Then paragraphs 2 to 6 will each discuss the specific objectives i.e. one specific objectives per paragraph. Paragraph 7 will discuss the clinical implications of the study findings as well as what the study adds to what is already known. Paragraph 8 will discuss the strengths and limitations of the study while paragraph 9 will state the conclusion plus or minus recommendations of the study. Depending,

recommendation can be a separate paragraph for dissertation, but one paragraph with conclusion for manuscript publications. Therefore, the number of paragraphs for discussion will be the number of specific objectives plus (+) 4.

38. Avoid the temptations of repeating information in the results section under the discussion section. Do not repeat results in the discussion section. In the discussion section, the researchers are only meant to discuss the results and relate the results or findings to previous similar studies either positively, negatively or neutrally.

### References

39. While writing reference using Vancouver style, the researcher need to write up to six (6) author names before putting *et al.* While writing it in the reference list (not in the body of manuscript), it can be shown as: Eg Eleje GU, Igbodike EP, Ikechebelu JI, Udigwe GO, Okafor CG, Ugwu EO, *et al.*
40. The researchers should ensure that the majority (>75%) of their references are within 10 years of publication.

### REFERENCES

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3. Yüksel M, İpekçi T, Tunçkiran A. Publication rates of dissertations written in medical faculties of Turkey in the field of urology between the years 2008, and 2011, and citation analysis: A cross-sectional study. *Turk J Urol*. 2018 Jul;44(4):341-345. Doi: 10.5152/tud.2017.32042.