

Planning and writing your research proposal

The IA task is your chance to explore an area of passion or interest that goes beyond the DP psychology course. Is there something that was covered in class that you want to know more about and apply to your population of interest? Is there a real-world problem you think could benefit from psychological insights? Is there a population of people whose lives could be improved by increased psychological knowledge? This is your opportunity to do a deep dive into anything in psychology related to your interests that is significant for a particular population.

It is recommended that you keep your teacher informed at all stages of your research proposal. Check in with them after exploring each point below.

Follow your interests and start reading broadly around some topics that interest you. Here are some examples to get you thinking.

- Did you really enjoy the unit on cognitive biases and would like to explore how they are used in social media to drive conflict or perpetuate stereotypes?
- Are you an avid football player and want to investigate the health and well-being benefits of playing a team sport, either in terms of developing a sense of belonging to a group, or the stress reduction effect of exercise?
- Are you interested in different educational settings that better serve neurodiverse students than the typical classroom set-up?
- Would you like to use an fMRI machine to investigate the parts of the brain involved in recognizing cross-cultural relationships as opposed to mono-cultural relationships?

Consider ethical implications: Although this is just a research proposal, and you will not actually be conducting the proposed research, you still need to design your study as if it needs to pass an ethics review board.

Find your population of interest—consisting of all the people in a population you as the researcher want to draw conclusions about and generalize. Identifying a population can generally be found by asking several questions and drilling down to what characteristics are important. For example, if you want to study the mental health of teenagers, questions may include the following.

- Does your topic only apply to teenagers? Or is it a specific age group of teenagers (16–18 years)?
- Are you interested in teenagers in international schools? Attending state schools? Who are multilingual? Who live in a specific culture or social context?
- Which area of teenage mental health will be investigated? For example, depression, well-being, stress.

State your aim or design your research question—combine the topic you are investigating with your population of interest to frame a research question or state an aim.

Choose a research method: This should be driven by your research question. For example, if you are investigating:

- bullying prevention strategies, it would be unethical to conduct a true experiment, so a survey may be more appropriate
- the effect of different coaching techniques on motivation to learn new basketball moves, an experiment makes more sense than an interview
- the experiences of living with schizophrenia, an interview makes more sense than a survey as it is such a sensitive and personal topic

- the effectiveness of play-based learning amongst kindergarten-aged children, an observational study may make more sense than an interview.

Think about data collection: You must create one data collection tool to collect your data, so this might be an interview guide, a survey, an observational checklist or a prompt in an experiment.

Critically analyse your proposal: All studies have strengths and weaknesses; there is no perfect psychological study. Use the key concepts to prompt your analysis of your study.

- **Bias:** Are you being personally reflexive in your research? Are your own demographics biasing your research decisions?
- **Causality:** How did you reach the decision to use the methodology you chose? What implications does this have for causality?
- **Change:** Whose lives will be better off if this research gets conducted? Could this research spark meaningful change in the world?
- **Measurement:** What are some of the issues with your chosen tool of data collection or measurement? Are there concerns relating to participant variability, order effects, researcher bias, validity or reliability?
- **Perspective:** What is the perspective of your population of interest on the problem that you have identified (i.e. do they see it as an issue?). Do you find yourself more interested in psychological phenomena from the biological, cognitive or sociocultural approaches?
- **Responsibility:** How are you ensuring your proposed research maintains high ethical standards? How can you be sure any findings are used in an ethical way? If you are investigating a sensitive topic, what extra responsibility do you have as a researcher?

Start writing! Use the outline in the guide to structure your research proposal to incorporate all you have considered above.