Proposal Writing for Nursing Capstones and Clinical Projects

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As new graduate programs evolve at schools across the country, diverse student cohorts have the opportunity to enhance their skill sets in planning and writing proposals. This book shares the “must know” for gaining a set of clinical scholarship tools for writing a concise, scholarly project proposal. The purpose of the text is to provide practical guides for graduate students and advanced clinicians to organize and package their clinical projects through tight proposals.

The concept of advanced clinical projects is described broadly. All health care professionals, whether they are in direct or indirect practice roles, are, in essence, seeking to provide improved health outcomes for populations and quality, efficient patient care. This uniqueness provides an opportunity to raise awareness of diverse important problems or concerns in various practice areas.

A well-written clinical project proposal is a form of scholarly communication and is expected in advanced practice. The text is broadly written to support diverse clinical project topics. Although the uniqueness of advanced nursing practice allows no one proposal “formula,” there are guides for taking unique topics and relating these to common project models. Focus is on the use of the best evidence in projects, including synthesis of the literature for further project work.

Gaining ongoing skills for quality improvement, evaluation, and collaborative research is valued. Although clinical projects can have similarities to theses and dissertations in some cases, the clinical project proposals are much more focused on gaining best evidence for use in advancing quality patient care. So often the tools of research will be used in writing proposals, but the focus of the clinical project is to gain best use of evidence for improving clinical care. This book guides the reader in using...
tools gained in previous courses, such as theory, research, and statistics, to develop a sound proposal for a quality advanced clinical project. The “must know” information from these courses is reinforced, and references for further reading are recommended.

Much of a good clinical project proposal relates to being a reflective clinician and thinking prospectively of the big picture of the project, from start to finish, so important parts are not missed. A toolkit of resources, including a project triangle framework, guides graduate students and clinicians in practical skills for proposal planning and writing. Using a reflective clinician approach, guidelines and checklists are provided to develop quality capstone proposals. Students interact with the content through the ongoing reflective prompts and questions to guide them in reflective writing to better understand their projects and what they propose to do. The following broad themes organize the 15 chapters in a logical flow toward completion of planning and writing a clinical project proposal.

1. Writing Your Proposal: Putting Your “Problem” in Context. Putting a clinical problem in context, including an introduction to the topic and problem statement, is important in making the case for and outlining a project. Context also includes synthesizing the literature on a clinical topic and placing a project within that existing literature.

2. Writing Your Proposal: Designing and Setting the Stage for Your Project. The key points of a scholarly methods section that flows from a purpose statement are considered. Consistent with the methods of the sciences, traditional research methods are discussed as tools for capstone projects.

3. Writing Your Proposal: Adding the Detail for Proposal Completion. The importance of visualizing the finished product, editing for concise, understandable language, and fine-tuning proposal methods and analyses are all considered.

This book provides students with tools to implement in their own scholarly practice. Key features to engage readers include the following: chapter objectives, tips for making proposals complete and concise, and key point summaries. Reflective questions, exemplars, and activities for the reader are included. This text helps develop reflective clinical scholars who can write about clinical challenges, propose solutions, and use the methods of science to develop scholarly proposals.

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Introduction: Why a Scholarly Proposal for the Clinical Project Proposal?

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

As you begin your work on a clinical project proposal, there are benefits to reflecting on your goals. You have ideas for the clinical project and are seeking further thoughts for turning these ideas into scholarly proposals that will lead to tight, strong, finished projects. The following reflective questions will help you consider your writing plan and organize learning for this chapter. Which of the following do you have the most comfort responding to?

- What makes a project proposal important?
- What does it mean to write a clinical project proposal?
- How do concepts of reflective clinician and clinical scholarship relate?
- What makes a clinical proposal scholarly?
- How does best evidence fit with clinical projects?
- What are common terms related to best evidence and clinical project proposals?
Proposal Writing for Scholarly Clinical Projects: The Importance

This book is designed to help you become a reflective clinical scholar and write proposals for clinical projects that impact patient care. Clinical scholarship is key to advancing patient care and at this time of change in health care, advanced clinical nursing scholarship is needed more than ever. Your important role in becoming a clinical scholar continues to increase as you learn to write proposals for clinical projects. A clinical project proposal can help name one aspect of what you do as an advanced clinician and plan a project that positively impacts that aspect of your practice.

The concept of project design is key in proposal development. Design, as a broad concept, is often considered a tool for making things better. Designers can be considered agents of change. As an advanced clinician, you will be assessing current situations and in many cases proposing a change process for improving clinical outcomes. As proposal designer, the clinical project proposal can be one step in this development.

Writing a Clinical Project Proposal

A proposal is a straightforward, logically organized, clear document that includes essential details that will guide a project. A proposal is considered the plan for how work will be designed to learn something important related to an interest area. Proposals are further described as a presentation of ideas, a study justification, and a work plan, which serve as evidence of a chain of reasoning, project feasibility, and binding contract for proposed work (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). The proposal plan needs to be logical, with the overall plan flowing from a problem statement. It demonstrates how a need is met by this project and how it builds on previous work to address that need.

Scholarly clinical projects are one way you, as the advanced clinician, gain opportunities for making practice more visible to the public. Project aims can include promoting better patient care, supporting healthy people and community initiatives, and contributing to quality improvement in health care systems. The specific purpose of your clinical project may relate to addressing patient care outcomes that are about safety, quality care, quality of life, or patient transitions. As an advanced clinical practice nurse and leader, you develop clinical projects that integrate best evidence and consider contributions from other disciplines for the purpose of improving clinical practice.

The proposal is a written portion of the scholarly clinical project that “proposes” what is to be done to complete that project. It also situates the project within the existing literature on the topic. Once the proposal for the
clinical project is approved, the clinical project is ready to be implemented. Once the proposed activities are completed, the proposal document then is adapted to become the final project summary. To complete the final summary paper, the proposal methods are changed to past tense (in other words completed), and new sections on project results and implications are added. Thus, this is a useful, versatile document that:

1. Serves as a form of communication or as a type of information sharing.
2. Proposes what is to be done (provides the plan or proposed project outline to be implemented) so others can understand, provide approval, or even replicate.
3. Identifies important, related literature.
4. Provides information in a written and scholarly format through which others can quickly find key concepts.
5. Serves as a type of contract identifying clear expectations for a class or program requirement.
6. Serves as the basis for becoming a final project document that integrates the project proposal and outcomes.

This book guides you through steps for naming what you plan to do and describing to others how you plan to do it. For example, the Institute of Medicine (IOM; 2012) has identified the need for leadership in chronic care management. Advanced nurses have the opportunity to address population health issues to improve public health. Approaches such as education and quality improvement can be considered to help manage or control a chronic illness for a population subset. Designing a related clinical project could involve the following: naming a specific chronic illness and problem (such as osteoarthritis and pain management), selecting related concepts for further development or study that would lead to improved pain management (such as patient group coaching sessions on lifestyle modifications), reviewing the literature to determine the status of the evidence on the proposed concept, and finally framing this into a proposal for implementing or testing the best evidence to improve care of patients with osteoarthritis pain.

**CLINICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND THE REFLECTIVE CLINICIAN**

**Clinical Scholarship**

Boyer (1990) described the importance of acknowledging clinical scholarship as well as sophisticated research programs. His classic framework for documenting scholarship includes frames of teaching, application,
integration, and discovery. He provides a model for helping professionals not only share clinical products with others, but to reflect on and continue to improve these clinical products. Quality-improvement projects provide a good example of this process. Projects that serve as a type of quality improvement can help others know and learn from your observations and experiences. To meet the scholarship definition, components of product documentation, peer review, and publication or dissemination are required (Hutchings, 2002).

The Benefits of Reflection

Being an expert clinician or clinical leader comes with the responsibility of reflecting on practice issues to advance clinical patient care solutions. Reflection is a strategy that allows one to pause and think about what is going on; what is working or not working in a clinical or work-related situation. Reflection serves as a way to assess or identify gaps in clinical practice and move forward in clinical practice. Learning from these assessments often provides direction for future projects. As these ideas move to clinical project proposals, scholarly products and conversation that lead to clinical scholarship continue.

Critique of the current status of a particular care situation, for example, fall prevention, could involve addressing the problem from a systems perspective. This could incorporate reflection on the current unit or practice site structures and processes (both needs and gaps) for gaining positive outcomes. Listening, observing, and writing about this situation provide a starting point for related project development. In this situation a reflective clinician asks, What is the team doing? How is it working? What could be better? These questions then lead to the opportunity for future clinical projects.

Scholarly writing is also related to reflection and scholarly dialogue; this scholarly dialogue involves reading the literature, communicating with others about that literature, and then developing your own scholarly proposal. Further reflection and scholarly dialogue occur with completed project proposals, implementation of the projects, and finally sharing this scholarship via the literature. Scholarly writing of proposals and further products includes using methods of science and the language of the profession for disseminating clinical projects. Again, the scholarly proposal provides written communication to others. It communicates what you will do for the project and later it will be revised to communicate what you did. It provides the basis for a tight scholarly project that can be shared with others.

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MAKING A CLINICAL PROPOSAL SCHOLARLY

Writing a scholarly proposal is part of a skill set for furthering clinical scholarship. Scholarly proposals provide a way to share, in a written and professional format, the important points of a major project. The proposal conveys not only what you will do, but why it is important that other people think about this topic. Your proposal summarizes your plans, provides you a road map for implementing plans, and delivers to others a plan that they can review and critique and approve. Scholarly proposals, and then completed projects, provide a means to contribute to the body of knowledge and improve clinical practice.

In your scholarly proposal you will use the language of science and a commonly accepted format for organizing project proposals and final papers. This consistency in structure promotes ease of communication within nursing and the larger, interdisciplinary community. The common sections for a scholarly proposal are:

- Introduction with Problem Summary and Purpose Statement
- Literature Review
- Project Methods

Although clinical project topics are quite variable, in all cases a proposal is an important component and serves as a project guide. In some ways completing a proposal is like putting together a puzzle and making sure all the pieces fit to give the best final picture. A scholarly proposal involves justifying and writing about your plan so that all of the clinical project pieces fit together.

Proposals are important in serving as a mechanism of clear communication about a proposed project. In a clinical and interprofessional world, you will be communicating professionally in the literature and via conference presentations. Scholarly proposals incorporate the language of science with agreed-on terminology for communication. Common agreement across disciplines dictates that scholarly proposals include clear presentation of problem summary, project purpose, literature review, project methods, and projected outcomes. Though this sounds simple, there are numerous components to both consider and address to make this happen. Although this book lays out components by chapter, it is important to consider the back-and-forth nature of each, for example, detailing the problem as a component of reviewing the literature. The art of scholarly proposing, in simple terms, includes:

- Taking an important problem
- Situating that problem in the literature and best evidence

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• Framing it into a useful project, in writing, from which others can learn
• Making that written project proposal scholarly and doable

**HOW DOES THE REFLECTIVE CLINICIAN USE EVIDENCE IN CLINICAL PROJECTS?**

Scholarly dialogue includes reviewing best evidence in the literature as well as other professional sources of best evidence. Considering the state of the evidence can lead to further focusing on the clinical problem. As you move forward in your proposal, you will begin asking questions that help you address how you will

• further understand your concept
• gain a process for evidence-based practice
• enhance quality care
• generate questions requiring further study

Once you have a beginning understanding of what is available in the literature or best evidence, then you are able to make decisions on the type of project that will be most needed related to your problem/topic. This allows you to focus broadly on using the evidence in advanced clinical projects such as the following:

• Synthesizing the literature on topics to develop current best-practice summaries or protocols for testing. An example would be sharing a synthesis of best evidence and protocol for promoting best anesthesia care for pediatric patients dealing with obesity.
• Using and evaluating current best-evidence protocols to implement quality-improvement projects with unique populations. An example would be teaching and evaluating use of an evidence-based protocol on diabetes management in long-term care settings.
• Contributing to the evidence by sharing new clinical data. An example would be surveying rural advanced practice nurses related to their challenges and strategies for dealing with common rural population issues.

**COMMON TERMS RELATED TO CLINICAL PROJECTS AND USE OF BEST EVIDENCE**

Common terms such as translation of the evidence, research utilization, and evidence-based practice can relate to clinical projects and proposals. Many
terms are used in discussing clinical activities based on the evidence. Although there is overlap in these terms, each has unique components:

Translation of the evidence: Translating evidence to knowledge for practice and helping staff become aware of and access evidence-based resources.

Research utilization: Applying relevant studies to practice, after specific review and critique of each study.

Evidence-based practice: Expanding the concept of research utilization to include not only appropriate research in practice but, when limited research evidence is available, other sources of best evidence such as expert clinician are also considered. The patient preference for treatment is also a component.

Also, the concepts of research, evaluation, and quality improvement are often discussed together. Again, there are similarities and differences in these basic terms as well as frequent overlap of concepts/methods used.

Evaluation: Evaluative projects include systematic methods that judge the effectiveness of specific practices or policies.

Research: Large-scale projects that involve systematic inquiry, using specified, disciplined methods of science in addressing problems or questions (Polit & Beck, 2012).

Quality improvement: Projects that analyze a system’s performance and ways to improve using a formal approach with systematic methods (Duke University, 2005).

Relevant to these concepts, evaluation is a broad project approach/method used in both research and quality improvement. Research studies typically build in more controls to be more generalizable to other settings and populations. Quality improvement is typically considered more narrow in focus and for specific institutional use.

**CLINICAL SCHOLARSHIP: SEEKING AND GAINING A MENTOR**

Seeking and gaining a mentor in the early stage of your work is an important and sometimes challenging task. Potential mentors should have expertise specific to content, settings, and methods. A mentor’s time availability, the interest to help, and a strong commitment to your professional development are also important. The benefits of having a mentor are many, but in particular include helping you avoid pitfalls in feasibility or effectiveness of clinical project methods. When seeking a mentor, consider
concepts of mutual readiness, opportunity, and resources for support. For example, if your mentor is at a distance, are methods available to facilitate conversations, and are both of you mutually interested in participating?

Finding a project mentor and using your project mentor(s) well are beneficial in all phases/aspects of project proposal development, as well as project implementation, evaluation, and completion. Consider the following strategies to seek a mentor or improve current work with a mentor:

- Focus on clear guides and expectations for both mentor and mentee.
- Establish regular meeting times (phone/face to face/electronic).
- Find out when your mentor is available to read reports and what type of feedback your mentor is willing to give. Also ask about the lead time required to review documents.
- Build a schedule for project reports or updates.
- Follow-up on mentor’s comments or suggestions.
- If your mentor is at a distance, discuss electronic communication strategies.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CLINICAL PROJECT TRIANGLE

As you move forward with your clinical project, you will want to consider the benefits of a clinical project triangle (Appendix A) and rubric (Appendix B). The three points of the triangle include the project purpose, the methods, and the outcomes. This triangle helps hold the project together from a big-picture perspective and makes the project a cohesive whole. It is useful to begin a proposal with the triangle points in mind (subject to change as literature is reviewed and plans are finalized). For example, in a sample communications project (Appendix C), the purpose was seeking outcomes of improved communication between nursing staff and providers. Methods were then selected that could help achieve the designated outcomes. As noted, the purpose was broad and the methods and outcomes were quite specific. The goal is for all project points on the triangle to mesh so that all aspects of the project are consistent and the overall project is coherent.

SUMMARY

Clinicians have opportunities to impact patient care in changing health care systems. Being an expert clinician or clinical leader comes with the responsibility of reflecting on practice issues and advancing clinical patient care.
solutions via scholarly projects. Clinical project proposals provide a way to begin naming your specific concepts. Proposals for clinical projects directed at solving clinical problems can be implemented and shared as a form of scholarly practice.

**TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED**

- Schedule regular times to reflect on a problem topic of interest for your project. Initially avoid getting bogged down in detail. Note and relate facts, your reactions and feelings, and note both frustrations and “aha” moments (Zachary, 2000).
- Add something to your reflections each scheduled time. Even if you are not productive at first, it establishes the routine and sets the expectation to help you develop a regular work pattern.
- Prepare to address the questions your reflections raise: What is the evidence on this topic of interest? What is the state of current practice in a specified location or population? What value is there in further addressing this problem?

**NEXT CHAPTER UP**

Chapter 2 provides practical guides for getting started with your writing plan. The chapter addresses gaining ideas and tips for writing, asking the right questions, and making good choices to craft project proposals.

**LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

**Beginning Writing Prompts**

Writing prompts provide a way to reflect and get some ideas on paper. Use these prompts to brainstorm possibilities.

1. Some of the big concerns I have with my clinical work relate to the following . . .
2. If there is one clinical or work-related problem I would fix, it would be . . . the outcomes I would be interested in would include . . .
3. The people and place factors that impact this problem are . . .
4. If I could focus on just one aspect of this problem, it would be . . .

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Writing an Initial Reflection

Begin a written reflection by sharing what has shaped your ideas about a specific topic/problem. What have been your experiences or lessons learned? Then question how these might be similar or different from others’ perspectives?

CHECKLIST AND GOAL SETTING: READINESS TO BEGIN A CLINICAL PROJECT

On a scale of 1 to 3 (high), how would you rate yourself on each of the following? What further goals need to be addressed?

At this point in time . . .

1. I am motivated to help improve patient outcomes via advanced clinical projects.
2. I have beginning clinical challenges/ideas I would like to further develop.
3. I am in a situation that supports moving forward with a clinical project.
4. I am ready to communicate professionally via a written proposal.