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## Successfully Writing and Defending the Dissertation Proposal: A Review of Designing Qualitative Research

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## Successfully Writing and Defending the Dissertation Proposal: A Review of Designing Qualitative Research

### Abstract

Designing Qualitative Research (5th ed.) by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (2011) is, in my opinion, a book of compiled elements central to the design and defense of the qualitative research proposal. The authors provide invaluable examples through the use of vignettes. Overall, the book is an easy read that is essentially divided into two parts: research design and proposal defense. As a whole, this book is a useful tool for anyone taking on a qualitative research study for the first time.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research Design, Qualitative Research Proposal, and Proposal Defense

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## **Successfully Writing and Defending the Dissertation Proposal: A Review of *Designing Qualitative Research***

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*Designing Qualitative Research (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (2011) is, in my opinion, a book of compiled elements central to the design and defense of the qualitative research proposal. The authors provide invaluable examples through the use of vignettes. Overall, the book is an easy read that is essentially divided into two parts: research design and proposal defense. As a whole, this book is a useful tool for anyone taking on a qualitative research study for the first time. Key Words: Qualitative Research Design, Qualitative Research Proposal, and Proposal Defense*

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This book, like many other books that claim to elucidate the research process for the fledgling researcher, struck me as impressive at first glance. When I picked up *Designing Qualitative Research (5<sup>th</sup> ed.)* by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (2011), I thought, “Great; another resource for qualitative research!” I was as excited about this book as I have been about any other book that I have acquired on the topic of qualitative research.

Skimming the book revealed that much of the content covered similar topics as those covered in other comparable texts. The chapter titles seemed to be in-line with what the authors appeared to want to achieve through the title of the book. However, I recently attained new knowledge about how to get the most out of a book and how to really know what the author(s) are trying to present. In his article, *How to Read and Review a Book Like a Qualitative researcher*, Ronald J. Chenail (2010) offers very useful and creative advice on how to examine a book from multiple views. This information was key in evaluating Marshall and Rossman’s (2011) new edition of *Designing Qualitative Research*.

I started reviewing the book similar to the way that I have reviewed books in the past: I looked at the cover, scanned the chapters, and made a simple judgment of what I thought the value of the book was, for me. I proceeded to take a “tour” of the rest of the book, focusing on the back cover—and there it was. This was the part that Chenail (2010) refers to as the “author making a claim” (p. 1637). In this section, the first sentence starts “Providing students in applied social and behavioral science disciplines with invaluable guidance on developing and successfully defending qualitative research proposals....” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, back cover). As a Ph.D. candidate, I appreciated this statement, as I am currently writing my own research proposal.

It is through Chenail’s (2010) work that I was able take on a different perspective for this review. Once I began exploring the book, I noticed the inventiveness of the

authors. As they presented information on laying out the framework of a research proposal, they also interlaced it with vignettes on how one may be challenged during the defense process. To this end, my overarching question is “How is the information valuable?”

The authors state that their aim for this book is to provide students with “invaluable” information that will allow them to “successfully defend their qualitative research proposal” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, back cover). In order to achieve this, the student must be able to present his argument in a manner that showcases this specific qualitative research to be important and make a significant contribution to the area of study.

As with any other qualitative research proposal, the problem should be adequately addressed. The literature review is a major area of the proposal, and it will highlight other studies that have been conducted in comparable areas along with a description of the gaps that the literature reveals. The authors succinctly describe the major areas of a qualitative research proposal in terms of its preparation. This includes a plan for how the study will unfold with a well-outlined strategy for sampling and participant recruitment.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection tool, whereas quantitative research uses multiple forms of instruments. Keeping this in mind the authors suggest that “the researcher should think carefully about how he can deploy the self, as it were, to maximize the opportunities for gathering data. This consideration should be balanced against the resources available for the study—most notably time and energy” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 117).

The fundamentals of the research proposal are certainly those first three sections; however, defending the proposal is a critical part of the research process for graduate students, as it will allow the research to move forward. The authors posit that there are substantial elements of the defense to consider prior to facing your committee. Marshall and Rossman argue that “the researcher should anticipate questions about the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings; poor sampling design decisions may threaten these findings. To justify a sample, one should know the universe of the possible population and its variability and then sample according to all of the relevant variables” (2011, p. 103).

For me, the book was easily captured in two parts. The first part was the composition of the proposal. The second section was the defense in terms of considering what may be asked during the oral defense. While many of us may pound out work in the design of our proposal, it is easy to forget the essential criteria that our committee will look for in our studies. While keeping this text simple and straightforward, the authors took it to another level of interest and impact by adding vignettes throughout the readings. The authors describe a particular topic in the text, followed by real examples related to the topic of discussion. I found this characteristic invaluable, especially since working on a dissertation is mostly a solitary task. This reminded me of being in a classroom where a professor could be discussing the topic of entry into the field and the importance of rapport. Most students probably have not encountered this issue; however, with the real example made by the professor in a relatable context, the issue becomes more noteworthy and highlights the importance of this step.

I would consider the entire book as a very useful tool. The authors draw upon what some other authors have published (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000;

Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) and compiled it into one resource for preparing and defending the qualitative research proposal.

I recommend taking a look at the book's webpage <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book233112?level1=Course1007&currTree=Courses&level2=Course1008&#tabview=title>. In doing so you will find related products, reviews of others who have used the book, a table of contents with a couple of chapters to preview, and the new additions to this fifth edition.

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### Author Note

Diana Riviera is a Ph.D. candidate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University. Diana's research interests include identity and sense of belonging, visual qualitative research, culture and ethnic conflict, social control, poverty, border towns/colonias, single mothers, quantitative and qualitative methodology. She can be contacted at [riviera@nova.edu](mailto:riviera@nova.edu)

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