## The Pennsylvania State University New Kensington Campus

**BA 495B General Information**

Instructor: Rujirutana Mandhachitara, Ph.D

Admin. Building 106

Telephone: (724) 334 6769 Cell (347) 406 4064

Office Hours: (via Zoom) Mondays and Wednesdays, 6.00-7.30 p.m. or by appointment

E-mail: rum20@psu.edu

BA 495B (**Individual Research Project in Business**) is a senior-level project activity that is intended to build upon all of a student's previous coursework in business. It links the theoretical with day-to-day practical applications and represents the single largest event in the BSB program. This course is where the student will design a research project in which they have a particular interest. Under the supervision of a faculty member, the BA 495B student will carry out the data collection and analysis, prepare a comprehensive paper, and give a presentation of their work. Research, as defined for this course, means original research of actual business situations or phenomena, the findings or results of which may be of value to others.

As with many of the other courses within the BSB curriculum, BA 495B further reinforces the development of writing and presentation skills, but *also* build upon the competencies attained in project

management whereby the student, rather than the instructor, drives the time schedule and must coordinate their own unique set of resources, including scheduling time as needed with the supervising instructor. It is the student's responsibility to arrange for periodic meetings with the instructor during the semester so that effective progress is made towards a timely completion of the project. At Penn State New

Kensington, the BA 495B course is partially structured to help ensure students maintain a pace commensurate with a typical successful outcome.

Students are required to write an effective and acceptable research proposal. After approval of the topic, the student then sequentially develops nine additional assignments leading to a public presentation and a final research paper. The proposal must be officially approved at the beginning of the semester in which BA 495B is scheduled. This document is the guide for "Writing an Effective and Acceptable Project Proposal".

Grading criteria for .BA 495B - Grades will be determined on the quality of the final written project report, the quality of the research design, data collection and analysis, the oral presentation, and the professionalism and timeliness exhibited during the semester. Details of the grading process are available on the BA 495B Course Outline.

**Questions???:** Contact Dr. R. Mandhachitara in 106A Admin Bldg.

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***Writing An Effective and Acceptable Project Proposal***

This guide is prepared to assist students in their efforts to write a BA 495B project proposal that

will:

1. Focus efforts to provide a meaningful BA 495B experience,
2. Enable the student to determine whether a selected topic is one that is worthy of further pursuit. To this end, students may occasionally find that a partially written proposal may need to be discarded for one reason or another.

**Title**

Obviously, nothing else in this effort will function properly if an appropriate title is not assigned

to the overall undertaking. Students need to spend considerable time working to narrow a topic to help assure that completion of a particular project is largely achievable in the allotted time. An appropriate title will, therefore, need to convey the following:

1. The area of interest under investigation. This means that the title needs to provide some indication of the following:
   1. Specific industry (e.g. financial services, steel, rail transportation, retailing, etc.)
   2. Specific company, if appropriate (Norfolk Southern, Wal-Mart, Merrill Lynch, Target, WTAE, etc.)
   3. Business function (e.g. customer service, sales promotion, logistics, finance, accounting, human resources, etc.)
   4. Nature of the issue of concern or focus of the project
2. Some idea of the approximate scope of the project. In other words what are the limitations or boundaries of the project? These may be temporal, geographic, or some other limitation appropriate to the project.

**Executive Summary**

The first part of the project proposal document MUST contain a one-page executive summary of the project and briefly touch upon all of the sections discussed in this guide. As a suggestion, think of this section as a "teaser" to give the executive reading the proposal sufficient facts to arouse interest, to the point of possibly reading the document in its entirety.

**Project Background**

In brief, the student will need to communicate those circumstances that have led to the undertaking of this project. This section of your proposal can be designed as answers to the following series of questions:

1. What is the specific business problem being addressed here?
2. If it is not a problem per se, then why should the organization, you, or others care about this issue?
3. What has caused this problem or situation to come about?
4. Why might this be an appropriate time to solve it?
   1. Internal factors including, but not limited to:
      * organizational changes
      * merger, acquisition, or divestiture
      * cost reduction initiatives
   2. External factors including, but not limited to:
      * actions of competitors
      * customer demand
      * government regulatory initiative
      * singularly recognized opportunity (e.g. new technology)

## Objectives

Before receiving approval, all projects normally undergo a rigorous review that seeks to weigh the anticipated benefits of the project against the costs that will need to be incurred. The scenario written in this section is essentially a response to the business problem(s) articulated in the previous section. In other words, what does the student hope to achieve or gain by undertaking this project? Sometimes these statements can be very short and concise; other times, they may be far-reaching and quite elaborate. In all cases objectives should begin with the word *To.*

Some specific examples of objectives might be:

1. To identify areas where future training of sales representatives

are needed as a result of our developing as a new product,

1. To shorten total average days of accounts receivable by x¾ thereby increasing the volume of investible funds for the firm,
2. To identify market opportunities by adopting internet sales for our line of ice hockey equipment.

In addition to these statements, there should be some detailed narrative that lends some support to each. A comprehensive **"Review of the Literature"** is required in order to set up the conceptual framework for the project and support specific objectives. A literature review is a concise analysis appraising a specific area of research and theory. It provides an overview of that area, and more importantly, it assesses the quality of research in that area. That is, it supports and/or critiques the research. It points out both the positive and negative aspects of the area's theoretical underpinnings, research designs, research methods, procedures, and interpretations of research findings. The review of the literature should help support the logic of the research proposal and hopefully advance an understanding of the phenomena in the area of study once the project is completed. This section is fundamental to the success of a research proposal.

## Methodology

The principal output of the project will be a paper, but it is a paper significantly different than a term paper in that it does in fact represent a type of business writing. The issue of methodology means that the

writer will need to explain the manner in which the collection and analysis aspects of the project were approached. Specifically, there are just a few types, however, it is possible on occasion to use them in combination, but for the most part keeping your approach as simple as possible will help assure that you have an *achievable* project.

Those types of likely methodologies include:

1. **Case Studies:** If one is working on a project for a particular firm, this may be the most likely approach. It is like telling a story beginning with:
   1. a description of the old situation,
   2. what changes were desired,
   3. what costs or resources were estimated to be,
   4. what happened as the project progressed, and
   5. what was the final outcome.

Where the researcher adds value is by identifying the problems encountered, by assessing where outcomes exceeded or fell short of expectations, and why these occurred.

1. **Interviews:** When the researcher wishes to discover detailed facts about specific situations, a series of interviews with particular decision-makers may be the most efficient and practical approach to take. Students are encouraged to do some further reading as well as get some advice from faculty, and the following are some issues to keep in mind:
   1. Identify the specific people that should be interviewed,
   2. Consider what is required for the researcher to gain access to each,
   3. How many of these people are there?
   4. Where are these people located?
   5. Prepare an *interview protocol* or script of the questions to be answered during the interview,
   6. Prepare PSU Office of Regulatory Compliance human subjects documentation if appropriate.

If the researcher can speak with enough appropriate subjects, a wealth of good information from which to begin to draw conclusions can be collected. Moreover, this methodology has a higher response rate than does a mail survey.

1. **Surveys:** When attempting to learn the thoughts, opinions and circumstances of a large number of people, a survey may be appropriate. Great care, however, will need to be exercised in:
   1. Identifying the target group to be surveyed,
   2. Wording the questions in the survey,
   3. Assuring that we will have a sufficiently large sample and recognizing that we might only have a response rate of

25-30%.

Much like the interview method, you will need to do some additional independent research on survey methods. Note, too, that this method may incur significant printing and mailing costs.

1. **Conceptual Models:** Let's say one has a great idea for improving a particular business process and that despite it being unproven, your supervisor has given the "go ahead" to try it. This great idea is essentially a conceptual model and the researcher's role will be to find out if:
   1. It works or not,
   2. If not, what are the problems with it and how these might be resolved, and
   3. What are the net benefits to the organization.

Areas where such models may be employed include, but are not limited to,

1. Job descriptions of people in a particular function (e.g. every machine operator will also have responsibility for cleaning and maintaining their equipment);
2. Systems applications and types of data collected, the means of analysis, and the information disseminated;
3. Processes such as new measurement criteria for buyers in a purchasing department that might include:
   * supplier quality performance
   * supplier delivery performance
   * reductions in purchase order transaction costs

## Resources Employed

What will this project, as a BA 495B effort, require in order for the student to undertake it? Those resources can be divided into several major categories:

1. Data: What is likely to be needed and will the researcher have access to it?
2. Cost: Will the researcher need to spend money on travel or perhaps acquire some specific software?
3. Efforts of Others: If this is a project at work, who is also involved and to what

extent will the researcher be depending on them in order that the BA 495B interest proceed as planned?

1. Time: THIS IS THE MOST CRITICAL! Students need to budget sufficient time

required for data collection, analysis, and report writing.

1. Time Frame: Assign dates to the completion of the major milestones, and keep a copy of the assignment due dates in a place of high visibility.

## Format

Proposals must be submitted as formal business documents. This means that they should appear as follows:

I. Prepared with a word processing application package, preferably Microsoft Word.

1. Appear in a business-like, easy-to-read font with appropriate margins. The use of clip art is strongly discouraged. However, appropriate tables, charts, or illustrations can add to the presentation.
2. Expressed with proper English grammar with appropriate punctuation.
3. Contain NO spelling errors. Use your spell check, but remember that the wrong word spelled correctly is still an error.
4. Include a coversheet noting that you are submitting a BA 495B proposal entitled,

" ."

1. Use APA citation format (see a copy online or in the Blissell Library),and use it consistently.
2. Contact Dr. R. Mandhachitara for Research Proposal Template.

## Disclaimer

Every good proposal, or prospectus in the investment business, contains a disclaimer, otherwise known as a *red herring clause.* There MUST be a proposal in effect for whatever project you undertake. This means you can change topics, but when you do so, you must prepare a new proposal to reflect that change.

*This proposal must be prepared and officially approved by the beginning of the semester in which BA 495B is scheduled. The actual project may differ from the one described herein. Student makes no warranty that the actual project executed will be the same, but when different, a subsequent proposal shall be, as a prerequisite, in full force and effect prior to project commencement.*

**Oral Presentation** - Students will do a 10-15 minute oral presentation on their collaborative project on a date listed in the course syllabus. Students from BA 495 B will be giving presentations at the same time. Students are expected to attend the entire oral presentation session for all students. Students can use various multimedia in addition to their PowerPoint presentations, including videos. A draft copy of the PowerPoint slides is due one week before the presentation. The content of the PowerPoint presentation should include the following: background and objectives of the project, basic procedures or methods used, data analysis, results and implications.

**Written Project Report** - The final written project report will need to appear professional (neat, page numbers, paragraphs, headings and sub-headings, spell-checked and proof-read), be no more than 12 pages in length, single-spaced, in a 11-point font. Proper citations for references/resources used in the project need to be included. The complete written project report is due on the date of the presentation. The completed project report should include all sections described below:

General structure format of the collaborative or individual research project:

I. Title - This should sufficiently describe what is being studied.

1. Executive Summary - State the purpose of the project, basic procedures, main findings, and principal conclusions.
2. Table of Contents
3. Introduction - Describe the project background noting the nature of the problem/issue being studied and describe the firm, industry and nature of the business. State the project objectives or questions clearly. Include a review of the literature, if appropriate.
4. Literature Review- citations from relevant publications supporting and/or critiquing the project.
5. Methodology- Description of the business organization, participants, and sample

selection. Description of test instruments, items measured or analyzed, methods of analysis. Limitations of methods should also be noted.

1. Data Analysis
2. Results of the study- What specifically was discovered?
3. Discussion and Implication- Expanded discussion of findings, limitations, how the findings relate to other companies, and how the findings can be used by business manger.

I 0. Tables and Figures - may be integrated into the text for ease of reading.

11. Bibliography - References - follow standard American Psychological Association (APA) citation format.

**BA495B**

**Tips for Individual Research in Business**

## Choose a problem or pose a research question.

Your research should address a specific question or problem, not simply be a "report" about a "topic."

The group should begin preliminary work on a general topic area that is of interest, then make an appointment with the faculty member supervising the group project in business . Meet with him/her to discuss the particular depth or breadth of an issue and some possibilities. Several different meetings may be required before a research question is agreed upon.

Best advice: Start this process as soon as possible!

## Search for sources and information.

Make an appointment early in the process with one of the librarians for guidance.

Note there are many different kinds of information in many different places. Some information is on the Web; some is only in print form. All kinds of sources should be explored and none should be excluded by category. The librarian can help you keep your search focused and efficient.

It is also important to convert your research question into an articulated search strategy. Both the librarian and your faculty supervisor can provide advice. You may

explore with them how to evaluate issues of source reliability and availability as well. You should be sure to explore primary sources, not just secondary sources. For example, just because Mr. X says Ms. Y said or thought something, doesn't mean you'll come to the same conclusion when you read Ms Y for yourself. So, be sure to find Ms. Yin your search, especially when many other authors/critics cite her.

Best advice: The purpose is not just to gather material, but to critically think about what you are gathering and why as well as judging its quality and value.

## Keep track of what you find.

Different people have different systems and no one correct way. Some people use

old-fashioned index cards for notes; some use a laptop with reference software for keeping track of citations, and there is everything in between.

Best advice: Don't fall behind in this activity. You can lose weeks of productive writing if you do!

# Get organized.

Outline a plan for your write up. Outlines are essential for establishing an order

of presentation of ideas. What comes first, what's next and so on. It helps put a logic to your thoughts and body of information. You may also want to create a concept map to identify the key concepts and separate those from the subordinate concepts. Concept maps are also useful to illustrate how various concepts connect to one another. Outlines are not able to do that.

Best advice: It is important to have your outline/concept map reviewed by your supervisor. Be prepared to make several revisions as you work through the research and writing.

# Make adjustments.

Things change. As you collect more material, think about it, organize your

thoughts, and talk about it with your faculty supervisor and others, you may begin to see the question and the sources differently. You may need modify your outline, your plans, even your research question! That's okay. It's a natural, normal part of the learning and research process. We are supposed to change our minds when our understanding about a subject enlarges!

Best advice: Stay flexible, as well as focused!

# Start writing.

Begin writing as soon as you have any organization. Writing can be done in

pieces and it doesn't have to start on page 1. Once you have an outline in hand, if your ideas, for example, about subject IX on your outline are crystallized, write that up while your thinking is fresh on it. Come back to Section II (or whatever) later.

Second, share your writing with others, peers (engaged in the same kind of effort)

as well as your faculty supervisor. Receiving feedback may feel painful at first. You may want to "put it on ice" for a couple of days (or a week), then come back to it when you have further distance from your initial effort. It's worth it. The result of such discussions and feedback are bound to result in better thinking and ultimately, a better paper.

Best advice: Start with baby steps, string the baby steps together, and let other people in on your work. It's difficult to get a handle on your thoughts until you begin to write them down.

# Rewrite.

Good writing inevitably involves rewriting. There's a famous cartoon depicting a tired, frazzled stone worker standing with a hanm1er and chisel in hand and the words,

"You mean you want the revised version of the revised version revised?" The answer, of course, is yes. It's not just polishing words and grammar, but the thinking itself in the rewrites.

Best advice: Allow plenty of time in your schedule, not just for writing, but also for rewriting.

## Documentation.

TAKE CARE IN PRODUCING YOUR FINAL DOCUMENT TO CAREFULLY RECORD, CITE, AND REFERENCE ALL SOURCE MATERIAL. Check and double check for accurate attributions as well as proper format. Certain references can assist you with questions about formatting. Check with your librarian or faculty supervisor. Don't rely on spell checks for proofing this part of your paper. Read it forwards and backwards, literally!

Best advice: Check your deadlines and be sure to schedule sufficient time for this documentation operation in the production of your paper.

## Share the most recent version of the paper with your faculty supervisor for final comments.

Most faculty want at least one week to "tum around" or read a paper, and many want two weeks. Be sure to plan accordingly in order to meet paper deadlines.

Best advice: Talk with your faculty supervisor in advance about his or her expectations for your paper deadlines and review.