

Wrapping up a Business and Public Administration Research Report

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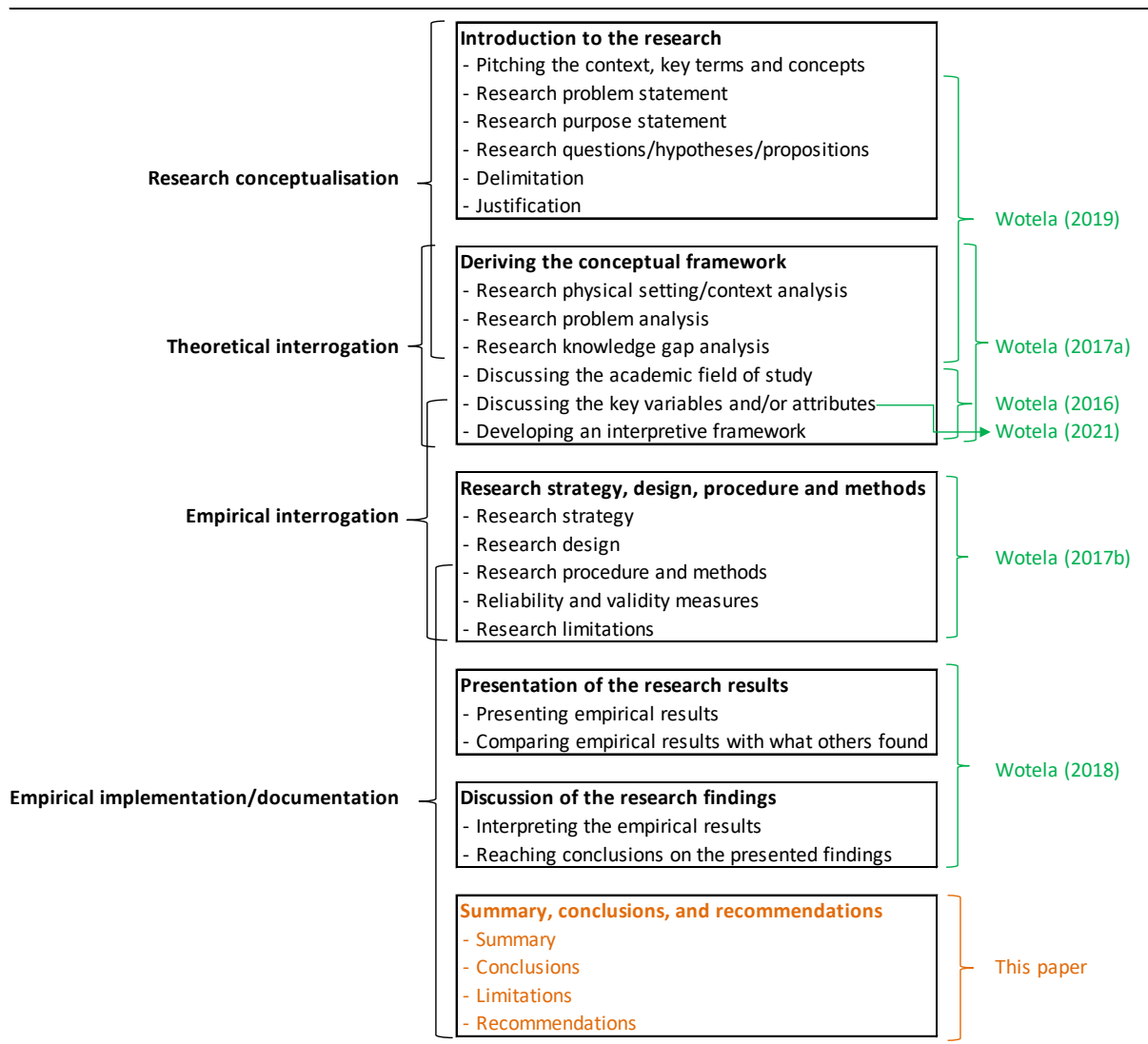
Abstract: Like the first component of a research report (introduction to the research), the last component (research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations) is an important component in business and public administration research as is the case in any humanities and social science research. In sum, the 'introduction to the research' component focuses on conceptualising the research, that is, 'what' research we are pursuing and 'why'. The 'research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations' focuses on four related aspects of a research report. First, it provides for the outputs of research by summarising its process and content. Second, it provides for the outcomes of research by pointing out its conclusions. Third, it documents aspects that took away (limitations) from the research process and its resulting content. Lastly, based on the foregoing, it proposes some policy, operational, practical, and future research recommendations. However, when undertaking this ultimate component, we often fail to explicitly tie in all that happened (research process) and how this led to the content. Therefore, this paper pursues the question, 'how can we effectively summarise a business and public administration research report and critically point out its conclusions as well as limitations and recommendations'. In doing so, we propose some approaches and considerations when wrapping up our business and public administration research. Generally, we should realise that this component feeds off and links in with the other five components of a research report, implying that its quality is only as good as the quality of the other components. Further, since this component also feeds into the other components of a research report, we can use it to improve our research report especially the first component (research conceptualisation) and the second (the conceptual framework). Specifically, the four subcomponents namely, research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations, are interlinked and, therefore, we should have this in mind when dealing with this component. Like any other component, it should be well structured, well written, and its content comprehensive and critical. We should remember that it is a platform for us to stand out from anyone else doing similar research. We believe that the approach proposed in this paper provides a firm starting point for wrapping up our business and public administration research.

Keywords: research processes, research components, research content, summarising a research, concluding a research, research limitations, research recommendations

1. Background

Remenyi and others (1998) have proposed an eight-stage process for business and management research—that is, reviewing the literature; formalising a research question; establishing the methodology; collecting evidence; analysing evidence; developing conclusions; understanding the limitations of the research, and producing management guidelines or recommendations. As shown in Figure 1, Wotela (2021) has grouped these eight stages into four processes and six components. The four processes include, *research conceptualisation* (Wotela, 2021), *theoretical interrogation* (Wotela, 2016, 2017a, 2021), *empirical interrogation* (Wotela, 2017b) as well as *empirical implementation as well as its documentation interrogation* (Wotela, 2017b, 2018). This paper focuses on this last process in general but more specially the last three (of eight) stages in Remenyi and others (1998), that is, (i.) developing conclusions, (ii.) understanding the limitations of the research, and (iii.) producing management guidelines or recommendations. Here we pursue the question; how can we effectively summarise business and public administration research and in doing so point out the conclusions and limitations as well as make practical and future research recommendations? Like the first component of a research report (introduction to the research) where we conceptualise our research, the last component (research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendation) is an important component in any humanities and social research (Trafford and Leshem, 2008) including business and public administration. However, we most often fail to explicitly tie in the research process to its key content. This is probably because whilst there are several articles on summarising and concluding a research undertaking, for example Bryman (2016), most of them merely outline and describe the requirements. This is the gap that this paper intends to contribute to and, therefore, it is a concerted effort to demonstrate how we should explicitly summarise our research process and key content before moving on to pointing out the key conclusions, limitations, and finally, practical or policy recommendations as well as future research.

Our suggestions in this paper reverse engineer comments that we have compiled from examiners' reports of our students¹ and subsequent discussions with colleagues and research students through devising seminars. Fundamentally, the paper follows basic systems thinking principles described in Gharajedaghi (2006) which for our purposes are detailed in Wotela (2016) and builds on the work of Wotela (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2022). The approach proposed in this paper provides a guide that research students, especially novices can use when wrapping up a research undertaking. If successfully implemented, the approach is likely to yield an integrated, comprehensive, and critical 'research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations' component. As always, we focus on business and public administration research but our approach could apply to any other research especially in social sciences and humanities.



Source: Modified from Wotela (2019)

Figure 1: Showing the four processes of research and their accompanying six components of a research report as well as their subcomponents

2. The 'summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations' component—what, why, and how

Social research textbooks—such as Bak (2004); Hofstee (2006), Wagner, Kawulich, and Garner (2012); Brynard, Hanekom, and Brynard (2014); Neuman (2013); Gilbert (2015); Bryman (2016); Kumar (2018); and Parija and Kate (2018)—have a chapter or section on research writing. Some books, such as Henning, Gravett, and van Rensburg (2005) as well as Remenyi and Bannister (2012), are devoted to academic writing or how to write a research report. However, most emphasis is on writing up the literature review (Neuman, 2013; Wagner,

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Kawulich, and Garner, 2012; Parija and Kate, 2018) and the research proposal (Kumar, 2018; Parija and Kate, 2018) but hardly on the other five components of a research report. A few authors, for example Remenyi and colleagues (1998) as well as more notably Hofstee (2006) and Trafford and Leshem (2008), include a detailed discussion on *how* to write the ‘summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component. Even then, apart from Hofstee (2006), the emphasis is, and reasonably so, on the research conclusions rather than the other subcomponents of this last component of a research report. We can, therefore, certainly argue that there are few holistic guides on how to approach the ultimate component of a research report. This paper seeks to address this deficiency.

In all, as Henning, Gravett, and van Rensburg (2005) point out, it should be evident that our ‘research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component results from a coherent research process. We should also demonstrate that we now fully understand the research we have been pursuing and our resulting content is based on this understanding. Therefore, rather than speculation, this component should be based on the theoretical and empirical evidence that we have generated (Henning, Gravett, and van Rensburg, 2005; Trafford and Leshem, 2008; Brynard, Hanekom, and Brynard, 2014; Bryman, 2016). However, Gilbert (2015, 549), has also argued that we should actually “... speculate a little, going beyond the ... [theoretical and empirical evidence that we have generated to] ... point out further issues that the research has raised”.

The material in this Section provides for the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of the ‘research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component but very little of the ‘how’. This is probably because, as Gilbert (2015) has argued, this component is the most difficult to write. It is not easy to summarise the process and content of a research “... in a succinct and interesting way” (p549). Trafford and Leshem (2008, 127) share this view when they point out that “the prospect of distilling all the chapters into a single highly focused chapter may ... [be] quite daunting”.

3. The research process and components preceding the ‘summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component

As shown in Figure 1, by the time we start thinking about summarising and concluding our research, we would have conceptualised our research and then undertaken our theoretical interrogation before moving onto empirical interrogation as well as way into our empirical implementation and its documentation. This implies that we would have completed five of the six components of our research report, be it a dissertation or a thesis. To prepare for the discussions in the sections that follow, this Section details what we would have achieved and produced in our business and public administration research before we start tackling our ‘research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component. As discussed in Wotela (2019), research conceptualisation allows us to reflect on our (i.) research title, (ii.) research problem statement, (iii.) research purpose statement, and (iv.) research questions as well as, where applicable, the accompanying research hypotheses or research propositions. We should then use these four pillars to develop the outline of the entire research write-up. However, we should also continuously update these pillars of research conceptualisation as our research progresses.

‘Theoretical interrogation’ entails interrogating six sets of literature (see Figure 1) and culminates in a conceptual framework (Wotela, 2017a). The first three sets of literature—that is, the research physical setting/context analysis, the research problem analysis, and the research knowledge gap analysis—provides for understanding the research problem (within the research context) that we are pursuing and then identifying the research knowledge gap. This interrogation assists us to strengthen our research conceptualisation and helps us start thinking about the research strategy, design, procedure and methods that we should use for our research (Wotela, 2019). The last three sets of literature—that is, establishing and discussing the academic field of study, establishing and discussing the key variables and/or attributes, and establishing and discussing an interpretive framework—provides for interrogating the attributes and variables that are key to the research that we are pursuing (Wotela, 2021) as well as the frameworks that we should use to interpret the anticipated empirical research results (Wotela, 2016). Ideally, this should be situated within appropriate academic context. We then derive the conceptual framework by summarising the key aspects emanating from these six sets of literature on our research and then using this summary to propose how we should undertake the empirical part of our research. Ideally, the conceptual framework affirms our research conceptualisation and paves the way to empirical interrogation.

Empirical interrogation entails interrogating research methodology literature to detail the research strategy, design, procedure and methods used (Wotela, 2017b). This paves the way to empirical implementation (and its documentation) that provides for describing how we actually collected, collated, processed and analysed either the quantitative research data or qualitative research information. Thereafter, we present our empirical research results before moving on to discuss our research findings by using our framework, theoretical or otherwise, to interpret what our empirical research results entail (Wotela, 2018). We need to emphasise that the discussion of research findings is an important ingredient into the ‘summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component. Trafford and Leshem (2008) emphasise that it is the discussion of research findings that provides a foundation for wrapping up the research. With the preceding discussion in mind, we should then move onto reflecting on how we should summarise and conclude a business and public administration research report.

4. Towards wrapping up a business and public administration research

Figure 2 shows how the ‘research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component links in with other components of a research report. Intuitively, this component both feeds off and into the other components of a report. This means our first consideration when wrapping up a business and public administration research is its relationship with the preceding components (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). Therefore, following on the discussion in Section 3, we should explicitly² reflect on the material in the first five components of our research report to articulate the material for the sixth and last component. Table 1 shows the Microsoft Excel template that we can guide our reflection and articulation. More generally, we should begin with pointing out the summary points and then reflecting on the conclusions resulting from the summary. We should then move onto pointing out the limitations and then reflecting on the recommendations arising from the summary, conclusions, and limitations. Figure 3 is the possible content, proposed by Trafford and Leshem (2008), that we should articulate and reflect on to derive content for the ‘research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component.

Specifically, and without exception, our reflection during research conceptualisation focuses on (i.) the research title, (ii.) the research problem statement, (iii.) the research purpose statement, and (iv.) the research questions as well as where applicable the accompanying research hypotheses or research prepositions. The other materials and subsections such as background, justification, and delimitations in the first component are meant to support these four pillars of research conceptualisation. The second component focuses on the theoretical interrogation to derive the conceptual framework and should include (i.) the knowledge gap on the topic of our research, (ii.) the attributes or variables that are key to the research that we are pursuing, (iii.) the frameworks, theoretical or otherwise, that we have used to interpret the empirical research results. The third component focuses on empirical interrogation and empirical implementation (and its documentation). The former is a reflection on the key aspects of the research strategy, design, procedure and methods as well as how appropriate they are to the research that we are pursuing. The latter entails capturing key experiences during data or information collection, collation, processing, and analysis. The four and fifth components are an extension of empirical implementation (and its documentation) and provide for presenting empirical research results and discussing research findings.

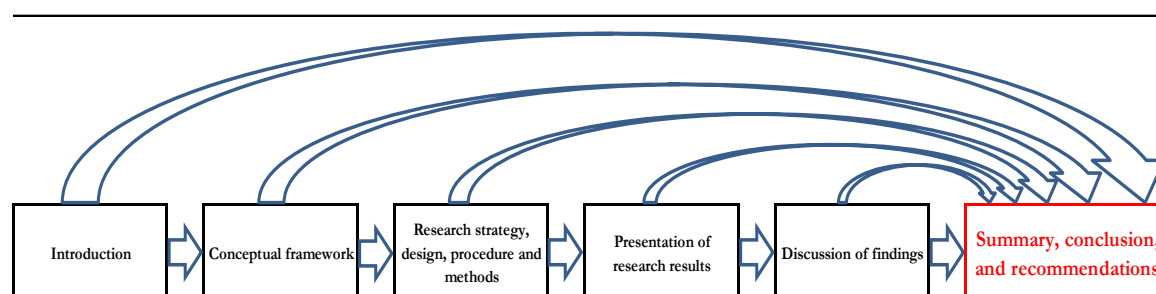


Figure 2: Showing the linkages between ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component and other components of a research report

² This implies that we should think through what we need to do before we actually do it, that is, we should not just do it because we have to.

We should be very economical so that we only pick key aspects in each of the preceding five components especially that we have already summed up the other aspects in each of the components. Further, for each key aspect, we should articulate the conclusions and point out the limitations and recommendations. Similarly, feeding off our articulated summary and conclusions, we should then reflect and point out the limitations and the recommendations. Furthermore, based on the limitations of the research, we should recommend future research. We should note that these limitations apply to the entire research process and content beyond those we have articulated in the ‘research strategy, design, procedure and methods’ component. Therefore, they should bring out what else we could have done as well as what we could have done better as well as what else we should have rather realised.

Another consideration, as shown in Figure 4, is that the subcomponents of ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component link in with one another. Therefore, it is equally important that we reflect on this linkage explicitly. Basically, it entails linking (i.) the summary to the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations, (ii.) the conclusions to the limitations and recommendations, and (iii.) the limitations to recommendations. Therefore, once we have populated our Table 1 with our summary points, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations and considering that the subcomponents of the ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component and linked together, we should then reflect on our points collectively. This helps us to collate our key summary points, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations.

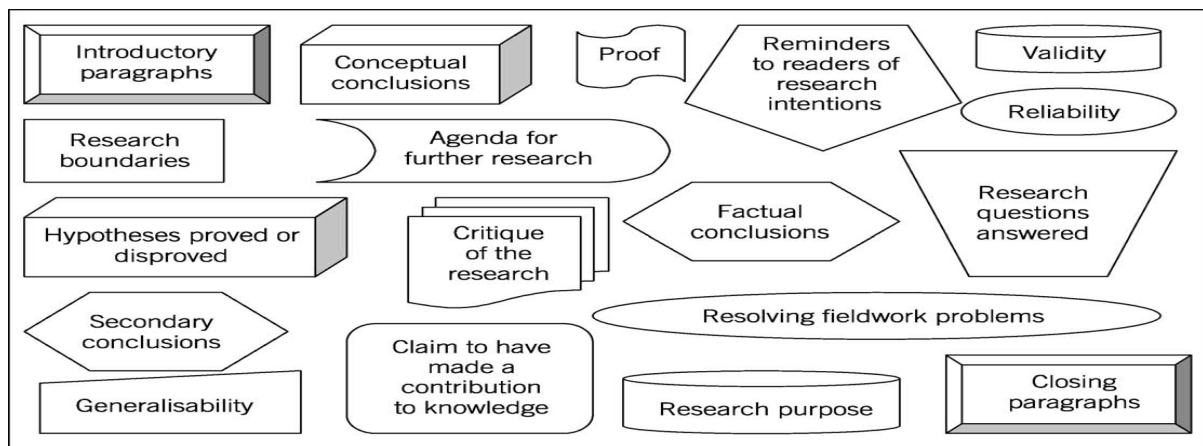


Figure 3: Showing how the possible content of ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component suggested by Trafford and Leshem (2008)

Table 1: Showing the Microsoft Excel template that we can use to reflect and articulate the final component of a business and public administration research report

	Key summary points	Arising key conclusions	Possible limitations	Recommendations
Research conceptualisation				
Research title				
Research problem statement				
Research purpose statement				
Research questions and if applicable the accompanying hypotheses or prepositions				
Research justification				
Research delimitations				
Conceptual framework				
Research problem analysis				
Research knowledge gap analysis				
Interpretive framework				
Conceptual framework write-up				
Research strategy, design, procedure and methods				
The employed research strategy and design				
The employed research procedure and methods				
Data/information collection and collation				
Data/information processing and analysis				
Presentation of empirical research results				
To question 1 ...				
To question 2 ...				
To question 3 ...				
Discussion of research findings				
Point 1 ...				
Point 2 ...				
Point 3 ...				

5. Writing up ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component

Like any other component, the write up of this component should be well structured (ideally around Figure 4) and well written, comprehensive, and critical. It should also be sufficiently attributed and correctly referenced. Second, based on its intended aim and objectives, we should write up the introduction to this component of between half-a-page and one page. The introduction should state the aim and objectives (what) of the component and why we need it as well as how we have put it together. If possible, we should also point the reader to layout (where) of the content in this component. Third, using the material in our populated Figure 4, we should *summarise* the (i.) introduction to research component, (ii.) conceptual framework component, (iii.) research strategy, design, procedure and methods component, (iv.) empirical research results component, and (v.) the research findings component.

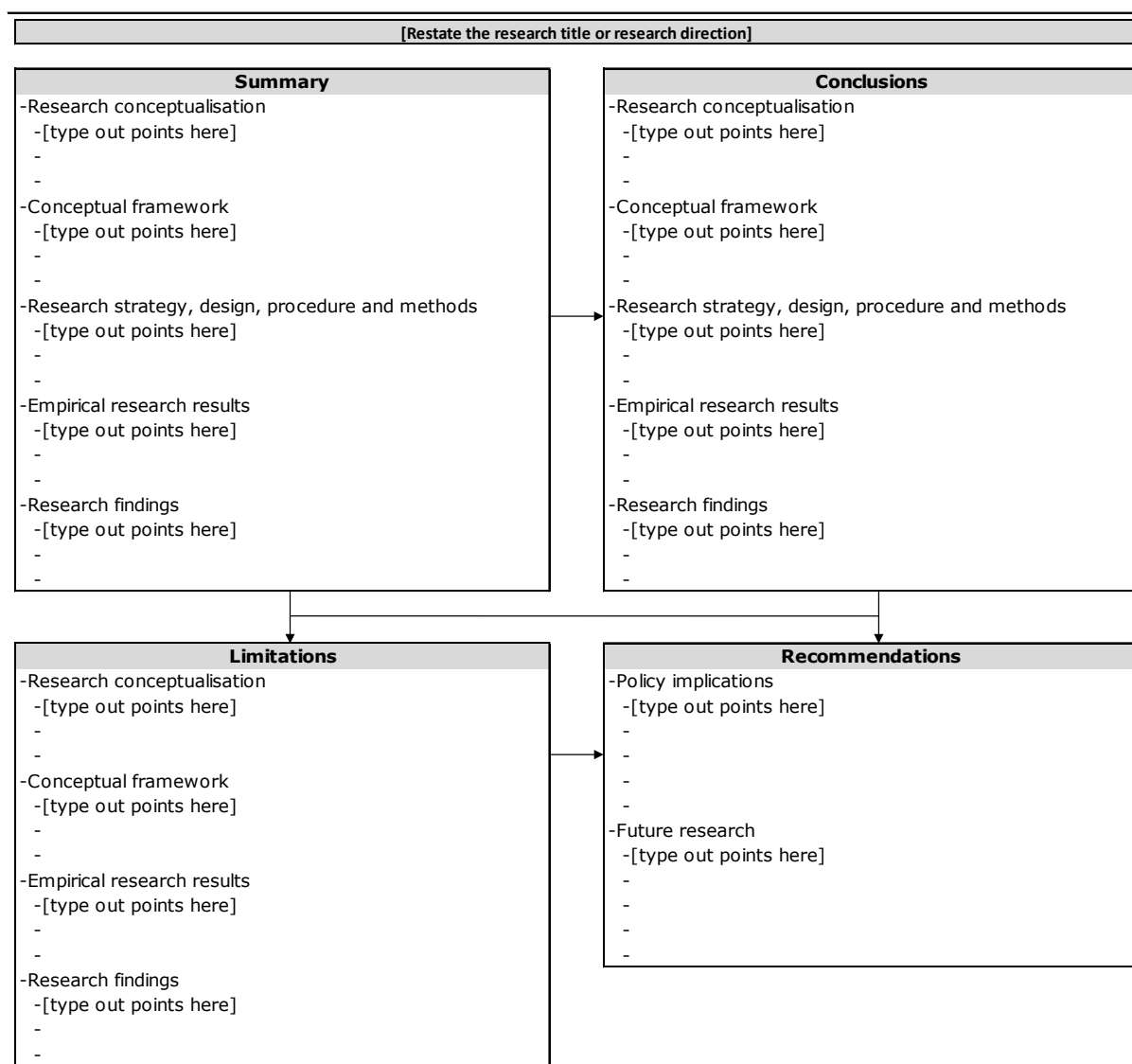


Figure 4: A Microsoft Excel template showing how the four subcomponents of the ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component link in

Fourth, linking in the summary, as explicitly as possible, we should discuss the *conclusions* pertaining to the preceding five components. As implied in Henning, Gravett, and van Rensburg (2005), while the summary should provide us and the reader with sufficient gist about our research, the conclusion should tie the research components together (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). Therefore, we should be creative and our argument should be well pitched as well as convincing that the research process and emerging content is an addition to the body of knowledge (Remenyi, Williams, Money, *et al*, 1998). Another crucial inclusion should be the implications of our conclusions on existing frameworks, theoretical or otherwise—that is, do our conclusions confirm, substantiate, or contradict existing frameworks (Hofstee, 2006). Whatever the case, we are contributing to the body of knowledge (Remenyi, Williams, Money, *et al*, 1998). For a doctoral research, we may need to reformulate the existing framework or formulate a new one if our research shows that the existing ones are insufficient or absent. In sum, as emphasised in Hofstee (2006), we should point out the key contribution of our research, that is, (i.) the ‘new’ knowledge that we have generated and (ii.) the implications of our contribution, theoretical or otherwise, to knowledge on the topic of our research. This should preferably be in reference to the ‘theoretical’ research knowledge gap discussion in the second component of our research as well as the ‘empirical’ research knowledge gap that we unintentionally pick up in our research results and findings.

Fifth, linking in, as explicitly as possible with the summary and the conclusions we should point out and discuss the *limitations* of the research process and content pertaining to our (i.) research conceptualisation, (ii.) conceptual framework, (iii.) empirical research results, and (iv.) research findings. Here we are referring to the

overall limitations and not those specific to the ‘research strategy, design, procedure and methods’ component because we have already discussed these. As Remenyi and colleagues (1998) point out, since we have done the research, we understand what went in and what we could have done differently. The limitations help us to reflect on what we can do better if we are to redo the research. In essence, it is an element of self-discovery as we reflect on our work. Sixth, as explicitly as possible, linking in the summary, the conclusions, and the limitations; we should point out and discuss the *recommendations*, that is, (i.) policy or practical (re)considerations and (ii.) future research. Without exception, business and public administration research should offer tangibles that can make practitioners enhance their work or dealings effective and efficient (Remenyi, Williams, Money, et al, 1998). With regards future research, Hofstee (2006, 162) makes a case that “... one good answer leads to several new good questions ...” that we or others should answer as well. We should, however, restrict our further research recommendations to those that will advance knowledge. Both the limitations and recommendations should be described in full and not bullet points or numbered items.

Lastly, even though this component feeds off the other five components, we should not merely repeat the earlier text (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). Rather, we should use the ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component to show our intense reflection on our research so that we can stand out from anyone else doing the same research (Hofstee, 2006; Gilbert, 2015). This component is “... a means of selling to [our] readers the impressions that [we] would like them to have ...” about our research (Trafford and Leshem, 2008, 135). Therefore, we should critically read and edit the discussions and figures of this component. We should remember that good writing implies saying what we want to say first then backing it up with literature. We should attribute our discussions (both ideas and words) and reference them correctly (using an appropriate referencing system). Chikodzi, Dube, and Nhamo (2021) have provided an example of what we should aim for when wrapping up a business and public administration research. We should keep in mind the intended objective of this component—that is, to ensure that we have a reflective, comprehensive, and critical summary and conclusion to our research. Obviously, this should include the overall limitations of the research process and content as well as proposing arising key recommendations. Further, Component 6 should read like a standalone piece looping and linking in the other five components of our research as well as integrating (i.) the summary, (ii.) the conclusions, (iii.) the limitations, and (iv.) the recommendations.

Using the draft ‘Research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ to refine our research conceptualisation and the conceptual framework

Figure 5 shows how ‘the introduction to the research’ and ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ components link in with each other as well as the other components of a research report. Therefore, we articulate our 6th Component (research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations) from the material in our 1st Component (Introduction to the research) through the 5th Component (Discussion of research findings). Normally, we should even stop here since we now have all the six components. However, we should not do so because now we should use the material in the 6th Component to improve on our entire write-up especially its research conceptualisation and conceptual framework. Actually, one of the four ‘golden threads’ in researching and research reporting (Wotela, 2021) emphasises that ‘the introduction to the research’ component should align with ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component. Put differently, the first component of the research should echo or mirror the last component (Henning, Gravett, and van Rensburg, 2005). The former provides for what research we are pursuing and the latter documents what we have realised from the research. Therefore, the alignment is crucial because we should pursue what we have promised, and we should realise what we promised. Henning, Gravett, and van Rensburg (2005, 94-96) have provided some examples that illustrates this point.

In general, our ‘summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component means that we should capture our theoretical and empirical interrogation in all the components of our research now that we actually have all the material. Specifically, we should ensure that key information with regards (i.) the introduction to the research, (ii.) the conceptual framework, (iii.) the research strategy, design, procedure and methods, (iv.) the presentation of empirical research results, (v.) the discussion of research findings (vi.) the research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations is now present and explicit in the research title, research problem statement, research purpose statement, and the research questions as well as, where applicable, the research hypotheses or the research propositions. We should then proceed to update all the six components based on our refined pillars of research conceptualisation. This is a circular exercise that can continue

indefinitely, and we should repeat it as much as we can. Trafford and Leshem (2008) refer to this circular exercise as ‘the magic cycle: putting it all together’.

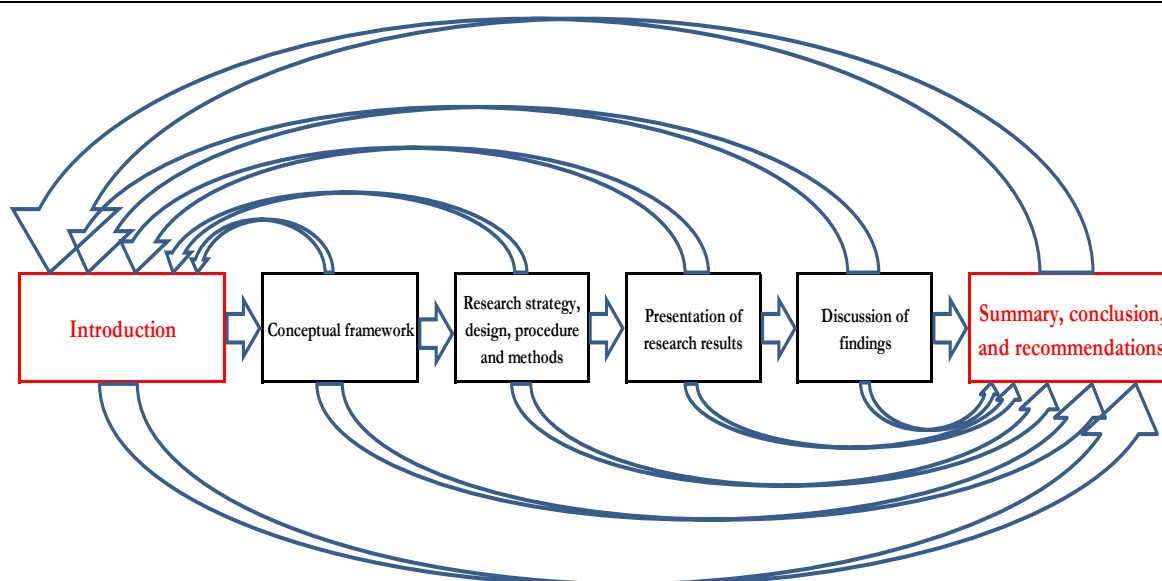


Figure 5: Showing how ‘the introduction to the research’ and ‘the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ components link in with each other as well as other components of a research report

In addition, we should look at the preface to the research report in Component 1 (Introduction to the research) as a summary of Component 6 (Research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations). We should, therefore, beef up the preface to a research report using the material in the 6th Component to provide adequate information on the contents of Components 2 through 6. Putting it differently, the preface is a reflective summary of the ‘research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations’ component. Again, we should not merely outline the names of the research report components. Instead, the preface should provide notable content of each component of the research report. It should be a full description and not bullet points or numbered items. Therefore, like any other section of the research report, the preface to the research report should be comprehensive and critical, that is, it captures the key arguments and content of the last component. Ultimately, Component 1 should now squarely and explicitly speak to or mirror Component 6.

Furthermore, the ‘conceptual framework’ component summarises the literature that we have reviewed to spell out our (i.) research problem, (ii.) knowledge gap, (iii.) attributes or variables that are key to the research that we are pursuing, and (iv.) frameworks that are important to interpreting our empirical research results. The summary of this literature is the basis for our proposed research strategy, design, procedure and methods—that is, the empirical interrogation and empirical implementation as well as its documentation. Therefore, now that we have actually done all this as captured in the ultimate component, it is important that it is reflected in the conceptual framework. In sum, we should ensure that the key information pertaining to (i.) the introduction to the research, (ii.) the conceptual framework, (iii.) the research strategy, design, procedure and methods, (iv.) the presentation of empirical research results, (v.) the discussion of research findings (vi.) the research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations is now present and explicit in the key sets of literature that makes up our conceptual framework. Again, we should then proceed to update all the other components of our research report based on our refined conceptual framework. We should repeat this circular exercise as much as we can. Badenhorst (2007) points out that this articulation helps us with critically revising our research report.

6. Summary and conclusions

Remenyi and others (1998) have proposed an eight-stage research process for business and management students—that is, reviewing the literature; formalising a research question; establishing the methodology; collecting evidence; analysing evidence; developing conclusions; understanding the limitations of the research; producing management guidelines or recommendations. Wotela (2022) suggests that we can also group these into four processes, that is, (i.) research conceptualisation, (ii.) theoretical interrogation, (iii.) empirical interrogation, and (iv.) empirical implementation as well as its documentation. In all, these four processes result

in six products or components (Figure 1) regardless of the number of chapters we have in a research report. This paper focuses on the last three stages of Remenyi *et al* (1998) list, that is, developing conclusions, understanding the limitations of the research, and producing management guidelines or recommendations. These are captured in the last process (empirical implementation as well as its documentation) and the last component (research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations) of a research report.

As the name suggests, the last component involves summarising the research, pointing out the key conclusions and limitations as well as making practical recommendations. However, it is easier said than done. Therefore, we highlight four considerations we should have in mind to produce a comprehensive and critical 'research summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations' component. The first two considerations are to explicitly reflect on the linkage of this component to other components as well as the linkage of its subcomponents. This component results from our prior processes and components. After conceptualising our research, we move onto the theoretical interrogation to derive the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework summarises the key literature that we have interrogated and then using this summary we propose how we should undertake the empirical part of our research. Our empirical interrogation summarises research procedure and methods that we should use to collect, collate, process, and analyse our research data or information. Research conceptualisation, theoretical interrogation, and empirical interrogation paves the way to *empirical implementation and its documentation*. The products of data or information analysis are presented as empirical research results before moving onto interpreting the meaning of the results that we should package as a 'discussion of research findings'. At this point, we are ready to wrap up our research in the last component that summarises the research process and content, points out the key conclusions as well as limitations before we make recommendations. Moreover, the subcomponents of 'the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations' component link in with one another and, therefore, should be presented as such.

The third consideration is ensuring that we use our last component to improve on the other components of the research report especially our research conceptualisation (what research? and why?) which is the nerve centre of our research as well as the conceptual framework. Lastly, this component like any other component should be well written and its content should be comprehensive and critical. Apart from the discussion of research findings, readers and examiners use this component to judge the merit of our research.

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