Most psychological research needs participants. Gaining and maintaining access to such participants can be challenging, especially for students and young researchers – yet we are provided with little guidance. The premise behind this article is simple: We tell you what we wish someone had told us.

Unless you plan to spend your career studying students (which has its own problems: see www.bps.org.uk/a61u), you’re going to need to venture into the big wide world: into schools, businesses, hospitals, or targeting specific groups through other means such as newspaper ads. We focus largely on the traditional research approach, but researchers negotiating access for qualitative or exploratory projects arguably require an even greater skill set – they are essentially asking their collaborators to sign a blank cheque (Robson, 2002).

This uncertainty works both ways, with fieldwork rarely following the mould set out by the researcher – there is a harsh difference between desirable in theory and possible in practice. One barrier to the ideal research project is participant access – there is no study without it, and access negotiation can be a difficult and time-consuming task. Despite its importance, many books created to act as guides on how to design and conduct research entirely omit access negotiation from their contents. We address this oversight by introducing nine steps that can guide researchers through their fieldwork. These steps are based on earlier work that introduced four stages – getting in, getting on, getting out and getting back (Buchanan et al., 1988).

Being prepared
Forewarned is forearmed: prepare before you begin negotiating. Key steps in preparation include familiarisation with the literature; choosing a valid approach; deciding the degree of researcher involvement; identifying key figures and gatekeepers; anticipating obstacles; and defining mutual benefits (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). You must consider who your participants will be; the level of access and type of data you need; how much time you need; whether the project is reasonable and feasible; and what the time plan is (Denscombe, 2003). In other words, you must be as clear as possible about what you want before entering negotiation.

Being prepared also means knowing what you don’t want: establish minimal and maximal tolerance levels (Buchanan et al., 1998). You must consider who your participants will be; the level of access and type of data you need; how much time you need; whether the project is reasonable and feasible; and what the time plan is (Denscombe, 2003). In other words, you must be as clear as possible about what you want before entering negotiation.

It is also worth explicitly defining the returns at the start of the project and sticking to them: what your contact may or may not want and how research participation could benefit them. Some participant pools may get a lot of these requests, so be prepared to bid competitively. But be realistic – if not, you could end up with countless hours of additional consultancy work or uncomfortable debates surrounding authorship on papers.

The next step is to identify contacts and make four decisions (Buchanan et al., 1988):
1. Organisations: Which type of organisation would be most suitable for the project? Which specific organisation could you contact? How many organisations?
2. Sponsors: Who do you expect to be most interested in the research? Who else could be interested?
3. Authorisation: Who needs to authorise what? Which additional key stakeholders will you need to contact, inform and convince?
4. Participants: Who is the target research participant? What other possible contributors are there? How many participants do you need? How many individuals do you need to approach in order to achieve the necessary participation?

Use these decisions to draft an introductory letter, explaining who will benefit from the research and how much time and resources it will demand. It is too late to think about preparing these documents when someone is asking for them! Think about your approach in terms of named individuals, using information gathered via telephone or the internet. Knowing the names and
roles of individuals you contact will make discussions more effective and help hold individuals accountable for negotiated agreements.

**First contact**
The first contact is normally the most important because at this point collaboration either begins or ends. Think of access as a favour people do for you, rather than taking it for granted – even when you are soliciting family or friends (Bell, 1999).

You should be prepared, professional, responsible, reasonable, unobtrusive and non-irritating (Bouma & Atkinson, 1995). This includes only taking up as much time as absolutely necessary and only asking those questions that are required. Design research within your skill and avoid inappropriate or sensitive questions as these may jeopardise access and research participation (Hall & Hall, 1996a).

It is useful to differentiate warm source from cold call access. Warm contacts are identified through personal and professional networks and tend to be receptive to the idea of conducting research. However, access is by no means guaranteed: people may have preconceived ideas about the research or the organisation that you represent, so don’t get complacent. A cold call is thought of as the most difficult path to access, but it is also the most common one (especially for new researchers). Sources of cold access can be identified through referrals, functions, databases, listings, phonebooks, managers’ yearbooks, the internet and adverts.

The next step is choosing the level and form of contact. For example, in the case of organisational research most novices falsely believe that they have to get the CEO or managing director of an organisation on board first in order to conduct a successful research project. This may not be necessary and in many cases it is not desirable to go in at the top (Buchanan et al., 1988). Top management may not be receptive to academic non-profit endeavours unless someone else within the organisation positively presents the research.

The form of contact is also important. Written letters, e-mail and telephone calls are by far the most common forms of research solicitation (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Each method has advantages and disadvantages. A written letter tends to be a formal and professional approach (Bell, 1999), while an e-mail is quicker and more direct but tends to be less formal. The latter may thus generally not be appropriate for high authority contact and may be best for initial queries. A telephone call is warm and personal, and individuals might be more agreeable when speaking to you. However, it may be difficult to reach individuals because they may not be receptive to a phone call from a stranger. Similarly, people in high positions are busy and don’t have involvement in unproductive academic activities on their priority list (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). In addition, while communication by telephone is helpful to gain the interest of people involved, it may be difficult to present all information effectively. Ideally, a telephone call should always end with clarification of the research aims and be accompanied by follow-up information material. Note that a combination of methods is often most appropriate!

Remember also that you cannot be convincing, if you are not understood. Communication must be pitched at the right level: identify your audience! Are you talking to someone with background in science, statistics, psychology…? Avoid danger words such as subjects, publishing, cross-sectional design, ethnographic study, etc. These words may easily be misunderstood or perceived as offensive. Other dos and don’ts are listed in the table below.

Desirable outcomes of first contact include making your research attractive, creating interest and arranging a follow-up meeting. Hall & Hall (1996b) even suggest signing a formal statement of agreement. Though not legally binding, this document can specify the research relationship and encourage adherence to agreed terms and conditions.

**First meeting**
The first meeting between researcher and client should be used to discuss the needs of both parties, and to explore possibilities for collaboration (Hall & Hall, 1996b). It is advisable to leave at least two hours for the meeting and plan additional time for unforeseen events such as train delays (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). During the first meeting, you should consider three main factors: Information, self-presentation and research presentation.

Firstly, be informed. Know who will attend the meeting and be clear on what you want to achieve. Comply with limits such as time restrictions and include research teasers: information that the person either expects to see or intrigues them. For example, is it a workplace looking to increase motivation, or a school wanting to improve behaviour? If so, does your study have implications for that?

Desired outcomes may include that the research is understood and perceived as relevant and stimulating; requirements, benefits and costs are clear to everyone; an active communication channel has been opened; and you know where and how to go from there. If possible, you should try to

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**TABLE 1 The first letter**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What to include:</th>
<th>What not to include:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Irrelevant information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full contact details</td>
<td>Bad grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject line</td>
<td>Spelling errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalised greeting</td>
<td>Student status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credentials</td>
<td>Over-complications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional information (e.g. pamphlet)</td>
<td>Academic or professional terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Do:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Don’t:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be brief – one page maximum</td>
<td>Beg or appear desperate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be polite and professional</td>
<td>Make unrealistic demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult more senior colleagues and acknowledge their support (e.g. ‘in collaboration with’)</td>
<td>Make unrealistic promises</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
discuss or even arrange further meetings and procedures as this encourages commitment to the research.

Even though no definite decision may be made at the meeting, those present may support your project and take it forward. However, there is a difference between formal access and general acceptance or support of the research. Even if one person has agreed to participate in the project, the researcher will need to continue renegotiating access with every person they meet from that point forth. In order to conduct research successfully, one should try to ensure wide-reaching support. For example, top-down research supported only by psychiatric nurses will not be successful if the research requires data from patients who refuse to participate because they have not been consulted. Further, even when individuals are not interested or do not consider themselves suitable, they may suggest alternatives.

Self-presentation is also important. Initial impressions are critical and most people form an opinion about others within 30 seconds of a meeting (Bernieri & Gillis, 2001). Indeed, 93 per cent of communication is thought to be nonverbal (Mehrabian, 1971). Pay attention to your physical appearance in terms of clothes, body jewellery and hairstyle, but understand that handshake, posture, eye contact, hand gestures and fidgeting are also important (Martin, 2005). Treat access negotiation as you would an important job interview – sell yourself, and provide information about your credentials.

Naturally what we say and how we say it also matters. Be prepared, professional, efficient and competent, whilst illustrating sensitivity, awareness and interpersonal skills (Hall & Hall, 1996c; Robson, 2002). Where appropriate make it clear that you are a representative of a bigger organisation such as a consultancy firm or university. Your presentation should always be professional, polite, informed, clear, confident, concise and without jargon. Try to anticipate and be prepared to answer questions from your audience.

People will want to know what is required of them, how much time is involved and what will be done with the data once it has been collected (Bell, 1999; Hall & Hall, 1996a). Take along sample questions and exemplar feedback reports, as these may be requested. Be flexible and prepared for unexpected turnarounds in the meeting and other emergencies, such as malfunctioning equipment. Finally, try to engage the audience and create interest. This will have a more enduring effect and encourage support.

**DISCUSS AND DEBATE**

Is it getting harder to gain access for psychological research?

What are the key issues in qualitative access negotiation?

What are key ethical considerations in access negotiation?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. Email ‘Letters’ on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute to our forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.
Solidification
Solidification is the process of continuing and enhancing the research relationship. There may be more than one access meeting, so aim to build up contacts and meet key personnel to ensure widespread support for your work. This makes it less likely that you will lose access if you lose a contact.

In this stage you should set more specific goals and deadlines, provide templates and arrange data collection. This includes the identification of sites, respondents and dates/times. In order to be successful, continue positive self-presentation, re-convoy earlier needs and benefits, provide additional information, respond to individual needs, and refine requirements and outcomes. Remember: access negotiation is a two-way process and may be renegotiated at any time (Hall & Hall, 1996c).

Getting started
Once your research has been authorised by all key individuals, you’ll be faced with the process of launching the project. You will need to approach individuals and invite them to participate in the research. Remember to inform potential respondents of their rights and responsibilities as participants, as well as ethical aspects such as confidentiality and anonymity of participation. You can then arrange data collection and start your research, keeping in mind that your design may have to be refined slightly.

Keeping going
There are many things that make research frustrating – you can become fatigued, you can make mistakes, things can develop against predictions and time schedules might change. Thus continuing research itself may represent a challenge. Take responsibility and continue developing relations, motivate yourself and alter data collection methods if necessary.

Having gained permission to conduct research doesn’t mean your project is safe and problems may emerge at any time. For example, a city council may be implementing an ethics board amidst your research and suddenly require you to pass your proposal through the board before being allowed to continue collecting data. In addition to prolonging the time required for the research process, the result may also include changes to the original design. It remains vital to stay alert and prepared throughout the entire process. Otherwise even small setbacks could jeopardise your research.

Feedback
Feedback generally takes the form of reports or presentations. When providing feedback, ensure to act ethically and remember individual rights such as anonymity of individual participants. Needs to inform policy are important but under no circumstances over-write individual rights. There are some sensitive issues in feedback, since it is not always positive or what the person expects to hear. We suggest some rules of thumb to help guide the process:

1. Consider your stakeholders – share feedback with key parties.
2. Deliver both positive and negative feedback – honesty is the best policy.
3. Provide descriptive, non-evaluative feedback.
4. Always start and end with positive feedback – this doesn’t make it sound quite so bad.
5. Avoid ‘danger words’ – e.g. call a weakness an area for development.
6. Make realistic (feasible) recommendations.

Don’t let people think your study is the answer to everything – Explain that there are limitations!

Getting out
It can be difficult to end a project because of emotional attachment to the institution, individuals within it or even the study itself. Remember that you can say goodbye without losing touch. It can be beneficial to keep contacts and is best practice to send a thank-you letter.

Also, many researchers have good but unrealistic goals. They set out to save the world and aim for the perfect research study. As such they may find it difficult to view a project as finished. However, it is important to move on to other stages of the research. These include further analysis, report writing, journal articles, dissertations and even other research projects.

Getting back
Once you’ve completed the study, you may realise that you want to extend the project or haven’t gathered some data during initial collection. You may want to return, so always try to leave a route back through the maintenance of contacts. Don’t presume that access agreements extend to this further work – reopen negotiations carefully without appearing to abuse or exploit the support that was once granted.

Considering some of these issues and working through them will help prepare you for negotiations and make you more effective during them. However, despite all the goodwill and preparation in the world, access negotiation is never an easy task. If you’re not successful the first time, don’t become discouraged and remember: Practice makes perfect.

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References


