Guidance on the use of permission letters

A permission letter from an organization allows you (the researcher) to do something and establishes communication and cooperation between you (the researcher) and a particular organization. Obtaining permission to conduct a study can be a time-consuming process and some organizations require applications for permission to be reviewed by a committee. Also, organizations are not obliged to give you permission to conduct research. Permission can be retracted by the organization at any time.

Many organizations require an ethics clearance certificate prior to providing permission. In such instances, you need to apply FIRST for ethical clearance, then apply to the organization for permission, and finally supply a copy of the signed permission letter to HREC in order to receive final ethical clearance. In this instance, the ethics committee will provide ‘conditional clearance’.

A permission letter must: (1) be on a company/organization letterhead, (2) be signed/stamped and dated by a named person in that organization, (3) refer to you (the researcher) by name and/or refer to the title of your project, and (4) give you permission to do something specific (e.g. interview staff, make observations, send out a questionnaire, access contact details of organization members) and within a specific timeframe. A general “we give you permission to do research in our organization” is not sufficient. An informal email correspondence with an organization will not be accepted by the ethics committee.

When a permission letter must be supplied:

- When the researcher needs access to a restricted space (e.g. a company’s or organization’s building, private land, library/archive, shopping mall). Just getting access to a building to interview a single person does not require a permission letter (see below). Getting access to that building for a longer period of time (if you want to interview several people, or several times, or if you are doing an ethnographic or longitudinal study) does require permission;
- When the researcher needs access to a restricted database (e.g. list of members, email list, contact details) or access to restricted information (e.g. company records or archives);
• When the researcher needs **direct access** to a particular population for sampling purposes (e.g. employees within a company, residents of a closed community, e.g. a retirement home);

• When you are working within the premises of a school, clinic etc. Please note that for government schools, provincial Department of Education permission is also needed as well as a permission letter from the principal of each school concerned. For private schools, only a permission letter from the principal of each school is needed;

• If you have been in an informal email conversation with someone and you want to quote them or to use the informal information as a line of evidence (permission by email is fine);

• Within the university, a letter of permission from the Registrar’s Office is also required if you are using Wits staff (academic or support) or students as participants in your project. If this is needed, you should apply for ethics clearance FIRST; registrar’s permission can only be given AFTER ethics clearance is obtained. To communicate with the Registrar’s Office, please contact Ashleigh Davids (ashleigh.davids1@wits.ac.za). In this instance, the ethics committee can provide ‘conditional clearance’ before you apply to the Registrar’s Office;

• Individuals, publishers, or organizations who own the copyright to an instrument you intend to use for data collection must provide permission for you to use the existing survey or data collection tool;

• An organization that owns ‘closed access’ data you would like to use for your research must give you permission to use their data. Even if you work for the organization, when conducting research, you are not acting as a member of the organization; therefore, you need to request permission to use data outside of your daily activities as an employee;

• If you are accessing and using data from a ‘closed’ social media online forum;

• If you are referring participants to certain professional services (e.g. counselling, legal assistance) that may require appointments or where payment is usually needed. In this instance, it is not acceptable for participants to have to pay, and you as the researcher must make private arrangements with these service providers for them to offer a free service to participants if needed. They must supply a permission letter agreeing to assist participants in your project. The terms and conditions agreed upon by you and the service provider must be made clear in their permission letters (which must be on business headed letter paper). A permission letter is not needed where you are referring
participants to free helplines. However, if you are using a free centre, like a drop-in clinic or similar free facility, then a permission letter is required.

NOTES: You will not be able to start data collection in these places/populations until a permission letter has been supplied to the HREC. This is a requirement of ethics clearance.

When a permission letter is recommended:

- When a letter can help you get access to a certain population or location, e.g. permission from a traditional leader to help you get access to a rural settlement;
- When you are using local organizations/NGOs/key informants to introduce you in the community;
- When you want to go indirectly through an organization to recruit participants (e.g. you want them to put up a poster, forward an email);
- When you want to work within a School of the University (e.g. School of Human and Community Development). In this example, you must obtain a letter of permission from the Registrar’s Office, but it is also useful to obtain permission from the School concerned as well.

NOTES: Often permission in these instances will not only help you get access to people/places, but will facilitate your data collection and also your potential safety, because then local people will know who you are and what you are doing there. You do not need these permission letters as a requirement of ethics clearance, however it is recommended that you obtain them anyway.

When a permission letter is not needed:

- When you want to do a one-off interview with an official/professional who is speaking in their official capacity as an expert. If you want to interview several people in that organization, or if this activity will take a lot of time and eat into their working hours, then a permission letter is needed.

NOTES: In some instances a permission letter may help you get access to the specific person you are looking for, rather than just a ‘spokesperson’. Please be aware of the potential for power and coercion if the head of the company directs you to certain people.

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