What Should Terms of Reference Say?

Terms of Reference need to state clearly and specifically the permitted and/or possible extent to which an investigation may reach. Thus, the TRs should enable a project team to:

- set boundaries on the project;
- know what is and isn’t within their jurisdiction;
- understand the context in which the TRs have been framed;
- have a clear idea of where they should begin; and,
- have a clear idea of outcome/product.

Terms of Reference should include:

2. Problem statement.
3. Boundaries, beyond which the investigation should not go.
4. Specific issues to be addressed.
5. Desired outcomes/outputs.
6. Persons involved.
7. Project administration including:
   - timeframes;
   - meetings;
   - reporting guidelines;
   - resources; and
   - intervention strategies.

Each of these content items is discussed in more detail below:

Content

1. Mission Statement (Essential)
   A short statement, preferably one or two sentences which explain the mandate given to either the steering committee or project team.

2. Problem Statement (Essential)
   Defines the problem in 2 or 3 paragraphs and explains simply what service/product/operation/issue is affected and how the problem is evidenced.
   This is often the most difficult section to write, yet it is essential to articulate the problem that caused the review/project to be initiated. Unless the problem is stated, it will not be known if the problem has been addressed when the process of review is complete.

3. Boundaries (Essential)
   This section, of about one paragraph or a series of dot points, describes where the process/system/operation/issue to be studied begins and ends.
   Also include a statement of the teams authority to recommend and/or implement change; and any powers given or delegated to them.
It is here that mention needs to be made of the systems, policies, procedures, legislation, etc., that are outside the scope of consideration by the team.

**4. Specific Issues to be Addressed (Essential)**
This section is the most important because it represents the work which will be actually undertaken by the team/s. In preparing this list, clarity is essential to provide focus and direction for the team/s. Be specific.

**5. Desired Outcomes/Outputs (Essential)**
Though the TR should not predict what the outcome will be it is essential to outline the end product of the review project. This section must be strictly linked to the problem which is the catalyst for the review/project.
These can be added where possible and if necessary. Only one paragraph should be necessary to identify and localise the expected outcomes. Usually they fall into making recommendation for:
- solving a problem;
- improving a process or a system;
- making a change;
- creating a new system.

**6. Persons Involved (Essential)**

- **TIMEFRAMES**
  - Beginning and ending times for the entire project.
  - Any significant or obvious checkpoints along the way.
  - Whether or not timeframes are negotiable and under what circumstances.

- **MEETINGS (AS REQUIRED)**
  - Location/s and schedule for and duration of meetings.
  - Process for setting up periodic, as-needed meetings other than those listed above.
  - Whether, to what extent, and who will take minutes.

- **RESOURCES (ESSENTIAL)**
  - Mention what resources are available to the team and how they will be accessed (For example, computing/word processing/accommodation/etc.).
  - Need for training of team members and how this will be provided.
  - Available budget for the project.
  - Materials and supplies to be accessed.
  - Clerical support available.
  - Other staff support (eg. research).
  - How team members will carry out the tasks of the project without neglecting the requirements of their existing position.

- **REPORTING GUIDELINES (OPTIONAL)**
  - List those persons/organisations that need to know about interim decisions made by the team.
Alternative Description of the Terms of Reference

The *Terms of Reference* (ToR) is the document that serves as the basis of a contractual relationship between the commissioner of an evaluation and the team responsible for carrying out the work. Devising the Terms of Reference is a vital step when an evaluation has to be performed by outside consultants. This work is equally important when part of the evaluation is performed in-house. The ToR may concern either the evaluation operation as a whole (when it is entrusted to a single team) or a part of the research work programmed in the evaluation project (in-depth analysis of an evaluative question).

The ToR should be brief (typically 5-10 pages) supplemented if necessary by administrative annexes

1. **Regulatory framework**
   The legal, contractual and institutional framework for a programme needs to be stated. This would, for example, include regulations of Federal, Provincial or Municipal governments. The ToR should specify who initiated the evaluation project and, where relevant, who was involved in formulating the evaluation brief. Underlying motives and intentions should also be stated. For example: Is the intention a change of policy direction? If so why? Is the intention to modify the implementation procedures? Is the intention to reallocate funds?

2. **Scope of the evaluation**
   We have already discussed the importance of defining the scope of the evaluation. The ToR should clarify the project/programme/policy/theme to be evaluated, the period under consideration, the point of the policy/programme cycle at which the evaluation is set and the geographical area of reference for the study.

3. **Main users and stakeholders of the study**
   We have already noted the importance of evaluation use and users being identified at the earliest stages of planning. It is therefore important to include statements about how the evaluation results will be used in the ToR. If there is to be user-involvement, for example in a Steering Committee, this should also be stated.
4. Evaluative and research questions
We have already noted that different evaluation and research questions can be addressed (descriptive, causal, critical, prescriptive or normative) and different criteria can be employed in formulating evaluation judgements. It is important to state the evaluation questions but it is also important to limit the number of questions that the evaluation asks. To focus the evaluation on a narrow list of questions that are relevant for the commissioner ensures better quality control.

5. Available knowledge
The ToR should contain a review of the current state of knowledge on the programme and its effects. This will include extracts or references from programming documents, lists of previous analyses and evaluations with relevant extracts, a description of the monitoring system in place, quantified indicators and the various reports and databases available from the services managing the intervention. This inventory is relevant for the evaluation teams to adjust their proposed methods.

6. Main methods or techniques to be used
Each evaluation will have its own particular methods relevant to its scope and content. It is not generally good practice to fully specify methods and approaches but to leave scope for those who propose an evaluation to indicate how they would wish to proceed. The priority is for those who commission the evaluation to specify what they consider to be their requirements in terms of outputs, e.g., answers, to key questions. They may or may not specify particular methods consistent with their intentions, for example, the need for a survey of beneficiaries. The choice is generally made to maintain sufficient flexibility to allow those answering the ToR to differentiate themselves in terms of the relevance and clarity of their methodological proposals. This is especially important in the selection phase because assessing the methodological qualities of the proposals is a crucial step in selecting the right evaluator. When possible from an administrative point of view, the best way is to determine a budget (see below) and to describe only the main lines of the method in the ToR and then to select the team that proposes the most promising method. Those selecting the team will then need to have the ability to judge the methodological quality of a tender.

7. Schedule
The evaluation schedule should be established by taking into account various constraints, especially those concerning the decision-making schedule and possible use. It is also necessary to integrate the main deadlines, generated by the procedures of calls for tenders and by the phases of primary data collection. It is advisable to define in the ToR the overall length of the exercise and to leave the first period usually between 10-20% of the duration of the overall evaluation to the detailed planning of the work. This phase should be concluded by an Inception Report in which the design of the activities as well as the detailed schedule will be spelt out. Equally advisable is to imagine the different outputs of the exercise, and among them, specific reference should
be made to the submission of the draft final report allowing enough time for the suggestion of changes and amendments before the end of the study.

8. Indicative budget
It is good practice to suggest an indicative budget and then to leave those competing for an evaluation by open tender to suggest what they would be able to provide for the budget available. This allows value-for-money assessments to be made. It also provides the commissioners of the evaluation with greater control over expenditure. An alternative to this top-down approach is to leave it to proposers to come up with their own estimates based on the tasks they see as necessary. In general, those tendering for an evaluation should be encouraged to breakdown their costs into basic categories, including for example, data collection, report preparation, fieldwork, etc.