

Writing the Research Proposal

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A. Your research proposal should answer the following questions:

1. **What** do you want to do?
(Research question/problem)
2. **Why** do you want to do it?
(Why is the research question/problem important?)
3. **Who** has done similar work? (What is the gap in the literature that your study will fill?)
(Literature review)
4. **How** are you going to do it?
(Methodology & design)
5. **How** long will it take?

(Timeframe)

B. A good proposal will eventually make up the first three chapters of the traditional thesis.

1. Statement of the Problem/Background

2. Literature Review

3. Research Methodology & Design

C. The following pages provide a suggested format for the student research proposal.

Note that these are guidelines only and that there are other ways to define and use these headings.

Suggested headings

1. **Abstract: (100 words maximum)**

A summary of your research proposal. This is usually the last thing you write.

2. **Introduction: (about 200 words)**

Write an introduction with impact: where does your research interest emerge from? Why is it significant/important? In what context did your research intention emerge? 'Walk' the reader up to your research 'problem' (that will come in the next section).

3. **Statement of the Problem, Significance & Theoretical Framework (about 400 words)**

"A problem might be defined as the issue that exists in the literature, theory, or practice that leads to a need for the study" (Creswell, 1994, p. 50).

Try to present this section as a **'puzzle'**. **What is the puzzle that you are trying to solve? Why is it a puzzle?**

What is the issue that you want to explore in your research and why is this interesting and important question?

In thinking about the **significance**, try to take the position of an average newspaper reader. **What is the background for this problem? What work has already been done? If she or he were to see an article about your research in**

the paper, how would you explain why this is an interesting project? Discuss (very briefly) any background research you may have already done.

Effective problem statements answer the question **“Why does this research need to be conducted.”**

Note: If a researcher is unable to answer this question clearly and succinctly, and without resorting to hyper speaking (i.e., focusing on problems of macro or global proportions that certainly will not be informed or alleviated by the study), then the statement of the problem will come off as ambiguous and diffuse.

The problem should stand out – the reader should easily recognize it. Sometimes, obscure and poorly formulated problems are masked in an extended discussion. In such cases, readers will have difficulty recognizing the problem.

You must identify why the problem is important. The questions that usually come to mind when reading some problem statements are: "so what? who cares? what difference will it make to society?"

In other words, the study should clearly be important and make some unique/significant contribution to theory and practice.

A problem statement should be presented within a context, and that context should be provided and briefly explained, including a discussion of the *theoretical framework* in which it is embedded.

Clearly and succinctly identify and explain the problem within the framework of the theory or line of inquiry that undergirds the study. This is of major importance in nearly all proposals and requires careful attention. It is essential in all quantitative research and much qualitative research.

One way to arrive at an appropriate theoretical framework is to ask yourself some specific questions that will set the creative thought processes in motion.

Examples:

- Is there a theory or set of generalisations to which my research problem has reference?
- Would X's theory or paradigm be useful for my purposes? (e.g. Does culturalist thesis on.. .. provide a framework for my own study?)
- Does Y's approach make the most sense in my circumstances? Etc.
- What key assumptions can be used as a starting pointing for framing research questions and exploring the research questions?

4. Aims/Objectives of the Study

This should be stated clearly. There can be several objectives related to the aim of the study. All these objectives can be mentioned in bullet points.

5. Research Question/s (100 words maximum)

This section should lead on logically from the previous. Try to write the research problem in question format. The research question/s should be very pointed and focused, but not to the extent that it becomes trivial.

6. Scope and Limitations of the Study (about 100 words)

This section is intended to set out the parameters or boundaries within which the study is being conducted.

In quantitative studies these are concerned with the reliability and validity of the work.

In qualitative research these include a discussion of the researcher's preconceptions, credibility, trustworthiness, and epistemological stance.

Every undertaking has specific conceptual limitations and the researcher must acknowledge their existence.

In quantitative research, external validity is related to selection, testing etc.. Internal validity is confined largely to experimental studies. Here, concern is with the effects of extraneous variables on the dependent variable.

In qualitative studies, the researcher's preconceptions must be addressed with regard to their previous experiences in the area under investigation, their social location in relation to those researched, and their understanding of the situation prior to undertaking the work.

No one investigation can encompass all the relevant factors, sites, people, or issues embedded in a topic of study. Researchers, therefore, must **delimit their study by establishing specific boundaries within which they will collect data.** Students must acknowledge their boundaries in terms of site and sample limits, time limits, data collection limits, and any other delimitation they impose on their work. Each of these choices will affect the extent to which the results can be applied. (In much qualitative work, however, being able to generalize the findings to the wider population is not the intention of the research – rather it is “thick description” or “illumination” using, for example, case studies or in-depth interviews.) **Students must acknowledge these limitations (I prefer the word ‘choices’) and indicate why they are appropriate for the chosen research design.**

7. Literature Review (about 400 words)

“The review of the literature provides the background and context for the research problem. It should establish the need for the research and indicate

that the writer is knowledgeable about the area” (Wiersma, 1995, p. 406).

Here you are essentially proving that your proposed piece of research has not been done yet. Critically analyse an impressive list of boring bibliography. The conclusion you should reach is that your proposed research has not been undertaken yet. You can also use this opportunity to prove solid theoretical knowledge in the field, and build the theoretical basis of your study.

One tip: don't review all the articles and books in the field even if you mention them in the bibliography list; **pay attention in your analysis to those you will build on.** The literature review should provide a strong enough theoretical and empirical foundation to support sections 3, 4 & 5 above (i.e., the research problems/questions should be distilled and naturally follow from the literature). The literature review should provide the basis for the gap that you intend to fill with your study.

The literature review accomplishes several important things.

- It shares with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the study being reported (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990).
- It relates a study to the larger, ongoing dialogue in the literature about a topic, filling in gaps and extending prior studies (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).
- It provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study, as well as a benchmark for comparing the results of a study with other findings.
- It “frames” the problem earlier identified.

Demonstrate to the reader that you have a comprehensive grasp of the field and are aware of important recent substantive and methodological developments. Should be able to explain/demonstrate to the reader how will

your study refine, revise, or extend what is now known?

Avoid statements that imply that little has been done in the area or that what has been done is too extensive to permit easy summary. Statements of this sort are usually taken as indications that the writer is not really familiar with the literature.

In a proposal, the literature review is generally brief and to the point. Be judicious in your choice of exemplars—the literature selected should be pertinent and relevant (APA, 2001). Select and reference only the more appropriate citations. Make key points clearly and succinctly.

8. Methodology & Design (about 600 words)

In short, what actions are you going to take in order to answer your main research question/s, and your fieldwork questions, and what framework/theory are these actions based on?

(Different from ‘methods’, ‘methodology’ is the ***theoretical*** approach you take to the research study):

a) **Methodology:** Describe and justify the chosen methodology or approach (e.g., positivist (quantitative), interpretivist (Qualitative), critical theory,

Mixed Method) ***This section requires explicit links to information from research methodology literature.***

b) **Research Design/Methods:** Describe the research design or method chosen to frame the study (e.g., case study, experimental design, field research, narrative, action research) and justify this design by linking characteristics of the design, ***as found in the research methods literature***, to your research questions.

Within the design, you can outline the ***general plan for collecting the data***. This may include **survey administration procedures, interview or observation procedures**.

c) Data Collection

This section specifies the 'instrument' that should be used to collect data and the procedures that will be followed. Instruments can be borrowed from others or developed by the researcher. For quantitative studies, if students develop their own questionnaire, it should be pilot tested and checked for validity. If instruments are borrowed, written permission must be sought for use. Statements about validity and reliability must be included in the proposal if relevant.

For qualitative studies, students should outline the types of questions they expect to ask in an interview or the types of items they will look for in an observation. These must be accompanied by an explanation of how the student decided on these questions/items (e.g., from specific concepts in the literature, from a previous study, from some other source).

If the students plan to analyze documents, the proposal must specify which documents will be collected, where they can be found, and how the documents advance the investigation.

d) Sample and Population/Site and Participant Selection

When relevant, this must be identified for all research designs. **Students should specify the type of sampling that is expected to be employed and should describe the steps that will be taken to gain access and to solicit participation.** Sampling options include:

- Simple random sampling
- Stratified random sampling
- Cluster sampling
- Systematic sampling
- Convenience sampling
- Purposive sampling

e) Data Analysis

The proposal should indicate **how the student plans to analyze the data in order to generate answers to the research question.** It is helpful to think about analysis in relation to the research questions. Students should consider which elements of data are likely to address each of the questions and what they might do with the data to derive an answer.

Quantitative analyses should be attached to research hypotheses. The type of test that will be used should be specified for each hypothesis, and

students might also provide a preliminary version of the form within which the findings will be displayed: chart, graph, and/or table. It is essential that quantitative terminology and statistical tests are clearly understood and appropriately used in the research proposal.

Qualitative analyses can be approached from a within-case and/or cross-case perspective and using an inductive and/or deductive approach. The type of analysis should be matched to the purpose of the study and to specific study questions. **Students should also give some consideration to how the data will be organized and displayed.** It is essential that qualitative terminology and analytic tools are clearly understood and appropriately used in the research proposal.

Provide a **general outline of the time schedule you expect to follow during your fieldwork.** Then ***specify the procedures you will use to analyse the data.*** If coding procedures are to be used, describe in reasonable detail.

9. Outline of chapters (80 words maximum)

Although it is not always essential, a provisional outline of chapters can be useful. These may be difficult to specify in advance, but some tentative outline allows you to develop an overall structure for your thesis, which will, in turn, provide you with a programme for doing your research. The chapter outline also acts as a check that you know how to apply your theoretical ideas in an appropriate way and that you have clear limits on your project.

Finally **writing, style and referencing:** Bad or incoherent writing often casts doubt on whether the writer will be able to sustain an entire thesis. Slipshod referencing

raises similar doubts. An over-reliance on jargon also raises questions about whether the student can sustain his or her own original argument.

10. References/Bibliography

Remember: All references shown in text should be included in your list of References or Bibliography at the end. Use **APA format** while listing these references and make sure to place them in **alphabetical order**.

11. Appendix

Remember to place all samples of questionnaire and or interview questions, consent forms and any other necessary documents used for the research in this section.