Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper

The purpose of this guide is to provide advice on how to develop and organize a research paper in the social sciences.

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Purpose of Guide

The goal of a research proposal is to present and justify a research idea you have and to present the practical ways in which you think this research should be conducted. The proposals and procedures for such research are defined by the field of study, so guidelines for research proposals are generally more exacting and less formal than a project proposal. Research proposals contain extensive literature reviews and must provide persuasive evidence that there is a need for the research study being proposed. In addition to providing rationale for the proposed research, a proposal describes detailed methodology for conducting the research consistent with requirements of the professional or academic field and a statement on anticipated outcomes and/or benefits derived from the study.

How to Approach Writing a Research Proposal

Your professor may assign the task of writing a research proposal for the following reasons:

- Develop your skills in thinking about and designing a comprehensive research study.
- Help learn how to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature to ensure a research problem has not already been answered (or you may determine the problem has been answered ineffectively) and, in so doing, become familiar with scholarship related to your topic.
- Improve your general research and writing skills.
- Practice identifying what logical steps must be taken to accomplish one's research goals.
- Nurture a sense of inquisitiveness within yourself and to help see yourself as an active participant in the process of doing scholarly research.

A proposal should contain all the key elements involved in designing a complete research study, with sufficient information that allows readers to assess the validity and usefulness of your proposed study. The only elements missing from a research proposal are the results of the study and your analysis of those results. Finally, an effective proposal is judged on the quality of your writing. It is, therefore, important that your writing is coherent, clear, and compelling.

Regardless of the research problem you are investigating and the methodology you choose, all research proposals must address the following questions:

1. What do you plan to accomplish? Be clear and succinct in defining the research problem and what it is you are proposing to research.
2. Why do you want to do it? In addition to detailing your research design, you also must conduct a thorough review of the literature and provide convincing evidence that it is a topic worthy of study. Be sure to answer the "So what?" question.
3. How are you going to do it? Be sure that what you propose is doable. If you're having trouble formulating a research problem to propose investigating, go here.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Failure to be concise: being "all over the map" without a clear sense of purpose.
- Failure to cite landmark works in your literature review.
- Failure to delimit the contextual boundaries of your research [e.g., time, place, people, etc.].
- Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research.
- Failure to stay focused on the research question; going off on unrelated tangents.
- Sloppy or imprecise writing. Poor grammar.
- Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues.

Structure and Writing Style

Beginning the Proposal Process

As with writing a traditional research paper, research proposals are generally organized the same way throughout the social sciences. Most proposals are between ten and fifteen pages in length. However, before you begin, read the assignment carefully and, if anything seems unclear, ask your professor whether there are any specific requirements for organizing and writing the proposal.

A good place to begin is to ask yourself a series of questions:

- What do I want to study, and why?
- How is it significant within the subject areas covered in my class?
- What problems will it help solve?
- How does it build upon [and hopefully go beyond] research already conducted on my topic?
- What exactly should I plan to do, and can I get it done in the time available?
In general your proposal should include the following sections:

I. Introduction

In the real world of higher education, a research proposal is most often written by scholars seeking grant funding for a research project or it's the first step in getting approval to write your doctoral dissertation. Even if this is just a course assignment, treat your introduction as the initial pitch of an idea. After reading the introduction, your readers should not only have an understanding of what you want to do, but they should also be able to sense your passion for the topic and be excited about its possible outcomes.

Think about your introduction as a narrative written in one to three paragraphs that succinctly answers the following four questions:

1. What is the central research problem?
2. What is the topic of study related to that problem?
3. What methods should be used to analyze the research problem?
4. Why is this important research, and why should someone reading the proposal care about the outcomes from the study?

II. Background and Significance

This section can be melded into your introduction or you can create a separate section to help with the organization and flow of your proposal. This is where you explain the context of your project and outline why it's important. Approach writing this section with the thought that you can't assume your readers will know as much about the research problem as you do. Note that this section is not an essay going over everything you have learned about the research problem; instead, you must choose what is relevant to help explain your goals for the study.

To that end, while there are no hard and fast rules, you should attempt to deal with some or all of the following:

- State the research problem and give a more detailed explanation about the purpose of the study than what you stated in the introduction.
- Present the rationale of your proposed study and clearly indicate why it is worth doing. Answer the "So what?" question [i.e., why should anyone care].
- Describe the major issues or problems to be addressed by your research.
- Explain how you plan to go about conducting your research. Clearly identify the key sources you intend to use and explain how they will contribute to the analysis of your topic.
- Set the boundaries of your proposed research in order to provide a clear focus.
- Provide definitions of key concepts or terms, if necessary.

III. Literature Review

Connected to the background and significance of your study is a more deliberate review and synthesis of prior studies related to the research problem under investigation. The purpose here is to place your project within the larger whole of what is currently being explored, while demonstrating to your readers that your work is original and innovative. Think about what questions other researchers have asked, what methods they've used, and what is your understanding of their findings. Assess what you believe is still missing, and state how previous research has failed to examine the issue that your study addresses.

Since a literature review is information dense, it is crucial that this section is intelligently structured to enable a reader to grasp the key arguments underpinning your study in relation to that of other researchers. A good strategy is to break the literature into "conceptual categories" [themes] rather than systematically describing materials one at a time.

To help frame your proposal's literature review, here are the "five C's" of writing a literature review:

1. Cite: keep the primary focus on the literature pertinent to your research problem.
2. Compare the various arguments, theories, methodologies, and findings expressed in the literature: what do the authors agree on? Who applies similar approaches to analyzing the research problem?
3. Contrast the various arguments, themes, methodologies, approaches and controversies expressed in the literature: what are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, or debate?
4. Critique the literature: Which arguments are more persuasive, and why? Which approaches, findings, methodologies seem most reliable, valid, or appropriate, and why? Pay attention to the verbs you use to describe what an author says/does [e.g., asserts, demonstrates, etc.]
5. Connect the literature to your own area of research and investigation: how does your own work draw upon, depart from, or synthesize what has been said in the literature?

IV. Research Design and Methods

This section must be well-written and logically organized because you are not actually doing the research. As a consequence, the reader will never have a study outcome from which to evaluate whether your methodological choices were the correct ones. The objective here is to ensure that the reader is convinced that your overall research design and methods of analysis will correctly address the research problem. Your design and methods should be absolutely and unmistakably tied to the specific aims of your study.

Describe the overall research design by building upon and drawing examples from your review of the literature. Be specific about the methodological approaches you plan to undertake to collect information, about the techniques you will use to analyze it, and about tests of external validity to which you commit yourself [i.e., the trustworthiness by which you can generalize from your study to other people, places or times].

When describing the methods you will use, be sure to cover these issues:

- Specify the research operations you will undertake and the way you will interpret the results of these operations in relation to your research problem. Don't just describe what you intend to achieve from applying the methods you choose, but state how you will spend your time while doing it.
- Keep in mind that a methodology is not just a list of research tasks; it is an argument as to why these tasks add up to the best way to investigate the research problem. This is an important point because the mere listing of tasks to perform does not demonstrate that they add up to the best feasible approach.
- Be sure to anticipate and acknowledge any potential barriers and pitfalls in carrying out your research design and explain how you plan to get around them.

V. Preliminary Suppositions and Implications

Just because you don't have to actually conduct the study and analyze the results, it doesn't mean that you can skip talking about the process and potential implications. The purpose of this section is to argue how and in what ways you believe your research will refine, revise, or extend existing knowledge in the subject area under investigation. Depending on the aims and objectives of your study, describe how the anticipated results of your study will impact future scholarly research, theory, practice, forms of interventions, or policy. Note that such discussions may have either substantive [a potential new policy], theoretical [a potential new understanding], or methodological [a potential new way of analyzing] significance.

When thinking about the potential implications of your study, ask the following questions:

- What might the results mean in regards to the theoretical framework that frames the study?
VI. Conclusion

The conclusion reiterates the importance or significance of your proposal and provides a brief recap of the entire study. This section should be only one or two paragraphs long, emphasizing why your research study is unique, why it advances knowledge, and why the research problem is worth investigating.

Someone reading this section should come away with an understanding of:

- Why the study was done,
- The specific purpose of the study and the research questions it attempted to answer,
- The research design and methods used,
- The potential implications emerging from your proposed study of the research problem, and
- A sense of how your study fits within the broader scholarship about the research problem.

VII. Citations

As with any scholarly research paper, you must cite the sources you used in composing your proposal. In a standard research proposal, this section can take two forms, so speak with your professor about which one is preferred.

1. References -- lists only the literature that you actually used or cited in your proposal.
2. Bibliography -- lists everything you used or cited in your proposal with additional citations of any key sources relevant to understanding the research problem.

In either case, this section should testify to the fact that you did enough preparatory work to make sure the project will complement and not duplicate the efforts of other researchers. Start a new page and use the heading "References" or "Bibliography" at the top of the page. Cited works should always use a standard format that follows the writing style advised by the discipline of your course [i.e., education=APA; history=Chicago, etc]. This section normally does not count towards the total length of your proposal.