

Research Proposals

Designing research is a very creative process. Andrew Abbott calls a good proposal 1/3 creativity and 2/3s rigor. But it is not creative writing in the fiction sense. Rather, you are creatively designing a study that can answer your research question. The rigor comes from the arguments and justifications for each methodological decision you make.

In general, a research proposal will consist of four sections: Introduction, literature review, Research design and methods, and supporting materials (e.g. references, appendices, timeline).

These proposal guidelines preference quantitative research to some extent and engage in some othering of qualitative research. I apologize for that. Quantitative research proposal writing is quite a bit more formulaic than is qualitative research and thus, coming up with guidelines is easier in connection with quantitative research. Expert qualitative researchers have added extensively to this guide to make it user friendly for qualitative research as well.

Depending on the type of project you are conducting, there will be some variability in the research process, however, there are general steps often involved. The first step is often to identify your research topic and develop your research question. If applicable, you should also develop your research hypotheses. The next step is to conduct a thorough but targeted literature review. You may have to modify your research question based on what you learn in the literature review. Part of the literature review should be to focus on what data and methods prior research used. If using secondary data you should also start to become familiar with the sample and measures. This will allow you to assess if you can answer your initial (or modified) research question or if you need to modify your question or find another data source. If you are conducting primary data collection you need to start developing your research plan. Your research plan should be step-by-step and detailed like a recipe.

Within these general steps, there are other important considerations. For example, what is the feasibility of conducting the research, especially if collecting your own data? How long will the study take? Do you have the expertise and/or support to carry out the project? If there are reasons that you might not be able/ready to pull off the “big project” that you really want to conduct, you should consider a more manageable question to engage in as a “stepping stone” to the larger project down the road.

The first three sections or chapters become with some alteration (such as verb tenses being changed from future to past tense) the first sections or chapters of your final thesis or dissertation. In other words, writing the proposal completes a good portion of the final product.

Things to keep in mind:

Writing and research is an iterative process, so expect to make modifications and **numerous drafts**.

As students, the goal should be to gain the toolkit you need to carry out the research you want to conduct over the course of your career. Taking opportunities to engage in research that will help you develop those research tools is as important (if not more important) than answering that *burning* question you have.

The Research Question

- A social research question is a question about the social world that you seek to answer through the collection of and analysis of empirical data.
- Three types of research questions: descriptive, explanatory and exploratory.
 - Descriptive questions define and describe social phenomena.
 - Explanatory identify causes and effects of social phenomena
 - Exploratory questions seek to answer questions on new or little studied phenomena.
 - In general, explanatory and exploratory questions tend to have more social and scientific relevance than do descriptive questions. Primarily, because description is also included in explanatory and exploratory research. In the publishing world, explanatory and exploratory research is more highly valued than descriptive research.
- Most of you are pretty clear on the area of sociology you wish to focus on but becoming an expert in that area(s) require extensive and in-depth readings of the research methods and findings that have been employed in prior research, and the broader scholarly discussion that is taking place regarding your research area As you read through the literature, note the gaps in the research and questions that remain to be answered. Some articles will say future research should do.... Choose one or two of the most interesting gaps or future research needs you identify. If you are using secondary data, it's important to keep in mind what the sample and measures include (and doesn't include). Next conduct an exhaustive literature search to check to see if others have already addressed each gap adequately. When you start to come across the same articles/books over and over again, you can feel fairly confident that your search is exhaustive. However, it is your responsibility to make sure claims that you make are accurate and reflect what the prior research says (and doesn't say). Create a list of all sources you checked out or those that look interesting and relevant.
- Also think about how specific the research question is. You want it to be specific enough that it can be answered for a thesis in 25-60 pages. In a dissertation, there may be one more general research question with a few subquestions that can be answered in 80-180 pages.
- Think about the question—is it descriptive, explanatory or exploratory? What method might be appropriate to address your research question? Remember, the question should always drive the method, not the other way around. There is no

such thing a good (or superior) method outside of the context of the research question.

- If you are using secondary data, it's important to keep in mind what the sample and measures include (and doesn't include). Next conduct an exhaustive literature search to check to see if others have already addressed each gap adequately. When you start to come across the same articles/books over and over again, you can feel fairly confident that your search is exhaustive. However, it is your responsibility to make sure claims that you make are accurate and reflect what the prior research says (and doesn't say). Create a list of all sources you checked out or those that look interesting and relevant.

Chapter 1: Introduction

- In the first section (a few paragraphs for a thesis, a few pages for a dissertation) set up your research topic as a social problem or an interesting sociological topic. Why is it important to study this? This section is designed to "hook the reader"; get the readers to be interested in the topic and want to keep reading your proposal and to want you to conduct the research.
 - Alternatives may be to start with a debate in the literature. Or to start with statistics describing the pervasiveness of the topic, or perhaps describe general misunderstanding about a topic (again, use statistics).
 - Make sure to frame the paragraphs in such a way that readers understand what you are doing. Don't leave half your thoughts in your head.
- Some people like to end section 1 with the research question. Others will start section 2 with the research question. Make sure there is a literal question in this paragraph. Most people just include a research topic. Provide the actual question. Regardless, discuss your topic in-depth in the section 2. What are the specific research questions you will address in this study?
- Section 3: This is the "contribution" section. Here is where you explain why this is an important topic to research. Science is communication. What fields of literature's conversations will your research join or contribute to? It is important for you to not be humble here. Be honest and don't overstate your case, but help your reader understand how your research will address different sociological bodies of knowledge, or practice or policy. You need to tie your research topic into a larger field or body of literature in sociology (think theory). This gives some context to your topic. Tell the reader what the sociological importance of your research is. You want to be broad and general here.
- The next section will provide a *general* overview of the method you will employ to address your research question and "fill the gap(s). Nothing too specific or elaborate, just what you need to flesh out the specific question(s) you wish to answer and give the reader an sense of the method you will employ.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conduct a review of the scholarly literature related to your research question. This review must be a *synthesis* of the literature. Take care to avoid the following: 1) "and then"

writing, or chronological narrative that represents a simple summary of the literature, 2) “all about” writing, or encyclopedic approach that says a little about everything, and 3) “data dumping” that puts everything out there with no discernable structure.

Follow these guidelines when searching for articles:

- Use peer reviewed scholarly journals rather than popular magazines, newspaper articles or the internet.
- Use scholarly books published by university presses or academic trade publishers.
- In general, select recent publication (i.e. 2000 or later). However, if an article is written in 1952 but is extremely pertinent (has many citations or is considered a seminal piece) then use it. If it is not well cited by other authors and it is this old then probably it's part of a field that died before it got started due to some flaw.
- It is harder to assess how well cited (used) books are. Use book reviews to help you evaluate the books you use for your literature review. Your advisor can help you here as well. Books reviewed in *ASR*, *AJS*, *Contemporary Sociology*, all of which are very prestigious is a good sign.
- Choose primarily research publications—they answer research questions using empirical data (qualitative or quantitative research) for the literature review. Limit editorials and book reviews.
- Avoid websites for literature unless you are looking for specific statistics, such as HIV rates or census numbers. Then go to the CDC or UNAIDS organization or the census. If you do not know who the sponsor of a website is, it may not be legitimate.
- You want original sources. If study B cites research found in study A and you want to cite study A also, but only have read study B, then you need to get study A. Otherwise you are depending on Study B getting the information correct, and they may or may not have. They may have left some important nuance out. Better to go directly to the original source.
- For those conducting exploratory research, the existing literature might not be available or adequate if you stick to the above formulaic literature gathering methods. When the existing literature is scarce, we use what is available. We get very creative here and look to comparable phenomena's literature at times to show how the phenomena might operate.

Writing a literature review:

- The purpose of a literature review is to explain what we already know about the research topic and use that knowledge to justify (argue the need for) your project.
- Notice that you are engaging in a discussion with other scholars in the field, not summarizing a bunch of articles. You are telling a story about what we do (and don't) know on a topic, and advancing this empirically if you are conducting an actual research project.
- Start becoming a student of articles and books, in regard to how others set up their argument and how they use prior research to “support” their story rather than trying to tell the “story of the literature.”
- Synthesize the literature

- The literature should be organized by topic, not author.
- Start with an outline of the points you want to make in your literature review and be sure that you are sticking to that outline (unless, of course, the outline needs to be modified).
- Use your references (citations) to help you make your points—support your statements, provide backup statistics or other forms of evidence.
- Again, remember to define all key terms and assume the reader is **not** familiar with the work you are citing.
- Write a concluding paragraph that summarizes briefly what we know (just learned) about the topic, but also highlight what we do **not** know. What is the gap in the literature? Or what has not yet been done. Or end with a critique of how the research has been conducted to date if your project will improve upon it methodologically. In other words, end with demonstrating the need for your project. Restate the purpose of your project—which the purpose and need for should now be clear. Be sure to emphasize the significance of your research that will fill the gap or extend the literature.
- Theoretical framework—some faculty like to see this incorporated into the literature review and others will want it as a separate section or chapter. Ask your chair which s/he prefers. It can come at the beginning or the end or a separate section.
 - The purpose is to describe the theories you will be using in your project and explain how they relate to your topic.
 - Start by explaining the theory(ies) in general (broad overall arguments).
 - Then explain how they have been applied to your topic in past research. (or why they haven't if they haven't).
 - Explain how these theories will inform your project. Think about:
 - Why are you using these theories?
 - What will an analysis of your topic from these perspectives contribute?
 - How does the theoretical framework impact your project?

Section 3: Research Design—Methods Section / Chapter

The purpose of this section is to describe and explain your research design. Include issues like, what type of time dimension is best for studying your topic and why (cross-sectional or longitudinal)? What are the strengths and limitations of your design? As social scientists we are required to document all our methodology and be transparent. This is where that happens. Do not wait until after your literature to write this section. Think about your design when you write your literature review and pay attention to the methods and data sources used by the studies you are reviewing. The proposal writing process is iterative and as you build your own methods, it might change (usually does change) what literature you emphasize in your review or affect the argument you are presenting in your review.

Start with an introductory paragraph in which you introduce your research question and the overall study design, data source(s), and analysis method. Be clear about whether you are using secondary data or collecting your own data. Secondary data can be publically

available survey data (ICPSR) or archived textual data or oral histories. Secondary data is not limited to quantitative research. If you are collecting your own data, briefly introduce your interviewing, ethnographic, sampling, and measurement choices.

In general, there are 3 sections to a methods section: The data section, the constructs section, and the analysis section. For a thesis/dissertation that is using quantitative data and methods, the proposal can follow the below sections in a fairly formulaic way.

For those using **qualitative** methods, the method is reflexive and allows for changes in the design if needed. For the purposes of the proposal, you should specify as clearly as possible what you intend to do, and how; you will need to append all interview guides, and it is wise to include as many questions as you can (lots of probes, even if you might not use all of them). Your methods should be clearly grounded in the literature you present in your lit review. Before you can begin work on your study and after your proposal has been approved, your project will have to go before the Institutional Review Board (IRB). You can make changes to your methods (or interview guides), if needed as you progress, but all modifications must be approved by the IRB before implementation.

- Section 1: Data
 - The purpose is to identify the best data source or collect your own data to answer the research question. So the data source must be capable of answering your research question. Address this issue first.
 - If collecting your own data (we do not advise this for the MA thesis simply because it will increase time to completion, but certainly can be done for the MA thesis), discuss the procedures you will implement to ensure a high quality sample. What is your mode of observation? Your units of analysis? How will you collect your data?
 - If using secondary data, it is important to demonstrate why this is the best dataset to use for your study. You want to show that it is a high quality dataset—provide information to prove this such as response rates, if it's well known and used in the field. The only or best dataset with the constructs you need. Anything else you can think of to show why its the
 - Sampling methods
 - If collecting your own data, are you using probability or nonprobability sampling methods? What is your population of interest (target population)? Do you have a sampling frame? If so, what is it?
 - What kind of sampling technique will you use?
 - Do you have any preliminary data to suggest what your sample will look like?
 - If using secondary data, provide all the sampling information from the dataset you are using. How did the original PI's collect their data?
 - If doing textual or discourse analysis, explain how you decided on which texts to include, and how you plan to code your data. (This can change too, based on the data. These changes do not have to be

submitted to IRB, but all initial projects must be submitted to IRB. Those which do not involve human subjects will be exempt.

- Section 2 Construct Measurement
 - Clearly define the theoretical constructs you will be using. What is the main concept you are investigating: what other concepts will be examined (Note the concepts' potential frequencies, magnitudes, structures, processes, causes and consequences?)
 - How will you operationalize your concepts? What questions will you ask? Or what questions ARE ASKED on the secondary dataset If you are going to perform in-depth interviews, what will you ask of your interviewees?
 - What are the levels of measurements of the variables (quantitative proposals)?
 - Variables exist in qualitative research as well. They are often called themes, but they are textual versions of some concept that varies across people.
 - Are you using an inductive or deductive approach? If not, what other types of qualitative analysis will you conduct—(e.g. conversation analysis?)
 - Clearly state your hypotheses or expectations.
 - Identify and operationalize your variables. Discuss causal relationships between the variables; that is, identify the independent and dependent variables.
 - Identify confounding factors that you wish to control for (providing there are any).
 - Identify the strengths and limitations of your construct measurement section.
- Section 3: Data Analysis
 - Explain the data analysis method you will use in detail. Explain how the method you are using works. How will you know that you have supported or not supported your hypotheses? Or that you have met your expectations? Explain how you will know you have found something substantively and/or statistically significant. How will you interpret the findings?
 - What are the limitations or weaknesses of your analysis approach?

Finally, write a formal conclusion to the proposal to highlight the overall significance of the proposed project for the field.

Section 4: References:

- Include a bibliography of the articles you reviewed, and any other books or articles you refer to in the text. This page should be titled REFERENCES (in capital letters, centered and no quotation marks).
- Use ASA style for your references.

Appendices:

- Human subjects issues need to be addressed if you are collecting your own data. In appendix A, which should be attached to your proposal, include a statement that addresses IRB concerns. What are risks and benefits to your participants? Include a consent form. Include an interview guide or survey or other instrument being used to collect data. If you think monetary compensation is necessary, include that information and explain how that will or will not incentivize participation

Additional Writing Tips

- Organization:
 - Outline each section before you begin writing—this will help you stay focused and organized.
 - Make sure to use good headings and subheadings throughout your proposal to help guide the readers through the various transitions you will be making.
 - Be sure that every paragraph and every sentence within that paragraph has *a purpose*; you are trying to make an argument, not fill up pages.
 - Make sure all information is in the right place (e.g. introductory material is in the introduction—not literature review and literature review is in the review section not introduction.)
 - Be concise—avoid using excess words—each word should have a purpose. When we publish, we often literally have to cut words to make our word limits. More importantly, ideas are more powerful when concisely stated.
- Tone should be formal/professional
 - Avoid contractions
 - Avoid “you” (nothing alienates a reader more than a statement like “you probably think...” when in fact the reader does not agree.
 - In some cases, it is appropriate to use, “I”. This is especially true in the methods section.
 - “I think” and “I believe” are not necessary in the literature review section. Since your job is to convince the reader to agree with you, state your observations not as your opinions, but as facts found in the literature.
- Using Sources:
 - Be sure that all ideas that are not originally your own are properly cited.
 - Cite the original person who created the idea, not someone else who summarized it.
 - Do not assume your readers have read the material you are citing. Therefore, define all key terms and explain all ideas clearly that you are referencing.
 - Paraphrase. Keep quotes to a minimum in the proposal. Quotes should be used only in the following two cases:

- To convince the reader the author actually said what you say they said—rarely necessary in reviewing articles.
 - When authors make a profound and direct statement that cannot possibly be given justice by paraphrasing.
 - All quotes that are more than 39 words should be indented.
- Clarity: After you complete the first polished draft of your proposal, ask a non-academic friend to proofread your proposal to see if it makes sense to them. Revise your paper to clarify anything that is unclear to them.
- Proofread. You should print, proofread, and edit your proposal numerous times. It is very, very obvious when scholars do not put enough effort into proofreading and revising their papers. Do not expect your thesis or dissertation director to copyedit for you.