

RESEARCH PROPOSAL ASSIGNMENT

Research Proposal

Due: December 8

The Research Proposal assignment is the third in a series of sequenced assignments. It consists of two parts: the proposal and an oral presentation as described in detail below. The purpose of this assignment is to provide you experience with designing a research study, and writing a research proposal. The benefits are both academic and professional—as this is a common genre in academia.

In general, a research proposal explains why and how a study will be conducted. It is useful for planning a study (and for getting critical feedback before undertaking the study) as well as a resource to mine while conducting a study. The process is recursive. As you design your study, you will be guided in part by your review of the literature, and will no doubt continue to review relevant scholarship in your research area and your proposed methods.

CONSTRUCTING A PROPOSAL

Designing the Study: Having conducted a review of the literature and having worked with your research question(s) for several weeks now, you may have an idea of how you want to study that question(s). If so, jot down a brief plan. If not, try the following heuristics to generate information to design your study.

Study your question.

What object (people, places or things) does it suggest you need to study?

What kind of study does the question suggest (empirical--e.g., ethnography, case study, descriptive study, experimental; historical--oral or archival or both; theoretical; discourse or textual analysis, etc.)?

What data do you need to collect? (artifacts, texts, people doing something, interviews, etc.)

How will you analyze the data? (qualitative? quantitative? hermeneutics? discourse analysis? historical? etc.)

Be very specific in both the data you will examine and the ways in which you will analyze it. Look for scholarship that is similar to the kind you wish to design to see what other researchers have identified as data and how they studied these.

Conventional Elements of a Research Proposal

Problem or objective. Research proposals generally begin with an introductory section that describes the research problem and establishes its significance. This section answers the following kinds of questions: What exactly do you want to study? Why is it worth studying? Does the proposed study have theoretical and/or practical significance? Does it contribute to a new understanding of a phenomenon (e.g., does it address new or little-known material or does it treat familiar material in a new way or does it challenge an existing understanding or extend existing knowledge)?

Review of Literature. The research problem or objective needs to be situated within a context of other scholarship in the area(s). The literature review presents a discussion of the most important research and theoretical work *relating* to the research problem/objective. (Note: for a thesis committee, the review serves an additional function, namely, as a demonstration of your knowledge and understanding of relevant research and thus a demonstration of your ability to undertake a given research project.) It addresses the following kinds of questions: What have others said about this area(s)? What theories address it and what do these say? What research has been done (or not done) previously? Are there consistent findings or do past studies disagree? Are there flaws or gaps in the previous research that your study will seek to remedy?

Research Question. Your specific research question(s) or hypotheses should be stated clearly either at the end of the description of the problem/objective or at the end of the review of the literature.

(You have already written a draft of the review of literature that included the research problem and question(s). But you will probably find that you are continuing to craft your research questions, and may need to revise your review, cutting out tangential or irrelevant research and adding other research that you have come across since you wrote the review. You may also find that you need to add methodological sources to support your research design.)

Procedures: Methods Section This section describes how you will conduct your study. Regardless of the type of research you plan to do, you need to indicate how you will carry out your study so others may judge its viability, its worth, etc. For example, for empirical research, this section includes a description of the subjects (or participants), the measurements, the data-collection methods, and analysis/analyses.

Subjects for study. Describe the subjects (people or objects, e.g. texts) for your study, considering carefully the type and number you need. Explain your method of selecting your subject(s) (and if a sample, describe the population and how the sample will be drawn). Discuss the subject(s) in relation to your research question or hypothesis, to availability, and to your research design. That is, you need to identify the subjects and make clear whether they will be available and how you will reach them. This section typically answers the following questions: Who or what will you study in order to collect data? Is it appropriate to select a sample from a larger pool? If so, how will you do that? How do these subjects relate to your research question(s)?

Measurement. Describe the kinds of measures you intend to use and explain why you have selected these (have they been used previously? if not, have you piloted them?). A discussion of measurements generally considers the following questions: What are the key variables in your study? How will you define and measure them? Do your definitions and measurements draw on or differ from those of previous research in this area? (If you are using a writing prompt, or a survey questions, or other such written material, it is usually appropriate to include a copy of this in an appendix at the end.) You want to consider whether you will use concurrent, retrospective, direct or indirect product measurements or some combination of these. Your research question should guide you in your selection.

Data-Collection Methods. Describe what you plan to actually do and the kind of research you will conduct. Your data-collection methods obviously need to be consistent with your research problem, your subjects and your measurements. This section typically considers the following

questions: How will you actually collect the data for your study? What kind of study will you conduct (e.g., ethnographic, case study, experiment, survey, historical, textual analysis, etc.)?

Analysis. Describe the kind of analysis you plan to conduct, and explain the logic and purpose of your analysis. The kind(s) of analysis you plan will, of course, be contingent on the subjects, the measures and the data collection as well as on your research question. These all work in tandem with one another. Whether you're conducting a quantitative or qualitative, a study of some combination or a study of some other kind, you need to explain how you will analyze the data you collect. This section typically answers the following kinds of questions: How precise a description or explanation of the phenomenon do you plan to provide? Do you intend to simply describe the what and how of a given phenomenon? Do you intend to examine relationships among variables? or Do you intend to explain why things are the way they are? What possible explanatory variables will your analysis consider and how will you know if you've explained the variables adequately? If you plan to use specific statistical procedures (whether descriptive, inferential, or some combination), state these.

Schedule. Most proposals require a schedule that outlines the various stages of the project along a time line. Typically, this is written as a chronological list of procedures you will follow in carrying out your study (data collection, analysis, writing and revising). Work backwards from the date you want to complete the project and be realistic about the amount of time that different tasks will take. Even when this is not required, it is a good idea to generate a timeline because this task forces you to think through the entire research process realistically and may alert you to problems that you might otherwise overlook. A timeline also helps you later on to stay on task during the research project.

Bibliography: Include a bibliography or works cited of all sources cited in the research proposal. Double check your bibliography against the proposal to make sure that all sources appear in both places.

As you draft your proposal, keep in mind that, as the name suggests, you are describing your tentative plans for research. You want the proposal to be specific enough for someone to understand what it is you plan to do so they can assess your plan, and you want it concrete enough to help you as you engage in your research. Further, your proposal should help you (and your readers) identify any problem areas before you invest time, energy and money in a study so that you can correct these. But your proposal is also subject to change once you actually begin the study. The point is: be realistic and be flexible.

Page Length: Your proposal should run between at least 10-15 pages not counting your works cited and any appendixes you might include.

Oral Report: You will present your research proposal (i.e., your research design) to the class on either **December 1 or December 8**. You will have about **15 minutes** in which to present your proposal and take questions. (Use this as an opportunity to practice for an oral defense of your thesis or dissertation project.) Suggestion: treat this as you would any presentation: limit your talk to 10-15 minutes (6 pages=15 minutes), structure it so that your audience can follow it (tell 'em what you're going to do and do it), and practice, practice, practice.