

**ALL YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WRITING RESEARCH
PROPOSALS BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK***

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A good research proposal is the key to successful research. Any research--whether in the area of Public Health examining the impact of passive smoking, or industrial pollution of in the area of social change investigating the impact of new agricultural technology on a rural society--must begin with a clearly focused research proposal. In recent times there has been a proliferation of researches indicating an exponential growth of scientific activity, which has made the business of research competitive. A good research proposal has become a necessity not only for ensuring a high quality of research but also for the practical reason of landing a research grant. In order to attract a research grant, a research proposal must be precise and convincing. The readers have to be convinced that you have something there, and that you can do it. The 'doability' is the ultimate test. John Markoff told me a story--a rare case indeed--of a student whose Ph.D thesis proposal was rejected. The proposed research topic was political rhetorics in Brazil. With properly formulated hypotheses, and an analytical framework, the research was carefully designed. But the only problem was that the researcher did not know Portuguese (the lingua franca of Brazil). However good the proposal was, it was not 'doable', at least, not by the researcher concerned. A good research proposal must be systematic, coherent and, above all, 'doable'.

An effective proposal should be crisp and be composed of segments that can be read independently of one another. It is not unlikely that many of the readers especially if they sit on the committees that evaluate research proposals for funding decisions will read only specific segments of the proposal. Each segment must tell its own story in a straightforward fashion. Save your jargon and literary styles for the draft of the research report or the dissertation, as the case might be. Even then, use them sparingly. Sociologists don't need any more notoriety than they already have for using jargon and euphemisms. Remember that parsimony is a feature of good science, the social sciences included. A research proposal must tell the readers clearly, at least two things: what you want to do and how you want to do it.

The what question leads us to section A.

Section A: Selection of a Research Topic

Step 1. There are three factors which you need to consider in choosing a research topic: a) your interest; b) your competence; and c) the relevance or usefulness of the topic.

A) Interest: Chose a topic that you find interesting. Don't worry if you have not done much reading on that subject. If your interest is genuine and you have confidence in your ability, you do not need to have a great deal of prior knowledge on that subject. With a modest knowledge you can start a project, provided you have a consuming interest in that subject. Remember, many anthropologists did monumental work about societies and cultures they knew little or nothing about prior to their field trip. Read books, articles, reviews, reports, etc.--as much as possible on that topic. The reading will make up for any deficiency that you may have. Do not select a topic just because it is fashionable. Do not commit yourself to a project unless you have a solid interest in it, otherwise the experience can be as painful as an unhappy marriage.

B) Competence: Make a careful self-evaluation. Choose a topic in which you think you are competent. Competence in this case does not mean that you have to be well-informed about the subject, it is more a mixture of your interest and some prior knowledge. Interest alone is, however, not always adequate. As a student of anthropology you may also have a more than casual interest in either microbiology or high-energy physics but I would not recommend selecting a research topic in those areas. Harsh as it may sound, you don't know what you are doing. So just forget it. Choose a topic within the range of your competence. You are a very bright and versatile researcher but you are not Stephen Jay Gould; not yet, that is. Give some thought at this stage to the methodological demands of the research and see if your methodological training matches with them. If you are not comfortable with multiple regression or factor analysis, don't get involved in a project that demands high-level quantitative skills.

C) Usefulness: Make sure that your research is useful on the following counts: it is topical (that is, everyone is talking about it and it may be relevant to public policy), it can help you land a research grant and/or a job (assuming you are working on a dissertation), and finally, it promises to contribute to your discipline, or more ambitiously, to humanity and knowledge per se.

Step 2. Narrow down your topic. It is very important to demarcate your interest. There is a catch-22 here. If your topic is too broad it will take you forever to do the research and even after that, you may find that your study is still incomplete. But if the topic is too narrow, sometimes it can be too trivial or difficult to research. So you have to be careful in striking a balance.

You can either start with a particular case and then move on to a relatively more general topic or you can do the opposite. My suggestion is: Start thinking with a broader topic, then go on to narrow it down. In moving from a general to a particular topic, it is useful if you can discover a knowledge gap, for example, an area we do not know enough of and are in need of knowing. In narrowing down your research topic, state clearly what you are not going to do.

Once you have selected a research topic that can be done with your resources i.e., time, money, knowledge, competence, etc., write down how you will go about doing it. That takes us to the next section.

Section 2: Proposal Writing

Step 1. Introduction: Say in the first paragraph what your research project is. Assume that the majority of your readers are impatient, and that those who are not are often too lazy to read the rest of the proposal. So make sure that they know in the first few sentences what your project is about. It is a good idea to start a research proposal like this: "In the proposed study we seek to examine ..."

Step 2. Review of the literature: Any research is a social activity. We all stand, Merton said, on the shoulders of the giants. Don't go alone, be a part of the group. Don't forget that knowledge, at least in the social sciences, is cumulative. There are people who must have already thought, studied, and written about your pet project.

So do read their books, be familiar with their works and in this section, review the existing literature on your proposed topic.

Step 3. Identification of the knowledge gap: Hopefully you will find that there are gaps in the existing literature which need to be filled. In this section, you state what we do not know from reading the existing fund of knowledge and need to know. This is a justification for your taking up of the project.

Step 4. Statement of the problem: Now you state clearly and precisely what your specific research problem is. Don't get confused with the word 'problem'. It does not have to be a real-life problem. Research problem actually means research topic. And the topic may sometimes concern a real-life problem.

Step 5. Objectives and limitations: State what you hope to accomplish by doing the research and mention the areas you are not going to deal with. Drawing boundaries is an important part of research. Stating what you are not going to do is often just as important as stating what you are going to do.

Step 6. Hypotheses (plural of the word 'hypothesis'): State what kind of relationships you expect to find between variables or factors. In thinking of a research proposal, it is always useful to think in terms of a cause-effect relationship between the variables (factors). In the jargon of research methodology these are called independent variables (causes) and dependent variables (effects) respectively. For example, you are thinking of conducting a research in the area of Juvenile Delinquency. You may begin to think in terms of what causes some juveniles to be delinquent. Here, delinquency is the dependent variable (effect) and the cause of it is the independent variable. There can also be intervening and incidental variables which we will not discuss here. You may hypothesize that lack of adequate recreational facilities may cause some kids to be involved in delinquent acts. You can word this statement as follows: "There is a relationship between the availability of adequate recreational facilities on the part of the kids in a neighbourhood and their involvement in delinquent acts. Delinquent acts are likely to increase if adequate recreational facilities are unavailable." Now, we really do not know if this is the case.

'Hypothesis' is your intelligent guess about the possible relationship between two variables. Remember this is only a guess; you are not putting your prestige in the line. Don't be hard pressed to prove that your guess is right. It is more common to disprove the hypothesis (or hypotheses) than prove it on the basis of the research findings.

Step 7a) Method: State what method you will follow in doing the proposed research. Your method may often be dictated by the nature of your research. For example, if you are doing research on the whiskey rebellion in Pittsburgh in the late eighteenth century, you cannot use the survey method! Unfortunately, your likely respondents have all been dead for many years. So the best--and actually only--method available to you in this instance is the historical method. Before committing yourself to the historical method, be prepared to spend long hours in the archives and reading microfilms. Both are tedious and back-breaking tasks (but who said research is fun???)

b) Source of data (plural of datum): Tell us about your data sources. Tell us whether you are collecting your own data or using an existing data set. In the latter case, mention who collected the data, when, and how. What sort of documents, or books, or newspapers etc. are you planning to consult? Don't feel shy. There are many who may not be aware of some of the sources that you know of. In case you are collecting your own data by interviews, tell us who are you going to interview, how many, and how. For example, you can use a mail questionnaire or you can even interview through the telephone (even by satellite, if resources permit!). You need to attach a sample questionnaire with your proposal. If you are going to do fieldwork using ethnographic techniques such as participation-observation, tell us about your subjects, the duration of your fieldwork and other plans related to it. In writing about your data sources, show some sensitivity to ethical considerations.

Step 8. Importance and contribution of the study: Make a concluding statement on the importance of your work and tell us in what area and in what way your work is going to contribute to our knowledge and to our understanding of certain issues. It's a good idea to exercise some modesty in this paragraph.

Good Luck (You will need it)!