



Suggestions on the Selection of a Dissertation Topic and Organization of a Research Proposal¹

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Consider the Disciplinary Concerns

It is better to contribute to the research within your field rather than to invest efforts in a study that will be useful primarily to people in another discipline. This is not simply a matter of proprietary selfishness; when you go outside your discipline, it obligates you to find committee members who are grounded in the materials of your outside field. This can be difficult or awkward, for you and for your professors. Becoming obligated to quickly develop expertise in another field in order to properly advise a doctoral student can be a forbidding hurdle for the established specialist.

Your own background can become severely over-stretched if when you choose to do a dissertation that calls for literature in which you are less than expert. Be especially cautious about leaving your known expertise simply because you become fascinated by a research interest that “shows up” while you are pursuing a topic for which your studies have already prepared you. The dissertation should be a capstone for you, not an exploratory adventure. Cautiously avoid appearing to be a “gee-whiz” newcomer in a field that is already populated by truly strong inquirers; avoid appearance of naivety.

Special Problems of a Derivative Discipline

Education is a “derivative discipline.” Like Engineering and Medicine, it is concerned with the application of knowledge bases from many scientific, historical, and philosophical sources. Thus almost anything and everything would seem to be an appropriate topic for a dissertation. Educational research thus has a special problem: in order not to become diffused and encumbered by a vast array of ultimately diverse concerns, it is important to be thoroughly aware of the lines of inquiry being studied by other disciplines. The importance of careful reading and comprehensive understanding is very important.

SUGGESTION: Keep the search for educational implications (teaching and learning) at the center of your research planning.

Organizing a Research Proposal

Every field of academic inquiry develops its own unique formats and procedures. Educational research borrows heavily from other fields, especially from its “near relatives” in the

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social sciences. Nevertheless, a careful observer will note many peculiarities in any given outline or plan for a research proposal.

The Five Fundamentals of a Research Proposal

Section 1: Selecting the Problem

The first task in any research project is to define, explain, and illustrate the decisions you have made in selecting the research problem. The **Research Problem** is the domain and situation that has motivated your interest and commitment to inquire. In this spirit this section of the proposal should be written as a blend of information that is known already and the suggestive clues about what needs to be better understood. This first section of the proposal should effectively engage your reader's mind and imagination as you explain clearly that you are engaged in this pursuit for good reason.

Section 1 lays out the foundation for understanding the research problem. Think of *problem* as you would think of *topic*: the research problem is the general social or psychological area in which your concern lies. It is an area, or arena, within which many problems may emerge. It is the corral full of horses in which you may ultimately cozy up to one particular horse and dedicate your efforts to learning all you can about this particular one—all the while bearing in mind that yours is related to the larger collection of horses.

The second layer of emphasis is often called the **Research Concern**. The emphasis in this matter is more particular. This one is *your* horse. It exhibits characteristics and suggests a set of concerns that is perhaps less a matter for all horses than it is the very reason why horses are of interest to you. The research concern is a particular issue or situation for which the possibility of a clearer understanding promises to open up important possibilities. If the *research problem* is influenza, the *research concern* is the virus or perhaps the transmission (communication) of this virus within a specific population.

The third section of this opening chapter of the proposal presents your assertion that it is fitting and timely to make a very specific attempt to answer certain important questions in regard to the research concern that you have revealed.

The importance of these **Research Questions** must be carefully revealed. Research questions cannot be simple hunches. You must illustrate that each question has a reasonable and logical foundation in the *research problem* that you have described. In some cases, you may choose to give some indications of the sorts of investigation and what specific inquiries you will need to make in order to deal effectively with the questions. The first section of your proposal is not the place to introduce your instruments and questionnaire items. These belong in the third section, but a well written first section will prepare the reader, at least in general terms, for everything that follows in the proposal. You may even be able to suggest a forecast of the criteria which might be used for assessing the outcomes of your inquiry.

Section 2: How this Problem has been Handled in the Literature

The literature that underlies and rationalizes this inquiry is reviewed in sufficient detail to justify the concepts, the logic of investigation, and the prospect of utility of the probable findings. The chapter need not deal in detail with every item in a bibliography on this topic; instead it should focus with supporting illustrations on the most pertinent and substantially relevant portions of the literature base. Use a careful selection of samples from authoritative texts to describe your understanding of

the *research problem*. This second section of your proposal should provide a responsible but abbreviated tour of the world of ideas underlying your research.

Prepare to introduce the literature that underlies and rationalizes your inquiry. Provide sufficient detail to justify the concepts, the logic of investigation, and the prospect of utility of the probable findings. The chapter need not deal in detail on more than five to ten of the most significant themes and lines of inquiry that are related to your inquiry. Using supporting illustrations, try to focus on the most pertinent and substantially relevant portions of the literature base.

Introduce more detail on any sources that you included to illustrate your view of the *Research Problem* or *Concern* in Section 1. Showing the major bones of the skeleton of the literature is more important than showing the breadth of literature in the field. The researcher should not attempt to be so broadly representative of the field that the particular research problem is obscured. It is not wise to show equal concern about everything that relates to the general domain.

It is expected that the researcher will have identified the matters toward which the research concerns are focused. In this section of the proposal each of the important aspects of the research concern should be identified and clearly illustrated through appropriate citations or paraphrasing. To keep these excerpts from becoming a jumbled mass, be sure that they are presented as a reasoned discussion of the problem, its background, and its importance to the field.

The inquiry should be outlined in the style of a grand preview of the entire research plan. The key assumptions and hypotheses that provide the logic for the planned inquiry should be introduced and briefly explained. Focus strictly on the literature that underlies and rationalizes *your* inquiry. Provide sufficient detail to justify your concepts, the logic of your investigation, and the prospect that outcomes will be valuable.

Section 3: The Inquiry Plan for this Research

This section will name the **Research Questions** (RQs) and provide a logical connection for each with the research concern that has motivated the inquiry. The logic of the inquiry, its procedural rationale, the researcher's plan for collecting data, and the estimates of prospects for providing answers to important questions should accompany the listing and explaining of the *research questions* proposed as the major guidance of the planned research.

This section should include a proposed time-table for the following milestones: defining the RQs and shaping them into tasks for the data-gathering procedures; transforming the research questions into items for the actual data-gathering; describing and specifying the population and sample for the study; scheduling the data-gathering (whether interviewing, observing, questioning—or other instrumented information-gathering); processing the data; and summary documentation. This last step will likely need to be subdivided into concerns for transfer of data from field notes, verification, and editorial counsel.

Section 4: The Management of Data in this Research—Findings

Types of Research Methodology. This section, especially, assumes that a qualitative research methodology will be used. **Qualitative research** is concerned with exploring and discovering the characteristics of a situation, usually a social situation. Thus the inquiry is more open and alert to emergent factors

that would be typically pre-determined in a **quantitative research**. Section 4 is fundamentally different for the two major types of social inquiry.

Qualitative research is not guided by specified hypotheses, though it ultimately serves as the shaper and source of the hypotheses that guide **Quantitative research**. Without the descriptive foundation that qualitative procedures provide, the task of hypothesis-building would lack guidance.

Choosing the Research Mode. From a scientific and philosophical perspective, there is no legitimate contest between the two types of inquiry. Both are needed. Each facilitates understanding of phenomena in the natural, social, or psychological universe. Each answers questions. Each utilizes a rigorous process for developing knowledge. Each is scientific, if implemented in keeping with empirical standards.

Two Purposes of Scientific Research. But here the similarities end. The two major types of research serve differing purposes. **Qualitative** research is concerned with development of the phenomena through *descriptive procedures*. **Quantitative** research is concerned with building theory through the *testing of hypotheses*. The logical sequence of these two processes is evident; it centers on the theory-building paradigm in which description comes first, to identify the components and the interactions evident in the phenomenon, and completing this first chapter of inquiry by proposing the relationships and functions of these interactions. These proposals are formed into hypotheses to allow the second process: testing the hypotheses by use of more refined observations (usually controlled in laboratory conditions). Standards in science insist on models of data analysis that are based on the logic of experimentation. In simplest terms this means that the situation is to be examined (measured) before and after the treatment (often called the *intervention*). Statistical tests are then used to determine the probability of the difference (change, if any) occurring by chance. Findings are then interpreted (explained) in terms of the probability that the intervention contributed to or caused the change.

The model for experimental research is strong in terms of the probability that what has been observed is not a chance occurrence. The major weaknesses of the experimental model are that change that is thus established may be relatively unimportant or the extent of change is inconsequential. Further, the contrivance of experimental conditions may create unrealistic constraints or biasing of the environment sufficient to lead to distortions of the measurements. Another matter that is often overlooked is the necessity of finding reliable and valid measurement procedures which will not introduce interferences or distortions in the data-gathering.

Outcomes of Qualitative and Quantitative Studies. The following lists suggest the major contributions of each type:

Qualitative studies . . .

- Build the necessary vocabulary and thereby enable communicable description.
- Discern and describe the apparent inter-play between factors in a system.
- Determine coincidences and possible dependencies and co-dependencies.
- Enable further exploration to identify additional components and relationships.

Quantitative studies . . .

- Allow for hypothesis-testing in a reasonably stable environment.
- Accommodate the conditions needed for complex statistical analysis.
- Provide evidence on interactions between and among factors in a system.

Establish cause-and-effect relationships.

Section 4 must include a description and explanation of each of the anticipated statistical treatments of all quantitative data that will be collected within the research.

Each of the research questions should be carefully linked to the supporting data that will provide the field a basis for deeper and more disciplined understanding of this factor or variable. That may sound simple, but it requires careful discipline in the inquiry, discovery, and testing, as well as calling upon the researcher's creativity and communication skills to compose the text needed for effective dissemination.

The task is to search out, to observe in action, and thus to describe what seems to be occurring. As soon as the possible interactions of factors within the process are identified, they can be tested for predictable consequences through experimentation.

Section 5: Interpretation of the Findings—Reaching Conclusions

Section 5 of the proposal is likely to be a relatively brief piece that represents one of the following three generalized models, prefaced by the following statements:

Model One. "The findings will be summarized and presented. They will be presented in such a way as to demonstrate their relevance to the research questions which have guided this study."

Model Two. "The findings have demonstrated the extreme difficulty of reaching conclusions about these matters. In a subsequent study the researcher would be well advised to deal with the difficulties encountered and to develop a simpler research plan that will deal more effectively with the following factors: . . ."

Model Three. "Findings from the various research questions are brought together in this chapter to illustrate what can be supported on the basis of this inquiry. The intention is to relate each of the themes noted in the findings to the facets of the research problem for which they provide new insights or add more confidence to previous evidences."