Research Proposals in the Social Sciences

A research proposal is a very specific genre of writing. The stakes are often high: research funding or a postgraduate study may rest on the success of our proposal. Like any other genre of writing, a good research proposal takes time, multiple drafts, and a clear understanding of the task at hand.

What is the Purpose of a Research Proposal?

- To persuade your reader of the value of your research question.
- To show you have a clear idea of where your research sits in existing knowledge.
- To demonstrate how you plan to answer your question.

Consider Answering these Questions:

1. What is your research puzzle/ central research question?
2. Why is it important?
3. How do you propose to solve it?

What is a Research Puzzle?

The research puzzle is the heart of the research proposal and the most intellectually complex part of the proposal. Therefore, it will require the most work. A helpful way to start is to separate out the component parts of the research puzzle: What are your research objectives? What do you want to learn by conducting this research project. What questions will get you there?

What are Your Research Objectives?

Often we are drawn to our research topic because it resonates with a personal experience or professional expertise. It is vital that we find our own research interesting because, if we are not interested in the answers to our own questions, others certainly won't be. However, "interesting" is hard to translate into research objects. We have to be more specific and do some excavation work into why we are interested in a particular topic by asking what we want to learn through our research. There are many different kinds of possible research outcomes, e.g. Are you proposing an empirical analysis? A conceptual analysis? A normative analysis? Do you wish to generate new theory or test existing theoretical frameworks? Do you have a burning desire to turn the theoretical assumptions of your field on its head? Your research objectives will determine your research question, so take some time to figure out what you want to discover or prove through your research.

Research Questions

Our research objectives will determine our research questions, but we also have to be careful about how we formulate our research questions. As we're likely to be drawn to research topics about which we feel strongly, there is a risk that our research questions are not questions but rather statements of what we currently believe to be right.

Example:

Your research objective may be to understand the relationship between political leadership and the preservation of democratic norms. You might look around and think that the US is a good case study because you feel either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris is damaging the strength of longstanding political traditions. So, you might start out with a research question like this:

> **How is Kamala Harris' candidacy damaging democratic principles and traditions in the United States?**
>
> or
>
> **How is Donald Trump's candidacy damaging democratic principles and traditions in the United States?**

Here, the opening premise suggests that either Kamala Harris' or Donald Trump's leadership style <u>is</u> damaging democratic norms in the US. We are <u>assuming an answer in the question</u> and therefore our answer is at risk of bias from the outset. In other words, the nature of the questions risks not being well-intentioned research. A more intellectually honest way to formulate the same question might be:

> **To what extent and how is Kamala Harris' candidacy impacting democratic principles and traditions in the United States?**
>
> or
>
> **To what extent and how is Kamala Harris' candidacy impacting democratic principles and traditions in the United States?**

Here, we are maintaining greater objectivity and an openness to <u>identifying answers based on the evidence</u> we find through our research. We are avoiding preconceived value judgements and allowing for the possibility that the relationship between political leadership and the preservation of democratic principles in our case study might be <u>either positive or negative, or a mixture of both</u>. Our research question now reflects our research objective: we are using the case study of Kamala Harris's candidacy or Donald Trump's candidacy to understand more about the relationship between political leadership and democratic principles.

Research seeks to find something out through systematic inquiry, and to draw conclusions based on evidence. Therefore, we need to formulate our research questions in a way that helps us to evaluate all the available evidence we have in relation to a question.

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UCD Writing Centre resources provide general writing advice only and students should always follow the specific rubric required by their School.

The Role of Literature in Your Research Proposal

The role of a Literature Review in a research project is often misunderstood. It is **not** where you describe everything you have read in relation to your topic. The function of a literature review is to demonstrate the value of your research project by analysing prior research and identifying an area in which further research can be fruitfully conducted by you.

- Research proposals are generally short. Therefore, you need to think about ways to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the field succinctly. A useful way to do this is to view academic research as a conversation.
- What are the main questions or debates within the field?
- What are the areas of agreement and disagreement among experts?
- Will your research attempt to add clarity to an unresolved question in the literature, or overturn an area of agreement?
- How has the literature previously treated questions like yours?
- Does it tend to focus on particular case studies?
- Will you also look at these cases or have you identified a new one that will shine new light on old questions?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of the field, and how will your research move the conversation forward?

Students are often told that research proposals must redress a gap in the literature. However, sometimes there are good reasons why no one has tackled a particular question or case. It may be that the resources required are not available to address a question, or it is impossible to arrive at definite answers because of the essentially contested nature of some social and political concepts. That is why a research proposal must also address the 'how' of research.

How will you conduct your research?

No matter how interesting or urgent your question puzzle, only viable research proposals will be successful. Therefore, you must address how you propose to conduct your research project by clearly demonstrating how it will progress from inception to completion. There are two things you need to think about in your proposal:

1. What is your methodology?
2. What resources/ materials are available to you?

Methodology

Once you have a research question clear, the next step is to outline your data and methods.

- What data will you examine in order to answer your questions?
- If you are using case studies, why these case studies?
- In the universe of cases you could select from, are these cases most similar or most different?
- Are they contrasting case studies?
- What separates them and what unites them?
- Will you be using pre-exiting data or generating new data?
- How will you go about collecting it?
- Have you checked if it is possible to access the data you wish to use?
- Are there any ethical issues you need to consider?
- Are you sure this data will actually be able to answer the research questions you have set yourself?
- And if not, do you need to revise your research question or the data you are using?

The creation of a research proposal is not linear – you will inevitably go back and forth between the research puzzle, the research literature, and your methodology. You can ensure the value and coherency of your research proposal by being open to how your research puzzle and methodology will shape and inform each other.

Resources

You need to make a realistic and pragmatic assessment of the resources you have at your disposal to conduct a piece of original research and tailor your objectives, questions, and methods accordingly. What you can achieve in a final year undergraduate thesis is very different to what you can achieve in a doctoral degree. There is no point writing a research proposal that requires you to interview individuals if you have no funds to travel to meet them. Likewise, there is no point in proposing research that requires you to interview people that you have no way of contacting. Similarly, you will be creating a lot of difficulty for yourself if you need to learn three new languages in order to conduct those interviews. Therefore, think about what you can reasonably achieve in light of the time, money, and skills you already possess. That is not to say you should not try to acquire new skills to conduct new research, but you should be able to point to the time and funds you have to enable you to acquire them. If space allows, it is a good idea to include a research timeline in your proposal to demonstrate you have given thought to how you will complete your project. Your research plan can and will change once you begin. In your proposal, it is sufficient to outline a plausible way forward. That way may be revised as you move into the research itself.

Final Points

- It should now be clear that writing a research proposal requires a lot of preparation.
- Once you have done the hard work of figuring out the what, why and how of your proposal, the next task will be to translate that into a well written proposal.
- Here you will face the challenge of limited space. Therefore, you should endeavour to be direct and succinct in your writing.
- Work with drafts and discuss your ideas with others. This will help you figure out what you really want to say.
- The clearer you are on the elements above, the easier writing will be .

Further Reading

- Della Porta, D. & Keating, M. (eds.) 2008. *Approaches and Methdologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2001. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Matter Again,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Gerring, J. 2012. *Social science methodology: a unified framework,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hancké, B. 2009. *Intelligent Research Design: A Guide for Beginning Researchers in Social Sciences,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Moses, J. W. & Knutsen, T. L. 2007. *Ways of knowing: Competing Methodologies and Methods in Social and Political Research,* Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan
- Schostak, J. & Schostak, J. F. 2013. *Writing Research Critically: Developing the Power to Make a Difference*, Routledge.