

A RECOMMENDED FORMAT FOR DISSERTATION PROPOSALS

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A dissertation proposal is the document you prepare to convince your committee that you have a clear understanding of what you are doing and how you will proceed. If done properly, it will be Chapter One of your dissertation. There is no “ideal” proposal length or format; the key here is quality and clarity. While the actual terminology and order may differ, and there is some variance depending on your advisor, the first chapter of your dissertation should include at least the following elements:

I. Introduction

This section provides a clear, brief discussion of the issue, provides important context, and sets the tone for the project.

2. Statement of the Problem¹

You must offer a clear statement of the research problem that must be both personally interesting (to sustain you during the sometimes tedious research and writing process), intellectually rigorous, AND something that can be completed in a reasonable amount of time.

This section must begin with a one sentence statement of the problem. If it takes more than one sentence, you are probably unclear about the nature of the problem. The importance of the research problem to political science as a discipline must be made clear. You are writing a political science dissertation, not one of history, communications, sociology, or some other discipline. This involves citation of relevant literature from the discipline. You should show that your proposed research addresses a significant problem.

This section identifies the problem in the issue you will study. It provides clear evidence that what you see as the problem is actually the problem.

In the social sciences, the research problem establishes the means by which you must answer the “So What” question. This question refers to a research problem surviving the relevancy test [the quality of a measurement procedure that provides repeatability and accuracy]. Note that answering the “So What” question requires a commitment on your part to not only show that you have researched the material, but that you have thought about its significance.

To survive the "So What" question, problem statements should possess the following attributes:

- Clarity and precision [a well-written statement does not make sweeping generalizations and irresponsible statements],
- Demonstrate a researchable topic or issue [i.e., feasibility of conducting the study is based upon access to information that can be effectively acquired, interpreted, synthesized, and understood],
- Identification of what would be studied, while avoiding the use of value-laden words and terms,
- Identification of an overarching question or small set of questions accompanied by key factors or variables,
- Identification of key concepts and terms,
- Articulation of the study's boundaries or parameters or limitations,
- Some generalizability in regards to applicability and bringing results into general use,
- Conveyance of the study's importance, benefits, and justification [i.e., regardless of the type of research, it is important to demonstrate that the research is not trivial],
- Does not have unnecessary jargon or overly complex sentence constructions; and,
- Conveyance of more than the mere gathering of descriptive data providing only a snapshot of the issue or phenomenon under investigation.

3. Central Research Questions

Here, you provide a brief contextual statement followed by your central research questions. Your questions should be substantial, researchable in a reasonable time frame, and tied to the problem(s) you identified in the previous section.

Qualitative research questions are the why and wherefores rather than asking “how often” something occurs and how widespread it is. In qualitative research we ask things like: who is doing or involved in something, how is it done, for what kind of reasons? What is done, what kind of steps are followed in what kind of order, what kind of strategies are used, what are the consequences of doing or not doing something, why is this like this, wherefore is it done and why?

Below you find a selection of qualitative research question based on my teaching practice that present good and not so good examples:

Example 1: How do elderly people living in a retirement home perceive their situation and how are they dealing with it? This question can be approached using a qualitative approach as you can talk with the elderly about it. A questionnaire is not appropriate as you can probably not come up with all the possible answer categories.

Example 2: How does the image of the ideal man influences the male population between the ages 20 and 35? The question, as formulated above, is probably difficult to answer in either a single qualitative or quantitative study. One first needs to know what the image of the ideal man is. Maybe there is not just one but a number of ideal images. This question could be followed up on in a qualitative study. For finding out how this influences a particular segment of the male population, however, a representative survey would need to be conducted.

A qualitative research question should not be too broad, but also not too narrow. And you should be able to examine it at all. A prerequisite is that you can gain access to the field. You may have formulated a perfect qualitative research question, if putting it into practice requires talking to all elected officials in a jurisdiction and you do not have the right connections, your project cannot be realized. Before you continue to invest a lot of time and effort in a research idea, check out whether you can find participants.

4 Research Hypotheses

A research hypothesis is a testable prediction or statement about the relationship between two variables. Ordinary hypotheses frequently concern causal relationships between constructs as behaviors have causes.

5. Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

This part of the proposal develops or adopts a set of logically related abstract ideas that are central to your research problem. The principal issue here is the phenomena you propose to analyze and the justification for studying them. The framework must include a definition of key terms and relationships.

6. Research Methodology

This section discusses the method you will use to collect and analyze the data necessary to answer your central research questions, test your research hypotheses, or both. Here, you should explain why you chose your method, why it is most appropriate, and what other methods you considered and why you did not employ. Minimally, this section should:

1. Define the unit of analysis or observation. Here, you should explain why some issues are not included (limitations)
2. Data collection instruments and/or data sources (e.g. content analysis, interviews (elite or otherwise), historiography, regression analysis, surveys, experiments, field work, participant observation, archival research, mixed methods, longitudinal studies, etc.)

7. Significance of the Study

While every author thinks his or her dissertation is significant, you must make the case as to why your research project matters. Don't over-sell what you are doing, but demonstrate to your committee which voids in the literature or research in your area you intend to fill, or what new ground you intend to break.

8. Literature Review

This part of the proposal will likely grow as your research continues beyond the proposal phase. It should, at proposal defense, be sufficiently developed to demonstrate significant knowledge of the previously conducted research related to your topic. You should identify any themes that consistently emerge, if any, in previous research. Remember, you can't be an expert on your topic without a significant knowledge of what has been done before.

9. Chapter Overview

This section gives the committee a roadmap for understanding where you intend to go with your research. You are to spend a sentence or two describing each chapter you intend to write.

10. Bibliography

Like the literature review, this section will evolve as the research continues. Be sure to format it properly from the start to remove the need to go back to it at the end of the project.

Endnotes

1. Adapted from: University of Southern California, USC Libraries Research Guide, <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/introduction/researchproblem>, accessed on 10.17.16. See also, Bryman, Alan. "The Research Question in Social Research: What is its Role?" *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 10 (2007): 5-20; Castellanos, Susie. *Critical Writing and Thinking*. The Writing Center. Dean of the College. Brown University; Ellis, Timothy J. and Yair Levy Nova Framework of Problem-Based Research: A Guide for Novice Researchers on the Development of a Research-Worthy Problem. *Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline* 11 (2008); Thesis and Purpose Statements. *The Writer's Handbook*. Writing Center. University of Wisconsin, Madison; Thesis Statements. *The Writing Center*. University of North Carolina; Tips and Examples for Writing Thesis Statements. The Writing Lab and The OWL. Purdue University.