Feedback on Developing a Research Proposal

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Recipe for a Research Proposal: "Fill in the Blanks"

Contrary to widespread opinion, there is nothing magic about developing a research proposal. Fill in the blanks below, and you will have one.

1. Title of research proposal _____

2. This research is concerned with the following problem or issue: _____

3. The research question that I will address regarding this problem or issue is: _____

4. My answer (or proposition) to this question is: _____

5. My reasons for this answer are: _____

6. I assume that this answer (proposition) holds under the following conditions: _____

7. The key concepts in this answer that I will investigate empirically are: _____

8. The research will be designed as follows: _____

9. The research results will address the research problem/issue as follows: _____

This "recipe" for a research proposal covers the bases of the ES "Diamond Model"

- Problem formulation (items 2 & 3) – deal with recognizing and grounding a problem in reality, and developing a researchable question that is relevant and important to a known group of people.

- Theory building (items 4-6) -- include formulating an answer to the question, and justifying it with a logical argument (consisting of a claim, reasons, evidence, reservations, and qualifications).

- Research design (items 7&8) – focus on developing an operational research model (concepts, variance/process design, measurement, sampling, data collection, and other procedures) to empirically assess the answer.

- Problem solving (item 9) -- deals with interpreting and applying the research findings to both address the research problem experienced by a specific group of people, and to advance knowledge in a scientific domain.

Student Feedback on Research Proposal Recipes

From the brief recipes, I can detect false starts and inconsistencies, but not whether your efforts will result in good research proposals.

Title.

What's in a title? The essential creative germ.

The Problem -- the issue existing in reality, be it in academe or practice.

Some False Starts:

1. Tendency to state the problem as a solution
    a) E.g. lack of something (resources) implies the solution that more of it solves the problem.
2. Problems stated in vague, abstract, general forms are too far from concrete reality.
    a) E.g., "Market competition requires firms to be more efficient."
    b) A research problem does not exist out there; it is an inference drawn and owned by specific people about an observed set of events or characteristics.
    c) If you can't provide a concrete description of the problem up close, then you probably have not faced the problem and you don't know its intricacies.
    d) If you can't provide data on the prevalence of the problem from afar, then you probably don't know the scope or generality of the problem.
3. A research problem is not a question.
    a) E.g., "How should organizations be structured?"
    b) Why study organization structure unless it addresses a problem? What is the problem that motivates the need to study structure?
4. A research problem is also NOT:
    a) An introduction or background context to a study
    b) A conclusion to a study
5. Problem is assumed to exist; do not take the problem/reality to be self evident.
    a) Describe, demonstrate, exemplify the problem; don't assert its existence
    b) Authoritative opinion is no substitute for description of problem in reality.
    c) Use a personal observation; a concrete experience to situate your problem.
6. A phenomenon is emerging and has received little research
    a) There may be good reasons for lack of prior research; the phenomenon may not be researchable or not worth researching.

b) Statement of no research is a solution, not a problem. Why is research needed?

c) If a phenomenon merits research, can have three kinds of questions:

i) How does it act, change over time, or differ from others?

ii) What are its antecedents? (Treat phenomenon as a dependent var)

iii) What are its consequences? (Treat concept as independent var)?

7. You might start with contradictory or conflicting principles, and work out conditions of paradox.

a) If you can work out opposing views logically, there may be no need for research.

b) Identify the empirical facts on which oppositions turn, which then can become your research question.

The Question – the specific, researchable part of the problem that you will investigate.

1. There is a disconnect if it is not evident how your question bears on your statement of the problem or issue.
2. Preordained questions:
   a) Advocacy: Why don't managers listen? Implies that more listening is good.
   b) Presumed solutions: e.g., listening may not address the problem.
   c) Presumed models: does Z moderate or mediate X-->Y relationship
   d) Dichotomous questions (with yes-no answers) tend to be analytically weak
3. State research question to be open to plausible alternative solutions.
   a) E.g. Under what conditions should people do A, B, or C?
4. Some questions are too general to be researchable
   a) E.g., how can organizations improve their performance? Is much too vague.
   b) Optimality questions (How do X best) are often not researchable.
5. Some have too many questions. Select one good question
6. Some questions could be answered with a more penetrating problem statement. For example, answers already exist or are known for the question that is posed.

The Proposition -- the analytical answer to the question about the problem

1. Does your proposition directly answer your research question about the problem?
   a) There is a disconnect if it does not.
2. Formulate the two most plausible alternative answers to your research question.

a) Maintain a critical attitude

b) Increase likelihood of making a research contribution.

c) Propositions of finding results different from zero or random chance are often a cheap triumph; our knowledge of subject may be more advanced.

3. Propositions often stated with far too complex a model.

   a) Concatenated propositions -- lists of factors; go for the "jugular" factors.

   b) Complicated with contingent, moderating, & mediating relationships

      i) Do you know the problem/reality that well to be that precise?

      ii) Tendency to over-engineer conceptual model

   c) Parsimonious proposition -- go for relationships between a few concepts that "carve at joints" between truly plausible alternatives.

   d) A good problem statement helps you "prune" propositions to critical few.

Reasons -- Do you explain why you think your answer is correct and better than the status quo or a plausible alternative answer?

e) A good explanation is a strong argument.

f) A sound argument consists of a claim that is substantiated with clear reasons, empirical evidence, reservations, and qualifications.

The Concepts -- used to answer the question.

1. Where do concepts come from? How many concepts are needed?

   a) There is a disconnect if you can't ground your concepts in the problem description and if not used to answer the question.

2. Keep concepts to a minimum; otherwise get "hair-splitting," confounding or overlap among concepts. Too many concepts produce over-determined systems.

   a) The literature may provide a source for many concepts, select only those concepts that are grounded and vary in the particular reality of your problem.

   b) Your source of concepts often betrays your purpose: Are you addressing a problem or elaborating a conceptual model.

3. Keep your concepts simple (KISS)! Concepts of fit, distance, difference, change and interaction between X and Y are complex.

The Assumptions -- the conditions (not examined) where/when proposition holds.

1. Assumptions are what you take for granted and will not observe empirically.

a) If you observe or intervene in a statement, it is not an assumption.

b) Assumptions deal with the boundaries of your proposition, not with your research design or methods.

2. If a crucial assumption is questionable, perhaps you should make it your proposition.

The Research Design -- the operational model for empirically examining the proposition.

1. Although it may be premature to specify details of your research design, for now it is sufficient to be aware of the following key elements of research design:

   a) Define your variables/events

   b) Unit of analysis

   c) Type of research design

   d) Research laboratory or field setting

   e) Sample size and data collection methods

   f) Data analysis methods

   g) timetable

   - This section of your proposal will become clear once you clarify your research problem, question, and proposition.

Application of Research Results -- how will research findings address the problem?

1. To say that "findings will advance our understanding" is meaningless.

2. Research for Whom? For What? So what? Involve stakeholders in each phase of your study.

   a) Involve stakeholders to feedback, interpret and apply findings

   b) Involve scholars to design and frame scientific reports.

Inter-relationships between different starting points of proposal.

- If you begin with a model (proposition), then work back to tell the reader the research question and the problem addressed by your model.
- If you begin with a research question, then work back to the problem and forward to the proposition.
- If you begin with an exploratory study or a grounded theory-building effort, then sharpen your research question and concepts first, followed by careful problem description and research design for developing a proposition.

Other Caveats:

- Many proposals begin with too complex or ambitious a goal.

    1. Some are goals statements of an area of specialization that interest you.
    2. Some are programmatic statements of a series of research projects.
    3. Some are frameworks useful for mapping literature reviews.
    4. Some are inventories of antecedents or consequences of a phenomenon.

- Some proposals confuse or skip components of theory building. In some:

    1. the research problem is not stated
    2. the research question is no different from the problem statement
    3. propositions are no different from the research question
    4. Jump from problem or question to research design with no concepts, assumptions, or propositions.