Elements of a Proposal

This brief outline has a basic purpose: *To give beginning students direction for developing a quantitative research proposal*. The proposal has the following three major sections: 1) the overview and introduction, 2) the review of the literature and generation of the hypotheses, and 3) the design and method of the study. The proposal document varies from a concise statement of the proposal to a more comprehensive description of the research project. In some graduate schools, the latter takes the form of the first three chapters of a dissertation, illustrated below.

Part One: The Introduction (Chapter 1)

• **Overview—** Start with a general overview of the chapter. In a paragraph, describe the organization of the chapter.

• **Background of the Study**—This is brief section usually of only a page or two that frames the study in terms of contemporary developments in the field. Provide the general setting of the study and foreshadow your research problem.

• **Need and Purpose**—This is an extension of the background; however, it is more specific. Why is this particular study needed? What is the purpose of the study? Create interest and convince the reader that this is an important area. What is the theoretical, research, and practical significance of the study?

• **Definition of Concepts**—*Briefly* define each of the important terms and concepts of the study. The definition of terms should be linked to the specific way in which you will be using the terms and should be consistent with usage in the extant research and theory.

• **Statement of the Research Questions**—What are the general questions and/or hypotheses that guide your study? Make sure that you clearly state the questions that you are trying to answer. In the next chapter, if you can develop a logical argument based on the literature; you generate hypotheses to answer the research questions.

• **Scope and Limitations**

- What is the *scope* of your study? Scope refers to how narrow or broad your study will be. For example, the study may focus on only elementary teachers in Ohio who responded to your research instruments.
- What are the *limitations*? Limitations refer to potential weaknesses of the study. For example, perhaps your study deals only with teachers in a given area or schools.

• **Summary**--Summarize this chapter in a paragraph or two.

Part Two: The Literature Review (Chapter 2)

- **Overview--**Start with a general overview of the chapter. In a paragraph, describe the organization of the chapter.

- **Conceptual Framework**--Review the literature for each concept.

    - Define each concept.
    - Review its conceptual underpinnings.
    - Examine the empirical and theoretical research.
    - Draw conclusions from review for each concept.

- **Theory**—the conceptual framework should culminate with a synthesis of the undergirding theory driving the study.

- **Statement and Rationale for Hypotheses—**Develop a rationale and statement of the research hypotheses. A carefully constructed theoretical argument can result in a model that links many assumptions and hypotheses into one explanation called a model. Most good studies will conclude this chapter with:

    - The *rationale* is the system of logic and evidence that leads you to a specific question or supports the proposed hypothesis. Each hypothesis should have a rationale. In terms of hypotheses, the rationale is often called a theoretical rationale for the hypothesis because it describes the theory (as well as research) supporting the hypothesis.

    - A *research question* asks what is the relationship between two or more variables; it is an interrogative. Research questions often guide exploratory studies, but it is best if you can determine the answers to the questions based on the extant research and theory—that is, develop a set of hypotheses.

    - A *hypothesis* answers a research question; it is a declarative statement that indicates the relationship between two or more variables. State the hypothesis in substantive form, not the null form.

    - A *model* is a theoretical explanation of the relationships, which often encompasses a number of hypotheses and as well as a measurement model. Not all studies will test a model because a model represents a set of integrated hypotheses and theoretical assumptions.

- **Summary**--Summarize the chapter in a paragraph or two.

Part Three: Methodology (Chapter 3)

- **Overview—**Start with a brief overview of the chapter.

- **Sample—**Describe the sample, how it was selected, and the rationale for its selection. How representative is your sample of the population (the target group to which you want to generalize your findings).

- **Design—**If your study is an experimental study, then you need to detail the experimental design of the study.

    - What are the experimental and control groups of the study?
    - How are these groups determined?
    - Is there random assignment to groups and selection of groups?
    - What is the experimental treatment? Describe.
    - How will the researcher manipulate the independent variable?
    - How will the dependent variable be measured?

- **Data Collection—**Describe data collection procedures, that is, how were the data collected.

- **Measures—**For each variable, describe its measure.

    - What kind of measure (e. g. a Likert scale)?
    - Provide a sample of items and the response set for the items.
    - Provide evidence of reliability and validity for each measure.
    - Describe any pilot studies that were done to develop or refine the measures.
    - Provide the full measure in the Appendix.

- **Statistics—**Describe the statistical analyses used to answer each research question or to test each hypothesis. Provide a rationale for the use of each statistic to be used.

- **Summary—**Summarize what was done in this chapter in a paragraph.

Simple Writing Suggestions

- Keep your writing ***simple and concise***; don't try to impress the reader with your vocabulary.

- When the argument is complex or abstract, provide ***concrete examples*** to illustrate.

- Prefer the ***active voice.***
  - Poor—The research method was designed by Tarter (1998).
  - **Better**—Tarter (1998) designed the research method.

- Use the ***past tense*** to express something that has occurred in the past, as when discussing another researcher's work and when reporting your results.
  - Incorrect-- Bandura (1997) argues that high self-efficacy produces higher levels of achievement.
  - **Correct**— Bandura (1997) argued that high self-efficacy produces higher levels of achievement.

- Use the ***present tense*** to express something that did not occur at a specific, definite time or an action beginning in the past and continuing to the present.
  - Incorrect—Since that result, investigators used the new method to reduce hostility.
  - **Correct** -- Bandura (1997) argued that high self-efficacy produces higher levels of achievement.

- Use the ***past tense*** to describe your results (Hostility decreased significantly.)

- Use the ***present tense*** to discuss your results and to present conclusions (results of this experiment indicate that hostility…..

- ***Agreement in Number***—when a sentence contains the pronouns *they* or *their*, *use* a plural antecedent.

  - Incorrect— A teacher sense of efficacy is grounded in their mastery experiences.
  - **Correct**-- A teacher sense of efficacy is grounded in his or her mastery experience.
  - ***Everyone is singular.*** Everyone does his or her own work, not their own work. If it gets awkward, make it plural; students do their own work.

- ***Watch out for "which"*** when "***that***" is appropriate. Go on a "which" hunt. Only use "which" if you can do without the clause that introduces it. In other words, a comma should always precede "which" when used to introduce a nonrestrictive clause.

- Avoid using "since" when you mean "because." Since implies a lapse of time.

- Avoid using "anxious" when you mean "eager."

- If a paragraph goes on for nearly a page, it is too long. Find the place to break it.

- Don't use "while" when you mean "although" or "whereas." While implies concurrent time—happening together.

- Don't use "that" when referring to a person; "who" is correct.
  - Incorrect-- The *girl that* came to dinner went home early.
  - **Correc**t—The *girl who* came to dinner went home early.

- Avoid split infinitives.
  - Incorrect—He made every effort *to diligently inquire*.
  - Correct—He made every effort *to inquire diligently*.

- Unique means without equal; there are no degrees of uniqueness.
  - Incorrect—The dissertation was the most unique one I have ever read.
  - Correct—The dissertation was unique.

- Use *very* sparingly; use a stronger word where emphasis in needed.
  - Not good—She was very pretty.
  - Better—She was beautiful.

- Use *regardless*, not irregardless.

- Data is a plural noun.
  - Incorrect—The data is clear.
  - Correct—The are clear.

This brief list of suggestions comes from a number of sources, including my colleagues Frank Pajares, Anita Woolfolk Hoy, and C. John Tarter. For a more extensive guide to writing, see the classic, Strunk, W. & White, E. B. (2000). Elements of Style, 4th edition. New York: Pearson.