

SOC 3620: RESEARCH METHODS FOR COLLECTING SOCIAL DATA RESEARCH PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

Objective

The objectives for this assignment are for you to apply the sociological imagination to a topic of your choosing so as to produce a respected proposal for research **not to exceed 15 pages in length**. In this proposal you will apply a dominant theoretical approach suitable to your topic from which a set of research hypotheses may be derived. You will also develop a research design describing your plan to gather data, sample respondents or other units of analysis, and measure concepts central to your hypotheses. This is a complicated project but you can do it by committing yourself to this assignment, organizing your thoughts, and working diligently throughout the semester. **Students cannot pass this course without submitting a completed proposal.** By successfully completing this assignment, you will have demonstrated that you are knowledgeable of the research process and can design a research study. Upon completion of this assignment you will know what it means to approach a research problem from the perspective of a social scientist and you will have developed a marketable skill.

The Research Proposal

The first step in creating a research proposal is to come up with an idea or general research topic. Topics may be derived from many sources: personal experience or observation, sociology courses in which you are or have been enrolled, existing social science research and theory.

The next step is to transform your initial idea into a research question or formal hypothesis. To do this, you need to review the literature to find out what is known and not known about the topic. Even if you begin with a well-formed hypothesis, you must review the literature to determine if the hypothesis has been investigated and to establish its practical and theoretical importance. While there are many sources of information on a topic, the most valuable source of recent, credible studies consists of articles in social science journals.

The kinds of journal articles in which you are interested are reports of empirical research. If you are able to locate a very recent research article on your topic, the citations within that article should provide a useful guide to the most relevant prior research. In your literature review, emphasize the most recent research and those studies that seem to represent major advances in knowledge (as indicated, for example, by their frequency of citation).

The immediate purpose of the literature review is to find out what is known about a topic, so that you can identify an original testable hypothesis that builds on previous research and theory. The concluding section of most research articles often provides hints on how to extend the line of inquiry. The author may note, for example, that studies have produced inconsistent results; he or she may offer one or more possible explanations for a particular finding; or the author may speculate about other possible effects of the causal variable. You may propose, therefore, to investigate an explanation of discrepant findings. You might ask yourself, how did the studies differ in their samples and measures? What extraneous variables were not controlled? Or, you may test an explanation or propose a limiting condition of a particular finding. Are there intervening variables that might explain the relationship? Does the finding apply only to the particular samples used in extant studies? Finally, you might propose to investigate other effects of a social condition.

In addition to helping you identify a testable hypothesis, reviewing published research will enable you to learn how the topic has been investigated by other researchers, including measures that have been developed. By paying attention to the style and organization of the articles, you also can learn how to write the literature review and methods sections of your proposal.

Described another way, the literature review sets up the context for your study. A properly executed review of the literature in an area lays the foundation for a successful piece of research. A literature review can be one of the most time-consuming parts of your paper, especially when you are entering a new area of study.

The longer you study a given topic, the easier the literature review will be to write. The two major parts of this process include:

- Identifying the most relevant and significant research in the area. Explore library databases of articles and books to help determine what research you should discuss in your proposal. When you find an article or book centrally related to your topic, read its reference section to find other pieces that might be useful. As you continue doing this, you'll begin to notice that almost everyone references certain works, which indicates that they are particularly crucial.
- Providing careful, well-written summaries of the literature. A good literature review systematically covers all the important research and logically follows the development of an idea. Rather than summarizing every argument a book or article makes, you want to focus on the issues that are most relevant for the study that you are proposing. Don't try to write about every study ever done with any possible connection to your research and all the details of each study. Instead, think about *framing* your topic, and report the relevant and most important issues that emerge. Your literature review should provide you with the theoretical and methodological rationale for the study you are proposing.

The literature review is sometimes called the "theory" section, because many researchers describe their theoretical framework in this section. If your study will test hypotheses using quantitative or qualitative data, you may include a statement of your hypotheses. You must be careful to construct convincing theories that can be proven right or wrong.

A final note about a literature review is that it is a piece of **discursive prose**, not a list describing or summarizing one piece of literature after another (which is an annotated bibliography-see below). It's usually a bad sign to see every paragraph beginning with the name of a researcher. Instead, organize the literature review into sections that present themes or identify trends, including relevant theory. You are not trying to list all the material published, but to synthesize and evaluate it according to the guiding concept of your thesis or research question.

If you are writing an **annotated bibliography**, you may need to summarize each item briefly, but should still follow through themes and concepts and do some critical assessment of material. Use an overall introduction and conclusion to state the scope of your coverage and to formulate the question, problem, or concept your chosen material illuminates. Usually you will have the option of grouping items into sections--this helps you indicate comparisons and relationships. You may be able to write a paragraph or so to introduce the focus of each section. (for more information, see <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>)

Component Parts

Your correctly formatted proposal should explain to me how you would investigate some aspect of social behavior that interests you. Your proposal should be conceptually clear, detailed, organized, feasible, and must follow the steps to effective writing as discussed Babbie's chapter on reading and writing social research (Ch 15). Your completed proposals should include all of the following:

1. **Title page** (not part of page requirement)
2. **Table of Contents** (not part of page requirement)
3. **Summary/Abstract** (not part of page requirement): A paragraph briefly describing what you intend to study and the theory you will likely be testing or utilizing. The summary should also describe the social group you will be studying and how you will sample from that group to obtain research subjects for your proposed study. This paragraph is generally written after one has completed the research proposal and serves to quickly inform the reviewer of the proposal's content. The abstract should follow the table of contents.

4. **Introduction, Statement of the Problem/Research Question, and Justification for the Research:** Here you would describe the issue, problem, or broadly stated research question. Then, you would convey to the reader why this problem is worth investigating (incorporation of the literature [e.g., data from other studies, government statistics, etc.] is extremely important at this early stage since you must support your position by citing the works of others who share your view). After clearly justifying the need to develop a research proposal around your research question, you would then clearly articulate a more narrow version of the research question that you will pursue in this proposal and explain what is important or unique about this narrow or specific research question.
5. **Review of the Literature:** This is a critical part of your research proposal. Choose your topic and do a review of current and past scholarly work on the topic. You are expected to use a variety of sources for information to supplement your proposal but you must have a **minimum of 5 articles** from recognized academic journals in the literature review section. **A minimum of 10 sources is required.**
6. **Adoption of a Theoretical Paradigm or Theory and Statement(s) of Hypothesis:** A section *describing and explaining* your choice of theoretical paradigm or more specific theory (Can be integrated into literature review section). I expect a clear articulation of the adopted paradigm or theory (i.e., what are the assumptions of the theory?) in this section and a solid explanation of how and why it is applicable to your proposed research. You will also prepare a section detailing your statement(s) of hypothesis. Since hypotheses are theoretically grounded statements that predict a relationship among variables, the logic of your hypotheses should be clear from reading your theory section. You must also clearly describe all of your variables and type (independent, dependent, intervening, control, etc.).
7. **Method of Data Collection and Operationalization of Variables:** This part of the proposal is one of the most important and will describe how you plan to gather data or make your observations. **Remember, you will not actually collect or analyze data in your proposals!!!** You should describe in detail your study population, how will sample from the population, what data collection method you will employ, and how you will measure all variables central to your proposed study. Solid measurement entails the inclusion of a set of definitions for each concept/variable as well as a detailed listing of questions you might ask to address each concept. Also, you must include a detailed explanation of the strengths and weaknesses of your selected data collection method over alternative methods. Finally, discuss the cost and accuracy of your methods by submitting a working budget.
8. **Implications for Social Policy or Action:** This will be the concluding section of your proposal. Assuming that your data were collected, analyzed, and your hypotheses supported, you will prepare a section describing how your research might influence social policy, law, action, or organizational practices.

Organization of Parts of the Proposal

I. Introduction.

- A. Statement of the research topic.
- B. Rationale for the proposed study.
- C. Literature review.
- D. Formal statement of the specific hypothesis to be investigated.

Part A consists of a very brief, general statement in one or two sentences of your research topic or question. This should be followed by a slightly longer subsection (of a paragraph or two) that establishes the importance of the topic. Part C is where you establish scientific relevance by showing how your investigation flows from existing theory and research. Finally, in the last subsection, you should clearly state the specific hypothesis of your investigation. Here is where you clearly identify your independent and

dependent variables. Also be sure to identify relevant extraneous variables that you plan to measure and/or control, and explain their relevance.

II. Methods.

- A. Overall description of the research design.
- B. Theoretical and operational definitions of all concepts.
- C. Specification of the unit of analysis and description of sampling design.

First, you should provide an overview of the major methodological choices you have made. Indicate your general approach--experiment, survey, use of available data, or some combination of approaches--and the specific design and data-collection method you will use. If you propose a survey, for example, indicate the mode of data collection--face-to-face or telephone interview or mailed questionnaire--that you intend to use. After you have outlined the basic design, if you haven't done so already, you will need to offer theoretical or conceptual & operational definitions of key concepts. Also, you need to make sure to identify them in terms of IV and DV's. Then you need to specify how you will measure each variable. If you are going to conduct a survey, measurement will involve the construction of specific questions or a series of questions representing each variable. Finally, identify your target population, the sampling design you will use (type, probability v. nonprobability, etc.), and the number of cases you will select. Throughout this section it is very important to justify every methodological choice. If you choose existing measures, for example, be sure to provide evidence of reliability and validity. And, be sure to justify your sampling design in terms of cost and accuracy by submitting a working budget.

Assignment Schedule

Jan 22-TOPIC: (15 points) Submission of the research question/topic statement. Here are a few points to assist in the organization of the topic statements. 1) What is your broad research question? 2) What is/are your dependent and independent variables? 3) What is your specific research question and hypothesis or hypotheses? 4) Based on your initial review of the literature/studies that have examined similar research questions, what data collection techniques did researchers use to examine this type of research question and what were their research findings? 5) Based upon your review of the literature/studies, what theoretical paradigms or theories were tested/developed? 6) What theoretical paradigm or theory is most interesting to you based upon what you have read? Explain how it might/does apply to your proposal? {See parts 4, 5, & 6 above}

These ideas must be developed enough so I can ascertain the direction you have taken with your proposal. You are also required to submit a typed and correctly formatted reference page (ASA Style) containing at least **four sources from academic journals**. These four sources, as well as others you may have used, must be internally cited at least once within the body of the submission.

Feb 12-LIT REVIEW: (15 points) You are to submit a working literature review section that summarizes at least 2 key issues pertaining to your topic and synthesize 5 scholarly articles around the key issues. Secondly, in a separate section, you must conceptually discuss your **DEPENDENT VARIABLE** (state the research question and hypothesis) and list all relevant attributes (indicators and dimensions as they pertain to your specific research question). This must be a comprehensive and complete description of your dependent variable. (I will provide you with a handout containing more detail.)

March 6-METHODS: (30 points) You are to submit a comprehensive working methods section reflecting each of the issues addressed in part 7. Submit this work with a cover sheet.

April 15-PROPOSAL: (100 points) Submit a finalized proposal reflecting a skillfully synthesized "fresh package" of all that was called for (the above parts 1-8) in this assignment including a complete references page. (Questionnaire's, interview questions, etc. are to be added to the end of the paper in an appendix and do not count toward the page limit).

Helpful Writing Tips

Here are some common writing errors to avoid: first, treat the word “**data**” as a plural (e.g., these data support my hypothesis); second, avoid confusing the words “**affect**” and “**effect**,” which often are used in conveying causality. In verb form, “affect” means to influence or have an effect on (e.g., the results imply that binge drinking affects academic achievement). In noun form, “effect” means a result, or anything brought about by a cause (e.g., the study shows that binge drinking has a negative effect on academic achievement). You should also write in **active voice** (See ASA Style guide on active and passive voice). Do not use **contractions** such as don’t in your writing. Do not **change tenses** throughout your writing either. Finally, make sure to provide your reader with a ‘**roadmap**’ that charts the course of your paper and makes sure that all parts are connected in a logical manner from the very beginning.

References and citations serve several purposes. Most importantly, they give credit to whom it is warranted. In addition, they acknowledge the value of others' work, create an important record of the line of scholarly inquiry, and allow readers to evaluate the accuracy of your conclusions and to pursue the subject further by examining the original documents.

All work that is a source of the ideas presented—whether quoted, paraphrased, or summarized—should be cited properly. To summarize is to condense the original into a sentence or two in your own words; to paraphrase is to follow the original statement or passage more closely but still restate it in your own words. In paraphrasing, do not use whole phrases, many of the same words, or sentence structures similar to the original. To quote a source is to extract a word, phrase, sentence, or passage from the original and insert it into the text. Quoted material should be enclosed within double quotation marks or, if lengthy (longer than three typewritten lines), indented as a block quote.

In general, it is better to summarize or paraphrase others' ideas than to present a stream of quotations. Your paper will be easier to read and will better convey your understanding of what you have read. Use direct quotations when the original words are particularly well chosen—clear, incisive, or powerful.

If you use another writer's words or ideas without citing the source, you have committed an act of plagiarism. Faculty members who find students guilty of plagiarism file a report with the Department Chair and the Office of Judicial Affairs and it results in assigning a grade of zero on the assignment, possibly the course, or dismissal from the University.

Documentation of sources should be presented in two places: (1) in the text, to identify and credit the source immediately following its use; and (2) following the text, in a list of references with more detailed information about each source. Cite the source whose ideas and/or words you are using. If you are citing work referenced or quoted by another author (and you do not have access to or have not read the primary source), cite the original author "in" the work where you found it; for example, (Rossi in Singleton and Straits, 1999:423).