

Developing your research proposal Workshop materials

Notes can be found online at
<http://crawfordphd.wikispaces.com/Developing+your+research+proposal>

Purpose of the research proposal

Source: Punch, K. F. (2010). *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. Los Angeles: Sage. Chapter 2

A research proposal is a document that describes

- What the proposed research is about
- What it is trying to achieve or find out
- How it go about doing that
- What we hope to learn and why it is worth learning (p. 9)

Research proposals themselves may be the product of a considerable amount of research.

Judgements that are made about your proposal include:

- Is the proposed research feasible an 'doable'? There needs to be sufficient information to assess this
- Is it worth doing? Are you proposing useful research that is informed by current debates in the area?
- Can you do it? Have you prepared properly in terms of the background knowledge, understanding of the problem, timelines, funding, resources, and training required?
- Will it produce a useful thesis? (pp. 11 - 12) One that will not only pass, but that will contribute to our understanding of what the problem you are researching

Models of research

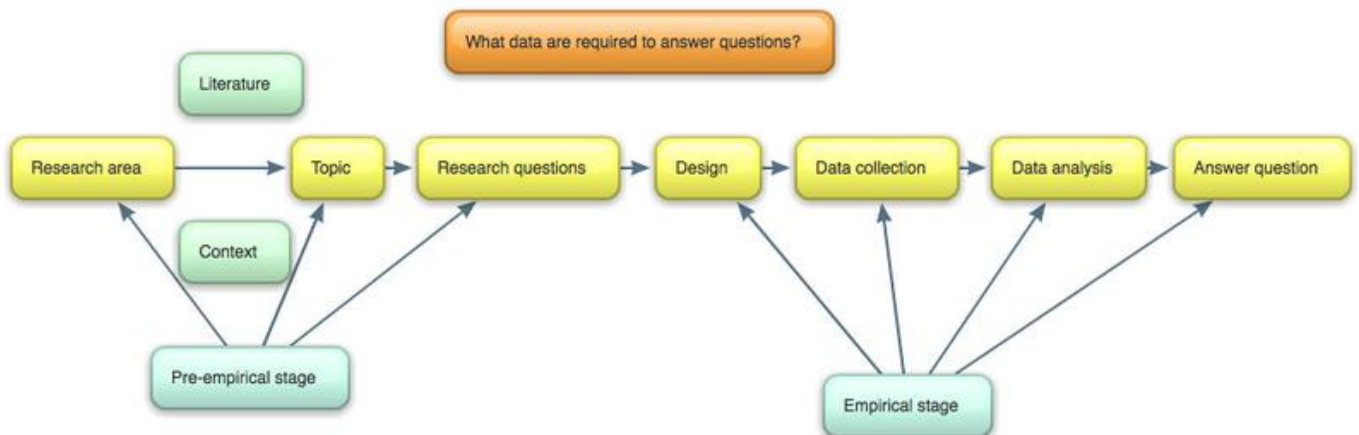
Source: Punch, K. F. (2010). *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. Los Angeles: Sage. Chapters 2 and 3

In quantitative research, problems normally precede research questions along the sequence of

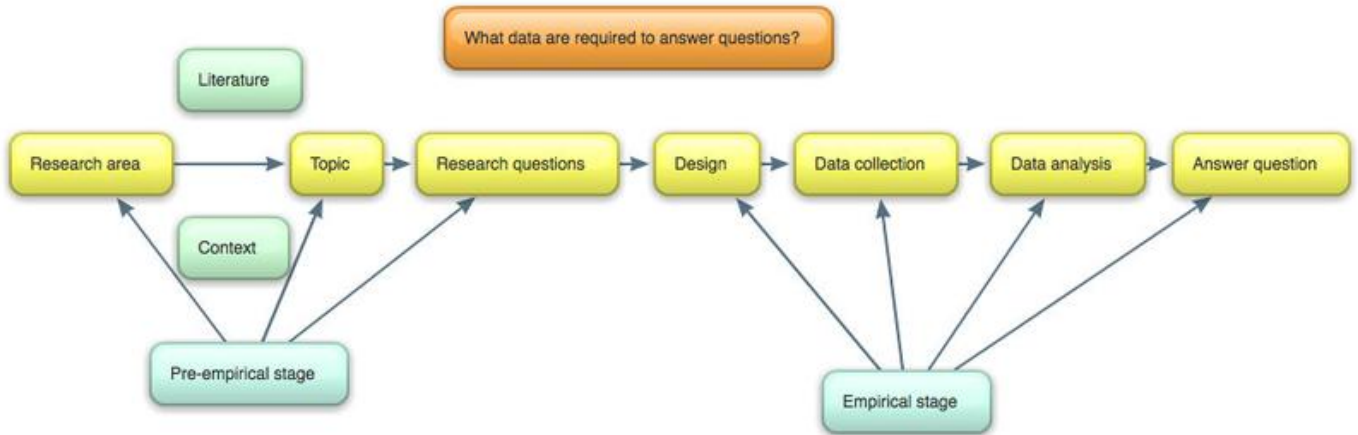
- Problem > Questions > Purpose > Hypothesis (p. 15)

In more qualitative research, questions may be central. In some cases, especially in research that tends more to 'unfold', the distinction between question and problem may be less obvious. (p. 15)

Model of research without hypotheses (p. 17)



Model of research with hypotheses (p. 28)



Theory and literature

Source: Punch, K. F. (2010). *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. Los Angeles: Sage. Chapter 4

Theory

- Are you undertaking a descriptive or an explanatory study? An explanatory study will already imply description (p. 35).
- Are you undertaking a theory verification or a theory generation study? Theory verification aims to test propositions (hypotheses) derived from theory; theory generation seeks to develop a theory to explain phenomena (p. 36)

Pre-structured research (mostly quantitative research) (p. 37)

- Pre-specified research questions
- Tightly structured research design
- Pre-structured data

Unfolding research (mostly qualitative research) (p. 37)

- General open-ended questions
- Loose design
- Data not pre-structured

[See the literature review pages for more information](#)

Focussing your proposal

Source: Gail Craswell. *Writing for Academic Success: A Postgraduate Guide*. Sage Publications: 2005.

Below are questions to think about when focusing a proposal. Again, though, which questions are relevant and the amount of detail included in answering them will depend on the degree in which you are enrolled, the nature of your research, the stage you are at in your degree and disciplinary requirements, if any.

What is your field of research or topic of investigation?

The answer to this question tells what you are setting out to investigate, what you want to look at or focus on. This could take the form of identifying the field of research in which you are interested, the general topic area, or laying out a specific topic. These distinctions are indicated below by way of an example from Linguistics, which you can adapt to your own situation:

- Field of research: Second language acquisition
- General topic area: Forms of address in different cultures
- Specific topic: Intercultural problems in teaching forms of address to Thai learners of English as a second language.

A proposal is just that. What is proposed is not fixed for all time. Do not be overly concerned when proposing a topic that you will have to stay with it, particularly not early in your degree. Topics are sometimes changed or the focus shifts, along with other aspects of the study, during the first phase of a research degree. Do take care though, as a radical change of topic might mean that an appropriate supervisor cannot be found, or that your designated supervisor no longer feels able to supervise your project.

What is the context of your study?

It is usual to provide relevant background information so as to contextualise your research. This can be done by way of a mini-literature review, which also allows justification of the foci and interests of the research you are proposing. If you have done little reading, provide general background information by way of topic generalisations. Ask yourself:

- What extent of background information on my topic am I able to provide?
- How does what I want to do fit in with research already done in the field? It may be that you have only a limited, general knowledge of what research has been done, but that would be sufficient for a proposal accompanying an application.

Your purpose here is to describe the broad context of your study—the BIG PICTURE—and then say which aspects of the research field you want to consider.

What is the primary research objective or central research question?

The answer to this question tells why you are undertaking your proposed research. There are different language forms encapsulating the why. Again, I am drawing on the Linguistics example above to illustrate my point.

- One language form: stating the primary research aim or objective.
My aim is to determine the range and nature of the intercultural problems in teaching Thai learners of English as a second language, and the reasons for these.
- An alternative language form: setting up the central research question
What are the types and causes of intercultural problems in teaching Thai learners of English as a second language?

You may also be testing a hypothesis (even more than one), which is defined as 'a proposition put forward merely as a basis for reasoning or argument, without any assumption of its truth' (New Shorter OED). Or you may be expected to 'lay out a problem' in some detail (see Appendix 1).

Having clarified your major aim or central question, break this down into a set of subsidiary aims or questions, like so:

- Central question
 - How are social identities being constructed by highlands migrants living in the urban areas of X [country named]?
- Subsidiary questions:
 - What conceptions are held by Y migrants about the village and the people who remain there?
 - What concepts are held about ethnic 'others' who are the neighbours of Y migrants in the urban settlements and how do these conceptions influence multi-ethnic social interactions?
 - What appeals are made to broader ethnic, class or even national identities and what are these appeals based on (e.g. as highlanders, the poor, as people of X country)?
 - What do these examples of the practice of identity suggest about processes of nation-making in X?

If yours is an early proposal, there is unlikely to be such clarity about the questions driving your research, so just do your best.

What is the value of your research project?

This question needs addressing if you are doing a PhD and perhaps a Master by Research, but not necessarily for a shorter thesis. A PhD requires an original contribution to the research field. Answering this question allows you to convey the nature of your contribution and say why you think it important to conduct the research. The significance of your research project can be conveyed through discussion of the existing literature—its strengths and weaknesses and how your research fits in.

Apart from providing information on the contribution you expect to make to research, it may also be important for you to mention practical or professional value attaching to your proposed research, e.g. industry application, commercial uses, reform recommendations, etc.

Do you need to discuss theory or methodology?

If theory, modelling or methodology is likely to be a special consideration in your research, provide information to this effect:

- Do you need to, and can you, discuss your theoretical framework or your choice of model?
- Do you need to discuss issues of methodology relevant to your research? It may be appropriate, for example, to discuss your choice of statistical methods for analysing data, issues relating to selecting a sample population for study, the research instruments or measurement devices you will use, experimental procedures, or the different methodologies—their strengths and weaknesses—available for comparative research along with your preference. Give reasons for your choices and decisions.

Methodology should not be confused with procedure (the next point discussed):

A rationale for the methods used to gather and process data, in what sequence and on what samples, taken together, constitutes a research methodology. This is not a grand term for 'list of methods', but an informed argument for designing research in a particular way. A research methodology needs to be appropriate for the research problem, and the justification that this is so should form part of a thesis

While it is impractical to include an entire methodology section/chapter, the extract below points towards Cryer's meaning:

- When states promote industrial development they assume direct involvement in processes of capital accumulation, even as their effectiveness in this pursuit is strongly determined by the international division of labor. For this reason, X's [reference] suggestion linking states' activities to development outcomes requires,

first, taking states as transformative actors in their own right, and second, examining state agencies' transformative activities as they are embedded in definite networks of social relations. **To meet these methodological challenges, my study will incorporate a comparative institutional approach [reference], as well as the sectoral approach of Y [reference] and the commodity chains approach of Z [reference]. In addition to their value as theoretical frames of reference, these approaches offer unique methodological insights for procedures of data collection and analysis.** (emphasis added)

This is a typical way to present an argument for a particular approach to the exclusion of other possibilities, though your discussion of methodology may be altogether more detailed and comprehensive, even constituting an entire chapter.

How do you intend to proceed with your research?

If yours is an early proposal, say something about procedure. The answer to this question tells how you intend to go about your research, what activities you will need to carry out and in what order. It might be appropriate, for example, to provide information about general plans for fieldwork if this applies (e.g. locations, populations targeted, etc.), to discuss experimental or test plans, or to identify primary sources to be accessed (e.g. archival materials). Of course, in a more comprehensive proposal, all these matters might be covered in a methodology chapter, justifying and validating your approach.

The idea is to give a general overview of what you think needs to be done to complete your research. Include as much information as you can so that a reader can determine any likely problems, unforeseen by you, in carrying out the research (e.g. difficulty accessing and using materials or equipment, locating suitable source materials, undertaking fieldwork or anything else). Mention any potential problems you anticipate so as to get feedback.

Is it appropriate to include a substantial review of the literature?

The inclusion of a substantial literature review is only likely if you are six months or more into your degree.

Do you need to discuss relevant work experience?

Where appropriate, give a brief account of any work you have done and are presently doing, putting special emphasis on anything, including courses you might be teaching, relevant to the research you are proposing. Work experience may feature prominently, particularly if this is a key reason for receiving strong support in the proposed research from academic referees, and/or this experience is highly relevant to your type of degree (e.g. a Professional Doctorate)

Should you include a timetable for completion of your research?

Probably yes, if you are at the end or beyond the first year of research, but no if it is a proposal accompanying an application for entry.

Do you need ethics clearance for your research?

Ethics clearance is needed for various types of research using animals and humans, including, at times, conducting interviews and doing surveys on human populations. This will not concern you at the point of applying for candidature, but discuss the matter with your supervisor before writing a proposal when you are on course.

Are you likely to need special training to undertake your research?

It is usual in a research degree to undergo training of various types. But if you are likely to need special training that could impact on time to completion (e.g. learning a new language), then mention this.

Are there other questions you should add given your research interests?

Generic proposal outline

Source: Punch, K. F. (2010). *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. Los Angeles: Sage. Chapter 6. p. 61

- Title and title page
- Table of contents
- Abstract
- Introduction: Area, topic, and statement of purpose
- Research questions
 - General
 - Specific
- Conceptual framework, theory, hypotheses
- The literature
- Methods
 - Design: strategy and framework
 - Sample
 - Data collection: instruments and procedures
 - Data analysis
- Significance
- Limitations and scope
- Ethical issues/risk management: consent, access, participants' protection, clearance
- Budget
- Timeline
- References
- Appendices