MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF URBAN STUDIES AND PLANNING

Writing a Research Proposal*

A research proposal can seem, at first, to be a mysterious document, mainly because, at early stages in our investigations, we are not quite sure what we intend to write. We may have more or less of a good idea about a problem that vexes us and that we intend to solve, or a research idea we want to explore, but we haven't determined yet how to satisfy this desire.

The answer to this mystery lies in the document itself, for the research proposal has two major, practical functions:

- It helps you to structure your thinking about how to approach an answer to your problem.

- It convinces your adviser and readers that you have thought through the parameters of your problem and have a good strategy for solving it.

Thus, the preparation of a research proposal, far from being a chore that gets in the way of your getting on with the task, actually provides the means of accomplishing the task, and in many cases can serve as a first draft of the paper itself.

While there is no strict outline for a research proposal, since research projects can vary in the shape and dynamics of gathering and analyzing information, a typical proposal will:

- Identify a practical or research problem and its context, specifying
  (a) the situation that has given rise to the problem, and
  (b) the need that is met in addressing the problem.

- State a clearly defined research question you intend to ask in order to solve this problem. This question should be a combination of
  (a) the subject you intend to explore;
  (b) the question you intend to answer about your subject;
  (c) the significance of your answer in solving the problem and others like it,
  (d) elaboration of the different implications of the research question, substantively linking it to the setting in which it fits; and
  (e) discussion of why the question is important (intellectually, practically, and theoretically).

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* Adapted from Rein, Martin and Mark Schuster (n.d.). "Elements in a Doctoral Research Paper Proposal." Handout for 11.800—Doctoral Research Paper Seminar. Cambridge, Mass.: Department of Urban Studies and Planning, MIT.

Not everyone will attempt a research project that is structured around a formal hypothesis test. But this does not mean that you will not have “priors” as to what you expect to find, and you ought to make those “priors” explicit as much as possible at the outset.

- Summarize the literature you have gathered so far and show its relationship to answering your question. What clues does the literature provide you as to what answers you might find to your questions?

- Describe the methodology or methodologies you would need to engage in to gather further evidence to answer your question, including

  (a) library and on-line database research
  (b) field or case studies
  (c) interviews
  (d) any other sources of information.

  Make the case that this is a reasonable methodology for answering the question you have posed, i.e. establish the fit. Discuss candidly the limits of the methodologies you propose to use; every approach has its limits. Be as specific as you can: How many cases will you need? What will the boundary of your analysis be? What will the unit of analysis be? etc.

- Tell what methods of data analysis would be needed to answer the question, whether quantitative or qualitative. Under the assumption that this is an empirical piece of research and not merely a literature review, you will be gathering some form of data. They may be quantitative or they may be qualitative, but they will need to be analyzed systematically with an explicit research strategy.

- Describe the practical, theoretical, and policy implications and significance of what you intend to find.

- Provide a timeline for completion of the various stages of research: data collection, information analysis, and document preparation.

- Provide the start of a working bibliography.