

SOC 310

METHODS OF SOCIAL

RESEARCH

Southeastern Louisiana University

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Research: Proposal

What is a Research Proposal?

Do you plan to interact with human subjects? Do you plan to obtain government funding? Do you plan to attend graduate school—go on for a Ph.D.? If you answered “Yes” to any or all of these questions, then odds are you will have to write a research proposal.

As its name suggests, the purpose of a proposal is to propose a study or social program you want to conduct. Through the proposal you show those in charge how you understand your subject, what others think about it, how you think things work, and how you plan to interact with social life. Most importantly, your **proposal is an argument**. Above all else, it's you convincing other people, those in power, to let you do what you want to do.

It's worth reiterating this point: the research proposal is an argument. It's you presenting a *pressing* social problem, program, or paradox—i.e. your research question. It's you clearly articulating why it matters. It's you convincing others that you're the best person to address it.

Overview

In this course you will write a research proposal on a topic of your choosing. This is your opportunity to begin thinking deeply about a social phenomenon you want to know more about. Think of it as tool to go from being simply interested in something to becoming an expert.

This proposal should be a unique research effort. That is to say, you may not use a research proposal you have already written in some other capacity, especially if you have received significant feedback on it from a professor. Instead of drawing on a

previous proposal, use this time to think about and develop your next project. This assignment is a great opportunity to explore new ideas you have been meaning to get to.

Proposal Outline/Section Instructions

Your proposal will take the form of the first half of a traditional scholarly research paper. Your proposal will consist of five major sections: 1) an introduction, 2) a review of the literature, 3) a description of your theoretical framework/statement of hypotheses, and 4) a description of your research method. When writing these sections, keep in mind your underlying argument: 1) that your subject is important and 2) that you should be allowed to investigate it.

Introduction

As the title implies, the introduction introduces your audience to your proposed study. More than just setting up what you plan to do, a good introduction should entice your audience. If done correctly, it should make them want to read everything you've written. As said before, your proposal is an argument. The introduction is your first best shot at clearly presenting your social problem, program, or paradox and convincing others that it matters.

Your Introduction **MUST**:

1. Describe the historical/current social context of your subject. (1-2 paragraphs.)
 - A. What is the relevant historical path that lead up to your subject today?
 - B. What is the relevant present context for your subject like right now?
2. Provide a compelling argument explaining why your subject is important (1-2 paragraphs).
3. State your central research question. (1 paragraph.)
 - A. What do you want to know about your subject?
 - B. What don't people know about your subject, but should?
4. Entice your intended audience.
 - A. This is the one place where you should be creative and entertaining. Give your audience your best story.

Page length: 1 page.

Literature Review

The Literature Review is where you show what it is other people have observed about your subject. Remember, your proposal is an argument. There is no better way to show people that you are an expert than by summarizing, organizing, and writing about lots and lots and lots of other studies.

In addition to looking knowledgeable, summarizing the literature is in fact a great way to become knowledgeable. By conducting a literature review, you get to see whose work is similar to your own. More importantly, it shows you what you can do that nobody else has *ever* done before—what you get to be the first to discover. Once you really start reviewing the literature, you'll be surprised by how little anyone has ever done about anything.

Your Literature Review MUST:

1. Describe the factors or conditions others have observed that affect your subject.
 1. With this part, your goal is breadth. Don't get into the nuts and bolts of what you've read. Just state what was observed, cite your sources, and move on.
 2. Cite 10 sources.
2. Briefly summarize the two papers that most resemble your study. (2 paragraphs.)
 1. This part is more about depth—but don't go too deep. Spend slightly more time describing your four studies. Make sure you talk about their: purpose and/or research question, research method, specifically their sample, and major findings.
3. Describe a gap in the literature. What will your study do that few other studies have done before? What are you going to do that is new or different? (1 paragraph.)

Page length: 1 1/2 pages.

Theory/Statement of Hypotheses

Social theory is generally understood as a set of beliefs or rules that argue how, under certain conditions, social life works. Some theories are complex. Routine Activities Theory argues that, in the absence of capable guardians, motivated individuals are more likely to commit crimes against sufficiently suitable targets. Others theories are more straight forward, though not necessarily simpler. Devah Pager showed that race and felony status have an effect on who is hired for a job.

Notably, most social theories are built around the idea of *nomothetic causation*. Recall, nomothetic causation occurs when three criteria are met:

1. The cause is observed to co-occur with the effect (i.e. you don't get one without the other).
2. The cause is thought to happen before the effect.
3. There is some logical reason for the cause to actually have the expected effect.

In this section you will apply these causation criteria and make one causal claim about how your subject works.

Your Theory section MUST:

1. Pick a sociological or criminal justice theory.

2. Describe the theory you selected. Specifically, how does social life work according to your theory? (1 paragraph.)
 - A. HINT: Describe your theory's major tenets or core principles.
 - B. REQUIRED: Define key concepts.
3. Think about your theory and how its major principles apply to your subject.
4. State your hypothesis. (1 paragraph.)
 - A. Make a claim about what factor or condition influences something about your subject.
 - B. State how you know the factor/condition you identified actually occurs before the outcome you expect to happen.
 - C. Provide a logical justification for why this factor/condition *should* have the outcome you expect.

Page length: 1/2 page.

Method

The Method section is where you detail your plan for actually observing your subject. It should give your reader a clear understanding of who or what exactly you plan to study. It should also describe in as much detail as possible how you actually plan to select your analytical units.

Your Method section MUST:

1. Describe your population. (1 paragraph.)
 - A. Describe your target population. In a perfect world, what or who do you plan to study?
 - B. Describe your study population. The world is not perfect. What or who do you think you'll actually get to study? In other words, what or who might be left out?
 - C. Make sure to clearly describe what your unit of analysis is (e.g. classrooms, parishes, students, etc.). Estimate how many analytical units you plan to sample.
2. Describe your research method and how it works. Explain why you think this is the best method to study your subject. (2 paragraphs.)
 1. As part of your answer, correctly state whether this method is qualitative or quantitative. Explain why.
3. Describe the ethical concerns associated with your research method. Describe how you will lessen potential harms to your analytical units. Describe how the benefits of your study will outweigh the harms. (1-2 paragraphs.)
4. Describe your sampling procedure. How will you actually select your analytical units? (1 paragraph.)

5. Describe how you will measure your concepts. In other words, what are your independent and dependent variables and what do they actually look like in real life? (1-2 paragraphs.)
6. (If applicable) Describe all open-ended or interview questions you plan to ask your respondents/informants.
7. From the following list of research principles, select and discuss 5 topics (1 paragraph each): external validity, internal validity, face validity, measurement validity/reliability, random assignment, Hawthorne effect, placebo effect, diffusion of treatment, maturity, attrition, cross-section/longitudinal, ecological fallacy, reductionism. For each topic:
 1. Define what it means in your own words.
 2. Describe how you might actually encounter it in your proposed study.
 3. Explain why the topic is a strength or a weakness for your proposed study.

Page length: 3-4 pages.

Proposal Format

A research proposal is often a lengthy document—in many cases surpassing more than 25 pages (over 11,000 words). In this class you will have to write a sizable document (though nowhere near 25 pages). Your proposal should be between **6-7 pages**.

Formatting requirements include: 1 inch margins all around, double line spacing, and 12 point Times New Roman font. Include page numbers. You should also include a title as well as header information (i.e. student name, class number, date, assignment title). Remember to cite all sources referenced. Plagiarism is strictly prohibited (ANY plagiarism will result in an automatic zero.)

When writing your proposal you should write in *future tense*. In other words, write as though your study is something you plan to do in the future. It is important to write in this way. Otherwise, you may give the impression that you've already started conducting your study—which in some cases is regarded as a serious ethical violation.

Submit an electronic copy of your report via Moodle or email.

Grading Rubric

Criteria	Points**
Introduction Entices the read; Demonstrates an accurate understanding of the historical/social context of the subject; Effectively justifies why the subject is important.	15
Literature Review Provides a detailed review of the literature on the subject selected; Identifies a gap in the literature and discusses how the present study will address this gap.	25
Theory/Statement of Hypotheses Shows correct understanding of a sociological or criminal justice theory; Hypothesis is clearly and correctly stated; Relationship between variables meets criteria for nomothetic causation.	10
Method Clearly identifies study population and analytical units; Selects an appropriate research method and knows how it works; Addresses ethical issues associated with the selected research method; Employs an appropriate sampling method; Understands variables and what it means to measure (i.e. operationalize) them; Demonstrates a strong understanding of the research principles selected.	40
Overall Proposed study is well designed to answer the research question(s) and test the research hypothesis; Proposal expresses the importance of the study throughout.	10

* Scoring for each requirement is based on a 0-1 system (i.e. 0 if absent, 0.5 if moderately successful, 1 if successful). This will determine what percentage of the points you will receive for each criteria category.

** Total points = 100.