

THE 'IDEAL' RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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The following is a short outline of what I believe constitutes an ideal proposal for social science dissertation research or for subsequent research funding. Needless to say, in the real world, no one actually writes “the” ideal proposal and all existing ones are based on some compromise tailored to fit the specificities of a particular project. It may be useful, however, to have this as a template against which to compare your effort – if only to encourage you to think about what you did and did not put into your own proposal.

I. **THE INTRODUCTION:** A proposal has to be introduced. You have to shake hands with it before getting to know it better. This is much more important than many students realize because in many competitions, the reader will be evaluating a large number of proposals and may well not go much further than the first two paragraphs! You have to catch your reader-evaluator’s attention with a compelling idea/theme/ concept/method right at the beginning. Once (s)he has lost interest in what you propose to do, it will be very difficult to get it back.

1. The Idea: What do you want to study?

Describe your topic/theme in a single sentence and follow with one or two short paragraphs “fleshing” out its basic properties: substance, location, key concepts, time period.

2. The Reason: Why do you want to study it?

Explain where the idea came from and why you think it should be researched. Do not hesitate to relate it to normative concerns and/or events in the real political world, but somehow try to tie it into “the discipline” (whatever “it” is).

II. **THE STATE OF THE FIELD:** Develop the relation of your topic/theme to the existing literature by explaining what we think we already know about it and how your work will improve upon or differ from this -- in no more than two or three pages. Insert a mini-bibliography or bibliography by citing specific works and authors to illustrate the breadth, if not depth, of your preparation. If apposite, stress any unusual combination of literatures that you are making (that is known as “inter-disciplinarity” and in some circles is very favorably received).

Complete your critical assessment of what has been written (and not written) on this topic with a statement of what your “posture” with regard to the existing wisdom is going to be. You have two options: (1) basically agree with what has been done and propose to extend it to a “missing case” or an “unlikely setting;” or (2) disagree with it and claim that you are prepared to offer and apply an alternative approach/theory/ analytical test/ methodological technique that is better. The first rests on a logic of confirmation: “no one has yet examined this specific event/case/archive/time period(s) competently and, when I have, I am convinced that it will strengthen the existing theory;” the second involves something like a logic of disconfirmation: “I want to study an anomaly or puzzle that does not fit with what we think we know and, when I am finished, existing theories or methods will have to be revised, if not rejected outright.”

Footnotes in this and subsequent parts of the text are a useful device for setting off parts of your argument and for demonstrating your scholarly vocation.

- III. **THE PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** In this middle section of ca. 7-8 pages, you should restate your initial idea in the form of a “model.” The model does not have to be formal and explicit, but it should indicate both the external parameters: what you are taking for granted and proposing not to study, i.e. the universe of application and the conditions that you believe are shared or can be regarded as constant; and the internal “mechanisms:” what you regard as problematic and are going to study, i.e. the operative variables, the sequence of their occurrence and, especially, the hypothetical causal relations among them. The traditional format for doing this is via a set of “If ... then” hypotheses that, first, define a dependent variable (DV) or variables and, then, specify the independent variable (IV) or, more likely, variables that you believe “explain” variation in it. Needless to say, such a neat separation may not always be relevant and what is a dependent variable at time α may become an independent one at time β . Also, more sophisticated explanatory models may incorporate multiple intervening variables that can alter the anticipated relation between DVs and IVs. Even if you have no intention of testing a formal model with quantitative indicators, it is nevertheless a good idea to think in these terms when presenting a qualitative narrative argument because it can help you to better specify your argument for readers/evaluators – many of whom will be searching for evidence of “hard science” no matter what the topic.

This is also where you should indicate the temporal, as well as spatial and social, limits to your topic. Fashions in this regard have varied in the social sciences. At one time (and, again, with contemporary rational choice theory), priority was given to projects that claimed to be universalistic, i.e. valid for all times, places and persons. There is nothing “embarrassing” or “diminishing” about admitting that your topic is limited in any or all of these dimensions. Most “historical,” “sociological,” and “institutional” projects tend – implicitly or explicitly – to have such a restricted validity. And typologies (yours or those borrowed from others) tend to be especially useful in delimiting your universe of applicability and selecting cases for comparative analysis.

- IV. **THE RESEARCH DESIGN:** Here, you should take a few pages to outline two key aspects of any project: (1) its selection of cases/events/persons/processes/outcomes; and (2) its choice of methods for observation and inference. Why have you chosen a specific case or set of cases? What will you use to measure those variables that you consider “operational” and what will you use to test for the magnitude and significance of their relationship to each other?

Comparison is an especially valuable component of most social scientific designs. In its ‘orthodox’ version, this means a project with more than one unit of observation and, often, with either a sample of or all such units within a stipulated universe. If you choose this route, you should provide an indication of why you have selected these units and, if possible, why you have chosen either a “small N” or a “large N” design. NB It is possible to do ‘virtual’ comparative research, and many doctoral students do this for quite practical and methodologically defensible

reasons. By selecting only one case, the student can conceptualize it in a fashion that is potentially applicable to others – and can even introduce “contrasting” empirical material from these other cases while concentrating on the preferred one.

Statistical inference from quantitative data is also a valued asset in most branches of social science, but it is not indispensable. Everything depends on two factors: (1) the operationalizability of variables; and (2) the relationship between the number of cases and the number of variables. If your variables cannot be meaningfully transformed into cardinal or ordinal measures and if you intend to do a “deep description,” i.e. one in which the number of observed conditions greatly outnumber the number of cases, then, you would be ill-advised to draw inferences from social statistics.

- V. **THE FEASIBILITY OF THE PROJECT:** This can be dropped from many proposals, but if there is a potential concern with the availability of data or the sensitivity to a particular topic, then, you should spend a page or less explaining how you might overcome these difficulties. Where you recognize the potentiality, then, you might say a few words about what you might do if data does not make itself available (it never does, but you can usually find it) or if the subjects involved do make themselves obstructive. An ideal design in this regard is like an artichoke – it has a heart that you are confident you can reach and exploit for your dissertation, but it also has a lot of external leaves that it would be nice to have but only to complement and enhance the core.
- VI. **THE PAY-OFF OF THE PROJECT:** Normally, this is taken-for-granted. You write a thesis to obtain the doctoral degree and that is your “ticket” to an academic career. (If you do not want to be a teacher/researcher in a university, you are probably ill-advised to even submit such a project). Beyond this, however, are two questions that are relevant to making a competitive judgment about your project: (1) why is the discipline(s) of ... (or the country of ...) going to be better off, if you compete this project successfully?; and (2) what is going to be the “generalizability” of whatever it is that you eventually discover? Obviously, a reader/evaluator that becomes convinced that this project is going to make a major (and, not just a marginal) contribution to political science or sociology is going to rank it higher – as (s)he is also likely to do, if convinced that it has a wide range of potential applications.
- VII. **THE BIBLIOGRAPHY:** For me, this seemingly banal *coda* at the end of the proposal plays a surprisingly important role. For one thing, it serves as a certification of what you have said about the state of the field and the breadth of your grasp of the topic. A project with an excessively summary or manifestly inappropriate bibliography loses a lot of credibility. For another thing, it serves as a demonstration of your “craftsmanship,” i.e. your ability to follow a disciplinary set of rules in assembling sources and presenting them in a uniform fashion. A student who is sloppy, incomplete or inconsistent in the way that (s)he does a bibliography is probably going to do the same when writing the thesis. This, incidentally, also holds for footnotes, should you use them in the text.

Ideally, you should be able to accomplish all this is 12-15 pages.