

Components of a Research Proposal

I. Statement of the Problem

The problem statement is the guiding theme of the proposal. This section should include a statement of the **purpose** of the study and should specify its **objectives**.

Purpose of the Study. This section should explain why the research is being conducted. It should establish the importance of the problem addressed by the research and explain why the research is needed. For example, it might establish the seriousness of juvenile antisocial behavior nationally and describe the gaps that exist in the knowledge about this behavior. It might also explain why the specific knowledge gap chosen is of particular importance.

Objectives. This section should describe what the investigator hopes to accomplish with the research. After reading this section, the reader should be clear about the questions to be asked, the kinds of answers expected, and the nature of the information to be provided by the proposed research. For example, one might propose to test a drug abuse treatment approach to determine the intervention characteristics that contribute differentially to the success of adolescent boys and girls who participate in the program. Expected outcomes might also include the provision of descriptive information not currently available. An example of this might be a comparison of arrest rates for participants in the years prior to and following participation in the program.

II. Review of the Literature

This section will review published research related to the purpose and objectives described above. It should be noted that references may be found throughout the proposal, but it is preferable for most of the literature review to be reported in this section.

A review of the literature should also relate to the hypotheses, definition and operationalization of variables, methodology and data analysis that follow. It should summarize the results of previous studies that have reported relationships among the variables included in the proposed research.

An important function of the literature review is to provide a theoretical explanation of the relationships among the variables of interest. It is most important that the review explain what mechanisms link the variables. The review can also provide descriptive information about related problems, intervention programs and target populations.

The literature review must address three areas:

- 1 . Topic or problem area: This part of the literature review covers material directly related to the problem being studied. There will usually be at least **two** substantive areas reviewed because most research involves variables that have been studied in separate substantive areas.

For example, a study on some aspect of juvenile antisocial behavior suggests a review of the literatures on anti-social behavior, adolescent development and families at risk. As another example, research on the differential impact on males and females of intervention characteristics in a substance abuse program would require a review of the literature on substance abuse programs, the specific intervention characteristics in question, and pertinent research on gender differences. As another example, research on conceptualizations of work in

high stress settings would suggest a review of literature on the stress factors in such settings, the concept of stress and the development of job-related attitudes.

2. **Theory area:** Investigators must identify the social science theory which relates to the problem area. Examples of such theories might be sex-role theory, theories of deviance, organizational theory, small group theory, family systems theory, or conflict theory. The theory area provides the theoretical "lens" through which the writer chooses to view and understand the problem. It provides guidelines for explaining the etiology of problems and the linking mechanisms that connect variables.
3. **Methodology:** Investigators must review the literature which is appropriate to various aspects of their chosen method, including design, selection of subjects, and methods of data collection. This section describes research methods and measurement approaches used in previous investigations in the area. This content should be considered in designing the proposed research and used to support the choice of design and measurement techniques. Otherwise, the investigator must explain why s/he has chosen methods or approaches that have not been used previously.

After reading the literature review, the reader should understand the problem area you have selected and the theoretical models, findings, methodologies, and measurement techniques that have been used in previous, related research efforts.

The literature review should lead up to specific hypotheses, which are then listed at the end of the literature review.

III. Methodology

Subjects. Subjects can be individuals, families, groups, organizations, states, or countries, depending on the unit of analysis. This section will describe how the sample in the study will be selected. For example, will volunteers be solicited? Will every subject who volunteers be included? If not, what criteria will be used to choose those to be included? Will there be a comparison group? How will the subjects in that group be chosen? In addition to describing how subjects will be chosen, this section should provide a rationale for the selection approach taken. This rationale usually includes external validity requirements (i.e., the conditions necessary to generalize the findings to a particular target population). After reading this section, the reader should have a clear understanding of how subjects will be selected for the proposed research and of why they will be selected in that particular manner. The reader should also have a clear idea of the characteristics of the intended subjects, including age, sex, ethnicity, education, SES, and other related variables.

Design. This section will describe the type of research design to be used. Will it be an idiographic, survey, quasi-experimental or experimental design? Will it be cross-sectional or longitudinal? Will it be a retrospective or a prospective design? The design should also describe the sequence of events that will occur in conducting the research. This would include how the subjects will be divided up, what the subjects are expected to experience during the research, and when and how often they will be observed or asked for information. After reading this section, the reader should have a clear understanding of the overall design of the study.

Data Collection. This section will operationalize the variables to be included in the proposed evaluation. It is helpful to divide the variables into dependent variables, independent variables, and covariates. Dependent variables are outcomes (e.g., drug abuse, self-esteem, depression) which are affected directly by other variables. They might also include variables which are affected indirectly (e.g., arrest rates,

recidivism, employment record). Independent variables can include intervention approaches, program characteristics, and subject characteristics believed to affect the dependent variables. Covariates are additional independent variables included in the research solely for the purpose of controlling for differences that might exist among subjects. These differences are controlled statistically so that they will not confound conclusions that are drawn about relationships between independent variables and dependent variables.

A description of how each variable will be measured should be included in this section. Ideally, one should measure each variable two different ways so that some estimate of measurement validity can be made. After reading this section, the reader will know the specific variables that will be included in the proposed study and, most important, how they will be measured.

IV. Data Analysis

This section will explain how the data will be analyzed once they are collected. Usually, more than one analysis is conducted. Each analysis that will be used to meet each objective listed above should be described. Also a description of the specific effects to be examined in each analysis, such as main effects, interaction effects, or simple main effects, should be included.

The unit of analysis to be used should be specified and the reason for choosing that unit should be explained. After reading this section, the reader should know which effects will guide the data analysis and in exactly what way the data are to be analyzed to meet each objective of the proposed study.

Data analyses should be specifically linked to the hypotheses so that it is clear how each hypothesis will be tested.

V. Bibliography

The bibliography should include full reference documentation for all articles and texts mentioned in the proposal. It is important that the investigator fully review relevant previous work in developing the proposal.

VI. Timetable

This section will describe the sequence of activities necessary to conduct the research. It will include the time necessary to complete each activity. After reading this section, the reader will have a clear understanding of what steps will be taken, the order in which they will occur, and the time each step will require.