

## Key Sections of a Research Proposal

### I. Introduction

- A. this section is typically structured to take the reader from a general topic to your more narrow research focus—culminating in your specific research question(s)
- B. you may frame this in one or more of the following ways:
  - 1. solving an important empirical problem or puzzle
  - 2. filling important gaps within or between literatures
  - 3. improving our theoretical understanding of some phenomena
- C. you need to convince the reader that the topic is important, interesting, and worthy of attention and then later convince the reader that your proposed research is also important, compelling, and necessary
- D. but you also need to do this in a very concise fashion with an economical use of text
- E. remember that this is just an introduction to your arguments; you will have more space in subsequent sections to elaborate on your thinking
- F. if you are introducing relatively new abstract concepts or ideas that are not common in the literature(s) you are engaging, then you probably should clearly define them early in your proposal
  - 1. you can decide whether to do that in the introduction or later
  - 2. a key factor is whether or not doing so in the introduction seems premature or unnecessarily breaks up the flow of the prose
- G. the very end of your introduction should feature your major research question(s) that your proposed research will answer
  - 1. these should be italicized or bold-faced and written in question form
  - 2. with each major research question, you may have one or more minor (or sub-) questions; you need not list those here; rather, save those for subsequent sections

### II. Relevant Literature Review

- A. an effective review of the relevant review covers a lot of ground in a small amount of space
- B. you should clearly identify the scope of your review, noting what you will review and what you are bracketing out
- C. your goal is to help your readers see the landscape of the relevant literature how you see it and convince them that your interpretation of this landscape is justified and compelling
  - 1. you should first read key review articles and the literature reviews of others' studies to get a sense of how others characterize this landscape
  - 2. how do you characterize this literature: theoretically driven, atheoretical, coherent, scattered, burgeoning, well-established, stale, dynamic, etc.?
- D. when summarizing the landscape of the relevant literature, you should focus on patterns across multiple studies (and NOT reviewing one study after another after another)
- E. ultimately you should try to identify key puzzles, gaps, inconsistencies that deserve further attention and analysis
- F. there are different types of literature reviews, written for different purposes
  - 1. if you are attempting to make contributions to theoretical understanding (either by integrating/synthesizing existing theories or by testing your own), be sure to summarize the performance of different theories/models/hypotheses
  - 2. if you are attempting to make contributions to substantive understanding, be sure to summarize the effects of key predictors/variables on key outcome variables
  - 3. if you are attempting to make contributions to conceptualization and measurement, be sure to examine the strengths and weaknesses in how others have measured key variables
  - 4. if you are attempting to make contributions to the scope/applicability of theoretical arguments, be sure to examine the strengths and weaknesses of prior studies' samples, geographic scope, and/or temporal scope
- G. If you are simply testing existing theories (on their own or after some minor/modest synthesizing or integrating),
  - 1. then you should locate your (consecutively numbered) hypotheses immediately after the specific theoretical arguments from which each are derived
  - 2. then you won't list your major research question(s) again in this section; rather, you will restate them at the beginning of your methods section

### **III. Your Analytical Model**

- A. if you are putting forth a novel theoretical argument (or are so heavily integrating/synthesizing existing theoretical arguments that you need space to delineate your full argument), then you will need this section in your proposal to fully explain your analytical model
- B. at the beginning of this section, fully restate your major research questions (which were last explicitly stated at the end of your introduction) and also delineate any minor (sub-)questions
- C. you should present your full theoretical argument both in text and in a figure
- D. fully justify all (consecutively numbered) hypotheses you derive from your analytical model

### **IV. Methods**

- A. as expected, this is the most important section of your research proposal
- B. in general, you need to describe all relevant aspects of your methods so that readers will know exactly what you will do and could replicate your methods themselves
- C. if you do not have an “analytical model” section, then start off your methods section by restating your major research questions (which were last explicitly stated at the end of your introduction) and also delineate any minor (sub-)questions
- D. If you have an “analytical model” section, then you can just allude to “my research question(s)” at the beginning of this section: “My proposed research will help answer the research questions described in the previous section.”
- E. it is generally a good idea to divide up your methods section into the following subsections: research design, sampling, measurement, and data collection and analysis procedures

#### **F. Research Design**

1. describe the general method(s) you are using (e.g., survey, experiment, ethnography, analysis of existing/archival data, etc.) and why
2. describe how you will handle time (and, by extension, inferences about causality) (i.e., is this a cross-sectional design or longitudinal design?) and why
3. describe your unit of analysis

#### **G. Sampling**

1. this section should make transparent your logic regarding all sampling decisions
2. describe your target population
3. explain how you created/identified your sampling frame
4. describe and justify your sampling design (i.e., how you will draw a sample from your sampling frame)
  - a. discuss which probability or non-probability sampling design are you using and why
  - b. describe your desired/expected sample size and why
5. describe the potential strengths and limitations of your sampling design

#### **H. Measurement**

1. this section should make transparent your logic regarding all measurement decisions
2. identify the key theoretical concepts in the theory(ies) you are using to answer your research question(s)
3. clearly characterize these as dependent/outcome, independent/predictor, intervening/mediating, moderating, and/or control—as informed by the theory(ies) you are employing
4. order the presentation of your concepts/variables/measures as follows
  - a. dependent
  - b. independent (including mediating and possibly moderating—unless the latter are drawn from the typical set of demographic, social, and political variables used as controls in many studies)
  - c. other variables you are controlling for in your models
5. ideally, for each concept you will fully discuss the entire measurement process—though this is more important for complex concepts (e.g., environmental concern) than for relatively simple ones (e.g., age)
  - a. conceptualization: clearly define the concept; identify the dimensions of the concept
  - b. operationalization: clearly identify the variable(s) that is/are matched to each dimension of the concept
  - c. identification of specific indicators: clearly identify the indicator(s) you will use to measure each variable
  - d. discuss any issues with reliability and/or validity for each indicator
6. place all of your indicators (e.g., survey instrument, interview schedule, content analysis coding scheme, etc.) in an appendix, which you can refer to when describing your indicators
7. when possible/appropriate, you should use already-validated measures of your complex concepts
8. typically, any efforts to use obscure measures or create new ones will face extra scrutiny; you therefore need to be quite convincing to justify your use of such measures

## **I. Data Collection and Analytical Procedures**

1. you can write this subsection as a chronological timeline mirroring actual workflow: from gaining human subjects approval/exemption from the IRB (as appropriate/necessary) to writing and revising your resulting manuscripts
2. for each stage in the process, indicate how long it is estimated to take; keep in mind that nearly all research tasks will take longer than you estimate
3. here are some often-overlooked steps in the process that you should be sure to account for in your time estimates (though you need not explicitly describe these as “stages”)
  - a. pre-study or pilot study to hone sampling and/or measurement procedures
  - b. gaining access to and building trust/rapport with participants (especially with intense qualitative interviews and/or site-based ethnographic research)
  - c. data quality control checks (e.g., intercoder reliability when coding content analyses)
  - d. data management (i.e., manually entering or downloading data, changing dataset formats, recoding variables, learning new software and/or new operations on existing software)
  - e. the psychological stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance that you will almost certainly need to endure while you cope with the reality that your results are confusing (at best), underwhelming, and/or horrific (at worst)
4. as best as you can, clearly identify how you will analyze your data
  - a. describe what types of analyses you will use and why
  - b. identify the software you will use (if applicable)
  - c. though you will not report this here, in your head (and preferably in another file) you should visualize what your tables/figures of results will look like

## **V. Works Cited**

- A. include reference entries for all in-text citations
- B. use the ASA style guide

## **VI. Appendix**

- A. include your data gathering/analysis instrument that you references in your Measurement subsection (e.g., survey instrument, interview schedule, content analysis coding scheme, etc.)
- B. number each of the elements in your instrument, so you can easily refer to them in your Measurements subsection