

## **Developing a Problem Statement**

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These guidelines assume that you have given some thought to a research topic and have begun to review related literature. It is written for neophyte researchers who wish to develop a research prospectus or proposal. A prospectus is a mini proposal. It is usually submitted to funding agencies as a pre-proposal. It gives funders a sense of the researchers' capability to write a competitive proposal, and, ultimately, to conduct the study. A research prospectus or proposal may be divided into two parts: a) **problem statement** and 2) a **research design**. The guidelines provided here are intended to help you develop your problem statement.

Before you begin, please read the guidelines in their entirety. Then, in **15** double-spaced pages or less, write your problem statement. Do not wait until you have completed the entire exercise. Submit sections to your advisor(s) to review as you proceed.

Developing a problem statement includes some combination of the following interrelated tasks: a) generation of an issue, b) exploration of the issue, and from that exploration, and c) determining worthwhile research purposes and questions. I shall now address each task in turn.

### **Section 1: Generating an Issue (1-3 pages)**

Authentic investigations arise from personal concerns—from puzzlement and wonder; from things that bug us about situations we encounter. Academic investigations, referred to here as research, typically explore a special type of personal concerns—those over which there is some debate or disagreement. A personal concern may be quite significant, but not necessarily an issue. Something is an issue only if there are different perspectives, i.e., different points of view, on it. Disagreements may arise over what the matter really is (definitional discord), or over its causes, solutions, and so on (substantive discord). The first research task is therefore to generate an issue. People tend to care a lot about issues that they have personally experienced. Such issues tend to command more interest and commitment. It is advisable, therefore, that researchers generate their issues from personal and professional experiences (i.e., from their interpretive biographies).

Begin developing your problem statement by stating your research topic as succinctly as is possible at this early stage. Then briefly discuss the personal and professional experiences that have brought you to the topic. This narrative is a highly selective, interpretive biography. You are not recounting your life history. You are carefully selecting and interpreting those experiences that would help you identify and clarify the issue you wish to study. This interpretive biography would also help your readers understand why you are drawn to the topic. Your interpretive biography usually becomes the preface to your dissertation.

As you develop your interpretive biography, you will discover personal concerns—things you would like to see improved in the situation you are describing. You may regard some of these concerns as major and other as minor. Moreover you are likely to identify more personal concerns than you are able to tackle in one research study. You must therefore articulate a manageable concern or set of concerns to tackle in the study. I call this manageable concern your beef.

In a paragraph or two, articulate your beef. This paragraph may not end up in your interpretive biography, but the exercise helps tremendously in clarifying your issue. Tell us WHAT is bugging you about the situation, and WHY it is bugging you—why you care. Make every effort to articulate your beef as descriptions (rather than as evaluations) of your experiences. For instance, I once taught a course that included a section on how to generate systemic issues. A student in the course (a trainer in the US military) stated that one of his beefs was “lack of accountability” of his sponsor (the US Army) and his colleagues (other military trainers). I told the student that “lack of accountability” is an evaluation of the situation and not a description of it. “Lack of accountability” anticipates a solution, I said; it does not describe a personal concern. I explained to the student that descriptions were more observable things or behaviors such as these: *the course materials are not being maintained, students are not attending training, scheduled classes are not being taught, or the course contents are not being updated*. Incidentally, these were all concerns expressed by the student.

I told the student that neither he nor anyone else could be certain as to **why** these specific problems existed until thorough analyses were conducted. I pointed out to the student that he was furnishing, or at least anticipating, a solution (lack of accountability) before he had conducted the investigation. I told him that when it comes to articulating his beef he should refrain from furnishing or anticipating answers and stick, instead, to describing the situation and raising questions about it.

## **Section 2: Exploring the Issue**

In this section you describe your political interests (i.e., your rationale for exploring the issue), then you frame and explore the issue.

### **2.1 Provide a rationale for undertaking the study (1-2 pages)**

Social researchers have vested interests in the things they choose to pursue. They are often motivated by the desire to change something or by the desire to resist change. Researchers choose to spend resources and time studying a particular issue because, presumably, the matter affects their well being and the well being of those for whom they care. To investigate an issue is to imply that there is something at stake—social concerns to which the issue points that, if addressed, would make life better for some group(s) of persons. So before launching into an exploration of the issue, prudent researchers describe what’s at stake for them. And they also demonstrate that the matter is worth their expenditure of time, talent and resources. So before launching into a review of the literature, succinctly describe the nature and scope of the social concerns to which the issue points (the “who cares” factor). Tell us as precisely as you can what the social concerns are and how widespread. Tell us who are or might be affected (positively and negatively) by the issue, and in what ways. Use statistics, where appropriate, to give a sense of the scope of the social concerns.

### **2.2 Frame the issue (0.5 pages)**

No one has the expertise, resources and time to adequately explore all aspects of an issue. Furthermore, as investigators, we are often more interested in **some** aspects of an issue than in others. To adequately explore an issue it is advisable, therefore, to first frame it. Framing an issue means defining it—that is, placing boundaries around, and

giving direction to, the inquiry. The “frame” is the road map or outline that would guide the investigation. In framing an issue you should: a) choose the least number of terms possible to describe the issue; b) choose the most precise terms available to describe the issue; and c) arrange the investigation into a hierarchy of ideas. This hierarchical arrangement of ideas is sometimes referred to as the **research funnel**. The research funnel begins with the broadest idea comprising the issue and ends with the narrowest. The broadest idea is explored first. The second broadest idea is usually a subset of the first; the third broadest idea, a subset of the second, and so on.

### Framing the Issue: An illustration

*The Issue: In what ways does the structural behavior of community-based-organizations (CBOs) enhance and impede the health capacity of low-income communities?*

Three sets of questions frame our review of the literature, they are: questions related to: 1) defining community health capacity; 2) measuring community health capacity; and 3) examining how the structural behavior of CBOs enhances and impedes the health capacity of low-income communities.

- 1) Defining community health capacity: What are the major perspectives on community health? Do the perspectives distinguish between health capacity and health status/outcomes; if so, what are the distinctions? Do the perspectives distinguish between a community's health capacity and status and an individual's health capacity and status?
- 2) Measuring community health capacity: What instruments and mechanisms do the various perspectives use to measure the health capacity of low-income communities? How adequate are those measures?
- 3) Examining how the structural behavior of CBOs enhances and impedes the health capacity of low-income communities: Among current approaches to improving the health capacity of low-income communities, which ones pay attention to the role of CBOs? With regards to improving the health capacity of low-income communities, what roles do the various approaches give to CBOs? In defining the role of CBOs, what consideration is given to their structural behavior and how adequate is the consideration?

### 2.3 Explore the issue (2-5 pages)

Your exploration of the issue constitutes the MAJOR portion of your literature review. That review is ongoing and iterative and won't be completed even after the thesis is submitted and approved. The challenge is to bring it to strategic closure. At the prospectus writing stage, your literature review would be skeletal (necessarily so). More meat would be added in the thesis proposal and in the thesis, itself.

Begin exploring the issue by systemically addressing the framing questions. As your exploration proceeds, you may become aware of new and pertinent ideas that were not included in the original framing questions. Before plowing into that new set of literature, stop and determine how and where the new ideas fit into the original frame; and modify the frame accordingly. It is very tempting to go trawling into the literature, hauling whatever seems interesting. Resist that urge by developing the discipline of writing in

response to the framing questions **ONLY**. Any information that does not directly address the framing questions should be left alone—however valuable it seems.

You are not likely to exhaust the literature on any topic you choose to explore. Fortunately, exhausting the literature is **not** a goal of empirical research. In conducting a literature review, the important thing is to examine and assess the major perspectives on the issue. As you read, try to figure out the different stances (or points of view) taken by different researchers and theorists on the issue. Arrange researchers and theorists according to the stance they take. And focus your energies on those researchers and theorists that best represent particular stances. Many of the disagreements we encounter in the literature are semantic and definitional in nature—people using the same terms to mean quite different things, or different terms to talk about the same thing. It is therefore advisable to first sort out definitional discord before launching into other substantive areas of disagreement.

If you fail to identify different perspectives on the issue you are exploring, your writing is likely to be unfocused; plus, it will be very difficult to determine how much literature is enough. Those problems are diminished when your goal is to exhaust perspectives rather than to exhaust the literature. **Hint:** If you are unable to identify different perspectives on your topic, it is likely that you did not frame it as an **issue**; you may have stated it as a **personal concern**, only (see section one for distinction between the two).

Because you **WILL** find different and even opposing perspectives on the issue you are exploring, you must take a stance. That is to say, you must assess the relative worth of each perspective and formulate your own position on the issue. To assess the relative worth of the various perspectives you must develop a set(s) of assessment criteria. I refer to those sets of criteria as my **theoretical frameworks**. A theoretical framework is a set of interrelated criteria that a researcher uses to examine, assess and make sense of the literature. It also guides your choice of research methods, what data you collect, and the way you collect and analyze data. If your issue comprises two or more major phenomena, you may require multiple theoretical frameworks to explore them—one for each major phenomenon. Your theoretical frameworks are likely to develop and change as your literature review proceeds. Keep restating them as they unfold.

**My Damp Basement:  
Illustrating how theoretical frameworks shift with new information**

Two months after purchasing my first house I noticed dampness in the basement. I therefore sought answers to my dilemma by seeking advice from different entities.

**Perspective #1: provided by a for-profit water-proofing company**

*The company assessed the problem as pervasive ground water seepage. Your house has sustained extensive structural damage, they told me. In fact, your house is “on the move.” The solution is an extensive internal French drain system. Cost: \$10,000.00-15,000.00*

At this early stage of problem definition, my theoretical framework consisted of only two criteria: effectiveness and cost.

**Perspective #2: provided by another for-profit water-proofing company**

*This company assessed the problem as localized ground water seepage. Your house is beginning to show signs of structural defects, they told me. What you need is a localized internal French drain system. Cost: \$2,500.00-3,000.00*

I am wising up now. I am still thinking that there is only ONE way to perceive the problem (i.e., as ground water seepage). But I now realize that the problem may not be as extensive as suggested by the first water-proofing company. So I adjust my theoretical framework to include a third criterion: to effectiveness and cost, I added extent of the problem

**Perspective #3: provided by a colleague, a structural engineer**

*The problem, he informed, is localized surface water, resulting from a negative gradient around the premises. The problem should be corrected by landscaping to create positive gradient, and by repairing your gutters. This solution also improves resale value, he said, because it makes your lawn more esthetically pleasing Cost: Under \$1,000.00.*

I am really wising up now. I no longer think that there is only ONE way to perceive the problem (i.e., ground water seepage). I now add the possibility of surface water seepage. My new theoretical framework now has five criteria. I modified extent of the problem to nature of the problem, and added two new criteria: aesthetics, and resale value. My five criteria are now: effectiveness, cost, nature of the problem, aesthetics, and resale value

Note how my evaluation criteria (theoretical framework) shift as I am fed new information.

### **Section 3: Develop Worthwhile Research Purposes and Questions**

It is worthless expending time, energy and resources investigating problems for which we already have adequate solutions. To develop a worthwhile research purpose, you must therefore: a) ascertain what is ALREADY adequately known about the issue, b) determine what is not adequately known (the academic void) and c) select from among what is not adequately known, a manageable aspect to investigate (a research problem).

### Information-seeking Tips Associated with Exploring an Issue

- a) Identify the major phenomena comprising the issue and the major concepts used to discuss the each phenomenon.
- b) Identify the academic fields in which the phenomena are discusses and researched.
- c) Using databases from those fields, conduct computer searches—combining in various ways, the identified concepts.
- d) Use the AND/OR Booleans, together with Field Tags such as “Terms Everywhere”, “Key Concept”, “Keyword”, “Topic”, “Title”, “Abstract”, “Subject”, and “Descriptor” to combine concepts. Keep track of your searches.
- e) It is advisable to begin your exploration with review articles, encyclopedia articles, or texts that give an overview of the topic. (Amazon.com is a very good source for books). In the early stages, it is also advisable to consult dissertation abstracts. These early readings often lead to other valuable sources.
- f) In developing your theoretical framework it is advisable to begin with theoretical (philosophical) literature. But some empirical studies may be of use here also.
- g) Once your theoretical framework(s) are developed, focus the remainder of your literature on empirical studies, only. Spend most of your time reviewing empirical studies that are aligned with your theoretical framework. For example if you chose a post-structural feminist theoretical framework, then spend most of your time reviewing empirical studies that are aligned with post-structural feminism. Anti-feminist empirical studies and empirical studies that are aligned with other feminist traditions may also be examined for comparative analysis, but not as extensively as post-structural feminist studies.
- h) In reviewing empirical studies focus primarily on those that are published in refereed journals.
- i) Explore other relevant sources as well—newspapers, government documents, organizational reports, opinions of colleagues, friends and family members, etc, etc.

### 3.1 Determine the academic void and problem (1-2 pages)

As you explore the issue you would note aspects that are adequately conceptualized and addressed. You would also note areas in which there is inadequate information (the academic void). Take a closer look at those areas of inadequacies, and select from among them, an area you are capable of addressing. That identified inadequacy (in information or skills, theory or practice) is your academic problem. It is this problem that is referred to in the phrase, “statement of the problem.”

Chose a problem that is significant, but don't bite off more than you can chew. You can have depth or breadth when engaged in any type of research, but without extraordinary resources you cannot have both. So chose a problem that you have sufficient interest, expertise and resources to adequately tackle, and articulate is as best you can. In describing the problem, focus on what's missing from the empirical literature, not on what's wrong with society. It is the academic problem that is of concern here, not the social concern. The social concerns are addressed earlier in section 2.1, under “Rationale for the study.”

### 3.2 Articulate a purpose statement (0.5 pages)

A well crafted purpose statement informs the reader about three things: 1) the researcher's epistemic interests; 2) the researcher's substantive interests (i.e., the critical dimensions of the phenomena of her study, her CDPs); and 3) the anticipated outcomes of the study. Our CDPs are our substantive interests—expanded and elaborated. See my handout titled: "*Charting the qualitative exploration*" for a discussion of epistemic interests and CDPs; and my handout titled "*Five classes of research products*" for a discussion of research products.

Write your purpose statement as a response to your identified academic problem. Tell us clearly and concisely WHAT you anticipate would be your study's contributions to addressing the identified void. Those anticipated contributions are your research purposes.

I distinguish between research purposes and the significance of a study. For me, there is a one-to-one relationship between research purposes and research questions. A research purpose is a research question, stated. For instance, if my research question is: "how do police officers construe violence," a corresponding research purpose might be: "to describe police officers' construal of violence." If my research question is: "what is the impact of study habits on academic achievement", a corresponding research purpose might be: "to describe the impact of study habits on academic achievement."

Research purposes point to the actual outcomes of an investigation—to the anticipated findings and conclusions. They provide the reader with vivid clues as to the information or behavior changes that the researcher is seeking to produce during the investigation. Significance of the study, on the other hand, refers to uses to which the research findings are put, usually after the investigation is completed. Typically, researchers have a lot more control over their purposes than they do over the significance of their study.

In your purpose statement, richly describe your research purposes—articulating both your epistemic and substantive (CDPs) interests. Don't say "I wish to explore X" or "to describe Y" or "to explain Z" and leave it there. With words, paint a vivid picture of what you mean by terms such as explore, describe, and explain. And describe your CDPs in rich details.

It is very difficult to separate the discussion of our epistemic interests from the discussion of our substantive interests (our CDPs). When we try to do so, we often end up either describing both of them poorly, or repeating ourselves. So I advise that you do not separate the description of your CDPs (your substantive interests) from the description of your epistemic interests. Discuss both together—in your purpose statement.

Also, in your purpose statement, be sure to articulate the research outcomes you anticipate, in terms that are observable and achievable at the completion of the study. Give your readers a vivid picture of the kinds of research products they could expect to receive at the end of your study. Also, discuss who might use particular research products, and what they might do with them. **Do NOT discuss significance of your study in your purpose statement!** In other words, do not speculate on the benefits participants or other audiences might derive from your research, because the derivation of such benefits is usually beyond our control as researchers. For instance, if you are

conducting an investigation of social interaction in adult literacy programs, don't say in your purpose statement that participants would increase their knowledge of adult literacy, or that participant would gain greater insights into adult literacy students' social interactions—because you have no way to guarantee these outcomes. There are simply too many confounding variables that are beyond your control to make such pronouncement. Simple state what your research products would be, who might consider your research products useful, and what they might use those products for. For example, you could say: "I would provide general recommendations about learners' social interaction in mid-sized literacy programs in urban USA. Literacy practitioners might use the information to assist them in designing and delivering more effective instructional activities."

If your epistemic interests, CDPs and anticipated research outcomes are clearly described, there will be no need to label your research methods—they will be obvious. Furthermore, your research methods will become increasingly clearer as you articulate the other sections of your research design. Simply labeling your research methods (as an ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and so on) without clearly articulating your epistemic interests, CDPs and anticipated research outcomes is more concealing than revealing. My advice therefore is that you do NOT label your research methods—simply describe the process.

Research questions: It is a good idea to succinctly summarize your purpose statement in the form of research questions. Formulate research questions that mirror your research purposes. Number your research questions and set them apart for the rest of the text. Include only those questions you intend to empirically investigate. Questions that require extrapolation from your data should be excluded. Such questions are best addressed, not as research findings, but as conclusions and recommendations in the "Discussion" section of your final research paper/report.

### **Handouts**

Baptiste, I. Charting the qualitative exploration: using purpose statements to frame qualitative inquiry

Baptiste, I. Five classes of research products