

# Writing an Effective Research Proposal



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# Q: What is a good proposal?



- A: A good proposal is a good idea, well-expressed, with a clear indication of methods for pursuing the idea, evaluating the findings, making them known to all who need to know, and indicating the broader importance to the organizational and scholarly community.

# Key Questions to Ask Yourself



1. What do you intend to do?
2. Why is the work important?
3. What has already been done?
4. How are you going to do the work?

# How to develop a proposal



- Determine your long-term research and education goals
  - Answers the 1<sup>st</sup> question
- Develop your idea
  - Answers the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> question
    - ✦ Survey the literature
    - ✦ Discuss with colleagues/mentors
- Prepare to do the project
  - Answers the 4<sup>th</sup> question
    - ✦ Determine available resources
    - ✦ Develop preliminary data
    - ✦ Present to colleagues/mentors/students

# Good proposals are those that:



- Clearly state a central research question
- Make an argument that engages and/or debates relevant literatures
- Specifies the data the student will gather and the analytic procedures the student will apply to those data
- State what the researcher expects to find or demonstrate through the research
- Are theoretically framed and make clear contributions to some theory or problem in the organizational or academic world
- Have a research design that permits falsifiability so that the researcher can be wrong as well as right

# Writing Your Proposal



- Introduction
  - Statement of the problem, importance and general strategy
- Theoretical argument/background literature
  - Theoretical literature
  - Empirical findings
- Hypotheses that follow from the above argument (if positivist in orientation)

# Writing Your Proposal (cont.)



- **Research strategy**
  - Data
  - Measurement/method
  - Analytic strategy
- **Anticipated results and conclusions**
  - Potential impact
  - Possible explanation for unpredicted results
- **References**
- **Tables and figures**
- **Appendices**

# Writing Your Proposal



- Good proposals are well-written and concise.
  - They employ Strunk and White's (1979) rule # 17: they "*Omit needless words.*"
- Remember, in organizational scholarship, your readers will include scholars from a variety of specialty areas.
- Define key terms and keep prose free of jargon.

# Proposal Preparation



- Students should use their judgment to determine how much space to allot to various portions of the discussion of the research
  - For example, students analyzing existing datasets will probably need to devote more space to the theoretical discussion and engagement with extant literature.
  - In contrast, those designing their own study, whether quantitative or qualitative, will need to apportion more of their space to explication of the measurement instrument, fieldwork, or data-gathering efforts.
  - Likewise, different analytic techniques require more or less discussion.

# Proposal Preparation



- Regardless of how much space the student devotes to discussion of theory and method, it is crucial that these be tightly connected.
- Descriptions of data, regardless of type, should address how the specific data are appropriate to the theoretically motivated question(s) asked.
- Issues such as sampling, generalizability, reliability and validity are crucial components of this discussion regardless of data type (quantitative or qualitative).
- Proposals should specify how the student will use the data to generalize to a relevant population or theory.
- In addition to consideration of the quality, type and appropriateness of data, students should be similarly informative about their plan for data analysis.

# Proposal Preparation



- Readers will look for a clear description of how the student will use the data to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses
- Listing software programs, or methods (participant observation) does not provide sufficient information to readers
  - This strategy fails to demonstrate that the student has seriously considered all phases of the research process in designing the proposal.
- Readers should be able to look back to the specific research aims and understand the purpose of the data collection and analytic strategy

# Common Problems with Weak Proposals



- The problem is not clearly articulated.
- The researcher has not differentiated the current work from others (i.e., seems to be completely unaware of relevant literature).
- The proposal does not indicate WHY the research should be done.
- Errors in plan of attack.
- An engineering effort where the researcher fails to identify the research issue (method looking for a question).
- Poor page space planning and incremental work.
  - Often a good rule of thumb is that proposed new work should be *at least* 60% of the project description (net of tables, appendices, references and other such material) though see slide above.

# Five Deadly Sins of Proposal Writing



1. Failure to focus on the problems and payoffs
2. No persuasive structure
3. Key points are buried: no highlights, no impact.
4. Difficult to read: full of jargon, too long, too technical
5. Credibility killers: misspellings, grammatical errors, wrong client name, and inconsistent formats

# Proposal Preparation Checklist:



1. What is the research question?
2. Have you entered into a dialogue with the literature?
3. What is the project's theoretical contribution?
4. What do you expect to find?
5. How will you know if you are wrong? (falsifiability)
6. What, where and when will you conduct your research?
7. What kinds of evidence (data) will you gather?
8. How will you analyze the data?
9. Has your proposal been read (multiple times) by others before submitting it to any evaluator or reviewer?
10. Have you applied for or obtained human subjects (IRB) approval? (if appropriate)
11. Are you having fun?