Chapter 2: Formulating and clarifying the research topic

In selection of the research topic which is the first step of research project the researcher needs to be aware of what is going to be searched. Without being clear about research it is difficult to plan the process which needs long time and effort.

** Attributes of a good research topic**

Research topic can be selected according to the data collected or the data can be collected according to the topic selected based on the preferences of the researcher. Alternatively, some topics can be based on an organization-based piece of applied research, whilst some can be within the subject matter of a course or program.

The researcher must be capable, eager and he must have the enough time and finance to do the research. The reality that most research projects are undertaken over at least a six-month period shows that deciding the topic needs careful evaluation.

**Capability** also means researcher must be reasonably certain of gaining access to any data that might be needed to be collected. For most topics it is important that the issues within the research are capable of being linked to theory. Most project tutors will argue that one of the attributes of a good topic is clearly defined research questions and objectives.

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**Box 2.2 Checklist**

**Attributes of a good research topic**

- **Capability: Is it feasible?**
  - ✔ Is the topic something with which you are really fascinated?
  - ✔ Do you have, or can you develop within the project time frame, the necessary research skills to undertake the topic?
  - ✔ Is the research topic achievable within the available time?
  - ✔ Will the project still be current when you finish your project?
  - ✔ Is the research topic achievable within the financial resources that are likely to be available?

- ✔ Are you reasonably certain of being able to gain access to data you are likely to require for this topic?

- ✔ Appropriateness: Is it worthwhile?
  - ✔ Does the topic fit the specifications and meet the standards set by the examining institution?
  - ✔ Does your research topic contain issues that have a clear link to theory?
  - ✔ Are you able to state your research question(s) and objectives clearly?
  - ✔ Will your proposed research be able to provide fresh insights into this topic?
  - ✔ Does your research topic relate clearly to the idea you have been given (perhaps by an organisation)?
  - ✔ Are the findings for this research topic likely to be symmetrical: that is, of similar value whatever the outcome?
  - ✔ Does the research topic match your career goals?
b. Generating and refining research ideas

Some business and management students are expected both to generate and to refine their own research ideas. Others, particularly those on professional and post-experience courses, are provided with a research idea by an organization or their university. While selecting the topic, rational and creative techniques must be used to ensure both heart and head is included in research project.

| Table 2.1 More frequently used techniques for generating and refining research ideas |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Rational thinking | Creative thinking |
| • Examining your own strengths and interests | • Keeping a notebook of ideas |
| • Looking at past project titles | • Exploring personal preferences using past projects |
| • Discussion | • Relevance trees |
| • Searching the literature | • Brainstorming |
| • Scanning the media | |

- **Examining own strengths and interests** (assignments done previously, future plans).
- **Looking at past project titles**: Many of our students have found looking at past projects a useful way of generating research ideas. For undergraduate and taught masters degrees these are often called dissertations. For research degrees they are termed theses.
- **Discussion**: Colleagues, friends and university tutors are all good sources of possible project ideas. In addition, ideas can be obtained by talking to practitioners and professional groups.
- **Searching the literature**: Articles in academic and professional journals, reports and books can be searched to generate research ideas. Especially review articles contain a considered review of the state of knowledge in that topic area.
- **Scanning the media**: The items in the news can be a source of items.
- **Keeping a notebook of ideas**: Note down any interesting research ideas as you think of them.
- **Exploring personal preferences using past projects**: Past project reports which you have done during your education can help you to generate ideas. To do this select a list projects (around six titles) and answer the questions for each one “What is the demand of the project? What is good about the project? What is bad about the project?”
- **Relevance trees**: Generating specific topics from starting general as mind mapping. A broad concept is selected; the branches, sub-branches and detailed sub-branches are formed. These can be examined and a number is selected and combined to provide a research question.
- **Brainstorming**: The problem solving method brainstorming can be used to generate and refine research ideas by defining a problem, asking questions related to it, asking for suggestions and analyzing the suggestions to determine the research idea.

a. Refining research ideas

- **The Delphi technique**: The ideas of the people interested in the research idea are collected independent from each other and the ideas are distributed to all group members. In the second cycle of the process individuals comment on the research ideas and revise their own contributions in the light of what others have said. A subsequent cycle of the process continues until a consensus is reached.

d. Turning research ideas into research projects

- **Writing research questions**
  Initial research questions are the key criteria in collection of the data and the conclusions derived. Defining research questions and research ideas work differently. Clough and Nutbrown (2002) use what they call the ‘Goldilocks test’ to decide if research questions are either ‘too big’, ‘too small’, ‘too hot’ or ‘just right’. Those that are too big probably need significant research funding because they demand too many resources. Questions that are too small are likely to be of insufficient substance, while those that are too hot’ may be so because of sensitivities that may be aroused as a result of doing the research. This may be because of the timing of the research or the many other reasons that may upset key people who have a
role to play, either directly or indirectly, in the research context. Research questions that are ‘just right’, note Clough and Nutbrown (2002:34), are those that are ‘just right for investigation at this time, by this researcher in this setting’.

The pitfall that you must avoid at all costs is asking research questions that will not generate new insights. This raises the question of the extent to which you have consulted the relevant literature.

It is often a useful starting point in the writing of research questions to begin with one general focus research question that flows from your research idea. This may lead to several more detailed questions or the definition of research objectives.

**Examples of research ideas and their derived focus research questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research idea</th>
<th>General focus research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising and share prices</td>
<td>How does the running of a TV advertising campaign designed to boost the image of a company affect its share price?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job recruitment via the Internet</td>
<td>How effective is recruiting for new staff via the Internet in comparison with traditional methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of aromas as a marketing device</td>
<td>In what ways does the use of specific aromas in supermarkets affect buyer behavior?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of Internet banking</td>
<td>What effect has the growth of Internet banking had upon the uses customers make of branch facilities?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to clarify the research question Clough and Nutbrown (2002) talk of the Russian doll principle. This means taking the research idea and ‘breaking down the research questions from the original statement to something which strips away the complication of layers and obscurities until the very essence – the heart – of the question can be expressed . . . just as the Russian doll is taken apart to reveal a tiny doll at the centre’.

- **Writing research objectives**

Research objectives can be written by using the research question as basis. Research objectives are likely to lead to greater specificity than research questions. Objectives are more generally acceptable to the research community as evidence of the researcher’s clear sense of purpose and direction.

**Table 2.3 Phrasing research questions as research objectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Research objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Why have organizations introduced team briefing?</td>
<td>1 To identify organizations’ objectives for team briefing schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 How can the effectiveness of team briefing schemes be measured?</td>
<td>2 To establish suitable effectiveness criteria for team briefing schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Has team briefing been effective?</td>
<td>3 To describe the extent to which the effectiveness criteria for team briefing have been met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 How can the effectiveness of team briefing be explained?</td>
<td>4a To determine the factors associated with the effectiveness criteria for team briefing being met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b To estimate whether some of those factors are more influential than other factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Can the explanation be generalized?</td>
<td>5 To develop an explanatory theory that associates certain factors with the effectiveness of team briefing schemes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maylor and Blackmon suggest that such personal objectives would be better were they to pass the well-known SMART test. That is that the objectives are:

- **Specific.** What precisely do you hope to achieve from undertaking the research?
- **Measurable.** What measures will you use to determine whether you have achieved your objectives?
- **Achievable.** Are the targets you have set for yourself achievable given all the possible constraints?
- **Realistic.** Given all the other demands upon your time, will you have the time and energy to complete the research on time?
- **Timely.** Will you have time to accomplish all your objectives in the time frame you have set?

#### Writing your research proposal

Proposal is a statement which is crucial part of the research process and it is a plan of a work that the researcher will be doing. The purposes of the research proposal are:

- **Organizing your ideas:** Clarifying the thoughts and organizing the ideas can be done by writing the research proposal.
- **Convincing your audience:** To show the module tutor the research objectives achievable, a detailed proposal will convince them.
- **Contracting with your 'client':** The proposal will be a base to make agreement with your commercial client or the academic committee.

#### The content of the research proposal

- **Title**
  This may be your first attempt at the title. It may change as your work progresses. At this stage it should closely mirror the content of your proposal.

- **Background**
  This section will demonstrate why your research worth effort and what is the related literature. Moreover, it will clarify where your proposal fits into the debate in the literature and link between the previous works that has been done.

- **Research questions and objectives**
  The precisely written objectives and observable outcomes should establish a clear understanding of what the research seeks to achieve.

- **Method**
  Methods part will show in detail and precisely how you intend to go about achieving your research objectives. It will be one of the longest sections of the proposal.
• **Timescale**
  This part will convince the assessors about the viability of your research proposal. The whole process should be divided into stages and plotted on a time scale by using **Gantt chart**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>December</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read literature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalize objectives</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft literature review</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read methodology literature</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devise research approach</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft research strategy and method</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pilot test and revise questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administer questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enter data into computer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyze data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft findings chapter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Update literature read</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete remaining chapters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit to tutor and await feedback</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise draft, format for submission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Print</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key dates</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>KEY DATES:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Oct 1st: Submit proposal to tutor.</td>
<td>4. December 10th: Complete draft and hand in.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Nov 12th: Begin fieldwork.</td>
<td>5. December 24th: Final submission</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

• **Resources**
  This part will state whether the proposed research has the required resources. Resource categories are categorized as **finance**, **data access** and **equipment**. Assessors of your proposal will need to be convinced that you have **access to the data** you need to conduct your research which can be done with a contract with your data supplier. Beyond data, you should have the equipment of **software** and **hardware** to analyze the data and you have enough **skills** to perform the analysis.

• **References**
  In the proposal part, no need for an enormous number of references. A few key literature statements will be enough to convince the assessors.

**Criteria for evaluating research proposals**

• **The extent to which the components of the proposal fit together**
  Your rationale for conducting the research should include a study of the previous published research, including relevant theories in the topic area. This study should inform your research question(s) and objectives. Your proposed method should flow directly from these research question(s) and objectives. The time that you have allocated should be a direct reflection of the methods you employ, as should the resources that you need.

• **The viability of the proposal**
  This is the answer to the question: ‘Can this research be carried out satisfactorily within the timescale and with available resources?’
The absence of preconceived ideas

Your research should be an exciting journey into the unknown. Do not be like the student who came to Phil to talk over a research proposal and said, ‘Of course, I know what the answer will be’.

If it is absolutely crucial that your proposal is of the highest quality then you may wish to use an expert system such as Peer Review Emulator™. This software is available either on its own or as part of the Methodologist’s Toolchest™ suite of programs. It asks you a series of questions about your proposed research. The program then critiques these answers to ensure that common research standards are achieved (Idea Works 2008).

From research ideas to a research proposal

A template of a proposal will be in the following format.

| Name and Affiliations of Applicants: |
| Telephone number: |
| E-mail address: |

PROPOSED RESEARCH TOPIC:

PROBLEM STATEMENT/JUSTIFICATION (What is the problem for which support is being sought, and why is it important?)

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES (Where applicable)

METHODOLOGY (In addition to data collection methods, include description of study area/sites/subjects and a subsection on data analysis)

RESULTS & DISSEMINATION (Expected outputs/results and how they will be disseminated and reporting times.)

TIMELINE (Provide activity by activity; in the form of a GANTT Chart).

BUDGET (Provide a budget break-down on an annual basis, by activity/line item)

REFERENCES

Let’s walk through this step by step.

The first step is to identify what large general topic of wide interest that your specific project relates to. These are topics that anyone, including your grandmother or someone sitting next to you on a plane, would say, “oh, yes, that’s an important topic.” Examples include: immigration, sustainable energy, changes in the family, curing cancer, new social technologies, environmental degradation, global warming, etc. Until you can identify a really broadly interesting theme that your project relates to, you will never be successful in applying for grants.

This is because your application must *excite* the readers, and the readers are likely from a range of different disciplines. They will not all be interested in your discipline’s narrow
debates. They want to know that your work and your intellectual and scholarly vision are wide, and broad, and encompassing.

Once you have established your wide, much debated topic, you then identify two bodies of literature relevant to your own training that dealt with this topic.

If you are an anthropologist, and your research is on Haitian communities in New York City, for example, you will start by pointing to the wide debates on immigration in America. Then you will write, “scholars in many fields have addressed these important questions. Within cultural anthropology, scholars such as xxx, xxx, and xxx have all explored the role of cultural beliefs in shaping immigrant communities. Within Caribbean Studies, meanwhile, scholars such as xxx, xxx, and xxx have focused on the specific demographic and economic trends which have fueled outward migration.”

This brief survey will be no more than 3 sentences long. And indeed all of the above must be done in two paragraphs and no more. Complain, claim that it is “impossible,” and then get it down to two paragraphs. Because it is only the Introduction to the “Kicker” Sentence, the axis on which your entire appeal for funding rests. And the Kicker Sentence must be on the first page. The Kicker is your “HOWEVER” sentence. The “however” sentence is the crux and the anchor of your entire proposal.

It reads like this:

“However, none of these works have addressed the central question of XXXXXXX.”

XXXXXXX in this case is YOUR view of what is most essential to an accurate understanding of the big topic, but which has never to date been studied by anyone else.

This brings you to the GAP IN KNOWLEDGE: “Despite much excellent work on themes such as XXX and XXX, scholars examining the transformations in immigration in America have not yet fully explored the importance of XXXX in creating and sustaining these communities.”

Now for the URGENCY:

“Yet, without such an understanding, we are left with an inadequate analysis that creates the condition for ill-informed policy decisions and a self-sustaining cycle of misunderstanding and resentment…”

Now for the HERO NARRATIVE.

“This study will remedy this gap in the literature by examining the class and racial politics of an immigrant Haitian community in New York City in order to more fully elucidate the heretofore unrecognized relationships between XXX and XXXX in one highly contested immigrant context. “

Remember, YOU are the HERO who is going to save us from ourselves and our inadvertant but devastating ignorance about the true significance of XXX!

This is immediately followed by a CONCRETE AND UNMISTAKABLE STATEMENT OF YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT (One of the most common grant proposal mistakes is to never include a single and foregrounded, easily identified sentence encapsulating your research project):

“ This study will focus particularly on XXX. Through a close and fine-grained analysis of XXX, I will show that in contrast to previous assumptions, in fact immigrant communities are XXXXX.”
The rest of the essay then provides **substantiating evidence.** In other words, concrete evidence that the project is doable, by you, according to reasonable and well thought out disciplinary methods and timeline.

**SPECIFICS:** This is one to two paragraphs of more specific information about the **background, context, history,** and **limitations** of the research. This demonstrates that you’ve looked into the project thoroughly and are familiar with it from several angles.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:** This builds on the very brief references in the first paragraph, and demonstrates that you have, in fact, read the major literature related to this topic. All citations must be complete and correct. Zero tolerance for misspellings or typos. All sources **MUST,** without exception, be listed on the attached bibliography.

**METHODOLOGY:** These are the specific methods that you will use to conduct the research. These differ by discipline.

**TIMELINE:** This is a month-by-month (or week-by-week) plan of research. What will you do when? Be specific! Name dates!

**BUDGET:** This is a general list of costs and any already committed funding sources. Break down your legitimate research expenses, including lab supplies, field supplies, travel both large and small, books and materials, internet or computer access fees, etc.

All of this substantiating evidence is meant to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you will **CORRECTLY UTILIZE** the grant money once you receive it.

Finally, you cannot finish without a **STRONG CONCLUSION.** Even one sentence suffices, but do NOT neglect to include it. It may read like this: “I expect this research to contribute to debates on XXXXX and play an important role in shaping debates on XXXX and XXXX in the coming years.”

This **Conclusion** demonstrates that you are a master of both the micro and the macro implications of your project. You have an unassailable timeline and budget, but you also have your eye on the wider scholarly world and your role in it.

Do all of this and you will walk away with generous, abundant funding for your every project. You will have the leisure to do the best work, and the best work will in turn legitimize you for the next major grant for which you apply. You will be on the “**GRANT GRAVY TRAIN**”, and that is the key to the most successful and fulfilling academic careers.
Chapter 2: Formulating and clarifying the research topic

i. A written research proposal

Puvadol was a student from Thailand who returned home from the UK to complete his MA dissertation. His proposed dissertation concerned the applicability of Western methods of involving employees in decision-making in Thai organizations. An abbreviated version of Puvadol’s proposal follows:

Title
The influences of Thai culture on employee involvement.

Background
Involving employees in the decision making of their employing organizations has been increasingly popular in Europe and North America in recent years. The influx of American organizations into Thailand has meant that similar approaches are being adopted. However, this assumes that Thai employees will respond to these techniques as readily as their European and American counterparts. Doubts about the validity of these assumptions derive from studies of Thai national culture (Komin 1990). Using Rokeach’s (1979) conceptual framework, Komin characterized Thai culture in a number of ways. I have isolated those that relate to employee involvement. These are that Thais wish to:

a. save face, avoid criticism and show consideration to others;
b. exhibit gratitude to those who have shown kindness and consideration;
c. promote smooth, conflict-free interpersonal relations;
d. interpret ‘rules’ in a flexible way with little concern for principles;
e. promote interdependent social relations;
f. be seen to be achieving success through good social relations rather than individual success.

I intend to demonstrate in this section that these six cultural values contradict the values of employee involvement (e.g. employee involvement may involve employees in openly criticizing managers, which directly contradicts a above).

Research objectives
1. To examine the assumptions behind the management technique of employee involvement.
2. To establish the characteristics of the Thai national culture.
3. To identify the opinions of Thai employees and their managers, working in American-owned organizations in Thailand, towards values underpinning employee involvement.
4. To draw conclusions about the applicability of employee involvement to Thai employees.

Method
1. Conduct a review of the literatures on employee involvement and Thai national culture in order to develop research hypotheses.
2. Carry out primary research in three American owned petrochemical and manufacturing organizations in Thailand to assess the opinions of Thai employees and their managers towards values underpinning employee involvement. Informal approval has been gained from three organizations. American-owned organizations are relevant because it is in these that employee involvement is most likely to be found and values underpinning employee involvement exhibited. Petrochemical and manufacturing organizations are chosen because the occupations carried out in these organizations are likely to be similar, thus ensuring that any differences are a function of Thai national culture rather than of occupational culture. A questionnaire will be developed with questions based on the Thai values a–f in the Background section above. Each value will lead to a hypothesis (e.g. employee involvement may not be appropriate to Thai culture because it may mean that employees openly criticize their managers). The questions in the questionnaire will seek to test these hypotheses. The questionnaire will be distributed to a sample (size to be agreed) of employees and of managers across all three organizations. Data analysis will use the SPSS software. Statistical tests will be run to ensure that results are a function of Thai cultural values rather than of values that relate to the individual organizations.
Timescale
- January–March 2008: review of literature
- April 2008: draft literature review
- May 2008: review research methods literature and agree research strategy
- June 2008: agree formal access to three organizations for collection of primary data
- July–August 2008: compile, pilot and revise questionnaire
- September 2008: administer questionnaire
- October–November 2008: final collection of questionnaires and analysis of data
- November 2008–February 2009: completion of first draft of project report
- March–May 2009: final writing of project report

Resources
I have access to computer hardware and software. Access to three organizations has been negotiated, subject to confirmation. My employer has agreed to pay all incidental costs as part of my course expenses.

References

Summary
The process of formulating and clarifying your research topic is the most important part of your research topic. Attributes of a research topic do not vary a great deal between universities. The most important of these is that your research topic will meet the requirements of the examining body.
Generating and refining research ideas makes use of a variety of techniques. It is important that you use a variety of techniques, including those that involve rational thinking and those that involve creative thinking. The ideas generated can be integrated subsequently using a technique such as working up and narrowing down.
Clear research questions, based on the relevant literature, will act as a focus for the research that follows. Research can be distinguished from intelligence gathering. Research is theory dependent.
Writing a research proposal helps you to organize your ideas, and can be thought of as a contract between you and the reader.
The content of the research proposal should tell the reader what you want to do, why you want to do it, what you are trying to achieve, and how you to plan to achieve it.