

Getting from a research Interest to a research Proposal

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Good research is *focused* research. Skilful researchers formulate a clear *research aim* as a means to focus their research, and then identify a number of *research questions* that flow from this aim. Your choice of a research aim and research questions are determined by theoretical assumptions about the world and the meanings that we attach to the words that we use to speak about this world. Thinking carefully about how you want to focus your research thus also helps you to work through and question your own theoretical and conceptual assumptions.

Example:

I am interested in doing research on ‘the politics of global health’. This interest stems from my hearing about the Millennium Development Goals, of which three are related to health matters. However, I realise that ‘the politics of global health’ is a large topic, and that I have to focus my research to make it manageable. How do I go about it? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Decide what exactly it is that interests you about this topic

To do so, you have to consider:

** What you mean when you use the concepts ‘politics’, ‘global’, and ‘health’. These concepts are controversial, so it is no use just to rely on a dictionary definition. Consider the different connotations that a term such as ‘politics’ have, for instance.*

** Whether you want to focus on one specific issue, say action taken to address malaria, or on a number of issues (for example, communicable diseases in general)*

** What the reigning theoretical approaches in this field of study are, and how you relate to them*

** What you think you will have to forego if you do not undertake this study (why is this study important to you personally)*

Example:

After I took the steps suggested above, I decided that what really interests me is that a communicable disease such as HIV-AIDS seems to be affecting more women than men in certain parts of Africa. As I am committed to gender issues, and I want to make a contribution towards the achieving of the MDGs, this focus will satisfy me intellectually and emotionally.

Tip: Make sure that your research interest really excites you, and write down the reasons why it does. If you cannot come up with good reasons why you should be excited about a research interest, it is probably better to move on to something else.

2. Formulate a research aim/problem

The next step is to re-formulate your research interest into a focused research aim.

One excellent way to do this is to think in terms of a *problem* that you want to ‘solve’ through your research.

A research problem is a short statement of a significant intellectual puzzle that is implied by your research interest.

A well-formulated research problem suggests why others (your readers/audience) should also be interested in its solution.

Example:

I am interested in the gender-specific nature of HIV-AIDS in South and East Africa. Through my initial research I found that most policies aimed at addressing the AIDS epidemic in these parts of the world are impervious to the fact that AIDS seems to be affecting disproportionately more women than men. My research aim is to determine why this is so, and what the consequences of this are. In view of the devastating impact of HIV-AIDS on Botswana and Kenya in particular, the social cost of not ‘solving’ this research problem is considerable.

Tip: See how authors of journal articles use the first few paragraphs of their ‘Introductions’ to make their research problem also the reader’s problem – thus, getting and keeping the reader’s attention. If you do not know of any good articles to study as guides to good academic writing, ask your supervisor to suggest one or two.

3. The final step is to deduce a number of specific research questions that you have to answer in order to solve the research problem / meet the research aim. Ask yourself: what are the specific questions that I have to answer in order to meet the stated research aim?

Clearly formulated research questions will indicate what the appropriate methodology is that you should use. ‘The methodology’ refers to the theoretical frameworks, research sources, and research techniques that you will use in order to answer the research questions.

Examples of research questions flowing from the above formulation of my research aim:

- a) To what extent is HIV-AIDS a gender-specific phenomenon in Botswana and Kenya?
- b) What are the gender-specific dimensions of the AIDS debates in Botswana and Kenya (if any), and how are these dimensions reflected in policy documents / policy discourse?
- c) What are the degrees of success achieved by these policies?
- d) If these policies are largely unsuccessful, what could possibly explain their lack of success? How can we determine the *net effect* of the absence of a gender-specific focus? (There may be other reasons for the lack of success, and I will have to find ways to ‘control for’ these other factors.)

Tip: Try to formulate your research questions as clearly and unambiguously as possible. While you are writing down these questions, think about the possible meaning(s) of core concepts (such as ‘gender’, ‘gender-specific’, and ‘policy’ in the above example). If you are

unsure about the meaning of core concepts, consult encyclopedias or glossaries of the social sciences. Do not rely solely on general dictionaries, though. They provide information only on the denotation of a term, not on its (often controversial) connotations in the social sciences.

4. You are now ready to draft a research proposal. A research proposal must contain the following:

- a) A statement of the research problem and its related questions and a brief analysis of the main concepts used in this statement** (conceptual analysis includes a discussion of the possible connotations of a contested concept and the reasons why you prefer one connotation over others)
- b) A discussion of the reasons why this research problem is important to the wider academic (and/or policy) community**
- c) A summary of the theoretical approach and research methodology that you intend to use in trying to solve the problem**
- d) A brief discussion of how you are delimiting the study** (= drawing a clear boundary between what you are focusing on and what will be excluded)