

The Research Proposal

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1 Basic Expectations for the Research Proposal

As detailed in the course syllabus, your research proposal *must* be related to the study of human societies and fall within sociology's broad intellectual mandate. Your topic does not need to be tethered to the present day or wedded to any specific intersection of time and space—i.e., as long as you are explicit about your analytic choices, you are free to broaden your temporal horizon.

Broadly speaking, your proposal should illustrate your familiarity with the theoretical and methodological frameworks discussed this semester. You are free to propose a qualitative study, a quantitative study, or a mixed-methods project that fruitfully integrates different methodological and epistemological traditions. **You do not have to conduct any research this term.** That said, you may wish to field a [pilot study](#) or summarize the results of [exploratory data analyses](#) to help you develop the empirical architecture undergirding your proposed project and motivate your overarching research design.

2 Structure of the *Research Proposal*

2.1 The Introductory Section (1-2 Pages)

In your introductory section, you have to discuss the [research question](#) underlying your proposed project with lucidity and precision. Your introductory paragraphs must provide a *brief* summary of the literature you are in conversation with and offer a clear roadmap for the exposition to follow: i.e., what is the central question, puzzle, problem, or idea that your research will address? What are the key claims being made or hypotheses being adjudicated? How will different theoretical perspectives, conceptual models and empirical instruments be deployed to advance your arguments? Answering these questions is vital.

2.2 The Literature Review (5-7 Pages)

In your second section, you should provide a more detailed overview or exegesis of the existing literature. How have other scholars studied *x*, your phenomenon of substantive interest? What conclusions have they drawn? What are the evidentiary bases for these conclusions or claims? Identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments pervading the extant literature. Are there any “gaps” or lacunae worth filling?

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Note: For some projects it might also be appropriate to include a “Background” section of 2-3 pages.

2.3 The Provisional Argument (1 Page)

After reviewing the extant literature, you will provide a well-developed argument that builds on existing insights while charting a relatively novel path forward.¹ After all, if x has been empirically “solved,” it is not worth researching further. In furnishing your argument, you should *clearly* articulate what you expect to find and how this finding may be sociologically interesting. To this end, you may sketch formal hypotheses or provide a detailed discussion of your core expectations.

2.4 Methodology (3-5 Pages)

Once your basic argument is established, you must systematically explain how you will subject your propositions to empirical investigation. Consequently, you must answer the following questions:

- What is your “target population” or who are your research participants?
- What are your units of analysis?
- How will you find your analytic sample (e.g., through recruitment fliers, participant observation, by mining text corpora, and so on and so forth) and collect qualitative or quantitative data?
- What are the key concepts, variables or measures at the heart of your analysis? How will these concepts be operationally defined or translated from abstract ideas into empirically tractable units?
- How will you analyze your data (thematic coding, causal narratives, parametric statistics *etc.*)?

Note: If you do not have preliminary findings, this section should be 1-3 pages longer and more detailed.

2.5 Preliminary Findings (2-3 Pages)

If you have preliminary results (e.g., via pilot interviews or exploratory data analyses), please report those findings towards the end of your research proposal. What patterns have you observed so far? Do they align with your theoretical expectations? How will these provisional findings shape the next steps of your project?

2.6 Conclusion (1-2 Pages)

In your concluding section, briefly recapitulate the key arguments advanced in the body of your text. How do your arguments provide analytic utility? Moreover, how will your methodological interventions—as outlined in the proposal—refine our understandings of x , your phenomenon of substantive interest? To furnish an answer, you must situate your insights within the broader canon or literature reviewed in the body of your paper and address relevant counterarguments.

¹You can think of this argument as your *central thesis*.

3 Formatting Conventions

The final proposal should be 15-25 pages in length, inclusive of references. The text must be double-spaced and formatted in a 12-point Garamond or Times New Roman font. Margins should be set to 1 inch on all sides (top, bottom, left, and right). You are free to use either an [APA](#) or [ASA](#) citation style to manage references and bibliographies. If you haven't done so already, you may want to invest in [Zotero](#) to manage your citations. More generally, you must use subheadings to organize your arguments.