Writing Research Proposals

For Social Science Research

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A thesis/extended essay with publishable quality, should have some essential characteristics/qualities:

i. Should be based on research.

ii. Should advance a significant, interesting and original argument.

iii. That argument should originate from an analysis of data, evidence and other supporting material.

iv. Be written with an academically sound framework, structure, and organization.

v. Should be written in ‘scientific language’, with every effort being made to maintain academic rigour, yet clear, elegant and easy to comprehend.

vi. Should suggest a few or several significant conclusions that are original and interesting, and they should emanate directly from the material and analysis presented in the essay.
Research Process for Thesis/Extended Essay

- Research process has three phases:
  i. Proposal development and writing
  ii. Conducting research – secondary as well as primary research. (latter, laboratory, field, experimental)
  iv. Data analysis and writing.
Entry to Research Process

i. Have a broad scholarly/scientific aim – to produce a thesis, with some originality freshness in topic, research problem, analysis, research, argument and conclusions.

ii. Then, search for an exciting research idea. An idea that animates you and makes you impatient until it is developed into a good research topic.
Entry to Research Process

• The best way to develop a good research idea is to cultivate ‘intellectual/scientific curiosity’ about a phenomenon or a few relating to your field of study.

• Intellectual/scientific curiosity is a thirst to know more about something, by observing unusual patterns, dimensions, contradictions etc. of a phenomenon.

• It animates the researcher to ask why, how, what questions about the phenomenon or its observed patterns, contradictions, absences etc.
Entry to Research Process

• Research is essentially an exercise in asking questions and finding answers/explanations to them.

• Thus, a good research begins with an interesting research idea that arouses intellectual curiosity and enables the research to ask why, what, and how questions.
What is Research?

• An exercise in the production of knowledge.

• An exercise in the production of new and reliable knowledge.

• An exercise aimed at expanding horizons of the existing knowledge.
Production of Knowledge

• Production of knowledge, rather than creation.
• Because, it involves labour, collective labour.
• Knowledge production takes place through a labour process. ‘Creation’ does not.
• Labour of the researchers, research teachers, assistants, interviewees, informants, supervisors, and examiners.
• Books and printed material consulted in knowledge production are accumulated labour.
What is Research?

• Research is an organized, formalized and institutionalized practice.
• Professionalized research communities of specialists, with values, norms and practices.
• There are professional associations, academies, councils, learned societies to regulate and set norms and standards.
• Universities have the dual task of conducting and promoting research, training and recruiting members of research community.
What is Research

• Professionalized research is oriented towards producing ‘disciplinary knowledge.’

• Knowledge within academic disciplines – sociology, anthropology, law, political science, history etc.

• Formalization and institutionalization of knowledge production means the existence of consensus, conventions and structures of how knowledge is produced and validated.
• Requirement of writing a proposal before undertaking research as a demand by organized and institutionalized culture of research.
What is ‘New Knowledge’?

• Researchers are expected to produce new ‘new knowledge.’
• Research is expected to make a fresh contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the relevant field of study.
• Research is guided by methodologies and methods.
• Research-based knowledge is supposed to be different from ‘opinion-making’ and ‘ideology.’ The criterion of demarcation is ‘objectivity.’
Research Proposal

• The idea of ‘research proposal’ comes from the formalization of the practice of knowledge production.
• It lays down a framework which includes minimally the idea to be researched in the form of a problem, its justification, and the methods to be employed in the inquiry.
• It is the ‘Road Map’ to research.
Research Proposal

• An important phase in the preparation of research.
• Researcher seeks to produce knowledge according to steps as sanctioned within the scientific community.
• It is the beginning of ‘Apprenticeship’ as a scholar. Learns the methods, skills, norms, practices, values, ethics, injunctions as well as tricks of the trade.
Main Components of a Research Proposal

- Topic
- Research Problem
- Context and Background
- Objectives
- Justification/Rationale
- Hypothesis
- Research Questions
- Literature Survey and Review
- Theoretical Framework/Foundations
- Scope
- Approach
- Methods/Methodology
- Research Design
Research Topic

• indicates the thematic scope of your research project.
• A good topic should be brief, precise, and capable of communicating to the reader the scope and thematic orientation of the research project.
• Should be creative and attractive too. It is the topic that gives the first impression about your research project as well as yourself.
Topic

• To make the topic brief, the use of the language precisely and economically is crucially important.

• The length of the topic should not exceed two lines.

• Avoid unnecessary words such as ‘with reference to’, ‘with a special emphasis on...”
Formulation of Topic

• A topic can be formulated to have one part or two parts.
• Examples:
  • i. “Efficacy of Legislation for Combatting White Collar Crime in Sri Lanka”
  • ii. “Crime Without Punishment?: Efficacy of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement in Contemporary Sri Lanka”
Research Topic: Examples

- Gender Matters: Men and Women an Criminality in Urban Life.
- Gender Matters: Barriers to Women in the Legal Profession in Contemporary Sri Lanka.
Research Topic: Attributes

- A good research topic should pass the following tests:
- **SUBSTANTIVE ATTRIBUTES**
  
i. Disciplinary relevance.

ii. Reflects the current status of research, debates and interests in the field.

iii. Contains adequate scope for the degree requirements, (M. A, M. Phil, Ph. D).

iv. Suggests an adequate and substantive research program.

v. Shows researchers familiarity with current issues relevant to the topic.

vi. Has the potential to make a fresh contribution to knowledge.

vii. Creative and innovative in ideas packed in the topic.
Research Topic: Characteristics

• **TECHNICAL ATTRIBUTES**

  • viii Precise, and not vague, possessing clarity
  • ix Economy of language, no unnecessary words, cliches and platitudes (“problems and prospects”,” With special reference to..”, “A Comparative study.”
  • x. Word limit, ideally up to 15 words.
  • xi. Not like an essay topic or book title.
  • xii Suggests originality in research and thinking.
  • xiii Not boring, but interesting and attractive.
  • xiv Capable of generating interest among others.
Technical Attributes

- Xv Spatial and temporal parameters are clear.
- Xvi Structurally innovative; ideally a two part structure.
Research Problem

• A good research problem is the key to better research.
• It is also the centre of gravity of a research proposal.
• In evaluating research proposals for grants, fellowships etc., evaluators would usually judge the standard of the entire proposal by the quality of the research problem.
• A weak and vague research problem is always the weakest point in a research proposal.
What is a Research ‘Problem’?

• A conceptual query that warrants scholarly investigation.

• A ‘problem’ the exploration, or investigation, of which can potentially contribute to the production of some new knowledge.
Research ‘Problem’

• A research problem encapsulates a puzzle, an anomaly, a contradiction, or a paradox either in the existing body of knowledge and theory, or in the physical, material, social, political, or cultural processes.
Ways of Formulating Research Problem

• Two ways:

  i. As a puzzle.
  ii. As a substantive question.
Understanding ‘Puzzle’ in Research

• A research puzzle is an experience of surprise, or rather the intellectual expression of such an experience.
• Ideally, it may contain a paradoxical situation requiring unpacking, a riddle demanding resolution, a paradox requiring an explanation, or an interesting issue that warrants careful and systematic analysis and interpretation.
• A puzzle can also be an anomaly that calls for in-depth investigation. Puzzle in a scientific sense “poses an intellectual difficulty” (Girill: 1973), because the existing understanding is not adequate to explain it.
‘Puzzle’ in Research

• RESEARCH POUZZLE
• The task of the researcher is to explain and resolve the puzzle through systematic investigation.
• For social science research, puzzles can be observed in the broad social processes or in the way the processes are understood in the existing body of theoretical or empirical knowledge.
Research Puzzles: Examples

- Why is there so much electoral violence in Sri Lanka despite the fact that democratic traditions have taken firm roots in Sri Lankan society?

- Why is there a resurgence of the role of political families at all levels although Sri Lanka has a well-entrenched political party system?

- How is it possible for some students from rural backgrounds to succeed while others fail in coping with pressures of urban society when they join urban elite schools for secondary education?
Research Problem in Two Forms

PUZZLE
• Why is there so much electoral violence in Sri Lanka despite the fact that democratic traditions have taken firm roots in Sri Lankan society?
• Two components to the puzzle: question and the qualifying statement pointing to the condition of anomaly.
• OR
• SUBSTANTIVE QUESTION
• Why does the English education programme in Sri Lanka’s schools continue to produce minimalist outcomes?
Research Problem as a Substantive Question

• A significant intellectual question the understanding of which will require a serious research effort.

• They are also called ‘grand tour questions.’
Research Problem as Substantive Question

• Why does the English education programme in Sri Lanka’s schools continue to produce minimalist outcomes?
• Do children with educated family backgrounds perform better than their counterparts from families with low educational achievements and why?
• How does social background of children affect their educational achievements?
• Why are laws again white collar crimes are not effective amidst popular outcry against corruption?
• These substantive questions too suggest ‘research puzzles.’
Context and Background

• Your research topic and problem emanate from some context, against some specific background.
• That context and background needs to be described in detail.
Context and Background

• If your research topic is about the efficacy of legislation in combatting white collar crime, then you can describe:

• (i) what white collar crime is.
• (ii) What is the available legislation in combatting white collar crimes in Sri Lanka.
• (iii). Working and efficacy of the existing law, existing studies on it and criticisms etc. about the adequacy/inadequacy of the existing law.
• How the question of law enforcement on white collar crime has become an issue of public debate.
• Why a study on the theme is necessary.
Context and Background

• This section is a substantively long part of your proposal.

• It is also this section that provides justification for your research project.

• Since it sets out the background against which your research emerges, you need to use the existing scholarly as well as journalistic sources to provide the necessary information, data etc.
Research Questions

• Research questions help the researcher
  (i) to **unpack the research problem**.
  (ii) visualize what kind of data and evidence will
       be necessary for the research, and
  (iii) organize that process of collecting data
       according to a thematic framework.
Research Questions as ‘Unpacking the Problem’

- Research in a practical sense is initially aimed at collecting data and evidence. That requires questions to guide data collection.
- Unpacking a research problem means identifying the key issues that constitute the problem.
- Unpacking the research problem also means the identification of the thematic components of the research problem and transforming them into questions.
More on Research Questions

• Each research question also provides the basic outline for a substantial chapter in the thesis.
• Therefore, each research question should be substantive in terms of scope and range.
• Thus, research questions are NOT ones requiring brief answers: Rather, they should require research-based answers, through archival or field research..
Research Questions

• 5-6 research questions would be sufficient for a thesis.

• Each research question can be further broken into subsidiary questions.

• Research questions enable the researcher:
  i. To organize the research around each research question.
  ii. To structure the thesis chapters around research question.
Research Questions - Examples

• Topic: “Crime without Punishment?: The Efficacy of Law Enforcement in Dealing with White-Collar Crime in Sri Lanka”

• Research Problem: “Why does the law enforcement process appear to be ineffective in dealing with political and official corruption, despite the public and policy commitment to corruption-free governance?”
Research Questions

When you unpack the research problem, you need to ask **three types of Questions**:

i. Background questions
ii. New Research oriented questions
iii. Explanatory questions.
Research Questions: Background Questions

Research Problem: “Why does the law enforcement process appear to be ineffective in dealing with political and official corruption, despite the public and policy commitment to corruption-free governance?”

Background Questions: i. What are the existing laws that deal with white collar corruption in Sri Lanka at present and ii. why and under what circumstances have they been introduced?
Research Questions Requiring New Research

• Research Problem: “Why does the law enforcement process appear to be ineffective in dealing with political and official corruption, despite the public and policy commitment to corruption-free governance?”

• Example:
  i. How and in what ways the efficacy of anti-corruption law has been tested in recent years?
  ii. What is the experience of the law enforcement institutions – police, AGs department and judiciary – in the implementation of anti-corruption laws?
Explanatory Research Questions

• These questions seek explanations to your research problem through ideally field research:

• Examples:

i. What are the experiences and perceptions of law enforcement personnel in implementing anti-white collar crime legislation?

ii. What are the perceptions among law-makers, the media, the professionals and the citizens?

iii. Why is it that the law may have worked in some circumstances and not in others?
• Definition: A hypothesis is the **tentative explanation of the research problem**.

• Hypothesis 1: When institutions lack capacity for strict enforcement of law, the implementation of ant-white-collar crime becomes ineffective.

• Hypothesis: Lack of political and institutional will tends to weaken the law enforcement process against corruption.