Preparing a Research Proposal

There are a number of typical steps in preparing a research proposal, including the following:

1. **Preliminary & Revised Research Statements**: Prepared and submitted as part of a research application. You may wish to update and revise your statement of research intentions in the first few weeks of candidacy. Critically important is the clear statement of researchable and answerable research questions.

2. **Data-Base Search & Annotated Bibliography**: A report that is a summary of your data-base search to find out what has already been studied and what is known in your research area and about your research topic. Prepared as an annotated bibliography and including the following: (1) tentative title for your research, (2) a one-paragraph synopsis or abstract, (3) revised research questions, (4) an annotated bibliographic summary of the most important papers and books reporting on prior research on your topic, and (5) a longer list of additional papers and books relevant to the topic and domain that you have found but not yet read. Each annotated summary should be one paragraph in length and include (a) **Purpose**: the purpose of the research or the research question or claim being addressed, (b) **Methods**: brief summary of the mode of inquiry and specific methods used in the research, (c) **Findings**: most important findings from that research, and (d) **Conclusions and Implications**: conclusions from the research and implications for your research. Use a database for storing and organising your information, eg, EndNote, so you can change the style easily. Include a reference citation for each publication in standard bibliographic format, using the standard bibliographic format used in EBS and the environmental social sciences: the Harvard/Royal Society/APA social science style – cf American Psychological Association (2001), Publication Manual (5th ed.), also available at [http://www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org) > APA Style).

3. **Critical Literature Review Essay**: An essay that comprehensively, systematically and critically reviews the most important previous research literature pertaining to your research topic and questions. Includes properly referenced research papers or books. Structure and organise the review around the research questions relevant to your research or around the subareas of relevant previous research. Identify the modes of inquiry and research methods used in each study reviewed, and comment critically on the strengths and limitations of those research methods (especially in terms of how they do or don’t deal with the four criteria of trustworthiness). Indicate the contributions of the previous research literature by describing the relevance of the literature to the field and to your topic. At the end of this essay, include your revised research questions (ie, revised in the light of the identification of gaps in current knowledge). Assessment criteria are the following: (a) systematic and comprehensive review of relevant literature in the research domain, (b) identification and critical commentary about the research methods and (c) clarity of revised research questions in the light of current knowledge.

4. **Outline of Research Methods**: Following your latest restatement of research questions, a brief outline (text and/or dot points) of the mode of inquiry and most likely methods of research to be used to answer your research questions. Ensure your presentation makes clear how and why the methods proposed are suitable for answering the research questions, ie, there should be a clear mapping of research methods back to the questions they are intended
to answer. The subcategories within research methods will depend on the type of questions you are asking and *modus operandi* of your discipline, but at a minimum should include: (a) fundamental mode or modes of inquiry, (b) specific information collection or testing methods most likely to be employed, (c) methods of information analysis or evaluation and (d) how you propose to assure quality, ie, trustworthiness. It is important not only to state what you propose to do, but also *why*, ie, to justify your proposed methods.

5. **Preliminary Research Proposal:** A written research proposal (2500-3000 words, between 12 and 15 pages *including* title, abstract, body, figures, tables and references). A detailed template is available on request, but in general, your preliminary research proposal should include an abstract, objectives and importance, critical literature review, research questions/claims, research methods including research plan, research design, information collection methods, information analysis methods and quality assurance followed by a proposed time line. A detailed proforma with assessment criteria is also available on request and may be useful as you think about and write your preliminary research proposal.

Following a tradition begun at the University of Toronto in Canada, in assessing a research proposal, I will be looking for evidence of development in four areas: (1) your grasp of the subject matter, ie, what currently is known in your research area; (2) the organisation of your knowledge about modes of inquiry and research methods; (3) ability to critically evaluate methods used in prior studies; and (4) original thinking regarding appropriate modes of inquiry and research methodology for the research questions you seek to answer.

**Research Seminars**

The EBS Research Group has been holding regular Research Seminars starting in 1997. All EBS research students, post-docs and visiting scholars are expected to attend and participate.

*Environment, Behaviour & Society (EBS) Research Seminars* – every Friday, year round, 12:30-2:00 pm, Seminar Room 557, contact PhD candidate Chumporn Moorapun in Room 556 for information or see [http://www.arch.usyd.edu.au/research/env_behaviour.shtml](http://www.arch.usyd.edu.au/research/env_behaviour.shtml) for information on seminars.

**Outcomes**

Upon successfully completing a preliminary research proposal and the full proposal a few months later, you will have an understanding of the range of modes of inquiry and a beginning understanding of some of the specific methods of research and scholarship used in the environmental social sciences. You should also be able to locate and analyse research literature, have a more critical attitude toward research, be able to formulate a preliminary but robust research proposal, and have a beginning understanding of how to prepare, present and publish papers resulting from research.