

RESEARCH PROPOSAL STRUCTURE Using "Argumentative Inquiry"

These guidelines for designing a research proposal use the argumentative inquiry approach advocated by Popper, Perelman, van Eemeren, Rescher and Walton as well as many others, where a researcher designs the thesis as his or her best justification of its conclusion while anticipating the possible counter arguments. The thesis is intended to be a reasoned yet persuasive dialogue. The research proposal is an outline (or brief) of the researchers conclusion (argument) and likely source of supporting evidence.

It is important that the proposal critiques itself, so please highlight any shortcomings. Any counter arguments (rebuttals) should be fully anticipated and the empirical method should be designed as if done so as to counter your most able opponents.

THE OBJECT UNDER STUDY?

What is the thing or object that you intend to study?

YOUR CONCERN?

What is it about this thing or object that concerns you?

YOUR ARGUMENT?

Combine your object and concern into a sentence that states what you anticipate your research will conclude, i.e. the argument. The research report (thesis) is a justification of this conclusion. Being at least aware of the form of your conclusion indicates more familiarity with the topic. The conclusion (or argument) needs to be at least a little surprising (insightful) and falsifiable.

For example:

The thing, or object, under study may be, "***Modern wireless communications***"

The concern may be, "***developing a national social policy response to this technology***".

These go together in a one sentence argument or conclusion...

Eg: That the national social policy response to the new wireless communications technologies should include X, Y and Z.

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X Y and Z are 'issues' identified from the literature and refined through interviews with concerned and interested groups.

BRIEF DEFINITIONS

Immediately after stating your argument (conclusion), use the literature to *briefly* explain any technical keywords used, preferably using the literature.



E.g. By wireless communications it is meant...
By 'national social policy response it is meant...
By 'society' it is meant... etc. etc...

THE PROBLEM (MOTIVATION AND IMPORTANCE)

On one brief paragraph use the literature to state the problem that your research will address.

E.g.: This research will address the problem of the new wireless communication with respect to the quality of life for 'society'.

This section should also explain why the reader should spend time reading your work. Its aim is to persuade the reader to keep reading. Justify the importance of your research topic using the literature. Your personal interest or motivation needs to be presented i.e. reveal your background and biases (interpretation).

EVIDENCE FROM THE LITERATURE

The next step is to summarise the literature you are already aware of that will be used to support your argument (conclusion). As a big part of social inquiry research is defining terminology this can be divided into three parts; scoping the object, scoping the concern and then using the literature to provide evidence in support of your argument. By scoping it is meant, present the literature you have that is about the object and concern. This may be definitions, previous research, similar concepts and contrasting concepts. This serves to 'flesh out' or bound the concepts you are using. Remember, to include the counter arguments.

E.g.: About Wireless Communication

Abbott [9999] distinguishes wireless from wired because... .. Previous research on wireless includes Mitchell's [1999] work which...etc. etc. [This will discuss wireless in the context of its impact on people]

About National Social Policy

Quine [9999] suggests social policy be constructed around the guiding principle of...etc. etc.

Smith [9999] argues that policy should be outcome focused not prescriptive... etc.

At the end of the literature review you should be able to draft a table of issues derived from particular authors and which suggest corresponding questions that you can ask as part of your empirics

METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICS

Own Empirical Evidence

How are you going to collect your empirics (first hand experiences). The methodology uses the literature to argue how best to collect your empirics. These may be interviews, statistics, action research, observations or all three. The justification of these ways of collecting knowledge needs to be presented. Give details of the anticipated methods and expected results.

Observations should be designed and recorded in such a way so as to satisfy your worst critic. A discussion of the criticisms (limitations) in your empirics should be included. Remember that

usually the more “direct” the empirics, and the more ways they are recorded, the more convincing the research.

E.g. It is intended to organise focus groups with concerned citizens, to interview government policy advisors, interested academics and undertake an interpretive content analysis of the national newspapers and trade magazines.

This many people will be interviewed, it will be done over these months, any interview data will be transcribed and questions will be derived from the literature as mentioned above... etc. etc....

IMPLICATIONS (So what)

Comments such as the following often appear in the implications

- *It is thus hoped to show that ...*
- *The new evidence collected should extend the previous evidence collected because...*

Think of the implication of the study as being similar to the “final summation” given to a jury before its deliberations. Not only is the argument and evidence summarised but you need to answer the “OK, I agree with you but so-what” questions. To some extent the implications will have been mentioned in the “motivation” section but some reiteration and elaboration on how people should act differently in the future is useful.

E.g. This study is expected to show Because...etc. etc....The implications of this are that ... Further research on .. is suggested...

The social action suggested by your research is important (see Habermas and Argyris’s “Theories of Action”). To merely describe and evaluate a social situation is considered inadequate. It maybe OK in the physical science but not when studying human activity. The aim should be to come up with an “improved” way of behaving; a reduction of people’s concerns. Exactly how, should be explained. It is not sufficient to say that “having a better appreciation of the problem” guides future action.

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