

Writing Research
Proposals for Social
Sciences and
Humanities in a Higher
Education Context

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By

George Damaskinidis
and Anastasia Christodoulou

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FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that I respond to the request of George Damaskinidis and Anastasia Christodoulou, the authors of this book published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, for a brief critique of their book.

Wider participation in higher education has become a key component of European education policy in recent decades and is a strategic goal set by many European governments. The hope is that this will augment the Old Continent's human capital and give it a competitive advantage in the global arena. As a result, in the last twenty years Europe has witnessed a higher education explosion with mass participation in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Postgraduate programmes in particular have multiplied remarkably in all universities, covering all the scientific fields. Master's dissertations and doctoral theses especially are usually considered the culmination of an educational path. Within an environment of research independence, researchers must make a small (in the case of a master's dissertation) or large (in the case of a PhD thesis) original contribution to knowledge.

As the authors mention, their first book (Damaskinidis and Christodoulou, 2014) arose from the need to fill part of the literature gap on research methodology when writing a research proposal for a master's dissertation or doctoral thesis. The authors' second book continues the previous successful effort. This improved edition has added new material and removed other sections based on the experience gained from the first edition and from the book's use in lectures preparing postgraduate students to write their own paper.

Having read the book's eleven chapters, it is easy to see that it is an especially useful aid for master's and doctoral students of the social sciences and humanities. It is an easy-to-read, clearly structured book whose contents fully satisfy the expectations created by the title. The chapters strike a very good balance between theory and practical examples, providing the reader with useful guidelines on how to successfully complete a research proposal. I feel that this book was made to be read both right through and section by section, in the sense that you return to it again and again, especially to those parts on which every novice researcher would like to focus and receive more support.

Overall, I would say that this book is an essential manual and useful guide for every new scientist. I would recommend its addition to the bookshelves of every postgraduate student attempting to contribute productively to scientific dialogue through their independent research – research for which the research proposal is perhaps the key prerequisite for its success.

Professor Marios Vryonides
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To complete this book, we turned to a number of people, whose comments contributed decisively to the improvement of many parts thereof. We would therefore like to thank Professor Marios Vryonides, who is the coordinator of the Education Sciences Doctoral Programme at European University Cyprus, for his scientific critique of the book. Also, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Mr Andreas Kotridis, a secondary education teacher (MA in Education Organisation and Management, University of Thessaly; MA in Adult Education, Hellenic Open University), for his critical reading of the book and constructive remarks as a reader with a direct interest in its contents. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to Epikentro Publishers for giving us permission to use selected material from the book Damaskinidis, G. & Christodoulou A. (2014). *Η Ερευνητική Πρόταση στην Μεταπτυχιακή και Διδακτορική Έρευνα* [The Research Proposal in Postgraduate and Doctoral Research]. Thessaloniki: Epikentro. Additional thanks go to Athena Samaklis for her careful editing of this book. Last but not least, we owe a debt of gratitude to the students in the various master's programmes and training seminars for their cooperation in our endeavours to instruct them on how to write a research proposal.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly literature is rife with books on research methodology for most disciplines. Researchers have an abundance of methods and tools at their fingertips with which to plan their research. However, (at least) when it comes to the social sciences and humanities, the early stages of research design – namely the research proposal – have yet to be thoroughly examined (Haselkorn, 1985; Heath & Tynan, 2010).

One of the biggest challenges for a researcher is bringing the work of earlier researchers, current findings and new hypotheses all together in a single proposal for future research. Students who are called upon to write a research proposal for their master's dissertation or doctoral thesis also face the same challenge. If you are planning on embarking on such an academic endeavour with a higher education institution or research organisation, then this book will prove valuable to you, especially as you take your first steps.

Most educational and research institutions offer special postgraduate courses that prepare students to plan and write their research papers. In fact, having recognised how important it is to develop these skills, some of these institutions have even added relevant training to their undergraduate programmes. The incentive for this book came from the various research methodology courses we have designed and taught at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (A.U.Th.) in recent years. One of the exercises, "Writing a Research Proposal", brought home to us from the very first moment how necessary it was to deal with research proposals more systematically and with more specific academic criteria. In the next few years, this educational intervention went through different stages before ending up as the book you are now holding.

Our first publishing effort (Damaskinidis and Christodoulou, 2014) came to be used as a principal source in similar research methodology courses, and was warmly received and critiqued by master's students, doctoral candidates, research methodology instructors, supervisors and review committees. We therefore decided to attempt a new (this time international) edition that would be enriched with the knowledge and experience we had gained. Special mention should be made of our experience with designing and teaching the lifelong learning course "Writing a Research Proposal for Scientific Research in the Social

Sciences and Humanities” at A.U.Th., which prompted the writing of this book.

There were not a few master’s students and doctoral candidates (more of the latter) who came to us for advice in the last stages of their research, having realised their initial design was faulty. While this does not necessarily mean that they had inadequate academic guidance or that they themselves were not proficient researchers or hadn’t worked hard enough, it does point to the lack of importance assigned by all parties to the initial planning stage. Although this book does not intend to deal with the supervisor-researcher relationship, the comments made on the research proposals may be used for this purpose by both parties.

We hope that this book will be useful to students as well as early-stage researchers who want to develop the skills and abilities that will enable them to plan a research proposal which will meet the most demanding academic criteria. This book offers guidance on how to conceptualise and form a research plan and provides specific instructions on organising and presenting research material in standardised format. The examples analysed in this book were chosen not for their scientific soundness, but because they highlight the complex problems a proposer faces when writing his research proposal.

The book offers a complete organisational framework based on which you will be able to develop your own research and presents the parts that make up a research proposal. Before you begin writing your own proposal, you should have formed a clear idea about your research. However, there are no secret recipes that someone can follow to write a proposal. Each and every proposal needs to be adapted to its particular discipline, to the demands of the course taken at the host institution, and to the specifications set by the proposal’s review committee. In other words, the same research proposal can take many different forms, depending on who the intended recipient is.

Our aim is to help the reader of this book to determine the basic structure of a social sciences or humanities research proposal. We are therefore presenting a model we believe, if suitably adapted, will meet researchers’ needs in these two fields. We have applied this model with great success in our own research, as have students from different fields of study and with varied research experience. Discussions with colleagues experienced in research methodology, students’ research proposals, their personal stances and views and the constructive comments made by external reviewers all played a decisive role in the creation of this book.

Espousing astronomer Jean Dominique Cassini’s (1770) belief that it is better not to have the slightest idea where you are – and to know it – than

to be convinced you are somewhere you actually aren't, we invite you to (re)design your research with this book as your guide. If you do submit a research proposal after having studied this book, or if you use it as a reference, we would love to hear your comments and are happy to share our experiences with you.

Lastly, we would like to point out that the examples included in this book (raw thoughts, research ideas and research proposals) were initially written in Greek by Greek students. We have made every effort to translate them in a way that will retain their structure and content and leave their various errors intact (e.g. language style, expressions, grammar), so that the reader can get as complete a picture as possible of how the research stages had been initially designed.

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A BRIEF NOTE ON THE USE OF MASCULINE PRONOUNS

After much deliberation, in this fully updated and revised English version of the original Greek book, we decided to make use of the more traditional “he” and its derived forms to refer to antecedents of indeterminate gender. This decision was not intended as a sign of disrespect to or disregard of the female gender. We ask that you see it merely as an effort to simplify sentences by avoiding the cumbersome use of “he/she”, “his/her”, etc. Early attempts to use the plural “they” and its derived forms yielded ambiguous phrases in some passages, so we settled on the use of “he” with a gender-neutral meaning.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

*the book in your hand
is the coach
that gets the researcher
to the research starting line*

1.1 Some notions on design

Design, in the sense of mapping out certain actions, is what we do when we plan a number of successive steps that are needed to achieve something. Such an undertaking could be split into a number of key stages, a non-exhaustive list of which is provided below. First, we set a goal; in other words, we decide what we want to achieve. Second, we plan the order in which each step will succeed the other to make our undertaking possible. Third, we check to make sure that we have performed our intended tasks correctly. Fourth, we resolve to carry out each step in our undertaking skilfully. Last, we consider it a given that we will make every effort (be it intellectual, physical or a combination thereof) to achieve the desired outcome.

Since people are both the agency and final recipient in a design process, steps should be taken to ensure that every stage of the design is socially accepted. To achieve this, any situation that arises needs to be assessed and the actions being carried out accordingly corrected and adjusted. This type of design is based on a scientific method that translates into actual, conscious efforts to weigh the cost of different interventions in a given situation and to increase the soundness of the implemented actions now and in the foreseeable future.

One of the most recent developments in design arose with the close of World War II and concerned strategic operations management. The initial accumulated military experience and the ensuing advances in computer technology endowed designs with added techniques and methods that gave them their current complex form. The notion of design has been contemplated

by many famous historical figures, whose unique perspective may prove to be invaluable.

Unlike Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), who said “I have made all the calculations; fate will do the rest,” master’s students and doctoral candidates should not leave their designs to fate. At the same extreme, and to paraphrase the famous Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), no one starts a design without first being clear in their mind what they intend to achieve by the design and how they intend to carry it out. A design requires decisiveness, an important quality in a researcher. It is just such a quality that we find in the words of German chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), who said that “a really great man is known by three signs: generosity in the design, humanity in the execution, moderation in success”. In other words, while a researcher may be aiming for the best possible outcome, their design should not only be feasible but should also reflect a certain research-oriented humility, no matter the chances of success.

In the past, the acceptance or rejection of professional practices depended on appeals made to the reason or emotions of the general public and figures of authority. Only in the early 20th century did fieldwork with real data based on new concepts begin to compete with the customary deliberative process as a means of determining the effectiveness of a professional practice.

The Western world’s enthusiasm over the sciences (especially the exact sciences) in the early 20th century had a catalytic effect on the research field, and the idea of a scientific basis for research began to prevail. Advocates of science came from various scientific fields and were all convinced of the paramount importance of searching for quantified evidence, defining general principles and examining these principles through further investigation.

The impact of these factors was also particularly strong in the mid 20th century, when empirical research methods held sway. Almost all the higher professional degrees required students to study statistical processes in order to be able to analyse data. The research departments that sprouted in various faculties focused on training graduates to understand and use research plans and data analysis processes for empirical studies subject to maximum research variable control. A research project was only accepted if it was conducted according to the processes taught at the particular faculty’s research department. In many faculties, a “commended” research project was synonymous with a dissertation or thesis that had adopted a controlled experimental design and processed its data using complex statistical analysis.

In the late 1950s, there were a few rumblings of discontent regarding the view that any professional field could develop a theoretical and conceptual basis which could be adequately underpinned by a research design and research methodology based on a single viewpoint. Some faculty staff had pointed out the need for a broader interpretation from the start. Their students conducted field research, surveys and case studies, they performed retrospective evaluations of research plans, they studied development processes and variously defended their use of a wide range of investigative methods and technologies.

This reaction seems to have offset the view supporting one-sided research. Adding to knowledge by adopting different perspectives is today not only accepted but desirable, if not required. Master's and doctoral research students in academic and professional fields now have at their fingertips an unprecedented range of choices from which to choose their subject and design their research methodology. This type of design is now widely referred to as the "research proposal".

1.2 A researcher's coming of age

Research design is directly linked to the notion of *coming of age*. Conceptually, a coming of age is when a child becomes an adult. This process is distinguished by a person's age as an arbitrary, conventional number, by the specific moment in time, and by the social reason for which a person needs to be considered a mature adult citizen at that age. Similarly, a *coming of age in research* is a process involving formal and informal actions that bring a trainee to the point where he can begin his independent research process.

While trying to reach that point in time, the researcher is not (or should not be) treated as an unversed trainee who is directly dependent on the advice of an *expert*. A person comes of age as a researcher through his experiences. For a student, this means that they are weaned off the confining (yet safe) academic sphere where knowledge is mostly spoon-fed to them. It means that they are discovering their first research interest, and that when they reach a dead end, it is up to them to find their way out.

However, coming of age as a researcher is not an easy thing. It is directly linked to a person's educational and socioeconomic environment – an environment that may either help or exacerbate the difficult process of reaching the adult research stage. The academic environment plays an important role. A trainee often begins his research effort without proper preparation. While still *green*, he tries to reach adulthood via the research struggle or, conversely, his progress to research adulthood is stalled by a

sense of pseudo-autonomy. In both cases, the passage from passive acceptance of knowledge to its active discovery is weighed down.

Engaging in research design could be described as an *initiation ritual* that eases and adds a sense of safety to this passage, a safety that stems not only from the individual's experiences but also from the recognition he receives from the academic community and, of course, his supervisor. What a number of today's early-stage researchers seem to fear is the assumption of responsibility, what we refer to as coming of age. This substantial number of novice researchers looks back at their pre-research age with nostalgia and finds growing up a difficult experience. They may comply and react, but they do not know how to agree or disagree. This stance stems from an incomplete perception of reality. Research adulthood does, in fact, imply responsibilities, but not just any responsibilities. Not the responsibilities assigned by someone else (e.g. the supervisor), but those that individuals assume themselves because it is their wish to do so. A researcher should be able to bask in the joy of research and discovery, and not feel like a recruit following a schedule whose every step has been determined by someone else.

The metaphor "recruit" alludes to someone who executes orders given by a superior. Orders that are not his own, that he does not want, has not envisioned and ultimately has not decided for himself. If he fails to carry out the order, he will be punished since it is his duty to do the job assigned to him. Yet if a researcher is to become truly independent, he must first discover his own wants. What he himself wishes, and not whatever others might prescribe. The *want* we are referring to has nothing to do with the *want* of a trainee who thinks only of immediate satisfaction, who is demanding and does not take any rules into consideration. We are referring to *want* as will, a mature *want* that stems from and is defined by the researcher's identity. It is through this will that he will be able to determine the future of his own research path. This path is to a large extent governed by the characteristics of adult education.

Each time a researcher embarks on a new project, he will find himself in uncharted waters and will look for ways to deal with this new situation. However, many of the things the researcher experiences may possibly be related to the research topic and may therefore enhance the early design process. At this stage, the researcher develops a tendency towards mostly "self-directed learning" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991), where he is primarily responsible for designing and assessing his own research.

The researcher will enter a process where he creates knowledge by reflecting on his experiences (e.g. his studies in a particular discipline, any relevant work experience), the aim being to generate new ideas that will

lead to a research effort (Kokkos, 2005). Empirical learning can be defined as a process whose aim is to transform experience into knowledge, skills, viewpoints, values, convictions and behaviours that will be applied in the proposed research. This form of empirical learning thus becomes a process whereby the researcher redefines his own research identity.

While working on his research proposal, a researcher matures and his self-perception shifts from that of a dependent personality (e.g. as a university student) to that of an independent researcher. He gains an ever increasing well of experiences that have the potential to become a significant source of learning. As he matures, his readiness to learn will be focused on the research problem linked to his role as researcher. The way he perceives time will change and he will succeed in applying his knowledge directly. Consequently, his preparation will shift its focus from subject areas to specific problems. This assumption does not have so much to do with research experience as with a research approach or even research design.

In (academic) education, learning is defined as a formative process which includes assimilating the fundamental convictions and roles that concern the educational institution and the individual as a student and which aid academic socialisation. On the other hand, learning during research preparation is expressed as a transformative process, which includes the potential to distance oneself from *student* life and to reframe existing convictions based on new assumptions with a greater degree of self-determination.

Every (principally novice) researcher interprets reality based on a system of perceptions that he has constructed in the course of his academic socialisation. This system, which is etched into each student's personality, is the outcome of the academic and other professional frameworks within which the adult individual's academic socialisation took place. In other words, there is a system of predispositions that is the outcome of the various socialisations an individual undergoes as he progresses towards research adulthood.

Thus, in formal and informal education, formative learning becomes "transformative learning" (Mezirow, 1991) as one works on a research proposal. While a student learns from a source of authority (e.g. university course) and this early learning is a form of academic socialisation, the writer of the research proposal has a greater need to gain new meaning perspectives on existing meaning schemes through which he interprets the new research reality.

In this new reality, Mezirow's three types of learning – instrumental, communicative and emancipatory – may prove useful to the researcher. In

instrumental learning, the central idea is that the research emerges through the process of solving a specific research problem and determining the relationship between cause and effect. In communicative learning, the researcher will strive to be understood by the review committee and to understand the other researchers (and potentially also the supervisor) as they exchange research ideas through vocal deliberations and written argumentation (e.g. through possible feedback). In emancipatory learning, the research process entails acknowledging and questioning existing views and meanings regarding the field of inquiry, through a process of critical reflection.

A possible starting point for the researcher are his life experiences (knowledge-based, professional, personal, and so on) which will help transform the dominant meaning frameworks in his particular scientific field. Following that, he will critically reflect so as to examine carefully, insightfully and in depth the assumptions underpinning his research world view, and to explore the original reasons for the research and their consequences for everyone involved (e.g. the researcher, the research participants and the research site). In other words, the researcher questions the validity of the assumptions made in previous studies.

But it does not mean that this path the researcher has taken has to be solitary. He will communicate with others and exchange views, even with people who do not share his research concerns. Communication based on rational dialogue serves as a catalyst for the transformation of current knowledge, since it is through this that the researcher is motivated and, ultimately, *convinced* to search for the underlying meaning behind his research world views and to share his ideas with his supervisor or proposal reviewer using concise and critical speech. This is a unique type of discussion during which the researcher and reviewer or supervisor exchange and thrash out views, putting forward evidence and arguments that corroborate their opinion on whether the proposed study should or should not be carried out.

According to Mezirow (1997), critical reflection combined with participation in rational dialogue are the two elements that lead to awareness. When exploratory in nature, this awareness allows researchers to revise or disprove their (potentially) erroneous views and move on to a more satisfactory, better organised and more ordered picture of their research world. Such a picture can be formed if we approach learning in terms of “banking” and “problem-posing” (Freire, 1972). The banking model characterises much of formal education, where the student amasses a large volume of information that he cannot use in his research. Problem-posing learning, however, entails the real essence of learning, which

liberates and emancipates the researcher. The aim is for each researcher to capitalise on the learning he has banked, and at the same time break free from the precepts of his field of study's dominant scientific culture and transform his knowledge into new research avenues.

To achieve the above freedom, it is important to become critically conscious of the research topic. This involves approaching research reality critically on an ongoing basis in order to adopt new approaches and shed light on unseen, deceptive aspects that perpetuate anachronistic ideas and viewpoints which stop the research from evolving. Developing critical consciousness is a learning process during which the researcher becomes aware of his situation and builds up the skills that aid his efforts to make changes in research. Consciousness is achieved by comprehending the causes driving a research process. The researcher highlights the problems he chooses and poses critical questions that link a social reality to his consciousness with the aim of setting himself free in his research.

1.3 What is a research proposal?

You are awarded a postgraduate degree because you have contributed to knowledge in your chosen field. Irrespective of the extent or quality of your contribution, being awarded this degree proves that you have added something new to the specific field of study. One way of showing that you are capable of attempting such a contribution is by submitting a research proposal that meets certain scientific criteria.

According to Onwuegbuzie (1997: 5), a research proposal is a "formal written plan which communicates ideas about a proposed study in order to obtain approval to conduct the study or to seek funding". The proposal is one of the most difficult pieces of academic writing demanded of a researcher, since he is attempting to describe, in a scientific, substantiated and convincing manner, the various stages of the research he is planning to conduct in the immediate future (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). The researcher has to convince the academic committee or potential supervisor that the proposed study is scientifically sound, needs to be carried out and should be financed, and that he is capable of handling the proposed topic. The initial, exploratory contact between the student and potential supervisor is discussed in more detail towards the end of the book (see section 11.2).

Generally speaking, a research proposal has all the structural elements that characterise a scientific study, presented with the necessary depth and scope, so that the readers can assess its viability. Irrespective of the research field and the methodology to be adopted, a research proposal needs to answer three fundamental questions: "What is the research

topic?”, “Why is the study being done?” and “How will it be carried out?” Work on the research proposal can be viewed as a preparatory or transitional phase between guided learning and independent research.

The research proposal therefore provides all the information that will convince the reader that it is an important research idea, that the researcher is versed in the relevant literature and the key points of the broader research field, and that the methodology has been adequately developed. Of course, the quality of a research proposal is not only dependent on its scientific soundness, but also on the quality of the writing. An exceptionally well-planned study runs the risk of being rejected if the proposal contains ambiguities and is shoddily written. It is therefore worth checking it meticulously for any spelling, syntactical or other errors.

Quite simply, the viability of a proposed study is directly proportional to the quality of the submitted research proposal (Baker & Foy, 2008). A sloppy proposal may doom the study to failure, even if it is accepted by the review committee. A superior proposal not only lays a solid foundation for success but will also impress the review committee, especially if the researcher does not have any established research experience.

The proposal is also a type of contract between the researcher and the institution at which the proposed study will be carried out. It provides a common point of reference that the one contracting party can invoke if the other party fails to do as agreed in the course of the research project. Just as in any clearly defined contract, the scientific contract does not (or should not) have any fine print that could serve as an excuse for the deliberate or unintentional failure to observe its terms. Before taking a detailed look at all the aspects of a research proposal in the chapters that follow, let us try to grasp its three basic elements: the preparatory mental work, the subsequent organisation of the work and arguments, and the writing of the actual proposal.

The research proposal gives rise to a plethora of ideas and arguments that have to be sorted. The first step would be to organise this deluge of ideas with the help of a mind map. In its basic form, the map outlines the key theories and research methods. Each theory and method can be independently expanded, leading to a new mind map. Its main purpose is to remind its creator about the decisions taken. The next step is to organise the constituent parts of the mind map into logically ordered questions with points and arguments for each question. It goes without saying that this organisation is usually preceded by many fruitless efforts and *disappointments* that are the companions of any complex human activity. Mind mapping will result in a research proposal as soon as fully realised, analytical and logical arguments have been formulated. The above outline

will eventually evolve into a flowing, coherent piece of writing, which will most likely be a multifaceted process. In other words, the researcher will have to make repeated efforts until he has formed a fully developed plan to propose for a future research project.

This repeat process often leads to dead ends, is not linear, and so causes frustration and disappointment. The research proposal brings to light the other, unseen side of the real research experience. Bargar and Duncan (1982) frown on the stylised presentation of research results, where scientists conceal their real, personal experiences, which may involve intuitive efforts, temporary interruptions owing to various constraints, and the extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives. Thus, the research proposal should offer an inside look at the research process, since it is a retrospective tale of the study to be conducted. In other words, in filmmaking terms, the research proposal is like a trailer, showing only selected scenes from the film. In these scenes, the viewer takes a look at the “must”, “want” and “can” aspects of the proposed research.

