“HOW TO” WRITE A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

An “informal guide” for PhD candidates to prepare their proposal (and subsequently their thesis...)

STEP ONE : Preliminary Warnings and some useful tips:

Doing a PhD and going through the various phases of it, is a path into scientific research: you might want to consider a few things before you start writing your project.

1) Remember of Plato, and therefore always assume that you still have to learn quite a lot about your object of research, or about how to make social research, how to go for a scientific explanation of a social phenomenon, how to verify an hypothesis, how to write a paper etc. etc.

2) Remember of Weber, and therefore never identify yourself with your object of study! Keep in mind you are an “external” scientists. Your first concern has to be the process of scientific discovery & knowledge.

3) Writing and thinking are closely linked enterprises: therefore "fuzzy writing reflects fuzzy thinking"!

4) When people have difficulty translating their ideas into words, they generally do not know the material as well as they think!

5) As soon as you’ve written a text, ask yourself immediately if you could write the same things in a clearer and simpler way, wasting less words

6) Think at yourself as an “humble apprentice”: you are not an already trained and experienced social scientist, well expert and unanimously recognised in the specific field of study you’ve chosen.

7) You are not writing for your own specific and particular sociological and epistemological “tribe”: do not bother the reader/evaluator with nasty tribal-slangy writings. Try to use a clear, polite and understandable language for the standard academic reader. Be clear in your writing!
STEP TWO: Once you have clear in mind the previous warnings and tips, you are ready for the second step:

THE THREE FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH:

1) “In the abstract, it need hardly be said that before one proceeds to explain or to interpret a phenomenon, it is advisable to establish if the phenomenon actually exists, that it is enough of a regularity to require and to allow explanation” (Merton, 1987)

2) Description (“HOW”) comes first and actually is more important than Explanation (“WHY”)… (Boudon 1985)

3) Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem! and also: Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate! (W. Occam)

That is to say:
Does the phenomenon really exist?
Describe it accurately!
Be always parsimonious!

ONLY ONCE YOU’VE REALLY CLEAR THE PREVIOUS STEPS, YOU MAY CONSIDER TO START WRITING A PROPOSAL / A PAPER / A THESIS
How to write a research proposal

All research proposals should contain the following information:

1. **Title**
   This should be short and explanatory. Don’t try to be brilliant or witty if you’re not 100% sure of the message your title will convey...

2. **Background - Intro**
   This section should contain a rationale for your research.
   Why are you undertaking the project? Why is the research needed? This rationale should be placed within the context of existing scientific research. You have to demonstrate that you know what you’re talking about and that you have knowledge of the literature surrounding this topic.
   Once you have discussed other scientific work which covers this area, you need to show how your work will build on and add to the existing knowledge. Basically, you have to convince people that you know what you’re talking about and that the research is important.
   If you’re unable to find any other research which deals specifically with your proposed project, you have a problem:
   - either you’re an unrecognised genius – and trust me: better assuming this is not the case!- So: look for another topic! ...
   - or if you are so convinced to be such a genius, and that your work will fill the gap existing in the social sciences, you may try to convince your PhD Board of that, illustrating how your proposed research will fill this gap.

3. **Theories and Concepts – Reconstruction of the Debate and literature review**
   Here you have to give the clear impression that you master your topic down to the theoretical roots and you have a perfect knowledge of the main conceptual tools that current front-edge research is exploiting, analyzing and debating.
   Remember that your research work HAS to be theoretically driven!
   Therefore theory has to enlighten your research question/s and the whole process of defining concepts, deriving research hypotheses, finding empirical indicators and indexes...
REMEMBER:
- THEORY/IES MUST BE CLEARLY SPECIFIED;
- CONCEPTS HAVE TO BE UNAMBIGUOUS AND CLEAR
- LITERATURE AND RESEARCH RESULTS HAVE TO BE CLEARLY AND HONESTLY PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED

4. Define your research question

Make sure your “RESEARCH QUESTION” is specific enough!

WRONG: Too General
"I want to learn about the Dalai Lama."
"I want to learn about MUSIC."
"I want to study general intellect and the ‘social worker’ in the post modern, globalised world"
"I want to find out about teen gangs."
"I want to learn about AIDS."

RIGHT: Much Better, More Specific
"I want to know what role the Dalai Lama plays as the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people."
"I want to learn about what kind of social phenomena influenced the music of the '50s"
"My research question deals with the transformation of non manual work after the 70s fordist dismissal, in the x-y-z sectors. More in detail, I want to analyse the changes in the Gallino (19xx) dimensions of work quality..."
"I want to study gang activity and to discover if they can be understood as a matter of marginality or of they can be analysed as a real enterprise, acting and re-acting according to a RAT paradigm, according to main economic theory."
"I want to study the processes of transmission of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, the role of the “phallus-centric” sexual culture, its interrelationship with prostitution and the refusal of using condoms"
"I want to study youth LM entry process in EU continental LMs, verifying if the “partial and targeted” LM deregulation applied only in those countries belonging to the Corporatist W.R. or if flexibilization at the margins was much more widespread than..."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory would predict...</th>
<th>I want to learn about teen pregnancy.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I want to know: 1) about the social, familial, educational, racial, economic and cultural conditions affecting teenage pregnancy and 2) whether and how teenage pregnancy affects young fathers and young mothers differently.&quot;</td>
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</table>
| "I want to find out about immigrant criminality!" | "I want to know whether young 15-35 male immigrants from w-x-y-z countries have a higher propensity to criminal behaviors than their native counterparts"

**But also:**

**WRONG: Too ideological / too normative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are judicial sentences against immigrant criminals more severe than judicial sentences against natives? An analyses of 3500 judicial sentences in XY from 1970 to 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**RIGHT: Much Better, More Specific**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century</th>
</tr>
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</table>

| What happened to workers’ control over their means of production, with the shift from a craftwork economy to a fordist, mass-production one? |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>How to realize multiculturalism? / gender equity? / social cohesion? / active participation? How to enhance social capital?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| What economic, social, educational ... factors favour social integration and social exchange between immigrants (second generation immigrants) and natives in urban contexts? Etc.... |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Labor market rigidities and unemployment levels: at the roots of Eurosclerosis</th>
</tr>
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| Is there and what is the connection between labor market institutions and unemployment levels? Is there and what is the connection between labor market institutions and unemployment composition? |

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I want to demonstrate that Rock Music is at the root of Ethnic Identities in modern Russia

The connections between rock bands and ethnic violent groups in S.Petersburg. Is hard rock connected to neonazi ethnic violence?

Third sector and unpaid voluntary work are the key factor for the post-modern welfare states

Shrinking welfare and the reallocation of social risks in present Europe. How are changing the mechanisms allocating new and old social risks (poverty, unemployment, labor precarity) with the reallocation of public expenditure from welfare to workfare?

The Chinese diaspora: illustrating the new forms of urban victimization in Trento

The characteristics of the Chinese immigration in Trento. Is undeclared work a new form of slavery or is it a first step into entrepreneurship? At what institutional, economic and social conditions Chinese immigrant self-employment can become a step into service class?

4.1 How to define a good research question?

4.1.1) You need to be sharp
Unfortunately, we cannot teach you to be brilliant and sharp(*), sorry! A part from that, you can learn how to define a decent research question and how to illustrate it in a research proposal

4.1.2) You could try making two lists of questions (write them in your block notes, not in your research project!)
One list of "factual" questions and one list of "substantive" questions.

- The answers to factual questions will give your readers the basic background information they need to understand your topic.
  Asking factual questions:
  Assume your readers knows nothing about your subject. Make an effort to tell them everything they need to know to understand what you will write in your project.
  Make a list of specific questions that ask : Who? What? When? Where? ....
  Describe and explain your object : I want to study “serendipity”... sure everybody knows what serendipity is ??
- The answers to **substantive questions** show your creative thinking (*) and can become the basis for your **thesis statement**.

**Asking Substantive Questions:**

These kinds of questions are the result of your own original thinking. ...

They can be based on the preliminary research you have done on your chosen topic.

They should provide a (tentative) interpretation for the phenomenon you want to study.

Select one or two to answer in your presentation.

Different kind of substantive questions: try with all them as a sort of “exercise”.

Write them in your block notes and put your mind on them... your research question will become clearer.

A. **Hypothetical / counterfactual**: (Weber) How would things be different today if something in the past had been different?

   Example: What would have happened to the entire western civilization, with its rationalisms, if Persians should have not been defeated in the Salamina battleship? It would have been “strangled in its cradle” in favour of the political despotism and the theological dogmatisms of the Persians...

B. **Prediction**: How will something look or be in the future, based on the way it is now?

   Example: What will happen to Italian Population if Womens’ age at first child continue to increase at the rate it increased in the last XX years and the average number of children per woman continue to decrease as it did in the last xx years?

   What will be the TFR trend in Italy during the next XXX years?

C. **Solution**: What solutions can be offered to a problem that exists today?

   Example: How could we increase female LM participation in Italy? What can be done to decrease the age at which young people in Southern European countries leave parental home?

D. **Comparison or Analogy**: Find the similarities and differences between your main subject and a similar subject, or with another subject in the same time period or place.

   Example: In what ways the Nordic system of Flexicurity deals with LM redundancies of adult-aged male industrial workers and what are the differences with the way the Italian WS managed such a situation?
5. Linking Explanans to → Explanandum

**Step.1 “simplest”:** Welfare Regimes affect Female Employment, thus affecting Women’s Income, thus affecting Gender Equality

Macro-Condition → Macro-Effect

Micro-Condition → Micro-Effect

p.s. ..... Somewhere here you might already start considering disposable methods & data...!!
Are there any good data to provide adequate answer to your question?
It is pretty useless to go on working on an extraordinary research question if there is no way to operationalize it and to verify it.

6. Refine your “research question” and make a “thesis statement” of it

A thesis statement is a strong statement that you can prove with evidence.
It is not a simple question nor a statement of fact.
A thesis statement should be the product of your own critical thinking after you have mastered the literature, clarified the relevant theoretical debates, identified empirical research results in the literature and after you’ve done some preliminary research (F.E. with the Theoretical & Major paper).

Your thesis statement will be the main idea of your entire project.
It can also be thought of as the viewpoint from which you present your material.
This should be your personal, innovative, contribution to the literature.

Weber: think that the entire universe originated to allow you to be here, in this specific time and moment to create your specific “thesis statement”...
Therefore: you will develop a THESIS STATEMENT about your research topic after you have defined your RESEARCH QUESTION and done some actual research into the topic.

You will then
1) present your thesis statement in your introduction,
2) you'll demonstrate its theoretical foundations in the theoretical chapter,
3) you'll prove it with evidence in the body of your work, and finally
4) you'll restate it along with a summary of your evidence in your conclusion.

How to write your thesis statement?

1) Look again at your research question

2) Look at the kinds of information you have been finding while resuming the literature debate, taking notes, running preliminary analyses and models etc.

3) come back to step 1

   Linking Explanants to Explanandum and

4) Decide what kind of theoretically driven statement you have enough evidence to prove (be sure that you have done enough research to make a strong argument. You will be challenged!!)

5) Write that as your thesis statement: make sure that it is not a mere fact or an ideological statement and that you can support it with good evidence from reliable sources.

Ex:

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

My research question deals with the transformation of non manual work after the 70s fordist dismissal, in the x-y-z sectors. What happened to work quality?

**REFINED RESEARCH QUESTION (THESIS STATEMENT)**

According to part of the literature, the advent of ICT and automation at the factory level should have been conducive of a massif proletarization of craft work, an increasing deprivation of blue collar skills and a transfer of knowledge and control over work
workforce? Polarization or wider re-
qualification of the bluecollar
workforce?

conditions to CN/CNC/CAD-CAM thus
damaging and reducing workers’ power and
autonomy. I want to analyse the changes in
the Gallino (19xx) dimensions of work
quality...

7. Linking Explanans to → Explanandum

Step 2. refine the macro-micro-macro linkages...

... and clarify again your thesis statement.

Be sure that you’re making clear and unambiguous all the “grey” and “yellow”
steps/components of your schema...
8. Methodology/methods/data

In this section you need to describe your proposed research methodology and methods and justify their use. Why have you decided upon your methodology? Why have you decided to use those particular methods? Why are other methods not appropriate? This section needs to include details about data, samples, numbers of people to be contacted, method of data collection, and similar considerations. If you have chosen a less well known methodology, you may need to spend more time justifying your choice than you would need to if you had chosen a more traditional methodology. This section should be quite detailed – the clearer you have this section, the clearer you have your “refined research question” in mind...

N.B. For research at postgraduate level you may need to split the methodology and methods section into two
methodology: why the need for EHA methodology, what is EHa... the advantages of EHA...
methods: why continuous vs discrete time models, why piecewise, competing risks models.... etc.etc.
However, for most projects they can be combined.

Consider that the most common reason for PhD proposal failure is the lack of a clear research question, thus the lack of a theory driving the question and the specific research hypotheses, as well as your methodological details, and the choice of adequate data and techniques...
How to proceed when writing something... (research proposal / paper / article / thesis)

• Develop a Theory-based framework, and write around that model

• Never say, "No one has ever looked at this, so I did..."

• Never say, "this is interesting"

• Never talk at the level of methods in your introduction (e.g., variables, measures, factors). Just few words at the very end of the intro.

• Do not write papers for your ‘academic tribe’; better to write for the wider scientific community

• Your study should be totally motivated from your introduction

• Introductions are the hardest to write! Consider re-writing it once you’ve completed all your thesis...

• Most people accept or reject a paper in the first 5 pages and then look for evidence in a confirmatory manner

• Edit! Edit! Edit! (e.g., cut all phrases such as, "in order to"); cut all boilerplate sentences (e.g., "in today's society")

• In general, do not write about details of other studies/empirical works

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Practical tips:

- Write down every idea you have in a block notes

- Write every paper with the intention/expectation it will be published

- Ask other people to read and comment upon your work (in return, you should do the same)
Esercizio utile

“I dottorandi sono lavoratori precari della ricerca, sfruttati e vessati in quanto lavoratori della conoscenza portatori del general intellect e del sapere sociale, dai processi di valorizzazione del capitale globale”

Definite il concetto di “operaio sociale” : le sue origini storiche, il suo significato sociologico e politico, evidenze empiriche a sostegno / a diniego della tesi da cui origina il concetto

Definite il concetto di “general intellect” e le sue origini storiche. Situarlo nel contesto economico-sociale post-industriale

Definite il concetto di “precario” e descrivere le caratteristiche principali della deregolamentazione parziale e selettiva realizzata in Italia. Specificare se si tratta di fenomeno esclusivo del MdL italiano o se si ritrova in altri – e quali – MdL occidentali. Quali teorie ne spiegano l’origine?

Definite il concetto di “sfruttamento del lavoro” in senso giuridico e sociologico.

Definite il concetto di “capitale monopolistico”: le sue origini sociologiche, il dibattito che ha originato e le principali conclusioni cui tale dibattito è giunto

Definite il concetto di “sapere sociale”

PREPARARE UN “THESIS STATEMENT” CHE ARTICOLI LA FRASE SOPRA CITATA DEFINENDO I CONCETTI COME RICHIESTO, INFINE DEFINIRE SE E COME LE FRASE IN OGGETTO SODDISFA GLI ENUNCIATI DI MERTON, BOUDON E OCCAM. 
Poi sostituite la frase con il VOSTRO thesis statement e rifate il percorso...