**How to Choose a Proposal Topic**

Writing a research proposal is different than writing an ordinary research paper in a number of ways. Most importantly, in a research proposal you are trying to develop and justify a method to answer a question or test a theory, whereas in most papers you are actually trying to answer a question or to state whether a theory has been supported (or sometimes to summarize what theories other people have about a question). On the other hand, writing proposals and papers have some elements in common, such as picking a topic, creating a bibliography, reading the literature on a topic, organizing your materials into an outline, writing and editing a document and receiving a grade.

Developing a topic for a research proposal is a complex process which you should begin as soon as possible. Use every possible assignment to develop your proposal. Not only will you have a chance to get early comments and advice from me, you will also avoid panic at the end of the semester. Early in the semester you should begin reading in your theme area. I strongly recommend that you complete the 4 assigned theme readings as early as possible, well before they are due. As you are reading them, in addition to taking your usual notes or highlighting, keep a sheet of paper in which you record questions or comments that occur to you about the research. These may be gut reactions or they may be based on other reading that you have done. These questions might be something like these:

Would it have made a difference if a different (social class, ethnic or racial, gender, geographic location, gender, time period etc.) population had been studied?

What would happen if the variable _____ were included?

Why wasn’t _____ theory considered?

Would a different research method have yielded different results?

Why wasn’t this really interesting question I have answered?

The author seems biased on the issue of ____.

My experience of ______ leads me to think the author is wrong about ____.

Why didn’t they just try ____?

These items can help you to come up with a RESEARCH question which could be the basis of a new investigation to be designed (and, in theory, carried out) by you. After you have read the assigned readings, continue reading in the area on your own. You will get ideas for new readings when we work on the Internet and in the library, but don’t forget to follow up on interesting sounding studies cited in the bibliographies and on other works by authors who you either like or dislike. (If you really dislike someone’s work you may want to propose a study to test the hypothesis that his or her theory is wrong).

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1 This is adopted from a document by Elin Waring. I’ve made some minor edits.
The difference between a research question and broad general questions like those listed above is that a research question implies that action--research--will take place. This means that the question must become much more specific and put into a form which is realistic given budgetary, time and other constraints. To achieve this you need to use what you learn from me in class, from the textbook, and from other sources, including the existing research on your topic. It is a normal part of the proposal writing process for a topic to change and, usually, to become more narrow. If you wait too long to start your work on the proposal you will have difficulty in going through this necessary exploration and modification process.

Besides paying attention to the substance of the articles and books that you read, pay attention to the methods that they use. Do any of the particularly interest or excite you? Do you dislike any? Paying attention to your reactions will help you come up with a research plan that fits your interests and tastes.

After doing this thinking and reading, think of a question you want to answer or a theory you want to test. This can be anything that has to do with the general topics; it need not relate directly to the core readings. Then begin to think about what the variables involved in the question or theory are and what the appropriate unit of analysis would be. Also think about what other variables you would need to control for in order to assure that any relationship you find is not spurious. Then start to think about how and where you would do the research. As you become more and more focused, seek out other research on the topic so that you do not repeat the same mistakes they did.

**Other Guidelines**

If you want to know if an intervention would work, you need to describe and justify the intervention AND describe and justify a method of evaluating it.

If you want to do a survey, you should write a questionnaire.

If you want to do an ethnography you need to determine where it will be done, what the likely obstacles to access are, and how long you would need to stay in the field.