Writing of Research Proposal

Dr Qadar Bakhsh Baloch[*]

Abstract

Research is not a luxury but an essential need that no nation can afford to ignore. The purpose of this paper is to develop and suggest a Research *Proposal template* for the students of social and behavioral sciences that might help them in setting out their research proposals. The template and the attached guidelines fit the proposal requirements of most study programs all over the world.

Keywords: Research Proposal, format, components, mechanics of proposal writing

Introduction:

It has been observed that most of the students and research beginners do not fully comprehend the mechanics of writing a research proposal and its importance for subsequent research. Traenkel&Wallenb (2006) define research proposal as a detailed description of a proposed study designed to investigate a given problem. Research Proposal writing is an important node in the pursuit of a Master, M.Phil or PhD degrees throughout the world. The research proposal is a scholastic venture that specifies what the researcher aims at, how it intends to undertake it, how will it interpret the results and for whom.

The aim of preparing a research proposal is to show that the problem intending investigation holds significant worth, the plans of investigation are feasible, and the intended results are likely to have genuine contributions in academic / or administrative or social domains. Hence, in other words it may be called as a blue print or a conceptualized action plan to complete intended inquiry from the start of problem definition and selection of research instruments to the judicial employment of resources in term of time and material matching to the dictates of the inquiry and

[*] Dr Qadar Bakhsh Baloch, Department of Management Sciences, Islamia College University, Peshawar. Pakistan. E. Mail: qbuzdar@yahoo.com

environment. The degree of sophistication and comprehensiveness of the proposal is directly related to the level of degree, availability of time and resources and the purpose of research. These plans are not binding; and may change substantially with the progress of the research and in coordination/ consultation with the research supervisor. However, scope of the research issue, hypotheses and the   research objectives will remain as such and any change in them would call for the intervention / approval of the Board of Advance Studies and Research or the Research Guidance Committee (as the name may be) of the university.

Seeing the heavy commitment schedule, vast experience and versatile nature of tasks of the board members, it may rightly be assumed that the reader is a busy, skeptical person who without going thoroughly in nitty-gritty details, wants to ascertain that whether the proposal has succeeded to demonstrate:

- The originality and genuineness of the research study that has substantial potential to contribute something worthwhile in social, administrative, or academic context;

- Linkages with the already done work in the particular area of concern and draw to establish its theoretical foundation accordingly;

- Foresees and sorts out the nitty-gritty methodical lacunas likely to confront during the course of research.

- Determine its scope of inquiry, limits parameters, identifies most relevant sources of data, charts out logical scheme of activities in their sequential order, selects to apply most appropriate research instruments for data gathering and analyses, and rationalize use of time and other resources in most economical way.

Foregoing in view research proposal must be focused one, arranging all the nuts and bolts of a systematic and scientific research. A hazy, feeble or ill-defined proposal is likely to result in to a long, treacherous, and often futile exercise. Being clear about these things from the beginning will help you complete your thesis in a timely fashion. A clearly defined and well laid out proposal serves as the spinal column for the research and helps timely completion of the research. There can be deliberate and well laid out list of the elements tabulate below, however, each university or supervisor reserve the right to alter the list by inclusion or omission of any part.

Proposal Structure

1.   _Preliminaries_: This part includes the introductory pages of the research proposal comprising:

| Component	Function	Characteristics
Title Page Or Cover page	Introduces in a prescribed lay out about the: topic, researcher, degree, department and the institution	The title should be self explanatory, descriptive, concise, eye-catching phrase. It should avoid absolute or interrogative statement
Table of contents	List sections, parts or main paragraphs of the proposal with page numbers.	Must confirm writing rules and list title and subtitles in given order of hierarchy / sequence.

2.   _**Developing Research Idea**_: A tile of the research flows out of the topic /idea or the research problem. A focused topic with confined scope and aspect provides direction to the research and its reader on one hand and saves time and irritation later during the course of research. There may be numerous ways and techniques to develop a research idea, however, brain storming; discussing ideas with professionals, teachers, colleagues and class fellows; browsing encyclopedia and libraries; and reviewing the related literature / past research studies help a lot in mapping the concept[†] and reaching a well defined topic statement. A concept map taken from O'Leary (2004) is given below:
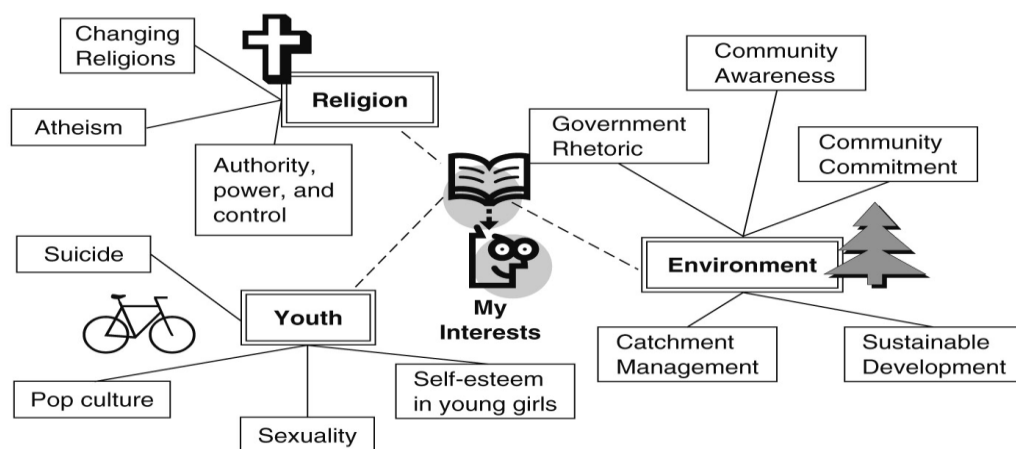
FIGURE 3.1   CONCEPT MAP OF POTENTIAL RESEARCH TOPICS

[†] .   A concept map is a brainstorming tool used to help you generate ideas and think about the relationships among these ideas.

Dr Qadar Bakhsh Baloch

Another example of developing research questions with the help of concept map on a climate change as given in the the University of Victoria booklet.[‡]   After completing the concept map and focusing the topic, the research question derived is: *How does climate change impact polar bear habitat?*
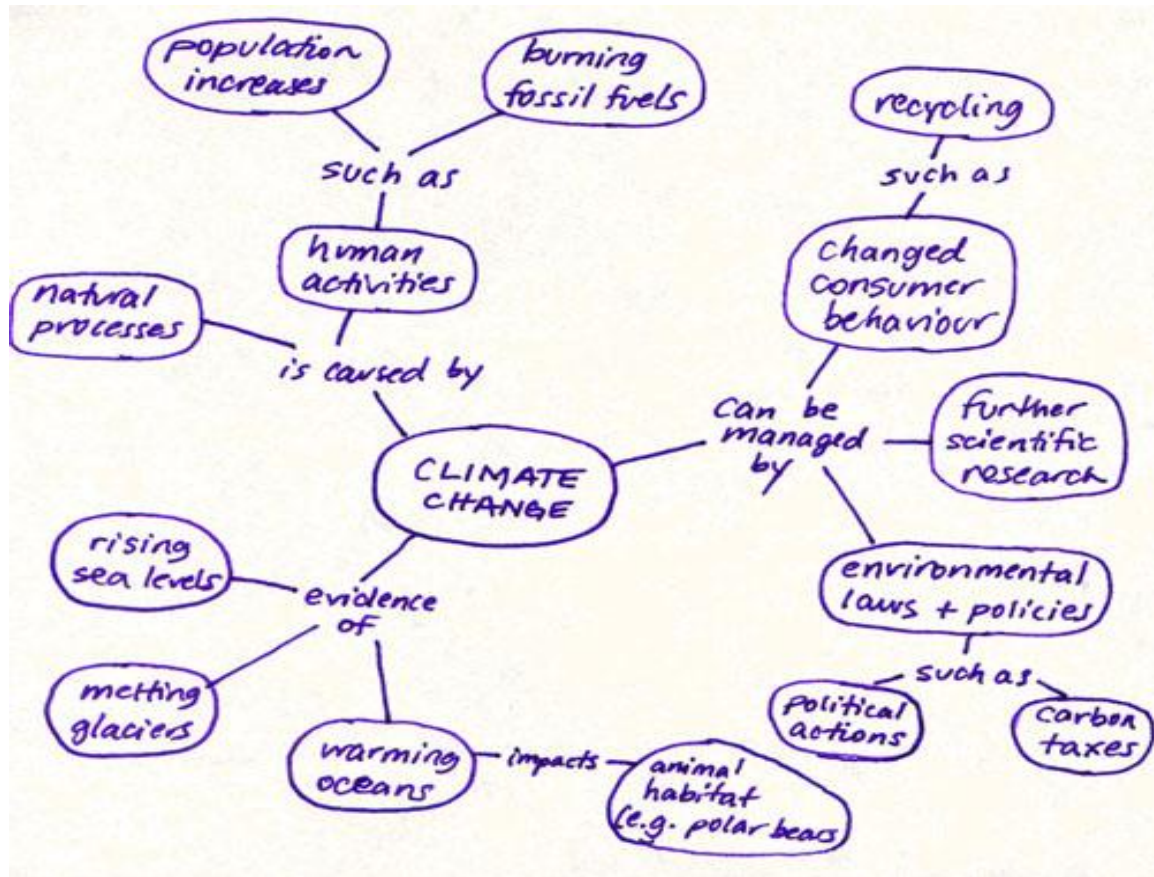
Research Questions Arising from the above given Concept Map could be:

- Which human activities have the greatest impact on global temperature changes?

- What political actions can be taken to minimize climate change?

- How does climate change impact animal habitat?

A good research question defines the nature of investigation, sets its parameters and provides direction. Narrowing, clarifying, and even redefining research questions are essential to the research process (O'Leary, 2004). However, utmost care shall be taken to ensure that neither the

idea nor the scope of the problem is too broad or too narrow. Following example would suffice to explain broadness or narrowness of the topics.

Broad Topic	Narrow Topic but still broad	Meaning ful Topic
Media Violence	Does media violence make children more violent	Does watching cartoons make children more violent?
Religious violence	Does religion Islam promote violence amongst its followers?	Does Islamic Mudrassa System in Pakistan is promoting violence?
Stress	Stress at work place: Causes & consequences	Is job satisfaction reduces stress at the workplace?
How does climate change impact animal habitat?	How does climate change impact arctic animal habitat	How does climate change impact polar bear habitat in Canada?

A research idea or a problem definition statement provides the starting point of the research which flows out from the research background and the purpose of the research.

Component	Function	Characteristics
Background	Provides background information to set the rational for justification of the study.	The background shall relate the historical, social, political, educational, administrative, managerial perspective of the problem to serve as a theoretical start point.
Need or Justification of the Study	To signify the importance of the study so as to persuade the reader about its usefulness and contribution	May fill the 'gap' in the available research literature, or apply old findings in a new environment
Purpose and aims of the study	to state clear and lucid purpose of the study or to outline the key research questions	the purpose is expressed in terms of the broader context of the study The purpose may be seeking answers of research questions, what, where, when, how and why. However, he number of questions shall be manageable in time and resources available.

The purpose statement should specify the overall purpose of the study (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1987). Following key points should be kept in mind when preparing a purpose statement.

- Try to incorporate a sentence that begins with "The purpose of this study is . . ." This will clarify your own mind as to the purpose and it will inform the reader directly and explicitly.
- Identify the specific method of inquiry to be used.

3.   Statement of the Research Problem: The statement of the research problem is the foundation for the construction of any research proposal. It is not only an integral part of selecting a research topic rather helps to select most likely research design as well. It serves as the bases for determining research objectives, formulation of research hypotheses, planning research design and the budgetary requirements. It allows the researcher to describe the problem systematically, to reflect on its importance, its priority and to point out why the proposed research on the problem should be undertaken. It also facilitates peer review of the research proposal by the funding agencies.

> "The problem statement describes the context for the study and it also identifies the general analysis approach" (Wiersma, 1995, p. 404).
>
> "A problem might be defined as the issue that exists in the literature, theory, or practice that leads to a need for the study" (Creswell, 1994, p. 50)

Any research process is set in to motion when there is a realization of existence of any challenge, problem, issue or opportunity affecting smooth functioning of society, system, process or organization. It molds uncertainty in to certainty of environment to facilitate decision making process at an appropriate level and time. The first and the foremost step for any viable research are choosing of the 'research problem. The problem under consideration shall be viable (feasible for research), shall provide motivational interest, should be relevant to the field of study of the researcher, should take care of business and social ethics as well as corporate social responsibility. A well defined and properly constructed statement helps determining specific objectives, identifying relevant variables, and formulation of appropriate hypotheses. On the other hand a hastily and poorly defined statement of the problem leads to nothing but- a mere confusion. Therefore, clarity of the proposal is that the problem clearly stands out and that the reader can easily recognize it. Sometimes, obscure and poorly formulated problems are masked in an extended discussion. In such cases, reviewers and/or committee members will have difficulty recognizing the problem.

Some of the key points to be remembered while identifying, defining research problem and formulating its formal statement are:

a.   A good statement of any research problem:

    i.   Before starting to formulate the statement of the problem the research must appreciate **that it is always hard to formulate a good answer to a bad question, and question well asked can be well answered.**

    ii. The logical way to formulate the research problem is the top-down approach i.e. *moving from general to specific* The research firstly select the area / field of research inquiry, followed by the topic of the research (theme with in the field of research), then generate the research questions (from general to specific) and translated in to propositions, followed by the relevant hypotheses. The research questions identified during the process are answered by the research study. These questions may be normative, descriptive, correlation or impact type in nature.

    iii. Should have viable solution alternatives and each on calls for analytical reasoning / logical thinking. However, if there is only one solution alternative or plausible answer to the problem then there is no need of research.

    iv. Help to divide the intended research in to comprehensive and manageable parts in such a way that each one is logically and conceptually linked with the next- providing base or grounds to built.

b.   The research problem shall be stated in a normal paragraph with out putting any interrogative sentence.

c.   The problem shall be focused one; neither shall it present a broad field of inquiry nor to narrow field-apparently meaningless.

d.   The problem shall revolve around a specific and measurable phenomenon with well identifiable variables/ parameters.

The statement of problem definition shall lead to seeking answer of some questions or help formulating problems. Hypotheses are designed to express relationships between variables. A research question poses a relationship between two or more variables but phrases the relationship as a question; a *hypothesis* represents a declarative statement of the relations between two or more variables (Kerlinger, 1979; Krathwohl, 1988) If the research question is more descriptive or explorative, generating a hypothesis may not be appropriate and it is mostly in descriptive research that seeks to answers what, where, how and when? According to O'Leary (2004) a hypothesis may not be appropriate if the research:

- Do not have a hunch or educated guess about a particular situation

- Do not have a set of defined variables.

- The research question centres on phenomenological description or

- The question centres on an ethnographic study of a cultural group

4.   **Objectives of the Research**

     a.   Each research objective shall be relevant to the research problem and its realization shall lead to salvation of part of the problem.

     b.   The objective shall be specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic and time bound.

     c.   Objectives are the milestones for the journey of the research inquiry. Therefore, each objective shall provide direction to the research, point towards the likely sources of data, and selection/ application of the research instruments.

     d.   Mostly the descriptive research studies are based upon the research objectives. However, exploratory research or even some time the causal nature of research may also employ the research objectives over and above the research hypotheses.

5.   **Research Hypotheses:** A hypothesis is defined as a tentative prediction or of the relationship between two or more variables that translates the problem statement into a precise, unambiguous prediction of expected outcome. Some research guru call it an 'educated guess', the guess that reflects the depth of knowledge, imagination and experience of the investigator and not a haphazard guess.

a. Research hypotheses are assumptions about the tentative solution of the research. These assumptions are derived on personal experience, review of the related literature, consultations/ focused interviews with the experts / professionals or combination of all. Therefore, scholars in educational research called it '*educated guess*'

b. The hypothesis is also defined as; '*statement of a problem showing relationship between the dependent and independent variables*' Therefore, the formulation of hypotheses shall be arranged in to such relationship:

- *Polio cases are decreasing with the increase in the frequency of vaccinations*

- Training of the employees reduces chances of accidents -or – training of employee's increases work place productivity.

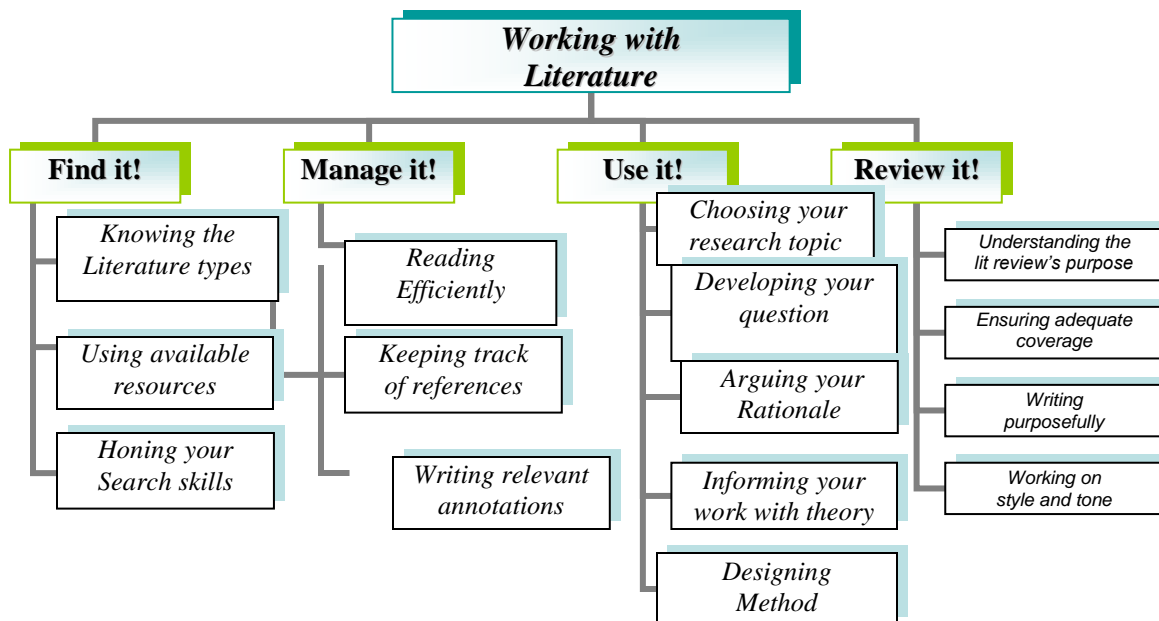- *Work place satisfaction reduces employees turn over*

Note: *A research study may be hypotheses based or objectives based. However, there may be situation where hypotheses and objectives both become research orientation.*

5.   **Significance of the Research:** This part of the proposal justifies that how the proposed research will contribute in refining, improving, or extending existing knowledge in the area under research. In other words how the intended results will affect the theory, practice, educational interventions, curricula, counseling, policy etc. Therefore, rationale answers of the following questions would help in describing the significance of your research:

- What is the uniqueness of the idea or Urgency of the problem and how its results are likely influence the theoretical framework that framed the study? In other words its contribution to the stream of knowledge or improving/ streamlining drills and procedures
- Utility- Degree of the usefulness of the research for the organization / or society. What addition it will make into the certainty of information thereby facilitating decision making on any issue at appropriate level.
- What suggestions for subsequent research arise from the findings? What will the results mean to the practitioners and how will it provoke further research and / or provide conceptual framework – key concepts

6.   **Review of the Related Literature**: The review of the literature provides the background and context for the research problem. It should establish the need for the research and indicate that the writer is knowledgeable about the area (Wiersma, 1995, p. 406). Reviewing the literature or the literature review occupies very important place in developing research proposal and writing research report. Working with literature is an essential part of the research process because it helps to; generates ideas, form appropriate questions and facilitate process of research designing. Oleary (2004) portrays its importance in following diagram:

```
┌─────────────────────────┐
│      Working with        │
│       Literature         │
└─────────────────────────┘
```

Find it!	Manage it!	Use it!	Review it!
Knowing the Literature types	*Reading Efficiently*	*Choosing your research topic*	*Understanding the lit review's purpose*
Using available resources	*Keeping track of references*	*Developing your question*	*Ensuring adequate coverage*
Honing your Search skills	*Writing relevant annotations*	*Arguing your Rationale*	*Writing purposefully*
		Informing your work with theory	*Working on style and tone*
		Designing Method	

The review of literature may provide solid and a comprehensive knowledge base provided the researchers are able to readily access and draw on a wide variety of resources such as; reference materials, printed and e. books, research journals, official publications and archives etc. A good literature review is an *argument* that is more purposeful than a simple review of relevant literature. Writing a good review requires researcher to read a few good reviews, develop a structure, write purposefully , use the literature to back up your arguments, review and write throughout the research process, get feedback, and be prepared to redraft.

7.   **Research Methodology:**   "The methods or procedures section is really the heart of the research proposal. The activities should be described with as much detail as possible, and the continuity between them should be apparent" (Wiersma, 1995, p. 409).This part of the proposal shall briefly explain about the following of the intended or / projected research methodology – most likely to be followed during the conduct stage of the research. Most common points that are to be elaborated are:

   a. Type/ Nature of the Research: Is the intended research is descriptive, exploratory or causal or combination of any?

   b. Sources and types of data: Will the research attempt to explore primary sources or secondary sources of data or both. Brief mention of such sources would add to the clarity of the research proposal.

c.   Research Approach:Will the research outlook qualitative or quantitative or combination of both

d.   Research Population: Populations are commonly made up of individuals, but can be made up of households, workplaces, or events. Populations are then narrowed through defining characteristics such as geographic range. Additional defining characteristics include age, class, gender, and/ or race – or in the case of an organization, number of employees, years of operation, type of business, etc. The population shall be represented as N.

e.   Sampling of the Research: It shall define:

- The population parameters & scope of the study

- Who are the respondents- Sample (n)

- How many are the respondents- Sample size

- How these respondents are selected – sampling technique (s) employed.

Note: Population includes all those entities/ units or items where the problem rests or phenomenon lies. Therefore, identification of the right form of research population is the under line point in this case. Similarly selection of true representative (sample) with true representations/ proportion (size of strata (s) in homogeneous or heterogeneous kind of population) is next important step that leads towards research validity. The size of the sample is directly related to the accuracy of the research. More the sample size more the accuracy of the results and vice versa. Appropriate and systematic employment of sampling method would reduce systematic as well as administrative errors both. *Hence; appropriate / scientific use of research methodology provides reliability, validity and the accuracy to the research.*

e.   *Selection of most appropriate research instrument for collection of data* is dependent upon the type of research, nature of the data, type of the respondents, availability of time, manpower and other resources. Outline the instruments you propose to use (surveys, scales, interview protocols, observation grids). Traditionally, population studies involved the use of survey questionnaires, quantitative data, random samples, and statistical analysis. However, a variety of methods, data types, modes of analysis, and the use of non-random samples have broadened possibilities for understanding populations

f.   Collection of Data: Virtually all methodologies are reliant on the collection of credible data and the first step in any form of data collection is gaining access of the

target population. While gaining access or collecting data the researcher must use power and avoid to abuse it.

f.   Data Analyses: The research shall identify most appropriate technique (s) of the data analyses that is intended to be used. Specify the procedures you will use, and label them accurately e.g., ANOVA, MANCOVA, Regression, co-relations, SPSS etc.. These technique/ formula, model, or statistical instrument shall be explained along with its methodology of application. The proposal must provide the rationale for decision to use the design, methodology, and analyses selected

8.   **Theoretical frame Work**:   This part of the proposal provides the important concepts, theories, models, terminologies definitions that are most relevant to the issue in hand and the research literature. Theories are constructed in order to explain, predict and master phenomena (e.g. relationships, events, or the behavior). A theory makes generalizations about observations and consists of an interrelated, coherent set of ideas and models. The theoretical framework of the study is a structure that can hold or support a theory of a research work. It presents the theory which explains why the problem under study exists. Thus, the theoretical framework is but a theory that serves as a basis for conducting research. The main purposes of developing theoretical frame work are:

- Helps the researcher to clearly see the variables of the study;
- It can provide him with a general framework for data analysis;
- It is essential in preparing a research proposal using descriptive and experimental methods.

 The researcher must ensure that he has provided in-text (parentheses citations) and the end note references in accordance with recommended style of the department/ university.

9.   **Conceptual Frame Work**: After formulating the theoretical framework, the researcher has to develop the conceptual framework of the study. A concept is an image or symbolic representation of an abstract idea. Chinn and Kramer (1999) define a concept as a "complex mental formulation of experience". While the theoretical framework is the theory on which the study is based, the conceptual framework is the operationalization of the theory.

 It may be an adaptation of a model used in a previous study, with modifications to suit the inquiry. Aside from showing the direction of the study, through the conceptual framework, the researcher can be able to show the relationships of the different constructs that he wants to investigate. It is methodological flow chart of the intended research that shows the likely

unfolding of the research. Most of the exploratory and causal types of the research take kick start from and alongside the conceptual flow chart. For example; News values, and the pressures and constraints shape the newspapers and television newscasts. The result of this relationship is selective reporting of events.
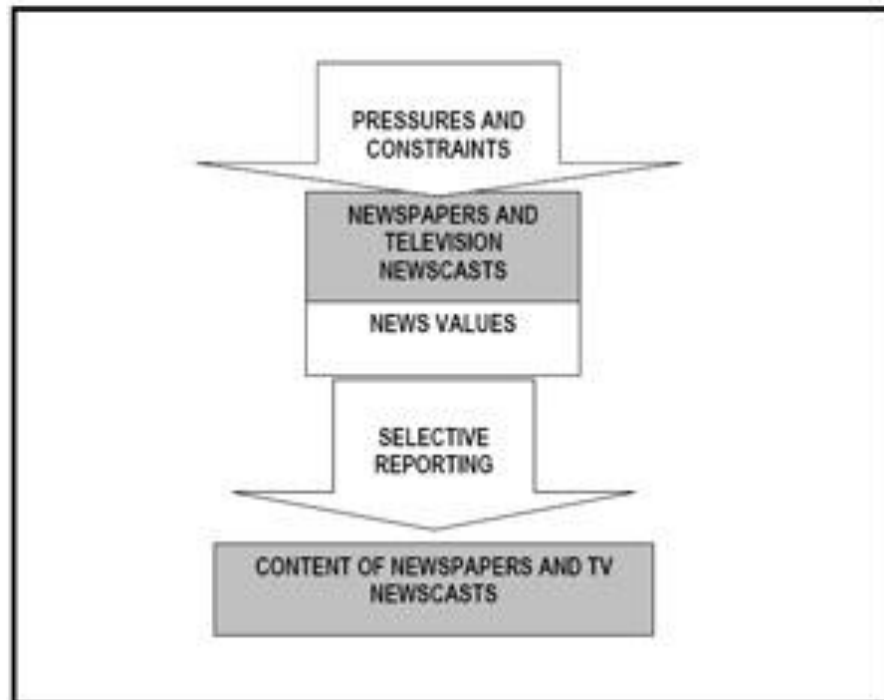
The foreign   news sections of Pakistani newspapers and foreign news segments of television networks are shaped by the interests of owners, editorial policies, audience and advertisements. The criteria for selection of news, the news values, also affect the news coverage. These factors result in unequal treatment of stories and paved way for the dominance of some topics and of some regions in news coverage of media.
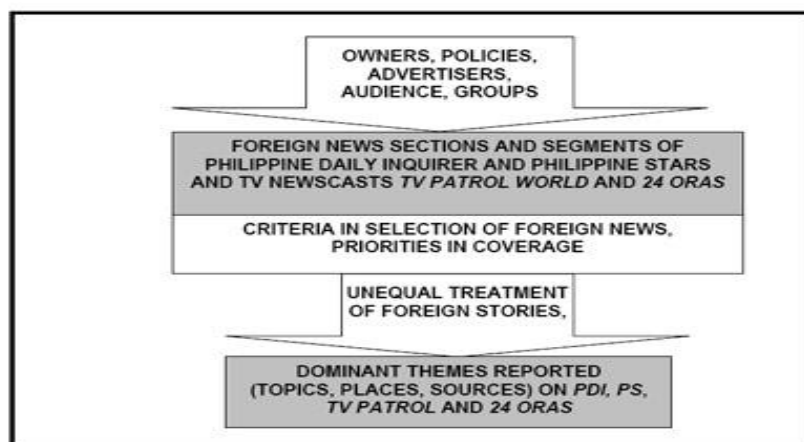
11.   **Limitations &/ Delimitations:** It expresses the nature and magnitude of the constraints likely to affect the conduct of the research.   A limitation identifies potential weaknesses of the study. It includes all those factors which are impossible to avoid thereby affecting the internal validity of research; forced choice analysis, instruments, the sample etc.   Delimitation addresses how a study will be narrowed in scope, that is, how it is bounded. The literature that the research will not review (and why not), the population not studying (and why not), so on and so forth. It includes or excludes; time or period, geographical boundaries or areas, social / political / cultural / ethnic or demographic groups etc. It may take some assumptions as well.

12.   **Outline Organization of the Theses:** It presents tentative chapterization / arrangements of the research theses/ report. Most commonly used chapterization of research theses/ report includes:

- ❖ Chapter-1:   Introduces the research study and dissertation
- ❖ Chapter-2:   Presents Review of the Related Literature
- ❖ Chapter-3:   Offers detailed explanation of the research methodology followed during the course of research.
- ❖ Chapter-4:   Data and Data Analyses
- ❖ Chapter-5:   Research Findings and Conclusions
- ❖ Chapter-6:   Recommendations
- ❖ References: Details of the parentheses citations made in side the text body are given at the end of each chapter under the heading of 'References' *in accordance with the APA Citation Style*. Examples of the likely references/ sources are given at Annexure-A - attached.
- ❖ Bibliography: Bibliography is also a list of references of its own style. The bibliography carries number of differences from citations / work cited etc. However, the main difference between the 'References' (under APA Style)and the 'Bibliography' is that 'Reference' list includes only those sources of information which have been cited in side the text under the parentheses citations. Whereas, Bibliography includes all sources of information which have consulted during the course of research study in hand. Irrespective they were cited or not cited.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Nothing can be precisely executed unless it is not properly planned and the same is the case with a research inquiry. The research is as good as its proposal as it serves as a tentative plan of an intended research. It describes research problem, justifies research by explaining its background that led to the need of research, specifies its significance and likely users and details of the methods to be employed and reasons of their appropriateness. A poor quality proposal dooms the research and a well conceived proposal promises quality outcome from approval to conduct phase.

<u>**Annexure-A**</u>

<u>**Format Research Proposal**</u>

Title of the Research Study

(By- the author name)

1. Introduction / Background of the Research
2. Statement of the Research Problem
3. Objectives of the Research
4. Research Hypotheses**:**
   Note: *A research study may be hypotheses based or objectives based. However, there may be situation where hypotheses and objectives both become research orientation.*
5. Significance of the Research
6. Review of the Related Literature
7. Research Methodology:
   f. Type/ Nature of the Research
   g. Population & scope of the study
   h. Sources and types of data
   i. Research Approach
   j. Sample Plan: Sample, sample size and sampling technique employed.
   e. Data collection techniques
   f. Tools for Data Analyses
8. Theoretical frame Work
9. Conceptual Frame Work
10. Limitations &/ Delimitations
12. Outline Organization of the Theses or Chapterization
13.   **References**
14. Annexure / Appendices

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (Fourth edition). Washington, DC: Author.

Armstrong, R. L. (1974). Hypotheses: Why? When? How? *Phi Delta Kappan, 54*, 213-214.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative & quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Guba, E. G. (1961, April). *Elements of a proposal*. Paper presented at the UCEA meeting, Chapel Hill, NC.

Fraenkel, J. R. & Wallen, N. E. (1990). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kerlinger, F. N. (1979). *Behavioral research: A conceptual approach*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Krathwohl, D. R. (1988). *How to prepare a research proposal: Guidelines for funding and dissertations in the social and behavioral sciences*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., & Silverman, S. J. (1987). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1989). *Designing qualitative research*: Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Shavelson, R. J. (1988). *Statistical reasoning for the behavioral sciences* (second edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Traenkel JR, Wallen NE (2006) How to design and evaluate research in education (6th ed), McGraw-Hill

Wiersma, W. (1995). *Research methods in education: An introduction* (Sixth edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Wilkinson, A. M. (1991). *The scientist's handbook for writing papers and dissertations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

O'Leary. Zina (2004) *The Essential Guide to Doing Research*, London, sage publication

Locke F. Lawrence, Spirduso and Stephen J. Silverman. (1997) Proposals t*hat work: A* guide for planning d*issertations and grant Proposals.* (ed 4th). Sage Publications