Research Proseminar, 16:450:603:01
Guidelines for Problem Statement[1]
30 January 2002

The purpose of this project is to gain experience writing a concise description of your chosen research agenda. The "deliverable" is simple: a statement of your research problem. The body of your statement must be no more than five hundred words.[2] Use a title of no more than ten words, and bring ten copies to class on February 6.

Your statement must accomplish three things. It must 1) clearly define a researchable problem, 2) demonstrate an awareness of relevant previous scholarship, and 3) justify the innovation of your perspective on the problem and its significance for the advancement of knowledge in a particular area of scholarly inquiry. This is a tall order for a five-hundred word document, but the situation is more common than you might think.[3] As a scholar, you are repeatedly asked to summarize what you're doing, and you will often find yourself describing the same research project to several different audiences. Professors, deans, publishers, editors, referees, and program officers at funding agencies must sift through a large number of submissions. Each author only has one opportunity to grab the reader's attention, make the case for a particular perspective or approach, and demonstrate its worth. Do everything you can to make your work stand out, to use each of those five hundred words wisely.

You may find it helpful to consider several different ways of framing research problems:[4]

> *The anomaly:* Theory, history, or previous empirical studies lead us to expect a particular result. You have found a case that does not fit the norm, and you propose to explain it.

> *The telling metaphor:* A turn of phrase is used to suggest insightful new connections between phenomena that are not usually examined together. Schroeder (2000) used the title of "Shady Practices," for example, to invoke the ambiguous politics of top-down environmental policies imposed on many African governments.[5]

> *The logical next step:* A body of literature has established a step-by-step progression in a particular theoretical or empirical direction. You accept the premises of this literature, and you propose to extend it by taking the next logical step.

---

[1] Initially developed by Elvin Wyly, January 2002.

[2] Do not include references or citations with your problem statement; we'll get to that later. If you need to position yourself in relation to other scholars, do so in the body of the text ("I propose a synthesis of the very different frameworks used by Azimov, Einstein, and Foucault...").

[3] Writing is extremely difficult, and yet rewarding, when tight space constraints are imposed. Lengthy manuscripts mean one of two very different things: either the author is unable to express ideas clearly and concisely (and has not been harnessed by a judicious editor), or the ideas are so sophisticated that even a very concise distillation of the work yields a long manuscript.

[4] This taxonomy was initially developed by Richard A. Schroeder, revised Spring, 2001, and slightly revised by Elvin Wyly, Spring, 2002.

[5] Schroeder, Richard A. 2000. *Shady Practices: Agroforestry and Gender Politics in The Gambia.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hypothesis testing: A particular theory X has been verified or falsified by other investigators, but has never been tested under Y circumstances; you propose to test the hypothesis under these new conditions.

Comparison: Two cases share similar attributes, but diverge in specific ways; you propose a detailed comparison to account for the divergence.

Critique of the literature: There is a gap in the literature, and you propose to fill it. Gaps can take the form of errors of omission (nobody has considered a certain theoretical connection) or commission (many have accepted a theoretical premise, but they've been misguided by certain unquestioned assumptions or flawed logic).

Multi-factorial analysis: In a given situation, several possible explanations have been offered; you propose to test the rivals and determine which is best.

The hot topic: A sudden groundswell of interest or debate has emerged in a key journal. You propose to make your contribution to that debate.

These categories are illustrative, and many, perhaps most, good research projects combine several of these different modes of explanation and description. There is no need for you to refer explicitly to this taxonomy; just use it as a way of thinking about how to organize your interests, priorities, hunches, and plans.

Do not be intimidated by the guidelines for this project. They are meant to be helpful, and not as straightjackets on your innovation. Be creative, and start out with a brainstorm on the things that excite you about your chosen area of physical or human geography.[6] Then begin rewriting, to distill your ideas into a progressively concise, organized statement of your central research focus. Strive for simplicity and clarity, using language that will speak to a generalist scholarly audience.[7]

---

[6] As a general rule, my first-draft-to-final copy ratio on abstracts and problem statements is *at least* 5.0: I have to start with at least 1,000 words to obtain a good 250-word abstract, for example, when preparing for the deadlines for the annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers. I am a social scientist, and I normally use a fairly run-of-the-mill set of positivist hypothesis testing tools, so this ratio is much higher among scholars specializing in historical, cultural, or humanistic fields of inquiry. My first drafts are completely covered with ideas, possibilities, and half-baked thoughts and hunches, and only a few of these wind up in the abstract, and even fewer can be pursued in the actual research agenda. But they are all valuable resources. Always keep well-organized files of your initial ideas for research paths, because these will prove extremely useful when you receive 'CFPs' (calls for papers for conferences, or calls for proposals for fellowships or funding opportunities).

[7] By this, I mean that you should feel free to use specialized terms, so long as you do so in a way that gives the reader some reason to care about the jargon. An example: "I seek to draw on the insights of the literatures on the expansion method, multilevel modeling, and spatial econometrics -- all of which are based on the recognition that regression-based models are flawed unless they test for the effects of institutional or geographical *context*."