

**BOOK REVIEW: WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSALS IN THE SOCIAL
SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES: A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL GUIDE
BY PROF. JAYADEVA UYANGODA**

G.D. Samarasinghe
University of Moratuwa
dineshs@uom.lk

N.J. Dewasiri
University of Sri Jayewardenepura
jayantha@postgraduate.edu.lk

Introduction

This eminent professor of Political Science has addressed a significant issue encountered by many postgraduate students and researchers in undertaking serious research in the disciplines of Social Sciences, Humanities and Management in Sri Lanka. It is available in both English and Sinhala languages. He has addressed a wide spectrum of concerns related to writing a research proposal that covers research philosophies, methodology as well as methods in academic research. Guided by the scientific method, it presents ten comprehensive chapters that defines the key elements of a marketable research proposal as well as sheds light on the key skills in writing such as winning proposals. It also covers bibliography and glossary of key terms at the end. As the book is handy, it can be used as a practical hand-book at all levels of academic research.

Content

The book chapters are organized in a logical and reader friendly manner targeting the novice postgraduate students as well as researchers. In chapter one, it first explains what is meant by research and links it to the scientific method. Here, the research has been identified as “an exercise in the production of knowledge”. The author argues the ways and means of knowledge production, discussing the evolution of the scientific method. Then, dissemination of new knowledge is discussed, emphasizing originality, especially in postgraduate research. The difference between opinion-making and research is further discussed, emphasizing the superiority in research in terms of objectivity and scientific evidence. Finally, the author emphasizes the role of a research proposal as a road map of scientific research.

Chapter two has made a significant and rigorous contribution to explain how to formulate a clear and concise research problem in a research proposal. The author has experienced in his classroom teaching the difficulty experienced by social science students in formulating an acceptable research problem in the Sri Lankan context. As a solution, he has practiced a simple but effective strategy that helps conceptualize a research problem using the metaphor of presenting a puzzle, an anomaly, a contradiction or a paradox with reference to theory and practice. Additionally, he proposes a second approach to craft a research problem in the form of a substantive question or a set of questions. In his effort to developing a practical guide for the novice researcher to develop a research problem, he also presents a several easy-to-understand local examples linking a broader research area to a research topic, key questions and research problems. This provides a logical flow of perfect understanding of the research problem and its broader theoretical and empirical domains. This chapter further makes a clear

distinction between questions of why, what and how and their rigor and relevance in a research project.

Chapter three separately addresses the research questions logically being derived from the research problem statement with some examples. It clearly differentiates substantive research questions from subsidiary questions based on theoretical, conceptual and empirical significance in a research proposal. Chapter four is especially devoted to explaining hypothesis building with its nature, approaches and types of hypotheses. It clearly illustrates the role of hypotheses as theory building as well as theory testing. The reader can also gain a good understanding of directional vs. non-directional hypotheses as well. It implies the domination of positivistic tradition in testing hypothesis in quantitative methodology but does appreciate the importance of building theory around analytical propositions in post-positivist research tradition in social sciences. Chapter five offers a very important matter that might go unnoticed in many postgraduate research proposals, which indicates relevance, significance and objectives of the study. It draws attention of the researchers to provide for relevance of the proposed research in terms of disciplinary, policy and social relevance as well as significance in the areas of theory, interoperation and empirical facts. These are the keys used to evaluate the attractiveness of the research proposal and that can attract grants in the competitive research world.

Chapter six enlightens the reader as it simply explains the purpose of a literature review and importance of starting a review at the global level and then finding local literature. It draws the attention of searching for theoretical and conceptual literature, which is a key area of the postgraduate research proposal. It also emphasizes the synthesizing literature and how to present it in a critical and argumentative tone, which is less attended to many academic research proposals at present. Chapter seven on theoretical approach can be the most essential element that provides the theoretical and conceptual rigor in an academic research exercise. It stresses the necessity of a good theory that guides the quality of a research proposal and enhances the understanding of the research community on theoretical frameworks leading to a conceptual framework.

The author presents methods in chapter eight whilst methodology comes later in chapter nine. Although this is somewhat different in the usual order in a research proposal, it simply differentiates methods from methodology. Methods are presented as practical steps and approaches to collect data and interpretation of data emphasizing more operational techniques even if methodology signifies the broader epistemological framework of methods. The book has dedicated a big chapter to methodology after the chapter on research problems. It simply puts methodology as a higher level of theoretical justification for the choice of methods and theory of knowledge. It enlightens novice researcher on methodological assumptions covering epistemology and a more balanced assessment on the classic arguments of objectivist versus subjectivist methodologies adopted in social sciences and humanities. It also highlights the importance of critical realism as an alternative to the two extremes in the methodologies. The author guides researchers on how to progress towards methodology starting with selection of ideal methods for his/her own research and then locating his/her own methodology. In the chapter, what really adds unique value to novice researchers in Sri Lanka is that it briefly discusses social science paradigms and schools with some indication of their natural orientations towards quantitative and qualitative data collection and research methods. It especially presents a clear and concise but rich note on post-positivist epistemologies and the methods covering phenomenology, ethnomethodology and postmodernist perspective as well as positivist epistemology and its methods.

Finally, chapter ten provides an integrated template of the content and key elements in an academic research proposal with some tips to make the exercise of writing research proposal an interesting and comprehensive task. It also cites some examples as it is related to the disciplines of social sciences and humanities such as international relations, history, sociology etc. At the end, the bibliography provides all important references for the reader to undertake self-learning in future while the glossary of key terms adds a quick reference for meaning of some key jargon and terms used in the day-to-day language of the academic social science researcher.

Evaluation and Conclusion

In the final analysis, it is noteworthy to say that the author, no doubt, fills an intellectual void by introducing this smart text book which can be recommended as a must-read for amateurs in Sri Lankan academic research in self-learning on how to develop an effective and marketable research proposal. It helps not only researchers but also academic supervisors in easily guiding their research students in social sciences and humanities. The author has materialized his wealth of experience in his teaching and supervising research students for years. The examples have been mainly drawn from political science, public policy, history and sociology allied research topics. Hence it provides a breath of coverage of communities in Social sciences and humanities. However, it has few examples in the disciplines of economics, and organizational sciences and management allied areas, which fall under social sciences and are currently on the rise in Sri Lankan academia. The author has been successful in crating interest of the novice researcher in anti-positivist or post positivist research paradigms by providing a key idea on each such paradigm though the details are not elaborative enough. One possible value addition to the text will be adding some international or regional examples so that a future edition can be useful to a much wider international research community. Further, it is possibly of greater value, if the chapter is on ethical concerns and issues of methods on a research proposal can be added as it is a must in a proposal evaluation in the contemporary research world. Furthermore, the methods chapter can be enriched adding some highlights and practical issues on digital and Internet technology based research practices such as social media research and netnography as the emerging industry 4.0 can pose new challenges.

The text attracts the readers' minds as the book has a scholastic appeal with a quality of international texts. The book is portable, light-weight and easy-to-carry in the hand. The bibliography makes the reader motivated to look for the original sources for more details. It is also reasonably priced. The writing styles are also a key strength that attracts the interest of the readers to read it at a stretch and digest easily as the language is very lively and simple enough to the local research scholars and students. Overall, the text makes a rigorous contribution to the research community in social sciences and humanities in Sri Lanka.

References

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