

**Enhancing Research Proposal Development (Chapters 1-3) Through Continuous Feedback**

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### **Need for Innovation**

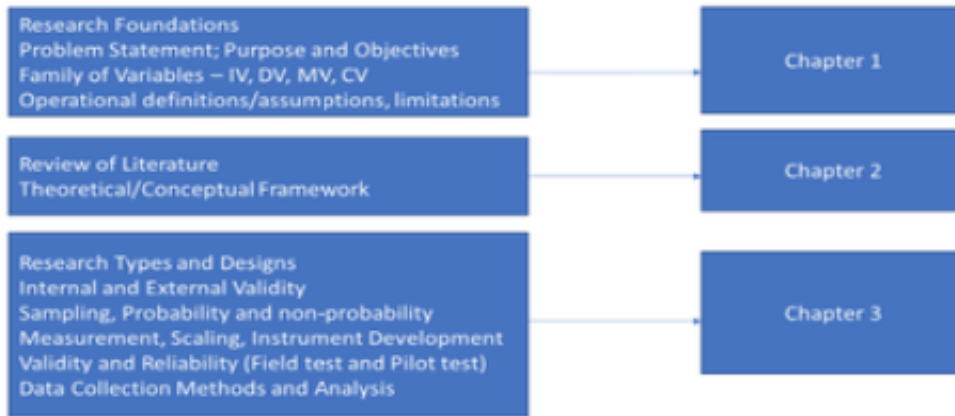
Research proposal writing is a major component of any research methods course in social, behavioral, and educational sciences. Proposal writing takes various forms depending on the nature of disciplinary practices followed by course instructors. The research proposal process, from introduction to data analysis is a complex learning experience for students (Arifani, 2016). Further, in many schools and universities, the dissertation proposal is a key metric for the qualifying (candidacy) exam. A typical research proposal includes the first three chapters of a thesis or doctoral dissertation. The goal of a research proposal is to provide a blueprint for a research study. In other words, the research proposal provides a solid background on what the topic is, the rationale for conducting the research, statement of the problem, theoretical/conceptual framework, purpose and objectives, operational definitions, limitations, and assumptions (chapter 1). The proposal also includes a thorough review of literature summarizing the scholarly work related to the topic and gaps in the current body of literature related to the topic (chapter 2). The most critical and important component of the proposal is chapter 3, the methodology, which provides a plan for executing the study and dictates the specific tool the researcher selects (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015). This is the chapter where most graduate students struggle and face tough scrutiny from their thesis/dissertation committee members.

Although research proposals provide a solid foundation for understanding and applying the research concepts learned, time is a critical element for both students and instructors for a variety of reasons, especially when the research proposal is due at the end of the semester. For example, graduate students must apply the research concepts learned in class for the research proposal while they complete final assignments from other courses, resulting in little interaction between the instructors and students. Additionally, course instructors have limited time to provide constructive feedback because of semester-ending activities such as final exams, grade submissions, etc. Recognizing these challenges among graduate students and course instructors, an innovative idea for enhancing research proposal development emerged. This idea was reflective of graduate student comments on the student rating of teaching effectiveness form at a Penn State University. Below, we provide a description of the innovative idea and how it worked. We share an example of how this idea was conceived, implemented, and evaluated. In addition, lessons learned from this effort and implications for future course offerings are discussed.

### **The Idea and Methodology**

As indicated earlier, the existing practice for graduate students taking the research methods course was to submit their research proposal (chapters 1-3) at the end of the semester. The instructor would grade the proposal, assign a grade, and provide feedback to strengthen the proposal. All this happened after the semester ended, leaving very little opportunity for interaction between graduate students and the instructor, resulting in several questions unanswered.

Therefore, an innovative idea to enhance research proposal writing and assessment was developed. In the following paragraphs, we describe the process. First, we list the key research concepts from the syllabus and group them under three-chapter headings—introduction, review of literature (RoL), and methodology. As shown in figure 1, the course topics delivered in a 15-week semester is sequentially grouped into three research proposal chapters. These groupings will serve as a guide and facilitate organizing and discussing key research concepts in each chapter.



*Figure 1: Linking Course Topics to Research Proposal Chapters*

Each student who is writing a research proposal will develop and organize his/her proposal using the information presented in Figure 1. Due to page limitations, a detailed discussion of the course concepts is not provided.

Under this new idea, each student writing a research proposal submits the research proposal in three sequential phases. Specifically, students submit chapter 1 (introduction) by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> week in the semester and the instructor provides feedback and comments within a week's time. Students submit chapter 2 (RoL) for review by the end of 7<sup>th</sup> week and receive feedback from the instructor. Importantly, chapter 2 is usually a work in-progress and students continue to add new reviews to strengthen chapter 2. Finally, students submit chapter 3 (methodology) by the end of 13<sup>th</sup> week and receive feedback within a week's time. Once all the feedback for all chapters are incorporated, students submit the final research proposal for grading and comments, if any, for revising the research proposal. A research proposal rubric was used to assess the quality of the proposal.

### **Results to Date, Advice to Others, and Resources Needed**

This whole process offers continuous interaction between the instructor and students during the entire semester, resulting in a learner-centered approach to teaching. It also allows for immediate application of concepts learned in class and feedback from the instructor. Based on the review and feedback, the instructor can identify weaknesses and strengths of the proposals collectively and individually and share that in the class for the benefit of everyone and, at the same time, adjust his/her teaching accordingly. Students feel confident their proposal has been vetted and have the satisfaction of preparing a quality document. Further, advisors of students have a well-prepared proposal to share with committee members. This new idea is a win-win for both graduate students and instructors. For the student, better understanding of research concepts and application of course content. For the instructor, the ability to adjust teaching content throughout the semester. Finally, the concept of continuous feedback also serves as an assessment strategy in an era of outcome assessment where knowledge, application, demonstration, and communication are paramount.

Instructors teaching research methods courses or proposal development courses and graduate students will immensely benefit from applying this innovative idea as a learner-centered strategy for enhanced learning and teaching. Resources required include a distribution of effort and time by the instructor and students over the course of the semester as opposed to the end of the semester.

**References**

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- Leedy, P.D., & Ormrod, J.E. (2015). *Practical Research – Planning and Design (11<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson