

Handout 17

Problem and Purpose Statements

Problem Statement, Purpose Statement, and Applied Doctoral Project or Dissertation-in-Practice Question Help

NOTE: The applied doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice includes checklists for all sections of the document, including problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. You should make sure you use these checklists and follow margin instructions. The present document is intended to provide additional help and examples, and also explain the importance of alignment. Alignment enables you to ensure consistency in your language and presentation of information, as well as provide a logical flow of your narrative.

Resource: Ellis, T., & Levy, Y. (2008). *Framework of problem-based research: A guide for novice researchers on the development of a research-worthy problem. Informing Science*, 11, 17-33.

<http://proxy1.ncu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=36030721&site=eds-live>

Problem Statement

The problem needs to be very focused because everything else from the applied doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice logically flows from the problem. If the problem is too big or too vague, it will be difficult to scope out a purpose that is manageable, given the time to execute and finish the project. The problem should be the result of a practical need or an opportunity to further an applicational study or project.

Given the above, the problem statement should do four things:

1. Specify and describe the problem (with appropriate citations)
2. Provide evidence of the problem's existence
3. Explain the consequences of NOT solving the problem
4. Identify what is not known about the problem that should be known.

What is a problem?

The world is full of problems! Not all problems make good doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice problems, however, because they are either too big, complex, or risky for doctorate candidates to solve. A proper problem can be defined as a specific, evidence-based, real-life issue faced by certain people or organizations that have significant negative implications to the involved parties.

Example of a proper, specific, evidence-based, real-life problem:

“Only 6% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies are women” (Center for Leadership Studies, 2019).

Specific

Specific refers to the scope of the problem, which should be sufficiently manageable and focused. For example, the problem “The depletion of government funding in the U.S.” is probably not specific enough in terms of what area of the government, or what type of funding?

Evidence-Based

Evidence-based here means that the problem is well-documented by recent research findings and/or statistics from credible sources. Anecdotal evidence does not qualify in this regard. Quantitative evidence is generally preferred over qualitative when establishing a problem because quantitative evidence (from a credible source) usually reflects generalizable facts, whereas qualitative evidence in the form of conclusions tend to only apply to the study sample and may not be generalizable to a larger population. Example of a problem that isn’t evidence-based: “Based on the practitioners’ experience, the problem is that people don’t accept female leaders;” which is an opinion-based statement based on personal (anecdotal) experience.

Real-Life

Real-life means that a problem exists regardless of whether research is conducted or not. This means that “lack of knowledge” or “lack of research” cannot be used as the problem for a doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice because it’s an academic issue or a gap; and not a real-life problem experienced by people or organizations. Example of a problem that doesn’t exist in real life: “There is not enough research on the reasons why people distrust minority healthcare workers.” This type of statement also reveals the assumption that people actually do mistrust minority healthcare workers; something that needs to be supported by actual, credible evidence to potentially work as an underlying research problem.

What are consequences?

Consequences are negative implications experienced by a group of people, organization, profession, or industry as a result of the problem. The negative effects should be of a certain magnitude to warrant research. For example, if fewer than 1% of the stakeholders experience a negative consequence of a problem and that consequence only constitutes a minor inconvenience, research is probably not warranted. Negative consequences that can be measured weigh stronger than those that cannot be put on some kind of scale.

In the example above, a significant negative consequence is that women face much larger barriers than men when attempting to get promoted to executive jobs; or are 94% less likely than men to get to that level in Corporate America.

While a problem may be referred to as a gap in traditional research, in a doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice, the problem could be a statement of the situational condition that requires a scholar-practitioner approach. For the applied degree, this may be the part of the program or procedure that is not working.

How To Write The Problem Statement

Option 1: Writing the Problem Statement

Do not exceed 250-300 words.

It is helpful to begin the problem statement with a sentence: "The problem to be addressed through this project is..."

Paragraph 1

The problem should be evidenced-based and focus on practice within your perspective field or domain. Then, fill out the rest of the paragraph with an elaboration of that specific problem, making sure to "document" it, as your doctoral committee will look for evidence that it is indeed a problem (emphasis also on the timeliness of the problem, supported by citations within the last 5 years). Identify the negative consequences that are occurring as a result of the problem.

Paragraph 2

Next, write a paragraph explaining the consequences of NOT solving the problem. Who will be affected? How will they be affected? How important is it to fix the problem? Again, your doctoral committee will want to see research-based citations and statistics that indicate the negative implications are significant.

Paragraph 3

In the final paragraph, you will explain what is not known that should be known. What isn't known about the problem? Presumably, if your problem and purpose are aligned, your research will try to close or minimize this gap by investigating the problem. Have other practitioners investigated the issue? What has their research left unanswered?

Option 2: Writing the Problem Statement

Do not exceed 250-300 words.

Another way to tackle the Statement of the Problem:

The Statement of the Problem section is a very clear, concise identification of the problem. It must stay within the template guidelines of 250-300 words but more importantly, must contain four elements as outlined below.

A worthy problem should be able to address all of the following points:

- identification of the problem itself--what is "going wrong" (Ellis & Levy, 2008)
- who is affected by the problem
- the consequences that will result from a continuation of the problem
- a brief discussion of
 - at least 3 authors' research related to the problem; and
 - their stated suggestion/recommendation for further research related to the problem

Use the following to work on the Statement of the Problem by first outlining the section as follows:

1. One clear, concise statement that tells the reader what is not working in the profession or industry. Be specific and support it with current studies.
2. Tell who is affected by the problem identified in #1.
3. Briefly tell what will happen if the problem isn't addressed.
4. Find at least 3 current studies and write a sentence or two for each study that

- briefly discusses the author(s)' work, what they studied, and
- state their recommendation for further insight or exploration about the problem

Option 3: Writing the Problem Statement

Do not exceed 250-300 words.

Finally, you can follow this simple 3-part outline when writing the statement of the problem section.

Your problem statement is a short (250-300 words), 3 paragraph section, in which you:

Context	1. Explain context and state problem (“the problem is XYZ”), supported by statistics, and/or recent research findings, and/or the profession or industry.
Consequence	2. Explain the negative consequences of the problem to stakeholders, supported by statistics and/or recent research findings and/or the profession or industry.
Gap	3. Explain the gap in the research, or the part of the program or procedure that is not efficient

- That’s it. All other content belongs in the introduction, the purpose statement, or somewhere else.

Example of a problem statement that follows this 3-part outline (295 words):

The problem to be addressed by this study is the decline of employee well-being for followers of novice mid-level managers and the corresponding rise in employee turnover faced by business leaders across the financial services industry (Oh et al., 2014). Low levels of employee well-being are toxic for morale and result in expensive turnover costs, dysfunctional work environments, anemic corporate cultures, and poor customer service (Compdata, 2018; Oh et al., 2014). According to Ufer (2017), the financial services industry suffers from one of the highest turnover rates among millennial-aged employees in all industries in the developed world, at 18.6% annually. Starkman (2015) reported that 50% of those surveyed in financial services were not satisfied with a single one of the four key workplace aspects: job, firm, pay or career path.

Low levels of employee well-being interrupt a financial services’ company’s ability to deliver outstanding customer service in a world increasingly dependent on that commodity (Wladawsky-Berger, 2018). Mid-level managers play an essential role in support of the success of many of top businesses today (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017).

The current body of literature does not adequately address the well-being issue in the financial services industry from the follower's perspective (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Strategic direction flows top-down from senior executives and passes through mid-level leadership to individual contributors at more junior grades. The mid-level managers' teams are tasked with the achievement of core tasks and the managers themselves are expected to maintain the workforce's morale, motivation and welfare (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). Unless industry leaders better understand the phenomenon of employee well-being from the follower perspective and its role in positioning employees to provide a premium client experience, they may be handicapped from preserving their most significant principal market differentiator: customer service (Wladawsky-Berger, 2018).

Purpose Statement

Purpose Statement

The purpose statement succinctly explains the objectives of the doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice. These objectives must directly address the problem. The purpose statement also identifies the project methodology and design.

A problem and a missing piece in combination can lead to different objectives, and hence, different purpose statements. In the example from above where the problem was severe underrepresentation of female CEOs in Fortune 500 companies; one purpose might be to explore the hiring practices and strategies of these companies. Another purpose may be to determine how board members rated female and male candidates on scales of competency, professionalism, and experience to predict which candidate will be selected for the CEO position. The first purpose may involve a qualitative ethnographic study in which the researcher observes board meetings and hiring interviews; the second may involve a quantitative regression analysis. The outcomes will be very different, so it's important that you find out exactly how you want to address a problem and help close a gap!

The purpose of the applied doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice must not only align with the problem and address a missing piece; it must also align with the chosen project method. In fact, the template requires you to name the research method at the very beginning of the purpose statement. In general, quantitative studies involve "closed-ended" research verbs such as determine, measure, correlate, explain, compare, validate, identify, or examine; whereas qualitative studies involve "open-ended" research verbs such as explore, understand, narrate, articulate [meanings], discover, or develop.

Qualitative Purpose Statement

A qualitative purpose statement following the color-coded problem statement (assumed here to be low well-being among financial sector employees) + missing piece (lack of research on followers of mid-level managers), might start like this:

In response to declining levels of employee well-being, the purpose of the qualitative phenomenology was to explore and understand the lived experiences related to the well-being of the followers of novice mid-level managers in the financial services industry. The levels of follower well-being have been shown to

correlate to employee morale, turnover intention, and customer orientation (Eren et al., 2013). A combined framework of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and the employee well-being concept informed the research questions and supported the inquiry, analysis, and interpretation of the findings to be applied in the financial services industry.

Quantitative Purpose Statement

A quantitative purpose statement for the same problem and gap might start like this:

In response to declining levels of employee well-being, the purpose of the quantitative correlational study was to determine which leadership factors predict employee well-being of the followers of novice mid-level managers to be applied in the financial services industry. Leadership factors were measured by the Leader Member Exchange (LMX) assessment framework by Mantlekow (2015), and employee well-being was conceptualized as a compound variable consisting of self-reported turnover-intent and psychological test scores from the Mental Health Survey (MHS) developed by Johns Hopkins University researchers.

Both of these purpose statements reflect viable research strategies and both align with the problem and gap so it's up to the practitioner to design a doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice in a manner that reflects personal preferences and desired study outcomes. Note that the quantitative research purpose incorporates operationalized concepts, or variables; that reflect the way the practitioner intends to measure the key concepts under study; whereas the qualitative purpose statement isn't about translating the concepts under study as variables but instead aim to explore and understand the core research phenomenon.

Applied Doctoral Project or Dissertation-In-Practice Research Questions

Research Questions: Applied Doctoral Project or Dissertation-In-Practice

The research questions (RQs) drive data collection and must be derived directly from the purpose of the study. This means they will also have to align with the research method. It is possible to develop sub-questions, but a single or a few questions should be the foundation that can guide your data collection and analysis, and help you reach conclusions.

Some students confuse research questions with interview or survey questions. They are not the same! Interview and survey questions are the detailed questions you will ask participants in your doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice; whereas the RQs reflect the high-level purpose of the study. The research question can cover several concepts and aspects of the purpose that can then be hashed out in an interview, focus group, or survey.

Qualitative and quantitative applied doctoral project or dissertation-in-practice research questions differ considerably. The research method identified in your purpose statement should guide how the RQs are stated. Quantitative RQs must reflect testable relationships between variables; whereas qualitative RQs should indicate the exploratory and open-ended nature of the inquiry. Quantitative RQs are followed by hypotheses that reflect the researcher's predictions about the nature of the relationships. These predictions should be firmly rooted in the researcher's understanding of the literature and theory or conceptual framework used to frame the

project. Because qualitative research projects do not involve any testing of relationships between variables, qualitative RQs are not hypotheses.

In the purpose statement examples above;

Qualitative RQ aligning with a phenomenological inquiry:

RQ1: “What are the lived experiences of followers of mid-level managers in the financial services sector, regarding their well-being on the job?”

If the researcher wants to focus on particular aspects of the central RQ, the following sub-questions could be formulated:

RQ1a. “How do followers perceive the quality and adequacy of the leader-follower exchanges between themselves and their novice leaders?”

RQ1b. “Under what conditions does leader-member exchanges affect a follower’s own level of well-being?”

The researcher can now develop an interview protocol with specific questions that he or she plans to ask the participants of the study; structured by the two sub RQs above.

Quantitative RQ aligning with a correlational inquiry:

In the case of the quantitative purpose statement above, a quantitative RQ that aligns with the correlational inquiry might be:

RQ1. “What is the relationship between leadership competencies as measured by the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) assessment framework and employee well-being?”

Associated hypotheses with this RQ include a null hypothesis (that proposes that no statistical significance exists among relationships between variables in the data); and an alternative hypothesis (that states there is a statistically significant relationship between two variables, based on the researcher’s prediction).

RQ1. None of the five leadership competencies from the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) assessment framework of (a) motivation, (b) professionalism, (c) business acumen, (d) communication and (e) relationship management are statistically significant predictors of follower well-being

RQ1a. At least one of the five leadership competencies from the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) assessment framework of (a) motivation, (b) professionalism, (c) business acumen, (d) communication and (e) relationship management is a statistically significant predictor of follower well-being

In the above example, you and your committee may decide that in order to adequately test a theory or a set of relationships between variables, you have to develop sub-questions and specific hypotheses related to each of the leadership variables (which are combined here into one RQ). The key is that for every research question, there is a set of null and alternative hypotheses statements. It is not generally permissible to have quantitative research questions for which there are no hypotheses, nor is it okay to have hypotheses that don’t connect to a research question.

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