**Problem Statement**

A strong problem statement is, in fact, an essential part of any research proposal. When drafting a research proposal, it's critical to express the significance of your findings, the particular issue you hope to solve, and how your work relates to previously published research. The checklist includes important components that help create a compelling problem statement for a research proposal.

The dissertation problem needs to be very focused because everything else from the dissertation research logically flows from the problem. You may say that the problem statement is the very core of a dissertation research study. If the problem is too big or too vague, it will be difficult to scope out a purpose that is manageable for one person, given the time available to execute and finish the dissertation research study.

Through your research, your aim is to obtain information that helps address a problem so it can be resolved. Note that the researcher does not actually *solve* the problem themselves by conducting research but provides new knowledge that can be used toward a resolution. Typically, the problem is solved (or partially solved) by practitioners in the field, using input from researchers.

A **research problem** is a specific issue or gap in existing knowledge that you aim to address in your research. You may choose to look for practical problems aimed at contributing to change, or theoretical problems aimed at expanding knowledge.

Some research will do both of these things, but usually the research problem focuses on one or the other. The type of research problem you choose depends on your broad [topic](https://www.scribbr.com/research-process/dissertation-topic/) of interest and the [type of research](https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/types-of-research/) you think will fit best.

**Why is the research problem important?**

Having an interesting topic isn’t a strong enough basis for academic research. Without a well-defined research problem, you are likely to end up with an unfocused and unmanageable project.

You might end up repeating what other people have already said, trying to say too much, or doing research without a clear purpose and justification. You need a clear problem in order to do research that contributes new and relevant insights.

Whether you’re planning your [thesis](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/thesis/), starting a [research paper](https://www.scribbr.com/category/research-paper/), or writing a [research proposal](https://www.scribbr.com/?p=23416), the research problem is the first step towards knowing exactly what you’ll do and why.

**step1: Identify a broad problem area**

As you read about your topic, look for under-explored aspects or areas of concern, conflict, or controversy. Your goal is to find a gap that your research project can fill.

**Practical research problems**

If you are doing practical research, you can identify a problem by reading reports, following up on previous research, or talking to people who work in the relevant field or organization. You might look for:

* Issues with performance or efficiency
* Processes that could be improved
* Areas of concern among practitioners
* Difficulties faced by specific groups of people

**Examples of practical research problems**

Voter turnout in New England has been decreasing, in contrast to the rest of the country.

The HR department of a local chain of restaurants has a high staff turnover rate.

A non-profit organization faces a funding gap that means some of its programs will have to be cut.

**Theoretical research problems**

If you are doing theoretical research, you can identify a research problem by reading existing research, theory, and debates on your topic to find a gap in what is currently known about it. You might look for:

* A phenomenon or context that has not been closely studied
* A contradiction between two or more perspectives
* A situation or relationship that is not well understood
* A troubling question that has yet to be resolved

**Examples of theoretical research problems**

The effects of long-term Vitamin D deficiency on cardiovascular health are not well understood.

The relationship between gender, race, and income inequality has yet to be closely studied in the context of the millennial gig economy.

Historians of Scottish nationalism disagree about the role of the British Empire in the development of Scotland’s national identity.

**step 2: Learn more about the problem**

**What is a problem?**

The world is full of problems! Not all problems make good dissertation research problems, however, because they are either too big, complex, or risky for doctorate candidates to solve. A proper research 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 dissertation research problem:

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

**Specific** refers to the scope of the problem, which should be sufficiently manageable and focused to address with dissertation research. For example, the problem “terrorism kills thousands of people each year” is probably not specific enough in terms of who gets killed by which terrorists, to work for a doctorate candidate; or “Social media use among call-center employees may be problematic because it could reduce productivity,” which contains speculations about the magnitude of the problem and the possible negative effects.

**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 ditto when establishing a problem because quantitative evidence (from a credible source) usually reflects generalizable facts, whereas qualitative evidence in the form of research 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 researcher’s experience, the problem is that people don’t accept female leaders;” which is an opinion-based statement based on personal (anecdotal) experience.

**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 dissertation study 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 or organizations, 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.

**What is a gap?**

To establish a complete basis for a dissertation research study, *the problem has to be accompanied by a gap*. A gap is missing knowledge or insights about a particular issue that contributes to the persistence of the problem. We use gaps to “situate” new research in the existing literature by adding to the knowledge base in the business research field, in a specific manner (determined by the purpose of the research). Identifying gaps requires you to review the literature in a thorough fashion, to establish a complete understanding of what is known and what isn’t known about a certain problem.  In the example from above about the underrepresentation of female CEOs, a gap may be that male-dominated boards have not been studied extensively in terms of their CEO hiring decisions, which might then warrant a study of such boards, to uncover implicit biases and discriminatory practices against female candidates.

**How to Write a Problem Statement**

1. Here is one way to construct a problem section (keep in mind you have a 250-300 word limit, but you can write first and edit later):

It is helpful to begin the problem statement with a sentence*:  “The problem to be addressed through this study is…*”  Then, fill out the rest of the paragraph with elaboration of that specific problem, making sure to “document” it, as NU reviewers will look for research-based evidence that it is indeed a problem (emphasis also on timeliness of the problem, supported by citations within the last 5 years).

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, NU reviewers will want to see research-based citations and statistics that indicate the negative implications are significant.

In the final paragraph, you will explain what information (research) is needed in order to fix the problem. This paragraph shows that the problem is worthy of doctoral-level research. What isn’t known about the problem? Ie, what is the gap? Presumably, if your problem and purpose are aligned, your research will try to close or minimize this gap by investigating the problem. Have other researchers investigated the issue? What has their research left unanswered?

1. 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 dissertation 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 1) at least 3 authors’ research related to the problem; and 2)   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, what is “going wrong”. 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

i. briefly discusses the author(s)’ work, what they studied, and

ii. state their recommendation for further research about the problem

3.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

1. Explain context and state problem (“the problem is XYZ”), supported by statistics and/or recent research finding
2. Explain the negative consequences of the problem to stakeholders, supported by statistics and/or recent research findings
3. Explain the gap in the literature.

**Example**

**Example of a problem statement that follows the 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).