

# Problem Statement, Purpose & Objectives

A clearly articulated purpose statement and supporting objectives or questions are the roadmap to your research proposal.

SSHRC *Insight Grants* and *Insight Development Grants* fund research. You may be considering writing a book, creating a documentary, producing a play, and so on. However, these are often considered the *products of research* or, in some cases, means of knowledge mobilization. Whether you will produce a documentary or a series of journal papers, your proposal must be developed based on a clearly defined **problem statement** and **research purpose** and guided by a set of research **objectives** or **questions**.

## **P**ROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem statement illustrates what's wrong, what's missing, what we don't know or need to know better, and what needs to be done. This should be *synthesized* in a paragraph or two, followed by your research purpose and a statement of your research objectives.

Writing a persuasive problem statement means setting the stage for why your research objectives, or the questions you are investigating, are important. Writing a persuasive problem statement means engaging your audience (i.e. your reviewers) so that they want to learn more about your proposed research.

**A GOOD PROBLEM STATEMENT** is succinct, convincing, articulates the research need, provides a rationale for the research purpose and objectives, and is developed further in the literature review/scholarly context section of your proposal.

For SSHRC *Insight* or *Insight Development* grants, the problem statement should be the very first paragraph (or two) of your proposal (i.e., the *Detailed Description* section). Written as a single paragraph, a problem statement consists of: **i)** a broad sentence or two introducing your research topic, **ii)** a thesis sentence or two that captures to the position you want to prove, the significance of the knowledge gap, or the importance of the topic at hand (i.e., identify that your research *is* important) and **iii)** a sentence or three that briefly overviews your main bodies of evidence (i.e., establish *why* your research is important).

The purpose of your problem statement is to:

1. Introduce the reader to the importance of the topic being studied,
2. Orient the reader to the significance of your study and the research objectives or questions to follow,
3. Answer the “so what?” question so that reviewers know why they should care about this problem and your research, and
4. Place the problem into a particular context that defines the parameters of what you will be investigating.

## PURPOSE STATEMENT

A purpose statement conveys the overall intent of your research in a **single sentence**. It indicates what you intend to accomplish and establishes the central direction for your research. The purpose statement should flow logically from your *Problem Statement*.

Your **purpose** is your goal or your overall aim of inquiry. In order to realize your purpose you will need to:

- **Achieve** some set of objectives,
- **Answer** some set of questions, or
- **Test** some set of hypotheses.

**"THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH IS..."**  
is a simple but effective way to let your reviewer know what it is that you hope to accomplish!

A good purpose statement is:

- Specific and precise,
- Clear,
- Concise,
- Able to lead to more than one objective or question, and
- Grounded in a well-established rationale/problem statement.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Purpose statements are realized through a set of research objectives or questions. Clearly formulated objectives (or questions) will help focus your research, structure your literature review, and guide your research design/methodology.

### **DO YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE YOU APPLY!**

Never propose as a research objective that you (or your graduate student) will dedicate the first six months to a year of the grant to undertake a review of the literature.

Research objectives (or questions) serve to narrow the purpose statement and are linked directly to the research findings. Research objectives (or questions) are the specific things you will achieve (or questions you will answer) in your research in order to accomplish your overall purpose

Good research objectives are explicit and clearly defined, and there is a high probability of meeting them. Good research objectives are:

- Concrete statements describing what the research is trying to achieve,
- Achieved by undertaking the research,
- Grounded in the *Problem Statement* – not a rabbit pulled from a hat,
- Presented clearly and concisely,
- Logically/ conceptually linked,
- Comprehensive of the different aspects of the research problem you identified,
- Clearly phrased in operational terms, and
- Attainable within the expected timeframe and available resources for the study.

**How many research objectives should I have?** Only the number that you can realize in the duration of the funding award. Typically, SSHRC *Insight Development* grants consist of no more than 2 or 3, and *Insight Grants* no more than 3 to 5 research objectives. You must ensure that your proposed research design is achievable and that you are able to tackle all of the stated objectives (or questions) within the constraints of your timeline and proposed budget.

Some effective verbs used to construct research objectives:

<b>Knowledge</b> relate, define, describe, identify, indicate	<b>Application</b> apply, demonstrate, measure, illustrate	<b>Analysis</b> appraise, analyze, identify, deduce, measure
<b>Comprehension</b> assess, compare, classify, predict, understand	<b>Evaluation</b> determine, measure, project, evaluate, determine, compare	<b>Synthesis</b> construct, create, compose, develop, integrate, formulate

Source: Compiled based on academia.edu

## MAKE IT EASY FOR YOUR REVIEWERS

The purpose and objectives are most impactful when stated at the beginning of the research description—a single paragraph that contains the purpose statement, followed by a numbered or bulleted listing of the specific research objectives or questions.

Statement of the research objectives is the first component asked for by SSHRC in the *Detailed Description* section of the proposal. Do NOT ignore this request, and bury your objectives two to three pages into your proposal!



Don't create a treasure hunt, forcing reviewers to search for your purpose and objectives! State your purpose and objectives "up front" in your detailed description, immediately following your *Problem Statement*. **Bold** your purpose statement. Indent or number your research objectives or questions.

## SOURCES AND SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Creswell JW. 2014. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. London: Sage.

Leedy PD and Ormrod J. 2005. *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 8th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Punch KF. 2001. *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. London: Sage

Schimmel J. 2012. *Writing Science: How to Write Papers that Get Cited and Proposals that Get Funded*. New York: Oxford.

Walters M. W. 2009. *Write an Effective Funding Application: A Guide for Researchers and Scholars*. Baltimore, ML: The Johns Hopkins University Press.