

Series Foreword

Why are you reading this book? Perhaps you have recently been assigned to write a research paper in an undergraduate course. Maybe you are considering graduate school in one of the behavioral, health, or social science disciplines, such as psychology, public health, nursing, or medicine, and know that having a strong research background gives you a major advantage in getting accepted. Maybe you simply want to know how to conduct research in these areas. Or perhaps you are interested in actually conducting your own study. Regardless of the reason, you are probably wondering—how do I start?

Conducting research can be analogous to cooking a meal for several people. Doing so involves planning (e.g., developing a menu), having adequate resources (e.g., having the correct pots, pans, carving knives, plates), knowing what the correct ingredients are (e.g., what spices are needed), properly cooking the meal (e.g., grilling vs. baking, knowing how long it takes to cook), adequately presenting the food (e.g., making the meal look appetizing), and so forth. Conducting research also involves planning, proper execution, having adequate resources, and presenting one's project in a meaningful manner. Both activities also involve creativity, persistence, caring, and ethical behavior. But just like cooking a meal for several people, conducting research should follow one of my favorite pieces of advice—"remember that the devil is in the details." If you want your dinner guests to find your meal tasty, you need to follow a recipe

properly and measure the ingredients accurately (e.g., too much or little of some of the ingredients can make the entrée taste awful). Similarly, conducting research without properly paying attention to details can lead to erroneous results.

Okay, but what about your question—“How do I start?” This American Psychological Association (APA) book series provides detailed but user-friendly guides for conducting research in the behavioral, health, and social sciences from start to finish. I cannot help but think of another food analogy here—that is, the series will focus on everything from “soup to nuts.” These short, practical books will guide the student/researcher through each stage of the process of developing, conducting, writing, and presenting a research project. Each book will focus on a single aspect of research, for example, choosing a research topic, following ethical guidelines when conducting research with humans, using appropriate statistical tools to analyze your data, and deciding which measures to use in your project. Each volume in this series will help you attend to the details of a specific activity. All volumes will help you complete important tasks and will include illustrative examples. Although the theory and conceptualization behind each activity are important to know, these books will focus especially on the “how to” of conducting research, so that you, the research student, can successfully carry out a meaningful research project.

This particular volume, by Jennifer Brown Urban and Bradley Matheus van Eeden-Moorefield, is required reading very early on. These authors focus on the earlier stages of the process—the careful planning, assembling of “ingredients,” preparing, and proposing a research project. Thus, if you are ready to design your research project and need user-friendly guidelines, this book can be of immense aid.

So, the answer to the question “How do I start?” is simple: just turn the page and begin reading!

Best of luck!

—Arthur M. Nezu, PhD, DHL, ABPP
Series Editor

Introduction

The first thing students typically feel when they learn they are required to take a research methods course for their major is dread. The very thought of research methods sends some students running to find another major. As professors, we appreciate the challenge of working with students who enter our classrooms less than excited about taking research methods. We love seeing their excitement and sense of accomplishment at the end of the semester after crafting their first research proposal. Is research methods challenging? Yes, absolutely. Is research methods fun? You might not think so right now, but we think it is, as do most of our former students.

We are confident we can convince you that it's certainly not as impossible as you may think. Our goal for this book is to help you get from Point A to Point Z. We break down the process of designing your research project into manageable steps and guide you through the decision-making process. Along the way, we also provide direction for writing up your research

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0000049-001>

Designing and Proposing Your Research Project, by J. B. Urban and B. M. van Eeden-Moorefield
Copyright © 2018 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

proposal. By the end of this book, we hope you will feel a sense of accomplishment. The best way to learn about research is to get your hands dirty and actually experience what it's like to design your own research project. So, let's begin!

OUR STORY

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, we, the authors, were undergraduates taking our first research methods class. Now, you might be thinking, "Of course they liked taking research methods as undergrads; that's what they do now for a living!" Although this is true, we weren't born loving research; in fact, most people aren't born loving research. It's an acquired taste. For one of us (Jen), her undergraduate research methods course was actually pretty fun. Jen got to work with friends to develop a research project, collect data, write it up in a report, and present it to her classmates. She still remembers the research project to this day.

She and her friends were interested in whether people would follow directional signs that instructed people to do something that was contrary to what common sense would dictate. So they designed an observational study to test that research question. They went to the campus coffee shop and put a sign on the door that said "pull." It was one of those doors with a big bar across it that was obviously supposed to be pushed. Jen can't recall the study's findings, but she still remembers how much fun she had working on the project. It was this hands-on experience, as well as experience working in actual research labs as an undergrad, that ignited her love of social science research.

Brad took his first research class as a sophomore and remembers all the horror stories he heard from fellow psychology majors—"You will hate it; you will be bored out of your mind!"—and, of course, the untrue rumor "everyone fails their first time taking research methods." Certainly, there was no way that taking research was going to be as enjoyable as taking abnormal psychology and diagnosing everyone you know with every known disorder you read about and then some. He was soon proved wrong.

The first study Brad ever conducted was an observational study examining personal space. He worked as part of a research team and went to

the library, where one team member went up to every 15th person who walked by the staircase and asked for the time. Team members varied how close they got to each person (1, 2, or 3 feet). A second and third team member recorded reactions. As you can predict, the closer they were, the more likely the random person was to back away (and sometimes not even respond). Brad admits that although this was a super fun study, there were times he felt a little awkward when he was a foot away from someone he did not know.

The second study lasted the entire semester and was a reexamination of the Wegner rebound effect—the classic white bear study. The basic premise is that telling someone they cannot think about something, like a white bear, makes them think about it more often than those who are told to think about white bears. How many of you will be thinking about white bears for the next hour? Don't do it! Amazingly, the results from Brad's study matched those of Dr. Wegner, who is known as the father of thought suppression research.

This experience of being able to find answers to questions using a systematic and reliable method (as opposed to WebMD or Wikipedia) was the coolest thing and ignited Brad's passion for research. Walking into the first research methods class, Brad was extremely anxious and did not know how he would survive. Fortunately, he had an incredible professor and fell in love with research.

So, how did we come to fall in love with research methods? Let's explain it using a dating analogy. The short answer is that we had some amazing "dates" with research methods that increased with frequency over time (i.e., we put in a lot of time and effort in and outside of class), and we did fun activities with research (i.e., designed and carried out two small studies), and we spent time communicating and getting to know about research methods (i.e., we read, thought, took notes, asked lots of questions, and listened for every detail). From this, a sincere passion for research methods developed that also resulted in a career for both of us.

Our unique undergraduate experiences helped us conceptualize this book. We want you to discover the joys of research for yourself, just as we did. This book will not sit in your bag all semester and be the book that you dread taking out to read. Our goal is that this book will be your guide,

workbook, and manual and will help you develop a great research project and proposal. With that in mind, we approached each chapter with the goal of including less writing and more tables, figures, exhibits, and case studies to make the text as usable as possible.

ITERATIVE PROCESS, LINEAR TEXT

Putting research methods into a simple series of steps requires that we present this guide in a linear format. However, designing a research study is not a linear process. For example, sometimes it makes sense to think of your sampling plan before you map out your design plan. Sometimes it's better to figure out the design before the sample. Most of the time, it's an iterative process. As you make changes to one section, you will need to go back and rework earlier sections. This is especially true for those who conduct qualitative research.

One element should always come first, though, and that's determining your topic, research question, or hypothesis. These will guide all of the decisions you make as you design your study. Because this step is so critical, we cover it at the beginning of this book.

ASSUMPTIONS

In writing this book, we made several important assumptions.

First, we assume that this is not your only research methods book. We expect that this book will be used in conjunction with a research methods book that covers these topics in more detail.

Second, we assume that you are being asked to design your own research project. This book is intended as a guide to help you develop your own idea into a full research proposal. In fact, we have developed a companion website with additional helpful information, including an example outline of a research proposal (<http://pubs.apa.org/books/supp/urban>).

Third, we assume that you need to make a lot of choices and decisions in designing your study. This book is intended to help you make those choices. We will not provide a comprehensive overview of all

possible research designs. Rather, we will present the most commonly used research designs, particularly those used by students.

Finally, it is important to understand that there is no such thing as a perfect study, or one that will provide all the answers to your questions. In fact, the best studies result in more questions than they do answers. Another way of stating this is that all studies have limitations: Your job is to become aware of some limitations and understand ways to improve on them in future research.

Many of you are likely feeling overwhelmed and wondering how you can learn everything about research, develop a research plan and proposal, submit an institutional review board application, carry out a study, analyze and write up the results, and everything else, all in one semester or maybe a year! Do you want the good or bad news first?

Let's get the bad out of the way: It takes a lot of work, period. The good news: Tens of thousands of students, and likely many more, have completed projects successfully under the same conditions for decades. Plus, you have this book to help you.

A NOTE ABOUT ETHICS AND READING LITERATURE

As you proceed with designing and proposing your own research project, one thing that is absolutely important to consider throughout the entire process is *ethics*—that is, how you will protect those who participate in your study from any harm or undue stress. Although a detailed discussion of ethics is beyond the scope of this book, we provide a quick overview of some of the main ethical considerations on the companion website (<http://pubs.apa.org/books/supp/urban>). To get you on the right path, we also created an ethics table that lists several tips and questions to ask yourself about the study you are planning. This table can be found on the companion website.

Similarly, throughout your research project you will no doubt find yourself reading many published studies to see what other work has been done. In our experience, when students read research studies, they often skip over the Method and Results sections. It is extremely tempting to

do this because those sections often include a lot of unknown technical terminology, and many of us are taught to care only about the outcomes. However, if you carefully read the Method section of articles and use strategies similar to those listed, you can have greater confidence in designing and carrying out your own study. As an added bonus, this reading can provide you with citations to use when writing your Method section. We wish you luck and excitement as you begin the journey of designing your research project!