

questions (e.g., What constitutes an explanation or theory of social reality? What does good evidence or factual information look like?)

Phillips, D. C., & Burbules, N. C. (2000). *Postpositivism and educational research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

D. C. Phillips and Nicholas Burbules summarize the major ideas of postpositivist thinking. Through two chapters, "What Is Postpositivism?" and "Philosophical Commitments of Postpositivist Researchers," the authors advance major ideas about postpositivism, especially those that differentiate it from positivism. These include knowing that human knowledge is conjectural rather than unchallengeable, and that our warrants for knowledge can be withdrawn in light of further investigations.



Review of the Literature

In addition to selecting a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approach, the proposal designer also needs to begin reviewing the scholarly literature. Literature reviews help researchers limit the scope of their inquiry, and they convey the importance of studying a topic to readers.

This chapter continues the discussion about preliminary choices to be made before launching into a proposal. It begins with a discussion about selecting a topic and writing this topic down so that the researcher can continually reflect on it. At this point, researchers also need to consider whether the topic *can* and *should* be researched. Then, the discussion moves into the actual process of reviewing the literature. It begins by addressing the general purpose for using literature in a study, then turns to principles helpful in providing a literature review in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies.

IDENTIFYING A TOPIC

Before considering what literature to use in a project, first identify a topic to study and reflect on whether it is practical and useful to undertake the study. Describe the topic in a few words or in a short phrase. The topic becomes the central idea to learn about or to explore in a study.

There are several ways in which researchers often gain some insight into their topic when they are beginning their research. My assumption will be that the topic is chosen by the researcher and not by an adviser or committee member. Several strategies can help start the process of identifying a topic.

One way is to draft a brief title for the study. I am surprised at how often researchers fail to draft a title early in their projects. In my opinion, the “working title” becomes a major road sign in research—a tangible idea to keep refocusing on and changing as the project goes on

(see Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). I find that in my research, this topic grounds me and provides a sign of what I am studying, as well as a sign often used in conveying to others the central notion of my study. When students first provide their prospectus of a research study to me, I ask them to supply a working title if they do not already have one on the paper.

How would this working title be written? Try completing this sentence: "My study is about. . . ." A response might be "My study is about at-risk children in the junior high" or "My study is about helping college faculty become better researchers." At this stage in the design, frame the answer to the question so that another scholar might easily grasp the meaning of the project. A common shortcoming of beginning researchers is that they frame their study in complex and erudite language. This perspective may result from reading published articles that have undergone numerous revisions before being set in print. Good, sound research projects begin with straightforward, uncomplicated thoughts, easily read and understood.

These easily understood titles should also reflect principles of good titles. Wilkinson (1991) provides useful advice for creating a title: Be brief and avoid wasting words. Eliminate unnecessary words such as "An Approach to" or "A Study of." Use a single title or a double title. An example of a double title is "An Ethnography: Understanding a Child's Perception of War." In addition to Wilkinson's thoughts, consider a title no longer than 12 words, eliminate most articles and prepositions, and make sure that it includes the focus or topic of the study.

Another strategy for topic development is to pose the topic as a brief question. What question needs to be answered in the proposed study? A researcher might ask "What treatment is best for depression?," "What does it mean to be Arabic in American society today?," or "What brings people to tourist sites in the Midwest?" When drafting questions such as these, focus on the key topic in the question as the major signpost for the study. Consider how this question might be expanded later (see Chapters 5 and 6, on the purpose statement and on research questions and hypotheses, respectively) to be more descriptive of your study.

A RESEARCHABLE TOPIC

To actively elevate this topic to a research study calls also for reflecting on whether the topic can and should be researched. A topic *can* be researched if researchers have participants willing to serve in the study. It also can be researched if investigators have resources at key points in the study, such as resources to collect data over a sustained period of