

Chapter 3

Getting to the Heart of Your Research Problem

ABSTRACT

Chapter 3 explores the foundational role of the research problem in guiding scholarly inquiry and shaping the structure of academic proposals and reports. It provides an in-depth examination of how to identify, articulate, and frame research problems within complex and evolving social, organizational, and theoretical contexts. The chapter begins by defining what constitutes a research problem and highlights its importance as the catalyst for meaningful investigation. Through theoretical insights and practical guidance, readers learn how to develop problem statements, formulate research questions, and distinguish among descriptive, causal, and relational research problems. The chapter also emphasizes the role of literature review, contextual understanding, and critical thinking in problem formulation. Designed for students and early-career researchers, this chapter offers both conceptual clarity and applied strategies for transforming broad interests into focused, researchable questions, ultimately laying the groundwork for impactful and methodologically sound research.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the Concept of a 'Research Problem'.
- Identify and Articulate the Research Problem.
- Recognize the Importance of Formulating a Research Problem.
- Initiate Your Research Journey.
- Writing the Problem Statement.
- Developing the Research Question.

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the landscape of research, the journey from curiosity to knowledge begins with a clearly defined problem. Chapter 3 delves into the essential first stage of this journey: identifying and articulating a research problem. In an increasingly complex and uncertain world—often described

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using the VUCA framework (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity)—the ability to systematically investigate pressing issues is more critical than ever. Whether the focus is social inequality, climate resilience, organizational innovation, or technological change, effective research begins by framing a question worth answering.

This chapter provides a comprehensive roadmap for understanding what constitutes a research problem and why it serves as the intellectual anchor for all research activities. Drawing from both classical and contemporary scholars such as Dewey (1938), Creswell and Creswell (2023), and Saunders et al. (2019), the chapter navigates through philosophical, methodological, and practical dimensions of problem formulation. It also guides readers through the art of writing a problem statement, developing research questions, and selecting the appropriate research problem type—whether descriptive, causal, or relational.

The goal of this chapter is to empower researchers to move beyond vague topics or superficial interests and instead engage in structured problem formulation that drives meaningful inquiry and innovation. Through this lens, the research problem is not merely an academic requirement but a tool for change, understanding, and impact.

UNDERSTANDING “PROBLEM” IN DEPTH

The Essence of a Problem

A research problem is not simply a question—it is a systematically framed issue that identifies a gap between current knowledge and a desired state of understanding. Seminal thinker John Dewey (1938) described a research problem as an indeterminate situation that prompts inquiry, which through investigation becomes structured and defined. This conceptualization remains foundational, as it underscores that problems initiate the very need for research—they are the catalyst for methodological and theoretical engagement.

More recently, Creswell and Creswell (2023) stress that a research problem must be researchable, significant, and feasible. This means it must go beyond personal interest to address a substantive issue within a field, be grounded in literature, and be capable of being investigated through empirical or theoretical means. Similarly, Saunders et al. (2019) emphasize that identifying a problem involves synthesizing prior studies, understanding contextual realities, and aligning the issue with academic debates or practical concerns.

Decoding “Problem”

The word “problem” itself, comprised of seven letters, encapsulates the essence and process of confronting challenges:

- **P (Pressure):** The continuous forces that affirm the existence of a problem.
- **R (Realization):** Acknowledgment and understanding of these forces.
- **(Obstacles):** The hurdles that arise.
- **B (Barriers):** The barriers further solidifying the problem.
- **L (Linkages):** The connections among these causes.

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