

## Assignment 2: Writing A Research Prospectus

This class has presented statistical evidence that documents group differences in college attendance rates. Explanations for these differences in educational achievement, however, are still debated. This research project invites you to enter this debate. Imagine that you will spend the next year inside one of Oakland's public high schools in search of answers to the following question: **why are some groups of people more likely to succeed or fail in high school than others?**

You will select a focus for your approach to this question and present your analysis of the problem in the form of a **research prospectus**. Sociologists and other scholars write a prospectus when they are preparing to undertake a new research project. The prospectus identifies a research question, summarizes the relevant scholarly literature on the major issues in the field, and offers an initial hypothesis that will be explored in the subsequent research.

A research prospectus is broken into several steps (explained below). Some of the basic research for this paper will be conducted as part of a small team (hopefully, you will already have formed your research team of three to four people). You and your research team will be given handouts containing basic data about your high school and its surrounding community. You and your team will review the data I have provided and determine a primary focus for your research (class inequality, racial inequality, gender inequality, sexual inequality).

Using the course reading assignments as your foundation, you will supplement these readings with information from at least **two relevant articles that you find through the library's electronic data bases** of scholarly articles. I encourage you to use your team as a brainstorming group (i.e., you should discuss potential interpretations of the data, identify additional information that you would like to discover and develop arguments that would help you explain the data). You will also use your team as peer editors of your work in progress. Your research papers, however, must be written on your own and reflect your unique voice. All quotes must be properly cited and you should attach a Works Cited page at the end of your research prospectus. See the ASA Style Guide handout on the course website for information on how to cite your sources.

The final paper should be between 2700 and 3000 words or about 9 to 10 typed and double-spaced pages. Your word count should be posted in the top left corner of the first page of your essay. **The preliminary drafts of your paper are due in class on November 17<sup>th</sup>**. The graduate student readers assigned to this class will read and comment on your drafts. **You will then revise your work and turn in your final project in class on December 8<sup>th</sup>**. Please staple your original draft with comments from the reader to your final draft.

### Group Formation and Data

Last names A-E will focus on McClymonds High School.

Last names F-L will focus on Oakland High School.

Last names M-R will focus on Oakland Technical High School.

Last names S-Z will focus on Skyline High School.

Data sheets are posted on Blackboard for students to download. Look in the Assignments folder under in the Course Material Sections, the click on "Research Prospectus" file to find your school's data.

You may form small groups without regard to the high school that you have been specifically assigned to consider—in fact it is a good idea to be able to contrast data from the different high schools—**but you should share a common interest in one form of inequality in order to generate a common general research question** and help each other find relevant academic literature.

### **Project Goals:**

- 1) to help you understand how larger social forces may constrain or expand the life chances of individuals (think about C. Wright Mills' distinction between "private troubles" and "public issues");
- 2) to help you understand the complex role of schools in perpetuating or countering social inequality;
- 3) to learn library search skills by exploring electronic data bases
- 4) to learn how to assess the quality and relevance of material found on electronic data bases
- 5) to learn how to write a literature review as a component of research papers
- 6) to practice appropriate quotation and citation of sources

### **Steps in Writing a Research Prospectus**

#### **Step 1: Choosing a research topic from the course literature**

One way of breaking down a big question (why are some groups of people more likely to have more academic success than others) is to study the problem through a particular lens. In this case, your group will choose class, race, gender or sexuality as the primary perspective from which to view your high school. When you and your research team have selected an area of interest, review the relevant course readings to enhance your understanding of the basic arguments made by each author (this may entail reading ahead). What wider issues are under debate? Are there questions that have not been adequately answered by the literature?

For example, if you have decided to focus on class, you could think about the relationship between school funding and the quality of education, the role of cultural capital in academic success, ways in which education is used to reproduce social class or ways in which education might be used to challenge the rigidity of the social class.

If you have decided to focus on race, you could think about differences in patterns of discipline, gaps between students' cultural capital and the cultural capital assumed by teachers, cultural differences in teachers' and parents' expectations of education, or the focus of the curriculum (e.g., Euro-centric or multicultural?).

If you have decided to focus on gender, you might ask why more women are entering college than men (or why this trend is especially evident among African Americans). You may want to ask if there are still notable differences in the attention given to boys vs. girls. Have changes in gender ideologies changed the nature of education for girls and/or for boys?

If you decide to focus on sexuality, you will discover that the statistical data is of little direct use to your topic. Hate speech can potentially be a grounds for school expulsion, but district records simply record the number of times a student is cited for an offense, not the exact nature of the offense. How does one begin to address the silence around issues of sexual identity?

### **Step 2: Initial discussion of data—identifying relevant information and issues for further research**

Look over the handouts with data on your high school. What issues pertinent to educational achievement do the data raise? Which items are particularly relevant to your topic? After looking at this information, are there questions that have not been adequately answered by the given data?

### **Step 3: Writing an initial research question**

After you have reviewed literature from the class readings and the data sets, what intuitions do you have that might explain differences in educational outcome according to your particular focus? Write your research question as a “how” or “why” question. For example, the research question in Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods* asked how the class-based cultural capital children learned at home affected their school performance. Ann Ferguson’s research question in *Bad Boys* asked why young African American men receive a disproportionate share of school discipline. The Sadker’s work on teachers’ expectations asked why boys were more likely to gain self-confidence in the classroom than girls.

### **Step 4: The Literature Search**

Using the library’s electronic data bases. After listening in class to the types of data bases available in the library and key words that might help you find articles appropriate for your research topic, each member of your group will search for five or six articles that might be useful in framing your research project. Bring the article titles and abstracts to your group and select articles that seem most relevant to your research question. Do you have articles from solid academic sources? Can you explain what makes an article relevant or irrelevant to the project? Each person should briefly summarize two articles as per the questions on the Group Progress Check Sheet II. Your article summaries (two per person) should be attached to Group Progress Check Sheet II and submitted to me in class on Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup>.

### **Step 5: Draft of Research Prospectus**

The research prospectus should have three parts, an introduction, a literature review, and research hypothesis and plan. For this class, since you will not actually be doing the research you propose, most of your focus should be on the literature review.

Your introduction should identify your topic and present your research question in its most general form. By the end of your introduction, the reader should have some sense of the importance of your topic and research question. You might want to use data from the school data sets to illustrate the urgency or significance of your research question.

The literature review will be the longest part of your prospectus. Drawing from the assigned class readings and articles from the library, summarize two (or three but not more than three) major explanations for unequal educational outcomes based on your chosen inequality (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality). Make sure you cite the authors' names so that the reader associates key ideas with particular scholars. Is one perspective from the literature more persuasive than another? If so, why? Are there gaps or unanswered questions in the existing literature that you would like to answer? By the end of the literature review, the reader should be familiar with the issues and research most pertinent to your topic.

The research plan explains how you would find an answer to your research question. Think about the design of a research project that you particularly liked from the literature. What kinds of questions could extend or modify this perspective? Do your preliminary data or intuitions support or differ from the literature? What narrowly focused questions would you ask to explain the larger issue of unequal academic achievement? What data do you have to support the importance of your research question? What data would you need to answer your research question? (For example, you could argue that we know X about our research topic, but we don't know why X occurs or we don't have other data that might give us a better understanding of school dynamics.)

Make sure your quotes and references are properly cited according to the ASA Style Guide.

### **Step 6: Revised Research Prospectus**

Look over the comments made by your reader. Pay attention to the mechanical errors in grammar, spelling and citation that made your draft less polished. You have had two weeks to reflect on this paper. When you rewrite, can you express your ideas more precisely? Can you be less descriptive and more analytical about the potential causes behind your observations? Are there gaps in your data that you might be able to fill given the resources you have at hand? Do you need to give credit to particular authors for unique ideas that you used in your draft without citations?

### **Project Calendar**

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Activity</u>
Oct. 20	Introduce Research Project	Bring printouts of your assigned high schools data sheets (download from Blackboard) to class. If you haven't assembled your research support group, use the discussion board on Blackboard to find other students who need group members.
Oct. 25	The "good" research question	Submit list of group members. Read and reread course material most related to your area of interest. Download and read the ASA Style Guide from the course website so that your selected quotes are properly cited. Meet with your group to work on the first part of your

group progress sheet, (i.e., write your research question and identify which pieces of data would be most relevant to your topic).

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Oct. 27	No assignments due Draft possible research questions and bring to class.
Nov. 1 Group Progress Sheet I due	Read promising articles from your electronic journal search. Begin writing article summaries as per questions on Group Progress Sheet II.
Nov. 3	Class demonstration on accessing Read promising articles from your electronic library resources electronically journal search. Begin writing article summaries as per questions on Group Progress Sheet II.
Nov. 8 Group Progress Sheet II due	Start writing the body of your paper.
Nov. 10 Quiz # 3	Bring in questions from your own work.
Nov. 15	Peer editing of first two pages of Read peer editing guide before class. Edit research prospectus your own draft using Peer editing criteria.
Nov. 17	Turn in completed draft of research prospectus!!
Nov. 29	Drafts returned in class. Read comments, revise accordingly. Ask questions if you don't understand comments.
Dec. 1/6	No assignments due Ask friends to read your paper. Revise & polish!!!
Dec. 8	Final copy of research prospectus due in class!! Congratulations!

Group Progress Check Sheet I  
Due in class Nov. 1, 2005

High School \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members:

\_\_\_\_\_

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Area of interest (race, class, gender, sexuality) \_\_\_\_\_

Research Question (How or why question)

Data from handouts that is especially relevant in establishing the scope of your problem (list by chart title)

Group Progress Check Sheet II  
Due in class November 8, 2005

High School(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Group  
Members:

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Area of interest (race, class, gender, sexuality) \_\_\_\_\_

Research Question (revised if necessary from first progress check)

Data from handouts that is especially relevant in establishing the scope of your problem (revised if necessary from first progress check)

Attaching additional sheets as necessary, submit a brief summary of relevant journal articles. Each group member should submit two entries (e.g., if there are three people in your group, turn in six brief journal reviews). Information should include the following:

1. Author (or authors)  
(see ASA Citation Guide on Blackboard for correct formatting)  
Date of publication  
Article title  
Journal name and volume  
Page numbers

