

## **The Research Paper: A Three Step Process**

Research papers are not written overnight. In fact, for some students it will be the first time that they conduct substantive research and report on it in a research paper. The objective of the MPA-research paper is to help the student develop the skills to independently pursue research. In order to facilitate the efficiency and quality of the research paper process, it is broken down into three distinct steps:

- a) initial identification of research interest in preparation for the prospectus,
- b) the prospectus,
- c) the research paper.

### *Step A: Initial Identification of Research Interest*

We encourage each student to fill out the form on the next page and send it to the program coordinator, Ms. Debbie Deering. She then will contact a faculty member whose expertise and interests best match the interests you have identified. This faculty member will use the information you provided on the form to guide you in the drafting of the prospectus. Read carefully section 5 of the »Research Foundation« page on the Public Administration website, for it provides you with some ideas of how to identify a topic for research ([www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm](http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm)). It is important that you fill out this form early, and prior to the semester in which you enroll for PSc 5950 (research paper; you cannot enroll unless you have turned in the forms on page two to four below) because it will link you with a faculty member and, thus, makes work on the prospectus far more efficient.

### *Step B: The Prospectus*

Information about this stage of the research paper process is provided on pages five to eight of this document.

### *Step C: The Research Paper*

Information about this stage of the research paper process is provided in section D. of the Student Self Assessment Guide (SSAG) and in the »Research Foundation« page on the Public Administration website ([www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm](http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm) and [www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/ssagd.pdf](http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/ssagd.pdf)).

**Identification of Interest Form**  
**Psc 5950 Research Paper**

**Student name:** .....

**Contact Information:**

**Phone:**

**Email:**.....

**Proposed semester of enrollment for comprehensive exam:** .....

**Desired Faculty Supervisor:** .....

1. The topic that I would like to pursue for the research paper concerns:

2. The relevance of this topic for the study and practice of public administration is:

3. Theoretical public administration or policy literature relevant to my topic includes (provide a brief listing of relevant books and journal articles):

4. Substantive literature relevant to my research topic include (brief listing of relevant theories; draw from the literature studied for your course work):

5. The skills that are needed to pursue this research include (attempt to identify methods of research, such as survey, interviews, statistical analysis, etc.). Also provide detail on what you propose to use, who you seek to contact::

## Prospectus for the MPA-Research Paper

### I *General Considerations*

The prospectus is a vital stage in the process for successful completion of the research paper. It serves to outline a plan of the proposed research and thus describes in detail the rationale, the relevant literature and theories, the method(s) of research, the proposed data to be collected for the research paper, and the structure of the research paper. To avoid misunderstanding, the prospectus is not a basic introduction to the research paper. The detail provided should (ideally) be sufficient to enable another person to complete the project based on what they read in the prospectus. The information presented in the prospectus on rationale, relevant literature and theories, method(s) of research, and data must be included in the final paper, certainly in the first chapter and wherever else relevant. It is no exaggeration to state that creating a solid prospectus is half the work of creating a good research paper! The importance of the prospectus in the context of the MPA-degree is further underlined by the fact that its successful completion serves as the comprehensive examination required by the Graduate College. Approval of the prospectus signifies the potential for satisfactory completion of the research paper. The approved prospectus serves as an agreement between author and faculty advisor.

### II *Content of the Prospectus*

A solid prospectus is one that shows that the proposed research is manageable and of appropriate scope (i.e., not too wide ranging, not too limited). The prospectus must contain the following sections:

#### 1. **Problem Identification and Research Question**

A clear and unambiguous statement of the **problem** to be researched. This is to be achieved in three steps (not necessarily in this order, but the prospectus should contain these three elements).

The **first step** is to introduce the general subject area to the reader (for instance: low income housing policies in the United States; deregulation; organizational reform).

The **second step** is to narrow the subject down to the specific object of the research paper (for instance: low income housing policy in Norman, OK; deregulation of electricity supply; the organizational reform of a particular public organization).

Finally, **the third step**, is the formulation of the research question(s) which must identify a particular problem of interest and/or concern (for instance: the effectiveness of low income

housing policy in Norman, OK; success and failure of deregulation of electricity supply; evaluation of the new organizational structure).

## 2. Review of Theoretical and Substantive Literature

Having defined the topic of interest and research question the student needs to relate this to relevant literature. The student needs to identify two bodies of literature: theoretical literature and substantive literature.

a) **Theoretical literature:** This part of the literature review serves to anchor the topic of research in the public administration literature. It is in the public administration literature that the student will find a theory or theories that are relevant to the topic of research (for instance: theories about deregulation; about organizational reform). The student must use that literature to carve out a **theoretical framework** that directs inquiry, may help in the fine-tuning of the research question(s), and may generate propositions and hypotheses. A theoretical framework is not something that is found readily available in the literature. The student must search the literature for theories that are relevant to the subject/problem identified in Section 1 above. A theoretical framework consists of concepts (and their definitions) and existing theory/theories that are used for this particular piece of research (see also section 4.1.b in the theoretical foundations= on the website) ([www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm](http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm)). The prospectus must demonstrate a grasp of theories and concepts in public administration that are relevant to the research paper topic and will relate it to the broader fields of public administration, public policy, and American government as appropriate.

b) **Substantive literature:** This part of the **literature review** provides a discussion of research findings in books and articles regarding similar or related problems and is not limited to public administration literature. The focus is on the substance of the problem being addressed (e.g., the history and current or emerging status of low income housing in Norman, OK). Indeed, research problems relevant to government can and have been studied in the entire spectrum of the social and humanist sciences. Obviously, the literature review cannot be comprehensive, but must be thorough in that the student displays a grasp of the main publications on his/her subject.

The literature review is one of the major requirements of the prospectus. The student should conduct library- as well as on-line searches. From the literature review emerges the intellectual, policy, and social relevance of the proposed research (again: see the theoretical foundation= page on the website). ([www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm](http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/pa/theoretical.htm))

## 3. Research Methods

A thorough discussion of the **research methods** to be used as well as a justification of why these

are the best for the analysis of the problem should be included. The student must discuss what data and information he or she intends to collect, why, how it will be collected, how the data/information will be analyzed, and how the data/information will help in answering the research question. The research methods section must be clearly linked to the research question(s) the student intends to answer. Draft of data collection instruments, such as survey questionnaires, should be included in an appendix to the prospectus. Again, this should be done as if another student should be able to carry out the research after reading the prospectus.

#### 4. Tentative Outline of Research Paper and Table of Contents in the Prospectus

The prospectus is concluded with a tentative **table of contents** of the research paper; the contents must at least include chapters and tentative chapter titles, but it could also include the various sections (and titles) of each chapter. The more detailed the chapter outline is, the easier it will be to write the research paper.

### III *Guidelines for Length, Format, and Style*

1. The student can choose from four different **types of papers**: a case study, a policy analysis, a program evaluation, and an administrative analysis. Apart from the guidelines discussed under II, the student should carefully look at the specific requirements listed under each of these types in the SSAG:

2. The **length of the prospectus** will vary depending on the complexity of the topic. It is important to remember that a clear description of research topic, a thorough literature review, and a detailed discussion of research design must be included. To suggest a minimum number of pages would be deceiving. Write whatever is necessary for a solid prospectus in contact with the faculty supervisor.

3. The prospectus is a double-spaced, type-written document.

4. All **references** in the prospectus must be listed alphabetically in a bibliography at the end of the text. The department-approved reference style is Kate L. Turabian (ed.) (1996, sixth edition), *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Thesis, and Dissertations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. It includes two reference systems: the parenthetical (or author-date) references and the footnotes style. Your faculty research paper advisor may specify a preference between these two styles for your prospectus and final research paper.

5. The prospectus (and therefore, of course, the research paper) need to be written in **proper English**. Spelling errors, awkward and run-on sentences, errors in verb-subject agreement, and one-sentence paragraphs are not acceptable. They also should not contain typographical errors, handwritten corrections, or inconsistent margins or spacing.

#### IV *Characteristics of the Good Prospectus and Research Paper*

1. **The topic must be significant:** It must concern an issue of importance to public administration and/or public policy;

2. **The study must be complete:** It should include an adequate characterization of the relationship between the topic and its context, a convincing and well-documented array of evidence clearly related to the research question(s), and a thorough analysis of the evidence.

3. **The study must consider alternative perspectives:** Rival propositions, hypotheses, interpretations, theories, and explanations must be identified and thus serve to recognize the limitations of the study.

4. **The study should present sufficient evidence:** The student must balance between the need to present a compelling argument and the need to present sufficient evidence to justify his/her conclusions so as to allow the reader to come to an independent judgment.

5. **The study should be readable and engaging:** A clear writing style, an effective use of figures and tables, and a clear organization are critical to the overall quality of the paper.

#### **Important Final Remark**

*It is important to note that the research paper should be thought of as a continuation of the prospectus, where the final pieces of the research puzzle are laid in place and the answer to the original thesis appears complete. Equally important should be the idea that the prospectus offers the student an opportunity to pause and receive valuable feedback from a faculty advisor before continuing on towards research completion.*