

How to write your Research Problem Statement at WBS

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Your Research Problem statement is the foundation and focus of your research report. It is a clear, stand-alone statement that makes explicit what it is you are aiming to discover or establish. Get this right and you are setting yourself up for success.

If your Research Problem is poorly worded, unfocused or ambiguous, the rest of your research is likely to go off-track very early; you will do a great deal of unnecessary reading and writing, losing sight of the big picture (and probably your mind!).

Writing your Research Problem Statement

1. First select your research topic, which is the issue or subject area that you intend to investigate – see the document “Finding a Research Topic”, available at www.wbs.ac.za .
2. Describe the business or management problem based on your topic that you intend to research. Do this right at the beginning of your research proposal or report as laid out in the templates (remember to reference any facts that you are basing your research on). This will set the scene for your Research Problem statement, so that you can write a clear, stand alone Research Problem.
3. A Research Problem is not the same as a business problem, ie it is not a “problem” in the normal sense of the word; it is research jargon that happens to be a bit confusing. You can think of your Research Problem as the unknown part of your business problem.
4. We prefer Research Problem statements to have an outcomes based verb at or near the beginning. Some good outcome based verbs are:

Identify	define	relate	describe	review	justify	indicate
formulate	explain	compare	contrast	suggest	interpret	analyse
assess	construct	apply	demonstrate	illustrate	categorise	deduce
create	resolve	debate	propose	differentiate	construct	argue
derive	design	evaluate	establish	conceptualise	suggest	integrate
compile	develop	challenge	consolidate	clarify	criticise	formulate
ascertain	appraise	calculate	recommend			

5. Verbs such as “understand”, “explore”, “investigate”, “examine” and “discuss” are poor verbs as they describe processes, not outcomes, eg you can discuss something endlessly without ever having to make recommendations, draw conclusions or offer a result. You might be

exploring, examining or discussing as part of your process, but they cannot be the end result of your research, which should be more tangible.

6. If your Research Problem contains two or more concepts / ideas, then break it down into sub-problems, so that each sub-problem consists of one idea only. Each sub-problem should contain key words that you can use in your literature search (using the electronic library databases and Google Scholar) on that sub-problem.
7. Your Research Problem statement should be your sub-problems added together – no more and no less. Do not introduce any new ideas when you write your sub-problems. For example:

The Main problem is to

Analyse and evaluate the role of entrepreneurship in the establishment of small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) and ascertain the value of the economic contributions of these firms in emerging markets.

Sub-problem 1

Analyse and evaluate the role of entrepreneurship in establishing SMMEs in emerging markets. (Here your key search terms for your literature review could be “entrepreneurship”, “SMME” and “emerging markets”)

Sub-problem 2

Evaluate the economic contribution of SMMEs to growth and development in emerging markets. (Here your search terms could be “economic contribution”, “economic growth”, “emerging market development”)

Your literature review would be likely to have headings similar or related to the search terms, as well as other topic areas that you find and are relevant but that you may not have anticipated – in fact you will find a lot of information and related topics that you won’t (and cannot be expected to) have anticipated. Use the search terms both alone and combined with each other.

You won’t find many articles on **exactly** your own research problem (that’s why you are researching it), so your literature review will be on topics broader than, but encompassing your specific problem. More detail can be found in the document “How to do a Literature Review” on www.wbs.ac.za.

Another example, starting with the research context and topic:

Research topic and context (stated exactly as submitted by a student):

The large corporate companies need to be encouraged to assist small businesses in empowering them with the necessary skills and resources to grow. Corporate Social Responsibility is one avenue that small business can benefit from big business in this regard. My aim in this research is to establish if large companies are using corporate social responsibility to empower small business and, if not, how this can be done.

Therefore the topic of this research is to identify the role of corporate social responsibility in empowering small business.

The Problem Statement was constructed by tightening up the context to eliminate repetition, correcting the grammar, removing the personal pronoun “my” and rephrasing it in the passive voice. In addition, the statement “. . . establish IF large companies . . .” was rephrased to “whether and how” because “if” has a yes / no answer (not OK) and “whether and how” requires a detailed, contextualised and rich response (OK).

Problem statement:

The intention of this research is to establish the purposes for which large corporate are using their CSI / CSR programmes, with particular reference to whether and how they are using such programmes to empower small businesses, and, further, to gather ideas to expand such investments.

Sub-problem 1:

Establish the purposes for which large corporates are using their CSI / CSR programmes

Sub-problem 2

Identify ways in which large corporates are using CSI / CSR programmes to empower small businesses, and further, to gather ideas for expanding such investments

8. Your sub-problems should NOT be steps in the process of finding the solution to your Research Problem. This is a common and understandable error. The example below shows the sub-problems to be steps in the process that the student intends to follow in the research (these can be described in the methodology chapter). They are not invalid - they are just not sub-problems.

Main Problem

Compare the characteristics of the South African and Ghanaian home loan markets in relation to consumer home loan choice criteria, home finance availability on both markets, home loan administration, success and hindering factors, risks in pricing of home finance, the status and causes of home loan default in both markets and to predict the way forward for both markets.

Sub-problems

1. Analyse consumer choice criteria in both home loans markets
2. Assess the availability and accessibility of home loans.
3. Establish the difficulties encountered in home loan administration
4. Identify the risks in home loan pricing and the effect of inflation on pricing
5. Determine the status and causes of home loan default
6. Forecast the future of the South African and Ghanaian home loan markets

In the example, the “sub-problems” listed are certainly useful topics to include in the literature review, although the list may not be exhaustive - keep an open mind to finding other factors in the literature that you may not have thought about. The literature review is a process of discovery, and you don’t know what’s been published until you get there.

A possible alternative to the above could be:

Main Problem:

Compare the actual and perceived characteristics of the South African and Ghanaian home loan markets and determine the nature of any relationship between these characteristics and payment defaults. Identify any other causes of home loan defaults in these markets and possible measures to reduce them.

Sub-problem 1

Identify the actual and perceived characteristics of the South African and Ghanaian home loan markets.

Sub-problem 2

Determine the causes of home loan defaults, whether they are related or not to the home loan market characteristics and seek measures to reduce the occurrence of such defaults.

9. Your problem and sub-problems should **not** have a yes / no answer or solution.
10. Your problem and sub-problems should not suggest the solution / finding that you expect, otherwise you are introducing bias.
11. Not all problems have sub-problems; if your problem statement contains only one concept or idea, and cannot be broken down into smaller concepts, you will have only a problem statement with no sub-problems.
12. A sub-problem should not depend on a particular answer to a previous sub-problem – you will be in trouble if it does not work out the way you anticipated. To avoid this, make sure that each sub-problem can stand alone, ie it could be a small research project by itself, such as in the example in point 8 of this document.
13. You should only have a small number of sub-problems – no more than 2 to 3 preferably. If you have too many, your project may be too big. In this case, exclude some of the investigation and state what you will NOT be including in your research under the heading “Delimitations”.
14. Your sub-problems with their key words are your guide as to what to look up in the literature to see what has already been published on your topic. Your literature review is based on one sub-problem at a time. Thus your sub-problems will keep you on track – but they may be tweaked from time to time as you read more and more – it is an iterative process.

Prepare to do a LOT of reading around your topic.

To be a “Master” of your topic, you need to know most of what has been written about it, what the main ideas are, who the most important authors are, and be able to differentiate credible sources from those that are not.