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Writing a Research Problem Statement: A Guide with Annotated Examples

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Abstract

A research proposal is expected to state the problem that the study addresses, yet first drafts often describe a topic rather than a problem, or point to a gap in the literature without explaining why it matters. This article defines a research problem as something that is going wrong, in practice or in understanding, for which no adequate solution is yet available, and a problem statement as the short passage that sets the problem out and argues that it is worth studying. It distinguishes the two terms from each other and from the research gap and the research question. It then describes five elements that a complete problem statement covers (the situation, the problem, evidence that the problem is real, its consequences and the study's response) and shows them at work in four problem statements quoted from completed theses and a doctoral project in nursing, education and computer engineering. It closes with the main sources of research problems and a procedure for finding and selecting one. The article is intended for students and early-career researchers preparing a research proposal, and for the educators who teach research design.

Keywords: research problem example; problem statement in research; research problem statement; research problem vs problem statement; how to write a problem statement; problem statement examples for research proposal; research proposal; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

Every study begins from a problem, and the problem statement is usually one of the first passages that a supervisor, committee or examiner reads. Ellis and Levy (2008), writing for novice researchers, describe the problem statement as "the centerpiece for any viable research" (p. 17) and note Kerlinger and Lee's view that identifying the research problem is "the most difficult and important part of the whole [research] process" (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000, p. 15, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 17). Ali and Pandya (2021, p. 470) make a similar point about doctoral work. They describe the problem statement as the section that the rest of a dissertation links back to (Burkard, 2014, as cited in Ali & Pandya, 2021, p. 470), and note that it is usually written at the start of the project, before the student can fully see what lies ahead.

A weak problem statement tends to fail in one of two ways. It describes a topic rather than a problem, or it points to a gap in the research without saying why the gap matters. Either way, the aims, research questions and methods that follow have no clear problem to answer to, and the proposal is harder to defend.

This article is written for students and researchers preparing a proposal, and for those who teach research design. Section 2 defines a research problem. Section 3 defines the problem statement, gives a short example from a nursing dissertation, and distinguishes it from the research problem, the research gap and the research question. Section 4 sets out five elements of a problem statement, using a labeled example from a nursing doctorate, and lists common weaknesses. Section 5 discusses two further problem statements from completed theses. Sections 6 and 7 describe where research problems come from and how to find and select one.

2. The Research Problem

A **research problem** is the issue that a study sets out to address: something that is going wrong in the world, or something that is not yet known and needs to be known. Ellis and Levy (2008) state the first half of this definition in their template for a problem statement:

> Remember, a problem is, essentially, something that is 'going wrong'.
>
> Ellis and Levy (2008, p. 28)

They also give two conditions that must both be met for a research problem to exist. First, the current state differs from the ideal state. Second, no acceptable solution is available, either because none is documented in the literature or because the documented solutions lead to mixed or contradictory results (Sekaran, 2003, and Creswell, 2005, both as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22). The second condition separates a research problem from an ordinary difficulty. An organization unaware of solutions that are already well documented in the literature has a problem, but not a research problem (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 25).

The same definition separates a problem from a topic. Ellis and Levy (2008) caution that "it is important to not confuse topics – areas of interest – with problems" (p. 22): a topic such as implementing a knowledge management system may be of interest, but it identifies nothing that is go-

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ing wrong. A useful test for a proposed study is therefore whether its author can say what is going wrong, or what cannot be done because something is not yet known. If neither can be said, the idea is probably still a topic.

Research problems can be divided into two kinds. A **practical** (or applied) problem concerns something that is not working in an organization, a profession or a community, and calls for a solution. A **theoretical** problem concerns something that research has not yet explained, and calls for more knowledge. Ellis and Levy's (2008) wording covers both: the "going wrong" may range "from physical pain through inconvenience to intellectual angst associated with vacuums or inconsistencies in our understanding" (p. 22). Many studies address a problem with both a practical and a theoretical side.

The research problem is also distinct from the research gap, although the two are often confused. Box 1 gives an invented case that separates them.

Box 1. An invented case that separates a research problem from a research gap.

> At a university, first-generation students are leaving their master's programs during the dissertation stage more often than their classmates. This is the problem. No study has examined which parts of the dissertation process these students struggle with, so the university's support services can only guess where to help. This is the gap. A study that asked these students what obstructs their progress would respond to both.

In this case the problem lies in the world, and the gap is what research has not yet established about it. Many problems in student research involve both, and a problem statement can take the same two-part shape (Section 3).

Drawing on Leedy and Ormrod (2005, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 19), Ellis and Levy describe the research problem as the starting point of a study and "a unifying thread that runs throughout all the elements of the research endeavor" (p. 19). In their conceptual map, the problem sets the limits of a study's goals; the goals are turned into research questions; the research questions structure the methodology; and the answers to the questions are the means by which the study addresses the problem (Ellis & Levy, 2008, pp. 19–21). A vague problem therefore leads to unfocused aims and to research questions that pull in different directions, which is why the problem is best settled before the proposal is written.

3. The Problem Statement

A **problem statement** is a short passage that sets out the research problem and argues that it is worth studying. This means saying what the problem is, showing that it is real, explaining why it matters and indicating how the study will respond, ideally within a single paragraph.

Where a program asks for a longer statement, the statement can take a two-part shape: the problem in the world first, then the gap in the research. At the other extreme, a statement can be very short. The following extract is the whole problem statement of a doctoral dissertation in nursing.

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The study examined nurses' experiences of caring for dying patients who report end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDVs). The extract shows how little a statement can contain:

> End-of-life dreams and visions are not uncommon among patients approaching death (Dam, 2016). With the publication of Dr Moody's (1977) work on near-death experiences (NDE), which is the experience of people dying and coming back with stories of an afterlife, there had been increasing interest in ELDVs. However, very little research focuses solely on nurses' lived experience with caring for patients discussing or demonstrating an ELDV and how this affects their personal and professional lives.
>
> Herron (2025, p. 5)

The first two sentences set out the background, and the third turns on "However" to name a narrow, clearly defined gap. This is close to the minimum that a problem statement can do. What the passage leaves out is why the gap matters and how the study will respond. The dissertation gives its response separately, in a purpose statement (a section stating what the study will do) that immediately follows on the same page (Herron, 2025, p. 5). Some programs require this separation, while others expect the problem and the response in one paragraph, so the program's guidelines should be checked. Where one paragraph is expected, a sentence on the problem that the gap bears on, and who is affected by it, supplies the missing argument.

3.1 Research problem and problem statement compared

The research problem is the issue itself. The problem statement is the written argument about it: the passage that shows the issue matters and, in most formats, says how the study will address it. A researcher can hold a research problem in mind before writing a word, whereas the problem statement exists only on the page.

The phrase "statement of the problem" is often used to mean the same as problem statement. Ellis and Levy (2008, p. 27) draw a finer line. For them, the statement of the problem is one or two sentences that outline the problem the study addresses, while the problem statement combines the statement of the problem with "the argumentation for its viability" (p. 27), that is, the argument that the problem is worth studying. Where a program's guidelines use the terms differently, the guidelines take precedence. Table 1 compares the two.

Table 1. The research problem and the problem statement compared.

	Research problem	Problem statement
What it is	The issue that the study addresses	A passage that sets out the problem and argues that it is worth studying
Form	An idea that can be stated in a sentence	Usually a paragraph of prose, with citations
Where it appears	Throughout the study: it shapes the aims, questions and methods	Early in the proposal, and in the introduction of the thesis or paper
Written as a question?	Usually not; the question form belongs to the research question	No; it is a set of statements

The last row marks a frequent confusion. Ellis and Levy (2008, p. 27) distinguish the statement of the problem from the main research question: research questions are phrased as questions and narrowed enough to identify the variables or constructs under study, whereas the statement of

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the problem is not phrased as a question and sits at a higher theoretical level. The two should still align: each research question should help to address the problem that the statement sets out.

The practical consequence for drafting is to work in order. The problem should be stated clearly in a single sentence first, and the statement is then written around it. A statement built on a vague problem simply argues for vagueness at greater length.

3.2 Where the research gap fits

The research gap is a third term often confused with these two. The problem is what is going wrong, or remains unresolved; the gap is what research has not yet established about it; and the problem statement is where both are argued. Figure 1 follows one example, about rural nurses, across the three.

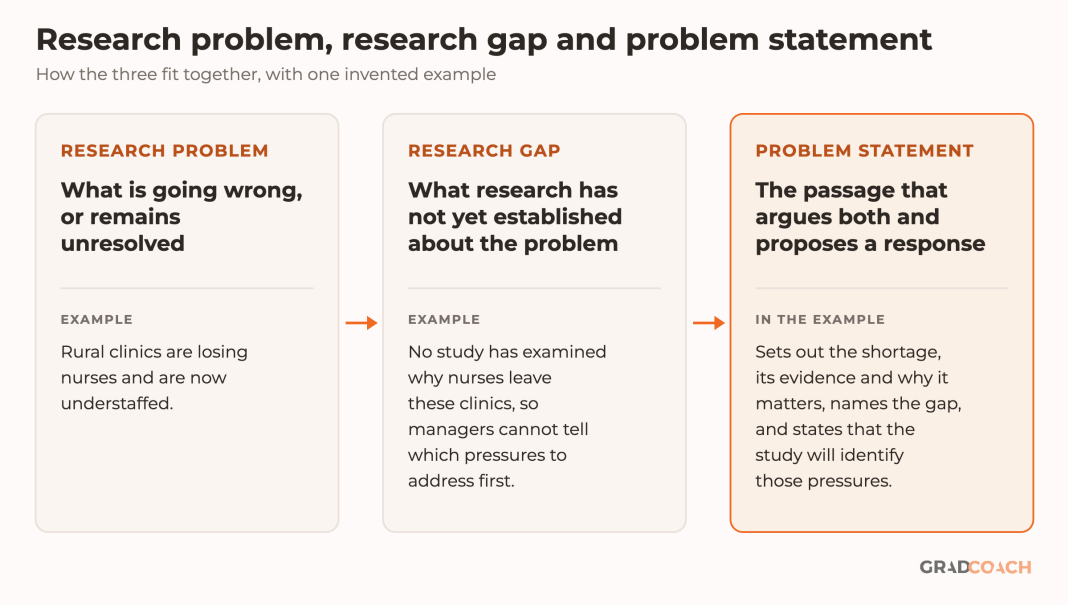


Figure 1. The research problem, the research gap and the problem statement, with one invented example.

A gap on its own is therefore not a problem. The claim that no one has studied a subject invites the question of why that matters, and the research problem is the answer. In a review of 52 articles in organization studies, Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) found gap-spotting to be the most common way of constructing research questions across paradigms, and argued that research that challenges the assumptions behind a literature is more likely to produce interesting theory. Their argument concerns theory-building, and their alternative, problematization, means questioning those assumptions. This article draws only a narrower lesson: a problem statement that rests only on a gap identifies an absence without connecting it to any consequence. Tying the gap to a problem in practice or in understanding is what gives it weight.

4. Writing a Problem Statement

Guidance on the content of a problem statement varies. Ellis and Levy (2008, p. 28) organize theirs around six questions (what, how, where, when, why and who). Together these ask for the problem, its impact and its conceptual basis, each supported by peer-reviewed references. Ali and

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Pandya (2021, p. 472) emphasize cause and effect: a statement reads as a problem when it names an effect and the cause the study will focus on. This article uses five elements that draw on both:

1. **The situation:** the setting, population or body of research in which the study sits.
2. **The problem:** what is wrong and, where it is known, why. For a practical problem, something is not working; for a theoretical problem, something is not known that needs to be known. Naming the likely cause, as Ali and Pandya (2021, p. 472) advise, shows the statement's focus.
3. **The evidence:** citations or data showing that the problem is real, not a matter of opinion.
4. **Why it matters (its consequences):** who is affected and what it costs if nothing changes.
5. **The study's response:** what the study will do about the problem, which leads directly into the aims and research questions.

The elements need not appear in this order, and a short statement may combine two in one sentence. Some statements open with why the problem matters; others begin with the situation. What matters is that a reader can find all five, whether in the statement itself or, as Section 3 showed for the response, in an adjacent section.

Figure 2 labels a real statement with the elements each sentence supplies. It comes from a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) project. The project aimed to increase the proportion of hospital patients who complete an advance directive (a written record of their wishes for care), in particular a health care proxy. A health care proxy names the person who makes medical decisions for a patient who is unable to communicate their wishes; Massachusetts, where the project took place, recognizes it as the health care power of attorney (Baldassari, 2026, pp. 4–5).

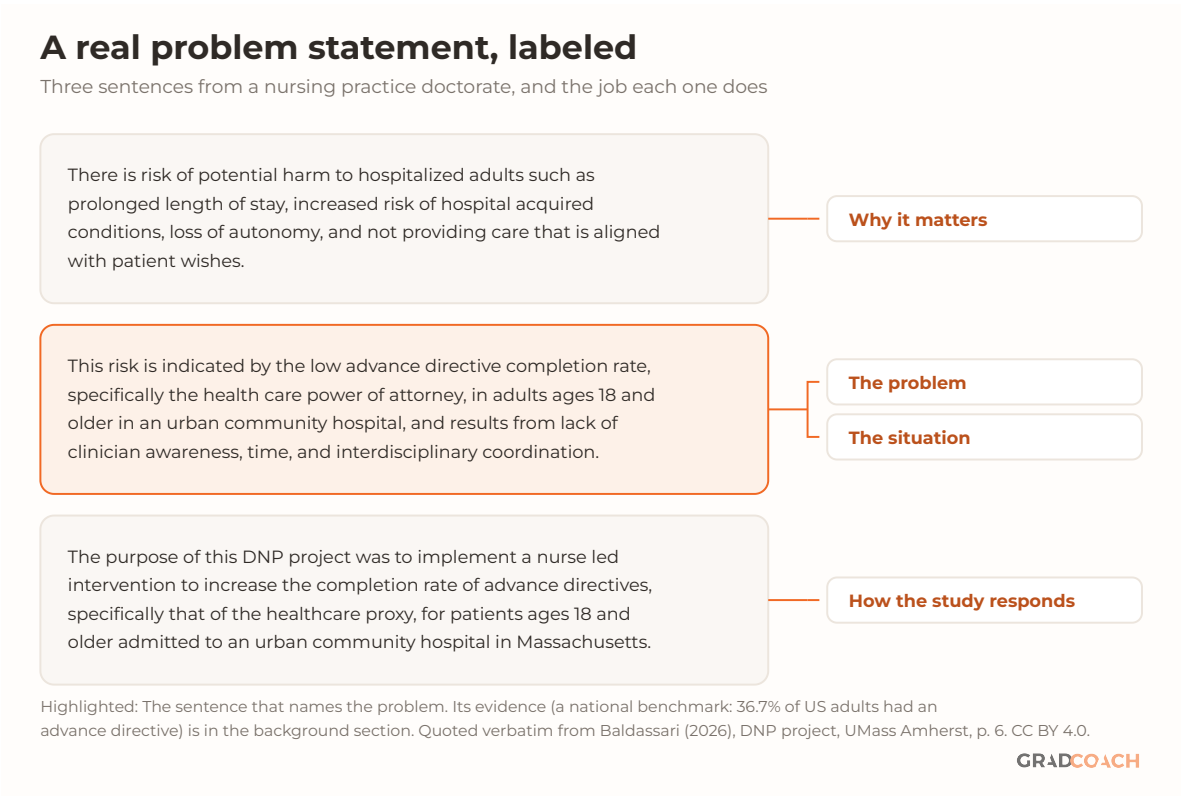


Figure 2. A problem statement labeled with its elements. Quotations from Baldassari (2026), CC BY 4.0.

The statement opens with the harm to patients before it names the problem, an order that suits a practical problem. One element, the evidence, has no sentence of its own. It sits in the background section just before the statement. That section reports a systematic review's completion rate of 36.7% for advance directives, with a lower rate for health care power of attorney documentation (Baldassari, 2026, p. 5). The words "This risk is indicated by" rely on those national figures; the statement gives no local rate for the hospital it names. The review covered 150 studies of adults in the United States published between 2011 and 2016, and its abstract gives the 36.7% figure for completion of any advance directive (Yadav et al., 2017).

The middle sentence also names the causes of the problem ("lack of clinician awareness, time, and interdisciplinary coordination"), which indicates what the intervention would have to change. This is the cause-and-effect structure that Ali and Pandya (2021, p. 472) describe. A practical way to draft a statement of this kind is to write a sentence or two for each of the five elements first, then merge and reorder them until they read as one paragraph.

4.1 Common weaknesses

Several weaknesses recur in draft problem statements, and each is easier to correct once it has been named:

- **It describes a topic, not a problem.** "Social media and teenage self-esteem" is a topic. The statement needs to say what is going wrong, and for whom (Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22).
- **It stops at the gap.** "Little research exists on X" needs a further step: the problem the gap bears on, and who is affected by it (Section 3.2).
- **It argues several problems at once.** The statement should address the problem that the research questions answer; any others belong in another section or should be dropped. A similar discipline applies to causes: Ali and Pandya (2021, p. 472) note that a research problem statement typically focuses on one cause of the effect it describes.
- **It presents a method as the problem.** Comparing two groups is a way of addressing a problem rather than a problem in itself, and a correlation between two variables does not by itself identify a problem (Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 24).
- **It answers its own question.** Stating what the study will do is appropriate; stating what it will find, or assuming the cause that the study is meant to investigate, is not.

A draft can be read first against the five elements and then against this list before it goes to a supervisor.

Three further points concern form: citations, position and length. First, a problem statement needs citations wherever it makes a claim about the world or about the literature: the evidence that the problem is real, and the claim that research has not yet resolved it, both need sources. Ali and Pandya (2021, p. 472) stress that a research problem statement leaves no room for intuition or opinion. Second, the statement usually sits in the introduction, after the background and before the purpose statement, aims or research questions; in a proposal it comes early, often directly after a short background section. Third, guidance on length varies. Blum and Preiss (2005, as cited in Ali & Pandya, 2021, p. 474) suggest 100 to 250 words. A program's own guidelines, where they set a length, take precedence.

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5. Two Further Examples

The two statements in this section, from education and computer engineering, take different shapes from the nursing examples above. Both theses are openly licensed, so the statements can be quoted at length. The two differ most in how much space they give to the situation before naming the problem: the first gives almost none, and the second gives a full paragraph.

5.1 Education: one gap at a time

The first is from a doctoral dissertation in agricultural sciences education, a quantitative study of how university students perceive culturally responsive teaching. Huang (2019, p. 42) describes this as teaching that builds on the cultures, knowledge and experience that students bring with them. The dissertation's problem statement is built from a run of sentences, each naming one shortfall:

> There is a lack of application of culturally responsive teaching in university classrooms (Bonner, 2014; Wiens, 2015). Additionally, there is a lack of understanding of students' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching practices in higher education. Moreover, no quantitative measurement was found that could measure culturally responsive teaching from students' perspectives in higher education, and more specifically, in the context of agriculture and STEM programs (Hiramiak & Huang, 2015). Moreover, we do not fully understand the motivational mechanism of culturally responsive teaching on student academic motivation; especially to what extent that culturally responsive teaching can foster students' sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy in higher education. By understanding students' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching and its association with students' academic motivation, we could effectively promote the application of culturally responsive teaching as a way to improve diversity and inclusion in Agriculture and STEM disciplines within higher education.
>
> Huang (2019, pp. 24–25)

Each of the first four sentences names something separate: first a practice that is not applied, then three gaps (students' perceptions are not understood, no student-side measure exists, and the link to motivation is unclear). Evidence appears as citations in two of those sentences, the first and the third; the other two, both gaps, are asserted without one. Why the problem matters comes in the closing sentence. The study's response is set out in the sections that follow, on the significance and the purpose of the study (Huang, 2019, pp. 25–26). For a study with several aims, naming one gap for each makes the link to the research questions easy to see.

5.2 Computer engineering: context first

The second example, from a master's thesis in electrical and computer engineering, shows a longer statement in a fast-moving field. The extract below gives the first three of the four paragraphs in its section headed "Context and Problem Statement":

> Modern software development depends heavily on externally sourced components. Applications are commonly assembled from third-party packages obtained through software ecosystems such as npm, PyPI, Maven, and Cargo [1, 2]. As a result, software supply chains have become central to how functionality is obtained, inherited, and maintained in contemporary practice. This model enables rapid development and extensive reuse, but it also exposes downstream projects to inherited security, maintenance, and governance risks [3, 4].

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> At the same time, generative systems are beginning to change the structure of software sourcing. Large language models and agentic systems do not only assist with localized code generation. They increasingly operate at the level of repositories and engineering tasks, where they can modify code, tests, and dependency manifests as part of producing working solutions [5, 6]. In doing so, they interact directly with software supply chains, influencing how external functionality is selected, integrated, and maintained.
>
> This thesis studies two related ways in which generative systems may reshape dependency-mediated software reuse. First, AI coding agents already participate in dependency decision-making within existing package ecosystems by adding, removing, and updating dependencies in real repositories. Second, increasingly capable generative workflows may support dependency replacement through use-case-oriented regeneration, where the functionality a repository uses from an upstream dependency is regenerated locally rather than obtained through continued reliance on the full external package.
>
> Singla (2026, p. 12)

Here the situation receives a whole paragraph, which explains how software is assembled and ends on the risks that this model carries. The second paragraph introduces the change ("At the same time"), and only the third names the two things the thesis studies. In a technical or fast-moving field, a longer account of the situation is reasonable, provided that the problem and the response remain easy to find.

Across the four statements quoted in this article, length runs from three sentences to four paragraphs (counting the whole of Singla's section). In the strongest of them, a reader can find what is wrong, why it matters and what the study will do without searching for it, and that is a reasonable standard for any draft.

6. Where Research Problems Come From

Research problems come from two broad sources: practice, where something is not working, and the literature, where something is not known. A thesis often draws on both, and the literature side usually rests on a research gap.

In the literature, gaps tend to open in four ways, which correspond to the four types of research gap set out in a companion resource on the research gap (gradcoach.com/research-gap/):

- **New frontiers (classic gaps):** new technologies, discoveries or events open areas with very little research. When generative artificial intelligence tools reached the general public, for example, their effects on teaching, work and assessment were largely unknown.
- **New contexts (contextual gaps):** research can cluster in particular settings and countries, so a well-studied question can remain open in another setting, population or period. A finding from one context does not automatically hold in another, and where there is reason to expect a difference, there is a gap.
- **Disagreements (disagreement gaps):** studies reach contradictory findings, and it is unclear which, if any, is right. Creswell (2005, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22) treats literature with mixed or contradictory results as one case in which no acceptable solution exists (see Section 2).

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- **Methods (methodological gaps):** when most studies of a question use the same design, sample or measure, they can share a blind spot that a different approach could reveal.

These are not the only routes into a gap, but they are common ones. Creswell's questions for judging whether a study is research-worthy point the same way: whether it will fill a known gap, extend previous research to a different group of participants, environment or set of variables, examine some aspect more thoroughly, or address documented problems with the solutions currently available (Creswell, 2005, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 24). In the health sciences, Robinson et al. (2011) developed a framework for identifying research gaps from systematic reviews, which characterizes each gap by its population, intervention, comparison, outcomes and setting, and records why the evidence falls short.

Practice is the other source, and for researchers who work in the field they study, it is often where an idea first arises: a target that a team keeps missing, or a policy that is not doing what it should. Kerlinger and Lee (2000, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 25) treat personal experience as a legitimate starting point, with the caution noted in Section 2: a problem that a particular organization faces is not necessarily research-worthy, because solutions may already be well documented in the literature. A problem identified in practice therefore needs to be taken to the literature, to establish what is already known. Whatever turns out to be missing becomes the gap.

7. Finding and Selecting a Research Problem

Whether the starting point is practice or the literature, a problem is worth stating only when research has not already resolved it, so finding one depends on reading the literature closely. The procedure below adapts the four steps that Ellis and Levy (2008, pp. 25–26) recommend for novice researchers (look, read, synthesize and consult). It combines reading and synthesizing into one step, and adds a step for selecting a problem and a step for writing the statement.

Step 1: Choose an area of interest. The search begins with a general area, which may already be in mind. Past dissertations and theses, including those from the researcher's own institution, are a good source of ideas and show what is normal for a project at a given level. Two or three candidate areas are enough at this stage. A business student might, for example, begin with social media marketing for small businesses, or with leadership in multinational companies. Any restrictions that the program places on what may be studied, or how, should be noted before going further.

Step 2: Read the literature and shortlist. Recent literature reviews and systematic reviews are especially useful, because they summarize the state of research; recently completed doctoral dissertations are, in Ellis and Levy's (2008) phrase, a "gold mine" of leads to the literature (p. 26). Not every article needs to be read in full: the abstract and conclusion give a snapshot of the findings, and the introduction sets out the problem that the study tackles. While reading, the aim is to note what is missing, meaning the questions that current research answers poorly or not at all. Most research articles close with recommendations for future research, in which the authors indicate what they believe is still needed (Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 26). Because no single article can establish

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that a problem is worth studying, the candidate gaps need to be drawn together from several sources (Creswell, 2005, as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 26) and narrowed to a shortlist of three to five possible problems.

Step 3: Evaluate the options. Each candidate can be weighed against three criteria. The first is **value**: who would benefit from the study, how, and by how much. The second is **practicality**: what data, skills, equipment or software it would need, and how much time and money it would take. The third is **personal interest**: a thesis is a long commitment, so the problem has to sustain the researcher's interest and, ideally, fit longer-term goals. Ali and Pandya (2021, p. 473) reduce viability to two conditions that match the first two criteria: the problem's resolution must be of use to a wider community, and the problem must be workable within the researcher's resources. In clinical research the same considerations are often summarized as the FINER criteria, which ask whether a research question is feasible, interesting, novel, ethical and relevant (Fandino, 2019). Where several options remain, a simple scoring grid against these criteria, together with any criteria set by the institution, makes the comparison explicit.

Step 4: Seek feedback. Before committing, the preferred problem should be discussed with experienced researchers, such as a prospective supervisor or other faculty, who may confirm its potential or show that the search needs to go back a step (Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 26).

Step 5: Write the problem statement. With a problem chosen, the statement can be drafted using the five elements in Section 4 and checked against the examples in Sections 3 to 5. One paragraph is a sensible target, or two short parts where the program expects more.

8. Conclusion

A research problem is something that is going wrong, in practice or in understanding, for which no adequate solution is yet available. A problem statement is the short passage, often a single paragraph, that sets the problem out and argues that it is worth studying. The two are distinct from the research gap, which is what research has not yet established about the problem, and from the research question, which is narrower and phrased as a question. A gap matters only when it is tied to a problem: something that is going wrong, or remains unresolved. A complete problem statement covers five elements: the situation, the problem, the evidence, why it matters and the study's response, in whatever order reads best. As the four examples show, length and structure vary widely, but in each of the stronger statements a reader can find what is wrong, why it matters and what the study will do. Finding a problem worth stating depends on reading recent reviews, theses and their recommendations for future research, and on weighing each candidate for its value, practicality and interest before the statement is written.

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