I can't get my dissertation proposal approved because

I can't get my elements to align

Alignment Tips for Frustrated Dissertators

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The term *alignment* refers to the logical progression of ideas between the structural elements of the dissertation. When your Chair and committee members talk about achieving alignment, they are referring to the logical progression from the introduction, to the problem statement, to the purpose statement, to the research questions and hypotheses (if you have a quantitative study), and to the methodology, and all of this has to align with your theoretical framework, and logically lead into your assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.

Lack of alignment between dissertation elements is possibly the most common reason a dissertation proposal fails to receive approval.

After studying this guide, you will be able to

- identify the elements of your project
- write them so they logically flow from one to the next

Contents

What is alignment?

The term *alignment* refers to the logical progression of ideas between the structural elements of the dissertation.

We can't talk about alignment until we know what needs aligning.

What needs aligning?

- The purpose with the problem
- The research questions with the purpose
- The theoretical framework with the research questions
- The methodology and methods with the research questions
- The significance statement, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations with everything else

At this point in your dissertation journey, you have no doubt read dozens of dissertations that included these sections. It seems a bit like a jigsaw puzzle at times, trying to get all the pieces to fit. It all begins with the problem statement. If you get that right, then the rest of the pieces fall into place.

Back up one second. I'm assuming your problem statement emerged from your topic, which you studied thoroughly and reported on in your literature review. The problem statement emerges from all that literature in the form of a gap. The gap is one small piece of information missing from the topic. You are going to fill that gap with your study.

First, you must define the problem you will study.

Start by defining the problem

Sometimes dissertators must write two levels for the problem they plan to study—the *central* or *general* problem and the *specific* problem.

Name the central problem. Answer the following questions, using information from your literature review:

- What is wrong? (the overarching central problem)
- What is the impact of the problem?
- Who is affected?
- What are the causes of the problem?
- What sources do you have to support your answers?

Ellis and Levy (2008) offered a structure for identifying your research problem.

Define the specific problem. The specific problem is that **we lack knowledge** about some topic. Remember, your job is to fill a gap in knowledge (that gap you found in your review of the literature).

You could write it like this:

> The problem this study will explore is the *lack of knowledge* about [central problem]. Other researchers have found [stuff (citations)]; however, to date, little attention has been paid to [this current, relevant, important problem (citations)], particularly among the [group to be studied (citations)]. The consequences of ignoring this problem could include [list some dire outcomes (citations)]. The findings could [help in some concrete way (citations)].

Remember, not all problems are worthy of doctoral-level research. Make sure you have identified a compelling central problem to justify your study, not just a lack of research. It needs to be timely, relevant, and useful to someone besides you. If nobody else cares, it's not a problem.

The problem statement is a critical part of your introduction chapter. However, that is not the only time you will need it. You will restate a one-sentence version of this statement at the beginning of each chapter to reorient readers toward the research problem.

A word about "lack of understanding" as the problem. In my experience, many dissertators seek to "increase understanding." Although increasing understanding is a noble cause, *understanding* itself is almost impossible to define or measure. We intuitively grasp its meaning (or we assume we do), but how do we *measure* understanding?

The difficulty of assessing understanding is why teachers work hard to identify the actual behaviors that demonstrate students' understanding. *Understanding* by itself is a vague construct that we can operationalize only with proxy behaviors—for example, test performance or grade-point average.

If "increasing understanding" is the problem you have identified, I encourage you to be more specific. What you really mean is you want to fill a gap in knowledge about something so that people can figure out how to remedy a central problem.

Align the purpose with the problem

The purpose statement comes directly from the problem statement. The purpose statement serves a practical purpose—it is the blueprint of your study. The purpose statement is a short, concise description of what you plan to do—your roadmap (and the essence of your methodology chapter). Ideally, the purpose statement should provide (in complete sentences) the answers to the following questions:

1. What objective? (to gather knowledge to solve the problem)
2. What methodology and research design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods)?
3. What method (survey, interview, focus group, content analysis, etc.)?
4. What participants?
5. (For quantitative studies) What variables/data sources?
6. What data analysis methods?
7. What location?

After you settle on the language for the purpose statement presented in your introduction chapter, you should use the same terms throughout the paper.

You could adapt this format for your proposal's purpose statement:

> The purpose of this study is to [restate the problem statement]. This purpose will be accomplished by applying a [qualitative/quantitative] methodology using the [method] in the context of a [name the theory] framework. The study will involve [identify the number of participants] drawn from [name the population] using a [name the recruitment method]. I will use [data analysis method(s)] to analyze the data. The study will take place [name the time frame] in [name the geographic location if applicable].

Align the research questions with the purpose

If the purpose statement is your roadmap, your research questions are the directions that get you to your destination. The research questions guide your investigation. The entire purpose of the study is to answer those questions. If they aren't clear—or if you don't have any at all—how will you know you have accomplished your research objective?

Follow this process:

1. Define the research problem (lack of knowledge)
2. Identify your research purpose (to fill that gap in knowledge)
3. Identify your research objectives in the form of questions
4. If you have more than one objective, write separate research questions for each
5. For a quantitative study, write the null and alternative hypotheses for each research question

If you want to nail this alignment challenge, I recommend you repeat the words and phrases you used in the problem statement and purpose statement in the research questions. Ideally, identify *lack of knowledge (research)* as your specific research problem. Your purpose then will be to remedy that lack of knowledge. When you preface each research question with *what* or *how* to indicate how you will remedy the lack of knowledge, the three elements will be aligned.

> Qualitative RQ1: How do faculty working at a west coast career college perceive academic quality?

> Quantitative RQ1: What is the relationship between student attendance and student math test scores?

Align the theoretical framework and the research questions

Theory is a neat way of organizing a social science dissertation project by spinning the discussion toward some framing concept. Instead of mentioning a theory once or twice, use it to form the spine of your study. Embedding theory into your research questions makes it easier to obtain approvals. It also makes it easier to arrange your conclusions by research question when you discuss your findings in the context of your theoretical framework.

Embed the core elements of your theoretical framework into the research questions. If you are collecting primary data, embed the theory's core elements into your survey questions or interview questions.

To find the core elements of your theory, dig into the literature and look for the components identified by previous researchers. I guarantee you will find these components. There may be only a few, or there may be many. Choose the ones that logically make sense for your project; but if you leave some elements out, be ready to justify your choices (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

> The theoretical framework for this study will consist of [name all the theories in your framework].
>
> **Theory 1**. The [first theory name] is based on the idea that [define the theory's main tenet (citations)]. [Theory author last name] developed [theory name] to [name main purpose of the theory (citations)]. Researchers have applied the [name the theory] to [name your topic area] to [identify some situations in which the theory was applied by other researchers (citations)]. I chose this theory for the proposed study because [justify your choice of theory (citations)].

Theory 2. [Repeat for second and subsequent theories in your framework].

Discuss each theory in detail and explain how they work together to create your framework.

I used systems theory in my dissertation, so my RQs reflected the four elements of a system:

RQs1-4: What are the experiences of faculty regarding [*inputs /processes/outputs/environment*] in a for-profit on-ground Gainful Employment program?

Extending theory. I recommend choosing one main theory. You can apply numerous methods to extend theory, for example, by applying a second data-collection method, or by adding another sample, or by implementing some sort of treatment.

If you are required to have two theories, choose one you can use as an overlay through which to view the first theory. For example, do we know how a pandemic affects elementary school kids' learning? You could start with social cognitive theory as your foundation and then add chaos theory. That could be fun.

Be sure to use terms consistently.

Align the methodology with the research questions

By now, you've settled on your research questions and have an idea of which methodology will accomplish your objective. At this point, if you've followed my suggestions, your research questions align well with your problem and purpose statements. A couple keywords in the research questions will satisfy readers that you've chosen the correct methodology.

Name your worldview. Methodology is based on a philosophical stance (call it a paradigm or worldview). You might see terms like *constructivist*, *postpositivist*, *pragmatic*, and *advocacy/participatory* (Creswell, 2009). In your methodology chapter, describe the underpinnings of your chosen methodology. You might get to write about ontology and epistemology. What could be more fun?

Name your methodology. Your choices are quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods, which is both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative researchers analyze numerical data. Qualitative researchers, in contrast, analyze text or image data. Mixed-methods means you do both.

Name your research design (aka design approach). Related to methodology is the concept of research design. I think of research design as the layer between methodology and methods.

Quantitative research design options include experimental, quasi-experimental, and nonexperimental approaches; qualitative research design options include phenomenology, case study, ethnography, narrative, and grounded theory (Creswell, 2009). Mixed-methods dissertators do a bit of both.

Align the methods with the methodology

Methods is the term we usually use to refer to how we collect and analyze data.

In quantitative studies, one data collection method is enough. To collect numerical data, do a survey or run some sort of experiment. Then analyze the data using one or more analysis tools, often involving statistical techniques with computer analysis software such as SPSS. There are too many analysis options to list here. Some analysis techniques you might recognize include *correlation* and *regression*. To get approved more quickly, use surveys that have been validated by previous research, rather than pilot your own.

Qualitative dissertators, in contrast, often wrestle with a challenge known as *triangulation*. Qualitative (constructivist) data are by nature open to interpretation, which means you might have to spend some extra time convincing readers that your study is robust and that your conclusions are credible. You can do this by collecting data from more than one source or analyzing data using more than one data analysis technique. Data analysis techniques usually involve some sort of coding process, which can be done manually or with computer software.

Qualitative data collection options include interviews, focus groups, observation, and content analysis. Dissertators who conduct interviews might talk to two samples of participants and then triangulate the interview data with their own field notes. In my dissertation, I talked to faculty and asked them to draw "rich pictures" of their definitions of academic quality. Then I compared their verbal definitions to their drawings. So fun!

Align these other things

The significance statement. You must describe why your study is important and outline how it could add to knowledge about practice or theory in your field. Mention the beneficiaries of your study and describe how your findings will help them.

Think of the significance statement as the positive side of the problem statement. After you've made a case for the negative consequences that could happen if the problem you identified goes unaddressed, now list all the benefits that will emerge if you are allowed to complete your study. Use consistent terminology.

Assumptions. Assumptions are things you believe (consciously or unconsciously) are true about doing research. The underlying assumption of all dissertation projects that make it past the proposal stage is the claim that the topic is worthy of doctoral-level study. Your choices of research design and methodology emerge from a long tradition of assumptions about what scholars think they know and how they think they know it. We assume we can measure abstract concepts like justice, racial inequality, self-esteem, and success when we can't even agree on definitions of those things! That doesn't stop us from trying to measure them. Another big assumption is that we assume everyone cares about research (I'm thinking of your participants. I am certain they don't care as much as you do). Assumptions can often become limitations.

Delimitations. Delimitations are restrictions you purposely implement to reduce the scope of your study, for example, constraining your study to a local geographical area or to one subset of a population. Your reviewers may ask you to justify your delimitations. All studies have delimitations. We can't study everything.

Limitations. Limitations are things largely outside your control that restrict your study's conclusions. In both quantitative and qualitative studies, if you are collecting self-reported data from humans, the limitation is just that: the data are self-reported. Participants make mistakes. They lie. They obfuscate or omit. They will make up things to save face, to impress, to distract, to minimize, and to exaggerate, especially is the topic is sensitive.

In qualitative research, the biggest limitation by far is the presence of you, the researcher, in the data collection process. The runner up in terms of limitations is the idea that applying methods based on a constructivist worldview (i.e., assuming participants are a reliable source of knowledge about a topic) can actually tell you something useful. Your entire study might be based on your wishful thinking.

In quantitative studies, small sample sizes can hinder robust analysis and lead to wobbly conclusions. In qualitative studies, nobody expects large sample sizes, so don't claim sample size as a limitation.

Now, let's review an example of bad alignment and contrast it with an example of good alignment.

Example of bad alignment

Element	Bad alignment
Topic	Children's consumption of snacks while watching television, video games, and cartoons
General problem	Children eat too much and watch too much television.
Specific problem	Children's video watching is making them fat and rotting their brains.
Purpose	To examine why children watch cartoons
Methodology	Qualitative
Method	Observation of how many snacks children consume while they are watching cartoons
Research question	What do children eat while watching television?

Example of good alignment

Element	Good alignment
Topic	Children and video game consumption
General problem	Researchers have suggested that children's academic performance is negatively affected by their use of video games; however, little data have been collected to determine the effects of video games on children's academic performance.
Specific problem	U.S. elementary school-aged children's consumption of video games may be negatively affecting their academic performance, specifically, their math abilities.
Purpose	To examine the relationship between elementary school-aged children's consumption of video games at home and their ability to perform 3rd grade math in a school district in Portland, Oregon.
Methodology	Quantitative nonexperimental
Methods	a) survey given to parents in the school district assessing their elementary school-aged child/children's at-home consumption of video games b) children's corresponding math scores obtained from the school district
Research question	What is the relationship between elementary school-aged children's at-home consumption of video games and their math scores?

Discussion of bad alignment example. You can see the topic is children. Apparently, they eat too much, and the dissertator thinks video games and cartoons are to blame … so she wants to find out why kids watch cartoons? Wha—? Disconnect! What's wrong here? Let me count the ways.

Topic. First, the topic is ill-conceived. Consumption of snacks is a valid topic, but it will be next to impossible to separate television watching from video games from cartoon-watching. Video gaming is not the same as watching television shows or cartoons. Best to choose just one.

General problem. The general problem may be valid, but it doesn't follow logically from the topic. The logical connection between kid's snack consumption and TV/game/cartoon-watching is lost. We would have expected something to do with examining the relationship between cartoons and child obesity. Confusing!

Specific problem. Besides showing extreme researcher bias ("making them fat and rotting their brains"), the specific problem departs from the general problem. "Too much television" is barely related to "video watching." (And how much TV is "too much"?) Examining the video-watching problem isn't going to help resolve the television-watching problem.

Purpose. Somehow, we diverged from our desire to study children's consumption of snacks to wondering why they watch cartoons. Both interesting, but not aligned.

Research question. The dissertator wants to find out why kids watch cartoons; however, instead of asking them why they watch cartoons, she plans to observe how many snacks they eat in front of the TV. Logically, that makes no sense.

Methodology and method. In this example, the dissertator chose a qualitative methodology because she wanted to observe

children's behavior. That goal aligns marginally with the topic but nothing else.

Can you see how all over the place this example is? Words are imprecise and undefined: children, snacks, video watching, video games, television, cartoons, fat, rotted brains … clear signs of unclear thinking.

Discussion of good alignment example. We've chosen *one* topic—children's video game consumption. The general problem is directly related to that topic (effect of children's consumption of video games). We present a specific problem that flows logically from the general problem (the effect of video game consumption for a specific group of children).

Once we have the specific problem statement well defined, the rest of the elements fall into place. Our purpose statement is a slightly more detailed version of the problem statement with the addition of sentences about our research implementation plan. The methodology, methods, and research questions flow directly from the purpose statement.

You might think the bad alignment example is extreme, but misalignment is quite common among the proposals I edit. In this case, a hard-to-define concept such as the relationship between child obesity and cartoon watching can be surprisingly slippery. That is because we know intuitively that the problem of childhood obesity is more complex than simply a matter of children watching too many cartoons.

Identify your keywords

Make a list of the key terms—the words and phrases you often use to describe your project. What words recur in your proposal or dissertation? These are your keywords. Make a list:

_____

_____

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_____

Using these keywords and phrases, fill out the matrix. When you get the "bones" of your study laid out in the matrix, it will be easier to see if the elements are aligned.

Fill in this alignment matrix

Fill in the matrix with brief descriptions of each element.

General problem	
Specific problem	
Purpose	
Research question(s)	
Methodology	
Methods	

Now you are ready to align your elements

Identify your problem accurately and align the purpose with the problem. This is the moment when dissertators trip up. We think the problem is obvious—for example, that students play too many video games, so we immediately roll up our sleeves and write something like, *the problem is students play too many video games; therefore, the purpose of this study will be to ask teachers how we can get students to stop playing video games*. It almost makes sense. However, **the specific problem is we study is lack of knowledge**. The purpose statement emerges easily when you remember that your job is to fill that gap in knowledge. We lack knowledge about XYZ; therefore, the purpose of this study is to get knowledge about XYZ. Perfect alignment.

Use language consistently. We can think of alignment as the process of using consistent terms and language throughout the main elements of the proposal. For example, if you use the term *professional development* in the problem statement, you should not suddenly switch it up with *teacher training* in the purpose statement if the terms mean the same thing.

Leave your creativity at the door. Part of the reason we don't use consistent language is because we have been taught to avoid repetitive and redundant language. After all, we don't want to be boring! However, academic writing is not creative writing. Readers (and reviewers and editors) are easily confused. They won't spend time trying to translate the many creative ways you refer to concepts and constructs in your study. You can use language creatively but within narrow boundaries. Check your style guide. Most social science dissertators must use the American Psychological Association's style manual. Avoid colloquialisms and jargon. Use metaphors sparingly. Watch out for pronouns that

refer to something vague. Aim for clarity, even if it seems repetitive and boring to you. Readers will be grateful, trust me.

Suggestions

To recap, here are suggestions and tips from my book *Aligning the Elements*.

- Review many dissertations published by dissertators in *your* field from *your* university.
- If you attend a for-profit institution, your requirements may be different from the requirements your private nonprofit and public nonprofit counterparts must follow. Follow your institutional handbook and template.
- Create a matrix of the elements in your dissertation so you can see how they relate and flow logically from one to the next.
- Academic writing is not creative writing. Make life easy for your readers and reviewers. Don't worry about being "boring." Be clear and explicit. Keep it simple.
- Use terms and language consistently among the elements of your dissertation. Make a list of key terms and use them— and *only them*—and always in the same order.
- Use introductory phrases such as "the problem addressed in this study is/was…" and "the purpose of this study is/was…" so if you need to revise your problem or purpose, you can do a find-and-replace throughout your document.
- Derive your research questions and survey/interview questions from the components of the theories you plan to use as your framework, so theory is embedded in the bones of your study.

Finally, one last tip: When I hit a roadblock, I remind myself of the ABCDs: Aim high, begin low, climb slowly, and don't give up.

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If you liked this guide, let me know.

For more about aligning the elements, including an exploration of what successful dissertators have done (and failed to do and still got approved), read *Aligning the Elements*.
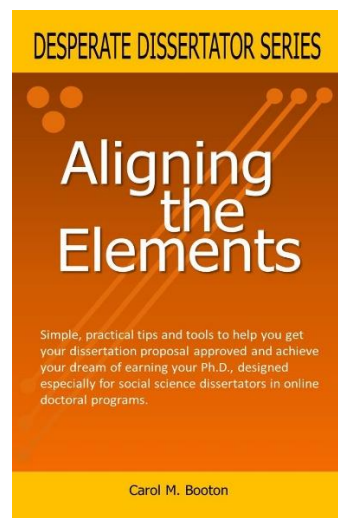
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