CHAPTER FOUR

The Introduction

After having completed a framework and a preliminary literature review, and having given consideration to writing and ethics, a proposal developer turns to the actual design of a study. A process begins of organizing ideas, starting with designing an introduction to a proposal. This chapter discusses the composition and writing of a scholarly introduction to a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods proposal. It examines the differences in writing an introduction to these three different types of proposals. Then, to provide a working model of a good introduction, a complete introduction from a published research study is presented. After this, the model is analyzed, section by section, using a framework for writing a good introduction. This framework is based on five key components found in all introductions, regardless of approach to research. This framework consists of establishing the problem leading to the study, reviewing the literature about the problem, identifying deficiencies in the literature about the problem, targeting an audience and noting the significance of the problem for this audience, and identifying the purpose of the proposed study. Because this approach relies on stating the deficiencies of past literature, it will be called a social sciences *deficiencies* model for an introduction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRODUCTIONS

An introduction is the first passage in a journal article, dissertation, or scholarly research study. It sets the stage for the entire study. As Wilkinson (1991) mentions:

> The introduction is the part of the paper that provides readers with the background information for the research reported in the paper. Its purpose is to establish a framework for the research, so that readers can understand how it is related to other research. (p. 96)

Setting the stage for a study, the introduction establishes the issue or concern leading to the research by conveying information about a research problem. Because it is the initial passage in a study or proposal, special care must be given to writing it. Unfortunately, too many authors of research studies do not clearly identify the research problem, leaving the reader to decide for himself or herself the importance of the issue that motivates a study. Further, the research problem is often confused with the research questions—those questions that the investigator would like answered in order to understand or explain the problem.

A research problem can originate from many potential sources. It might spring from an experience researchers have had in their personal lives or workplaces. It may come from an extensive debate that has appeared in the literature for several years. It might develop from policy debates in government or among top executives. The sources of research problems are often multiple.

To this complexity is added the need for introductions to carry the weight of encouraging the reader to read further and to begin to see significance in the study. This facet alone makes introductions difficult to write. The introduction needs to create reader interest in the topic, establish the problem that leads to the study, place the study within the larger context of the scholarly literature, and reach out to a specific audience. All of this is achieved in a concise section of a few pages. Because of the messages they must convey and the limited space allowed, introductions are challenging to write and understand.

Fortunately, there is a template or structure for writing a good, scholarly social science introduction. Before introducing this model, it is necessary to distinguish subtle differences between introductions for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies.

QUALITATIVE, QUANTITATIVE, AND MIXED METHODS INTRODUCTIONS

A general review of all introductions shows that they follow a similar pattern: The authors announce a problem, and they justify why it needs to be studied. Because problems differ for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies (as discussed in Chapter 1), the type of problem presented in an introduction will vary depending on the approach. In a *qualitative* project, the author will describe a research problem that can best be understood by exploring a concept or phenomenon. I suggested that qualitative research is exploratory and researchers use it to

explore a topic when the variables and theory base are unknown. For example, Morse (1991) says this:

> Characteristics of a qualitative research problem are: (a) the concept is "immature" due to a conspicuous lack of theory and previous research; (b) a notion that the available theory may be inaccurate, inappropriate, incorrect, or biased; (c) a need exists to explore and describe the phenomena and to develop theory; or (d) the nature of the phenomenon may not be suited to quantitative measures. (p. 120)

For example, the problem of urban sprawl (a problem) needs to be explored because it has not been examined in certain areas of a state. Alternatively, kids in elementary classrooms have anxiety that interferes with learning (a problem), and the best way to explore this problem is to go to schools and visit directly with teachers and students. Some qualitative researchers have a theoretical lens through which the problem will be examined (e.g., the inequality of pay among women and men or the racial attitudes involved in profiling drivers on the highways). Thomas (1993) suggests that "critical researchers begin from the premise that all cultural life is in constant tension between control and resistance" (p. 9). This theoretical orientation shapes the structure of an introduction. In the introduction to a study, Beisel (1990), for example, proposed to examine how the theory of class politics explained the lack of success of an anti-vice campaign in one of three American cities. Thus, within some qualitative studies, the approach in the introduction may be less inductive while still relying on the perspective of participants like most qualitative studies. In addition, qualitative introductions may begin with a personal statement of experiences from the author, such as those found in phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994). They also may be written from a personal, first-person subjective point of view in which the researcher positions herself or himself in the narrative.

Less variation is seen in *quantitative* introductions. In a quantitative project, the problem is best addressed by understanding what factors or variables influence an outcome. For example, in response to worker cutbacks (a problem for all employees), an investigator may seek to discover what factors influence businesses to downsize. Another researcher may need to understand the high divorce rate among married couples (a problem) and examine whether financial issues contribute to divorce. In both of these situations, the research problem is one in which understanding the factors that explain or relate to an outcome helps the

investigator best understand and explain the problem. In addition, in quantitative introductions, researchers sometimes advance a theory to test, and they will incorporate substantial reviews of the literature to identify research questions that need to be answered. The writing of a quantitative introduction may be from the impersonal point of view and the past tense to provide "objectivity" to the language of research.

A mixed methods study can employ either the qualitative or the quantitative approach (or some combination) to writing an introduction. For example, a mixed methods research problem may be one in which a need exists to both understand the relationship among variables in a situation and explore the topic in further depth. A mixed methods project may initially seek to explain the relationship between smoking behavior and depression among adolescents, then explore the detailed views of adolescents and display different patterns of smoking and depression. With the first phase of this project as quantitative, the introduction may include a discussion about a theory that predicts this relationship.

A MODEL FOR AN INTRODUCTION

These differences among the various approaches are small, and they relate largely to the different types of problems associated with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. It should be helpful to illustrate an approach to designing and writing an introduction to a research study.

The *deficiencies model* is a general template for writing a solid introduction to a proposal or research study. It is a popular approach used in the social sciences, and once its structure is elucidated, the reader will find it apparent in many scholarly studies. It consists of five parts:

1. The research problem,
2. Studies that have addressed the problem,
3. Deficiencies in the studies,
4. The importance of the study for an audience, and
5. The purpose statement.

An Illustration

Before a review of each component, an illustration will be presented. The example used here is from a quantitative study published by Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, and Parente (2001) in *The Journal of Higher Education* and titled "Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Classroom" (reprinted with permission). Following each major section in the structure of the introduction, I will briefly highlight the component of the introduction being addressed by the authors.

> Since passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, America's colleges and universities have struggled to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of their students and faculty members, and "affirmative action" has become the policy-of-choice to achieve that heterogeneity. **[Authors state the narrative hook.]** These policies, however, are now at the center of an intense national debate. The current legal foundation for affirmative action policies rests on the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case, in which Justice William Powell argued that race could be considered among the factors on which admissions decisions were based. More recently, however, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, in the 1996 *Hopwood v. State of Texas* case, found Powell's argument wanting. Court decisions turning affirmative action policies aside have been accompanied by state referenda, legislation, and related actions banning or sharply reducing race-sensitive admissions or hiring in California, Florida, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Puerto Rico (Healy, 1998a, 1998b, 1999).
>
> In response, educators and others have advanced educational arguments supporting affirmative action, claiming that a diverse study body is more educationally effective than a more homogeneous one. Harvard University President Neil Rudenstine claims that the "fundamental rationale for student diversity in higher education [is] its educational value" (Rudenstine, 1999, p. 1). Lee Bollinger, Rudenstine's counterpart at the University of Michigan, has asserted, "A classroom that does not have a significant representation from members of different races produces an impoverished discussion" (Schmidt, 1998, p. A32). These two presidents are not alone in their beliefs. A statement published by the Association of American Universities and endorsed by the

presidents of 62 research universities stated: "We speak first and foremost as educators. We believe that our students benefit significantly from education that takes place within a diverse setting" ("On the Importance of Diversity in University Admissions," *The New York Times,* April 24, 1997, p. A27). **[Authors identify the research problem.]**

Studies of the impact of diversity on student educational outcomes tend to approach the ways students encounter "diversity" in any of three ways. A small group of studies treat students' contacts with "diversity" largely as a function of the numerical or proportional racial/ethnic or gender mix of students on a campus (e.g., Chang, 1996, 1999a; Kanter, 1977; Sax, 1996). . . . A second considerably larger set of studies take some modicum of structural diversity as a given and operationalize students' encounters with diversity using the frequency or nature of their reported interactions with peers who are racially/ethnically different from themselves. . . . A third set of studies examines institutionally structured and purposeful programmatic efforts to help students engage racial/ethnic and/or gender "diversity" in the form of both ideas and people.

These various approaches have been used to examine the effects of diversity on a broad array of student educational outcomes. The evidence is almost uniformly consistent in indicating that students in a racial/ethnically or gender-diverse community, or engaged in a diversity-related activity, reap a wide array of positive educational benefits. . . . **[Authors mention studies that have addressed the problem.]**

Only a relative handful of studies (e.g., Chang, 1996, 1999a; Sax, 1996) have specifically examined whether *the racial/ethnic or gender composition* of the students on a campus, in an academic major, or in a classroom (i.e., structural diversity) has the educational benefits claimed. . . . Whether the degree of racial diversity of a campus or classroom has a *direct* effect on learning outcomes, however, remains an open question. **[Deficiencies in the studies are noted.]**

The scarcity of information on the educational benefits of the structural diversity on a campus or in its classrooms is regrettable because it is the sort of evidence the courts appear to be requiring if they are to support race-sensitive admissions policies. **[Importance of the study for an audience mentioned.]**

This study attempted to contribute to the knowledge base by exploring the influence of structural diversity in the classroom on

students' development of academic and intellectual skills. . . . This study examines both the direct effect of classroom diversity on academic/intellectual outcomes and whether any effects of classroom diversity may be moderated by the extent to which active and collaborative instructional approaches are used in the course. **[Purpose of the study identified.]** (pp. 510-512, reprinted by permission of *The Journal of Higher Education*)

The Research Problem in the Study

When researchers begin their studies, they start with one or more paragraphs that convey the specific research problems or issues. They also present, in the first sentence, information to create reader interest. In the sentences that follow the first sentence, authors identify a distinct research problem that needs to be addressed.

In the Terenzini et al. (2001) article, the first sentence accomplishes both objectives: piquing interest in the study and conveying a distinct research problem or issue. What effect did this sentence have? Would it entice a reader to read on? Was it pitched at a level so that a wide audience could understand it? These questions are important for opening sentences called *narrative hooks*, a term drawn from English composition, to draw or "hook" the reader into the study. To learn how to write good narrative hooks, study opening sentences in leading journals in different fields of study. Often, journalists provide good examples in their lead sentences of newspaper and magazine articles. Here are a few examples of lead sentences from social science journals.

- "The transsexual and ethnomethodological celebrity Agnes changed her identity nearly three years before undergoing sex reassignment surgery." (Cahill, 1989, p. 281)
- "Who controls the process of chief executive succession?" (Boeker, 1992, p. 400)
- "There is a large body of literature that studies the cartographic line (a recent summary article is Buttenfield 1985), and generalization of cartographic lines (McMaster 1987)." (Carstensen, 1989, p. 181)

All three of these examples present information easily understood by many readers. The first two—introductions in qualitative studies—demonstrate how reader interest can be created by use of reference to

the single participant and by posing a question. The third example, a quantitative-experimental study, shows how one can begin with a literature perspective. All three examples demonstrate well how the lead sentence can be written so that the reader is not taken into a detailed morass of thought, but lowered gently into the topic.

I use the metaphor of the writer lowering a barrel into a well. The *beginning* writer plunges the barrel (the reader) into the depths of the well (the article). The reader sees only unfamiliar material. The *experienced* writer lowers the barrel (the reader, again) slowly, allowing the reader to acclimate to the study. This lowering of the barrel begins with *a narrative hook* of sufficient generality that the reader understands (and can relate to) the topic.

Beyond this first sentence, it is important to clearly identify for the reader the issue or problem that leads to a need for the study. Terenzini et al. (2001) discuss a distinct problem: the struggle to increase the racial and ethnic diversity on American college and university campuses. They note that policies to increase diversity are at "the center of an intense national debate" (p. 509).

In applied social science research, problems arise from issues, difficulties, and current practices. For example, schools may not have implemented multicultural guidelines. the needs of faculty in colleges are such that they need to engage in professional development activities in their departments. minority students need better access to universities. or a community needs to better understand the contributions of its early female pioneers. These are all significant research problems that merit further study and establish a practical issue or concern that needs to be addressed. A *research problem* is the issue that exists in the literature, in theory, or in practice that leads to a need for the study. The research problem in a study begins to become clear when the researcher asks "What is the need for this study?" or "What problem influenced the need to undertake this study?"

When designing the opening paragraphs of a proposal, keep in mind these guidelines:

- Write an opening sentence that will stimulate reader interest as well as convey an issue to which a broad audience can relate.

- As a general rule, refrain from using quotations, especially long ones, in the lead sentence. Quotations raise many possibilities for interpretation and thus create unclear beginnings. However, as is evident in some qualitative studies, quotations can create reader interest.

- Stay away from idiomatic expressions or trite phrases (e.g., "The lecture method remains a 'sacred cow' among most college and university instructors.").
- Consider numeric information for impact (e.g., "Every year an estimated 5 million Americans experience the death of an immediate family member.").
- Clearly identify the research problem (i.e., dilemma, issue) leading to the study. Researchers might ask themselves, "Is there a specific sentence (or sentences) in which I convey the research problem?"
- Indicate why the problem is important by citing references that justify the need to study the problem.
- Make sure that the research problem is framed in a manner consistent with the approach to research in the study (e.g., exploratory in qualitative, examining relationships or predictors in quantitative, and either approach in mixed methods inquiry).

Review Studies Addressing the Problem

After establishing the research problem in the opening paragraphs, Terenzini et al. (2001) next justify the importance of the research problem by *reviewing studies* that have examined the problem. They discussed three "sets of studies" (p. 510) almost as if they had a literature map (as discussed in Chapter 2) in front of them and were simply presenting the major categories of studies about the impact of student diversity on educational outcomes. It is useful to note in their example that they did not review single, isolated studies; instead, they introduced larger groups of studies so that at this point in the article they could present the broader picture of the literature. It is in the "literature review" section, which typically follows an introduction in a quantitative study (sometimes in a qualitative study and in a mixed methods study), that one finds detailed reviews of studies.

The purpose of reviewing studies that have addressed the problem is to justify the importance of the study and to create distinctions between past studies and a proposed study. This component might be called "setting the research problem within the ongoing dialogue in the literature." Researchers do not want to conduct a study that replicates exactly what someone else has studied. New studies need to add to the literature or to extend or retest what others have examined. Marshall and Rossman (1999) talk about setting a study "within a tradition of

inquiry and a context of related studies" (p. 43). The ability to frame the study in this way separates novices from more experienced researchers. The veteran understands what has been written about a topic or certain problem in the field. This knowledge comes from years of experience following the development of problems and their accompanying literature.

The question often develops as to what type of literature to review. My best advice would be to review "research" studies in which authors advance research questions and report data to answer them. These studies might be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods studies. The important point is that the literature provides studies about the research problem being addressed in the proposal. Another question is "What do I do now? No research has been conducted on my topic." Of course, in some narrowly construed studies or in new, exploratory projects no literature exists to document the research problem. To counter this statement, I often suggest that an investigator think about the literature as an inverted triangle. At the apex of the inverted triangle lies the scholarly study being proposed. This study is narrow and focused (and studies may not exist on it). If one broadens the review of the literature out to the base of the triangle, literature can be found, although it may be only indirectly related to the study at hand. This broad-based literature is reviewed to cast the problem within the literature.

To review the literature related to the research problem for an introduction to a proposal, consider these ideas:

- Refer to the literature by summarizing groups of studies (unlike the focus on single studies in the integrated review in Chapter 2), not individual studies. The intent should be to establish broad areas of research at this juncture in the study.
- To de-emphasize single studies, place the in-text references at the end of a paragraph or at the end of a summary point about several studies.
- Review research studies that used a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approach.
- Find recent literature to summarize (such as that published in the last 10 years) unless an older study exists that has been widely cited by others.

Deficiencies in Past Literature

After advancing the problem and reviewing the literature about the problem, the researcher then identifies *deficiencies* found in this

literature. Hence, I use a *deficiencies model* for this template for writing an introduction to a study. The nature of these deficiencies varies from study to study. The literature may be deficient because the authors have not studied specific variables. They may not have explored the topic with a particular group, sample, or population. The literature may need to be replicated or repeated to see if the same findings hold given new samples of people or new sites for study. In any given study, authors may mention one or more of these deficiencies. If other authors have also mentioned these deficiencies—typically in the "suggestions for future research" sections at the end of research studies—then this section can include references to these studies as further justification for the proposed study.

Beyond mentioning the deficiencies, proposal writers need to tell how their planned study will remedy or address these deficiencies. For example, because past studies have overlooked an important variable, a study will include it and analyze its effect. Because past studies have overlooked the examination of Native Americans as a cultural group, a study will include them as the participants in the project.

In the two examples below, the authors point out the gaps or shortcomings of the literature. Notice their use of key phrases to indicate the shortcoming: "what remains to be explored," "little empirical research," and "very few studies."

Example 4.1 *Deficiencies in the Literature—Needed Explorations*

For this reason, the meaning of war and peace has been explored extensively by social scientists (Cooper, 1965; Alvik, 1968; Rosell, 1968; Svancarova & Svancarova, 1967-68; Haavedsrud, 1970). What remains to be explored, however, is how veterans of past wars react to vivid scenes of a new war. (Ziller, 1990, pp. 85-86)

Example 4.2 *Deficiencies in the Literature—Few Studies*

Despite an increased interest in micropolitics, it is surprising that so little empirical research has actually been conducted on the topic, especially from the perspectives of subordinates. Political research in educational settings is especially scarce: Very few studies have focused on how teachers use power to interact strategically with school principals and what this means descriptively and conceptually (Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1986; Pratt, 1984). (Blase, 1989, p. 381)

In summary, when identifying deficiencies in the past literature, proposal developers might do the following:

- Cite several deficiencies to make the case even stronger for a study.
- Identify specifically the deficiencies of other studies (e.g., methodological flaws, variables overlooked).
- Write about areas overlooked by past studies, including topics, special statistical treatments, significant implications, and so forth.
- Discuss how a proposed study will remedy these deficiencies and provide a unique contribution to the scholarly literature.

These deficiencies might be written using a series of short paragraphs that identify three or four shortcomings of the past research or focus on one major shortcoming, as illustrated in the Terenzini et al. (2001) introduction.

Importance of a Study for an Audience

All good writers have the audience in mind. Terenzini et al. (2001) end their introduction by mentioning how courts could use the information of the study to require colleges and universities to support "race-sensitive admissions policies" (p. 512). In addition, the authors might have mentioned the importance of this study for admissions offices and for students seeking admissions as well as the committees that review applications for admission.

The point is that authors need to identify the audiences that will likely profit from a study of the research problem. The more audiences that can be mentioned, the greater the importance of the study and the more it will be seen by readers to have wide application. These audiences will differ from one project to another, and they might include diverse audiences of policy makers, organizations, other researchers, and individuals in work organizations. Reaching out to an audience in an introduction might be accomplished by briefly mentioning the audience (such as the courts in the Terenzini et al. [2001] study) or detailing information for several audiences.

Finally, good introductions to research studies end with a statement of the purpose or intent of the study. Terenzini et al. (2001) ended their introduction this way, and they conveyed that they planned to examine the influence of structural diversity on student skills in the classroom. The purpose statement, a major guiding element of any research study, is the focus of attention in the next chapter.

SUMMARY

This chapter provides advice about composing and writing an introduction to a scholarly study. The first element is to consider how the introduction incorporates the research problems associated with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research. Then, a five-part introduction is suggested as a model or template to use. This model, called the deficiencies model, is based on first identifying the research problem (and including a narrative hook). Then it includes reviewing the literature that has addressed the problem, indicating one or more deficiencies in the past literature and suggesting how a study will remedy these deficiencies. It typically ends by identifying one or more audiences that will profit from proposed study and by advancing the purpose or major intent of the project. Guidelines are provided for writing each component in this introduction to a study.

Writing Exercises

1. Draft several examples of narrative hooks for the introduction to a study and share these with colleagues to determine if the hooks present an issue to which readers can relate.
2. Write the introduction to a proposed study. Include paragraphs setting forth the problem in the study, the related literature about this problem, the deficiencies in the literature, and the audience who would find the study of interest.
3. Locate several research studies published in scholarly journals in a field of study. Review the introductions to the studies and locate the sentence or sentences in which the authors state the research problem or issue in their studies.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Bem, D. J. (1987). Writing the empirical journal article. In M. P. Zanna & J. M. Darley (Eds.), *The compleat academic: A practical guide for the beginning social scientist* (pp. 171-201). New York: Random House.

Daryl Bem emphasizes the importance of the opening statement in published research. He provides a list of rules of thumb for opening statements, stressing the need for clear, readable prose and for a structure that leads the reader step by step to the problem statement. Examples are provided of both satisfactory and unsatisfactory opening statements. Bem calls for opening statements that are accessible to the nonspecialist, yet not boring to the technically sophisticated reader.

Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Joe Maxwell reflects on the purpose of a proposal for a qualitative dissertation. One of the fundamental aspects of a proposal is to justify the project—to help readers understand not only what you plan to do but also why. He mentions the importance of identifying the issues you plan to address and indicating why they are important issues to study. In an example of a dissertation proposal, he shares the major issues addressed by the author to create an effective argument for the study.

Wilkinson, A. M. (1991). *The scientist's handbook for writing papers and dissertations.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Antoinette Wilkinson identifies the three parts of an introduction: the derivation and statement of the problem and a discussion of its nature, the discussion of the background of the problem, and the statement of the research question. Her book offers numerous examples of these three parts together with a discussion of how to write and structure the introduction. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that the introduction leads logically and inevitably to a statement of the research question.