ASSIGNMENTS #1 AND #2: DRAFT AND FINAL RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Overview

For this set of assignments you will prepare a draft and a final version of a research proposal for your Planning Report. The draft is due on February 9 and the final version is due on February 23.

Purpose

Preparing a research proposal is the first and most critical step in developing a credible, manageable research project. Writing such a proposal will help you to:

- Think carefully about what you want to study and how you can accomplish your research goals.
- Communicate your ideas clearly and completely to others so that you will receive useful feedback.
- Practice writing proposals, a task planners must often complete in professional practice.

Note that your final research proposal, once the adviser gives you a passing grade, is essentially a contract between the two of you: you both agree on what tasks you must complete to prepare your final Planning Report. If you find you want to adjust your planned research question and methods later on, you must ask your adviser’s permission to do so.

Tips for writing a successful proposal

#1 Read the sample research proposals posted on the 298 website

Take some time to review the sample research proposals that are posted on the URBP 298A website: www.sjsu.edu/urbanplanning/courses/URBP298/298a.html. A few details of the assignment requirements have changed since these were prepared, but the general content of what your adviser will look for is very similar.

#2 Review your proposal using the grading criteria listed below

After you complete a draft of your proposal, and before you turn it in, review the grading criteria and use them to assess how you can revise the draft to improve it.

#3 Let MS Word help you with the formatting

Here are two tips for using MS Word features to format parts of the assignment. You can do an on-line search to find out how to use each feature with your particular version of MS Word.

- For the report outline, you may wish to use MS Word’s “automatic numbered lists” feature.
- MS Word can automatically create the “hanging indent” you need to format your bibliography properly. (The first line of each item in the bibliography is flush left, but subsequent lines are indented.)
Tasks

Draft Research Proposal (due February 9)
Write a research proposal consisting of the following 11 elements:

1. **Title.** Write a descriptive title for your project.

2. **Audience.** Describe your intended audience for the paper. Although you should write your report so that it will be intelligible to any reasonably informed member of the general public, you nevertheless want to write the report with a particular audience in mind. Examples of audiences relevant for a 298 report are: city council members and planners in San Francisco, water resource planners anywhere in the Bay Area, or land use planners anywhere in the U.S. who are interested in form-based zoning codes.

3. **Background.** Explain any background information your reader needs to know to understand the research question. For example, if your research will focus on a particular neighborhood or place, you will need to briefly describe it. If you propose to recommend changes to city policy X, you will need to describe what policy X does. Also, define any important terms you use in your research question. For example, if your research question uses terms with many possible meanings (like “sustainability,” “smart growth,” “equity,” or “social capital”), then provide concise but precise definitions for them.

   Make sure this section does not duplicate what you write in the “relevance” section (#6).

4. **Research question.** The question should be SPECIFIC, such as in these examples:

   - Has the use of transferable development rights in California over the past ten years led to the protection of significant amounts of farmland that would otherwise have been developed?
   - How should the County of Little Green Hills revise its agricultural preservation plan to stop the recent explosion of large-lot subdivisions in agricultural land, while still allowing farmers enough flexibility of land use to remain economically sustainable?
   - Is Transit Company X’s proposed bus rapid transit plan likely to increase or decrease overall system ridership in the first five years of operation?
   - How can SJSU redesign the plaza in front of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library to create a vibrant public space where students and community members gather and interact with each other?
   - (Examples of unworkable questions would be vague ones like “Is smart growth a good idea for California?” or “What can Los Altos do to become sustainable?”)

5. **Hypothesis.** State your hypothesis in a few sentences. In other words, what do you predict will be the answer to your research question? Explain briefly why you predict these results.

   This section of the paper must cite at least five sources (including at least two peer-reviewed journal articles) that support your hypothesis.
6. **Relevance.** To demonstrate that your question is an important one worth studying, you must answer for readers the “who cares?” question. To do so, this section must explain two things. First, explain why answering your specific research question will provide valuable information to improve either planning practice in general or the conditions within a specific community. In writing this section of the proposal, think both about the relevance of your general topic and also about the relevance of your specific question. Second, and as a related point, explain how your project is unique and will not duplicate research or planning work that has already been completed.

This section of the paper must cite at least ten sources to justify your claims, and at least four of these sources must be peer-reviewed journal articles.

Make sure that this section of the paper does not duplicate material you present in Section 3 (Background).

7. **Literature Review.** Formulate three or four questions you will try to answer by reviewing research literature and note which specific chapters or sub-chapters of your proposed report outline (item #9, below) the data will help you to write. Also note the databases you anticipate using to identify appropriate literature.

Before you write this section, be sure to look over the guidelines for the Literature Review assignment, posted on the 298A website. Looking over these guidelines will help you to understand how you might use the results of a literature review to write your final Planning Report.

8. **Methods.** Describe the methods you plan to use to find the information that will allow you to answer your research question convincingly. Examples of methods you might use are statistical analysis of existing data sets, interviews, observations, or a survey.

When you design your methods, you should review at least one textbook to help you with this process. If you are using quantitative methods, for example, you can review relevant texts you read in URBP 204. If you plan to do a policy or program analysis, you should review relevant texts from URBP 236. For those of you working with qualitative methods, the URBP 297P syllabus provides suggested resources.

This section should be very detailed. Think of this section as analogous to writing a recipe that you want someone else to be able to follow. In essence, you are writing a plan, laying out each step of the data collection and analysis that you will do. Imagine writing out your methods in so much detail that you can give them as instructions to a research assistant who will do all the data collection and analysis for you. You do not want the research assistant to collect the wrong data because you provided vague instructions! Similarly, you want to describe your data analysis methods so clearly that an assistant could do the analysis for you if you gave him/her the raw data and the instructions written out in the research proposal.

The methods section of the research proposal will likely be at least 750 words and could be considerably longer.

For each method that you plan to use, at a minimum you must describe the following topics. Be sure to structure your writing using the following headings.
a) **Overview**: Provide a precise, one-sentence description of the data to be collected, the method you will use to collect it, and what you want to learn from this method. Here’s an example: “I will conduct a drop-off/mail-back survey of residents in the Twin Pines neighborhood of Forest Hills to learn what changes they would like to see in their local parks.” Or: “I will analyze 2009 National Household Travel Survey data to look for correlations between socio-demographic factors and patterns of walking and biking.”

b) **Reason for collecting the data**: Explain how the data collected will help you to answer your research question.

When writing this section, note which specific chapters of your proposed report outline (item #9, below) the data will help you to write.

c) **Data collection procedures**: Explain these in as much detail as you possibly can. For example, if you plan to do interviews, you would at a minimum write down what type of people you will interview, how many interviews you will conduct, whether you will do phone or in-person interviews, how you will contact the interviewees, how you will record the interviews, how you will prepare transcripts, and what specific information you want to collect from the interviews. Remember the recipe analogy—a good recipe does not just say “cook the eggplants”; it says something more like, “roast the eggplants for 45 minutes, wrapped in foil, in a pre-heated 350 degree oven.”

d) **Method of data analysis**: Explain what methods you will use to analyze the data after you collect it. For example, you might plan to analyze statistical data using simple descriptive statistics and factorial ANOVA analysis. For interview data, you might analyze how the interviewees spoke about certain key themes that you identify as the focus of your research, as well as looking at whether men and women held different perspectives.

9. **Report outline**. Write a very detailed outline of the report, as you imagine it might look when you are finished. Include all chapters, as well as at least one or two levels of sub-headings giving more detail for each chapter. Also, for each chapter note in parentheses the number of pages you estimate it will be.

Remember that to prepare a good outline, you must write very specific headings like, “History of how San Jose zoning codes have become more detailed in the last 20 years.” Do not include vague headings like “Background” or “History of the zoning code” that do not tell your readers anything about the specific content you plan to discuss. Also, do not include a level of sub-headings if you have only one item listed. (In other words, you do not need an “a” heading unless you have a point “b” that comes with it.)

10. **Bibliography**. Create a bibliography divided into three parts: (a) items you cite in the research proposal, (b) other relevant items you have already read, and (c) items you have identified that look useful and that you plan to read. The bibliography can include any type of item: books, journal articles, magazine articles, newspaper articles, government reports, web pages, etc. Put an asterisk (*) at the beginning of each item that is a peer-reviewed journal article.

Make sure the entries in the bibliography are properly formatted according to the standards set out in the syllabus.
11. **Schedule of tasks.** Prepare a two-semester schedule that identifies when you will finish each task needed to complete the Planning Report. Keep in mind that tasks to schedule include, but are not limited to: library research for the literature review, testing and refining your research methodology, collecting data, drafting individual chapters, revising individual chapters, preparing two drafts of the complete Planning Report for your adviser’s review, and producing the final Planning Report.

Be sure to indicate the specific report section(s) you plan to write about for the 4,000 word assignment (due May 13).

For now, you can anticipate that the first draft of your final Planning Report will be due on October 12, 2015, the second draft will be due on November 9, 2015, and the final Planning Report in PDF format (and saved on a CD) will be due on December 8, 2015.

To submit your work, upload your draft proposal in MS Word format to the Assignments tab in Canvas (sjsu.instructure.com).

Note that the draft must provide complete information for all 11 sections. Advisers will not provide feedback on incomplete drafts.

**Final Research Proposal (due February 23)**

Prepare a final research proposal that incorporates all the feedback you received from your adviser.

Upload the final research proposal in MS Word format to the Assignments tab in Canvas (sjsu.instructure.com).

**Grading**

**Draft:** You will receive comments from your adviser on the following criteria:

1. Does the proposal contain all required elements and otherwise follow the instructions?

2. Is the proposal internally consistent? A key element for a successful research project relies on ensuring that the research question, methods, and report outline are all consistent. (Hint: As you work on your research proposal, carefully review these three sections in particular to make sure that you see consistency across all three. If you find that the pieces do not fit together well, there is a problem with your research question, your methods, your outline, or any combination thereof.)

3. Is the research question well defined and clearly stated?

4. Is the hypothesis clearly stated and convincingly explained, and does the section cite at least five sources, including at least two peer-reviewed journal articles?

5. Is the relevance of the research clearly and convincingly explained, and does the section cite at least ten sources in total, including at least four peer-reviewed journal articles?

6. Does the literature review section include 3 or 4 questions relevant to the project that can realistically be answered by reviewing research literature?

7. Is the methodology appropriate to answer the research question, and is it explained in detail?

8. Is the report outline detailed and logical?
9. Does the bibliography demonstrate that sufficient material is available to complete the research project?
10. Is the proposed schedule of tasks detailed and feasible?
11. Is the writing grammatically correct and free of typos?
12. Is the writing clear and easy to understand?
13. Are the bibliography and footnotes properly formatted, and are citations included where necessary?

**Final:** Your adviser will assess the paper using the criteria above and also assign a letter grade.

| To pass the course, you must receive a grade of B or higher on the final research proposal. |

**Note on late papers:** Be sure to submit the assignments on time, as late submissions may result in substantially delayed feedback from your adviser.