

## The Misplacement of Problem Statement in Social Science Research

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines why the statement of problem, despite being recognised as the cornerstone of any research design, is often absent, vague or weak in social science research. Drawing on a qualitative documentary approach, it analyses methodology textbooks, journal articles, institutional reports, university guides and professional resources to identify how weak or missing problem statements manifest in practice and why this persists. The review shows that common issues include vague or overly broad formulations, confusion between topic, problem and purpose, lack of a convincing "So what?", overuse of jargon and quotations, and insufficient grounding in the literature, with empirical evidence (such as REPOA's low proposal acceptance rates) indicating that problem formulation is a systemic weakness rather than an isolated difficulty. To explain these recurrent deficiencies, the study mobilises three complementary theoretical lenses: academic socialisation, academic literacies and sociocultural learning theory. Together, these perspectives suggest that the weaknesses of problem statements arise from unequal and incomplete socialisation into the norms of research design, tensions between students' existing literacy practices and the implicit expectations of academic discourse, and limited mentoring and scaffolding within supervisory and institutional structures. The paper concludes that improving problem formulation requires moving beyond purely technical "how-to" advice towards structural, curricular and supervisory reforms that explicitly teach, model and assess the statement of problem as a central component of research training.*

**Keywords:** problem statement; research design; academic socialisation; academic literacies; sociocultural learning; research training; proposal writing

### **Introduction**

In the social and behavioural sciences, research is typically framed around examining a problem that needs to be understood and resolved in order to improve society and the human condition (University of Southern California Library, 2024). A research problem is defined as "a definite, clear expression about an area of concern, a condition to be improved upon, a difficulty to be eliminated, or a troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or within existing practice that points to a need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation" (University of Southern California Library, 2024). In this context, the statement of problem stands as the cornerstone of any research endeavour. As Leedy and Ormrod (2005, as cited in Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023) affirm, the problem statement is the hub that holds

the entire research design together. It introduces the reader to the importance of the topic, anchors the research questions and hypotheses, places the topic into a specific context, and provides the framework for reporting results (Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019). In essence, the problem statement establishes the means by which researchers must answer the critical "So What?" question demonstrating not only a thorough review of the literature but also a careful consideration of its significance and implications for generating new knowledge (Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019).

Despite its foundational role, understanding and writing a problem statement remains one of the most challenging tasks for novice researchers, whether for a dissertation, thesis, or journal article (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023). Many students undertaking tertiary studies do not really know where to start; they often spend hours trying to develop a jargon-loaded topic aimed at impressing their supervisors, frequently formulating a sophisticated topic from their own "imagined research gap" or "personal opinion" rather than from a rigorous literature review (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023). Such candidates remain oblivious to the fact that any research endeavour owes its genesis to a meaningful problem statement and nothing else (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023). Empirical evidence corroborates this difficulty: a study by REPOA analysing 240 research proposals submitted between 2000 and 2004 found that only 16% were accepted outright, while 38% were rejected outright, with the remainder requiring revisions (REPOA, 2007). This low acceptance rate reflects widespread deficiencies in problem formulation among researchers across disciplines.

The consequences of a weak or absent problem statement are far-reaching. Common errors include: failing to get to the point and introducing the study with tedious length; making the reader believe the answer is already known; covering extraneous issues irrelevant to the topic; being inconsistent between the problem, purpose, and research questions; stating what "should" be done rather than what the researcher wants to know; using unnecessary technical language and jargon; using extensive quotations that disrupt the logical flow; making unsupported claims not grounded in theory or literature; and engaging in personal reflections or editorialising (Elk Consulting, 2020). Similarly, Goh (2022) identifies additional pitfalls: lack of a compelling reason for the research, failure to persuade readers of the problem's significance, lack of clarity pervading the dissertation, poor topic choice, failure to establish a nexus between the problem and the research, and ultimately, failure to develop a clear problem statement. In the academic community, as Goh (2022) notes, "there is always a clear purpose statement but there is never a clear problem statement."

The impact of these deficiencies extends beyond individual research projects. A well-defined problem statement sets a clear research direction, ensures proposal coherence, demonstrates relevance and urgency, facilitates effective communication, guides methodological choices, and provides a benchmark for success (SF Edit, 2024). Conversely, when the problem statement is weak or missing, the entire research design suffers: objectives become unclear, methodology may be inappropriate, and results lose significance. Furthermore, inadequate training and mentorship compound the problem. Research indicates that doctoral advisors often adopt mentoring styles based on their own experience as PhD students, and a lack of training or preparation by institutions leaves the task of acquiring mentoring skills to the individual faculty member (Knox et al., as cited in Young et al., 2019). This gap in structured guidance contributes to the persistent difficulty students face in formulating research problems.

On this basis, the present study addresses the following research questions: How does the absence or weakness of the statement of problem manifest in social science research? And why does this critical element remain frequently neglected in academic work whether due to

inadequate methodological training, conceptual confusion between theme, subject, and problem, time pressures, mimicry of flawed models, or local academic cultures?

This paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the materials and methods employed; followed by a literature review examining existing scholarship on problem statement formulation; then a theoretical framework situating the analysis within relevant epistemological and pedagogical perspectives; subsequently, the findings and discussion section analyses the manifestations and causes of the problem; and finally, the conclusion and recommendations offer practical guidance for improving the formulation of problem statements in social science research.

## Materials and Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in documentary and critical analysis. Given the theoretical nature of the research topic examining how and why the statement of problem is frequently missing or poorly formulated in social science research the methodology relies exclusively on secondary sources rather than primary data collection.

The corpus mobilised for this study includes: (1) specialised academic works and methodology textbooks, particularly those addressing research design and problem formulation in the social sciences (Creswell, 2008; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Clarke et al.); (2) peer-reviewed journal articles examining the challenges faced by novice researchers in developing problem statements (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023); (3) institutional and organisational reports providing empirical data on research proposal quality and acceptance rates (REPOA, 2007); (4) university library guides offering practical guidance on research problem formulation (University of Southern California Library, 2024; Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019); and (5) professional resources documenting common errors in problem statement writing (Elk Consulting, 2020; Goh, 2022; SF Edit, 2024).

The analytical method consists of two complementary approaches. First, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify and categorise the various manifestations of weak or absent problem statements in social science research, as well as the factors contributing to this phenomenon. This involved systematically reviewing the selected literature to extract recurring themes related to both the "how" (forms of deficiency) and the "why" (underlying causes) of the problem. Second, a comparative analysis was employed to juxtapose the normative prescriptions found in methodology literature (i.e., what a good problem statement should contain) against the documented errors and shortcomings observed in actual research practice. This comparison enables a clearer understanding of the gap between theoretical expectations and empirical realities.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the interpretation, triangulation was applied by cross-checking information across multiple sources. Findings were considered robust only when corroborated by at least two independent sources from different categories (e.g., academic articles, institutional reports, and university guides).

This methodological approach has certain limitations. The absence of primary empirical data such as surveys or interviews with students, supervisors, or reviewers means that the analysis depends entirely on previously published works. Consequently, the study is subject to potential biases inherent in the sources consulted, including variations in quality, objectivity, and temporal relevance. Furthermore, the focus on English-language sources may limit the generalizability of findings to other linguistic and academic contexts. Despite these limitations, the documentary and critical approach adopted here provides an in-depth, contextualised, and

theoretically grounded examination of why the statement of problem remains a persistent challenge in social science research.

## Literature Review

The scholarly literature on research methodology consistently emphasises the centrality of the problem statement in the research process. According to Hatipone and Machiridza (2023), the problem statement is the cornerstone of any research and serves as the hub that holds the entire research design together. This view echoes Leedy and Ormrod (2005), who argue that without a well-articulated problem, the research lacks direction and coherence. The University of Southern California Library (2024) defines a research problem as "a definite, clear expression about an area of concern, a condition to be improved upon, a difficulty to be eliminated, or a troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or within existing practice that points to a need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation." This definition underscores the dual function of the problem statement: identifying a gap in knowledge and justifying the need for scholarly attention.

A critical distinction exists between the problem statement and related concepts such as the purpose statement and research questions. Hatipone and Machiridza (2023) note that these elements are often conflated by scholars, yet they serve distinct functions. The problem statement identifies and contextualises the issue to be investigated; the purpose statement indicates what the study hopes to achieve; and the research questions help streamline the inquiry after the problem has been identified. This sequencing is essential for maintaining coherence throughout the research design.

The literature also specifies the attributes of a well-formulated problem statement. According to Point (2019), an effective problem statement must: (1) introduce the reader to the importance of the topic; (2) anchor the research questions, hypotheses, or assumptions; (3) place the topic into a particular context that defines the parameters of investigation; and (4) provide the framework for reporting results. Furthermore, the problem statement must answer the "So What?" question demonstrating not merely that the literature has been reviewed but that its significance and implications for new knowledge have been thoroughly considered (Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019). To survive this relevancy test, problem statements should possess clarity and precision, demonstrate a researchable topic, identify what will be studied without value-laden terms, articulate the study's boundaries and limitations, and convey the study's importance and justification (Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019).

SF Edit (2024) further elaborates on the impact of a well-defined problem statement, arguing that it: sets a clear research direction, enhances proposal coherence, demonstrates relevance and urgency, facilitates effective communication, guides methodological choices, and provides a benchmark for measuring research success. A strong problem statement acts as a compass for the entire research journey, ensuring that every aspect of the proposal from the literature review to the methodology aligns with a specific goal (SF Edit, 2024).

Despite this consensus on the importance of the problem statement, the literature reveals significant deficiencies in its formulation among novice researchers. Hatipone and Machiridza (2023) observe that understanding and writing a problem statement remains one of the most challenging tasks for early-stage scholars. Many students do not know where to start and often formulate topics from their own "imagined research gap" or "personal opinion" rather than

from a rigorous literature review. This results in sophisticated but unsupported topics that fail to meet scholarly standards. The identification of the research problem is described as "one of the most difficult and important parts of the entire research process," consuming considerable time as researchers move back and forth until a clear picture emerges (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023).

Empirical evidence corroborates these difficulties. A study by REPOA (2007) analysing 240 research proposals submitted between 2000 and 2004 found that only 16% were accepted outright, while 38% were rejected outright and the remainder required revisions. Although acceptance rates improved over time with outright rejection declining from 65% in 2000 to 21% in 2004 this was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in outright acceptance but rather by more proposals being accepted with minor or major revisions (REPOA, 2007). This suggests incremental improvement in proposal writing competence, possibly attributable to experience gained over time and capacity-building initiatives, yet fundamental challenges in problem formulation persist.

The literature documents numerous common errors in problem statement formulation. Elk Consulting (2020) identifies the following pitfalls: failing to get to the point by introducing the study with tedious length; making the reader believe the answer is already known; covering extraneous issues irrelevant to the topic; being inconsistent between the problem, purpose, and research questions; stating what "should" be done rather than what the researcher wants to know; writing in "dissertationese" rather than clear English; using unnecessary technical language and jargon; relying on extensive quotations that disrupt logical flow; making unsupported claims not grounded in theory or literature; and engaging in personal reflections or editorialising. Similarly, Goh (2022) highlights additional shortcomings: lack of a compelling reason for the research, failure to persuade readers of the problem's significance, lack of clarity pervading the dissertation, poor topic choice, failure to establish a nexus between the problem and the research basis, and ultimately, failure to develop a clear problem statement. As Goh (2022) pointedly observes, in the academic community "there is always a clear purpose statement but there is never a clear problem statement."

The causes of these deficiencies remain insufficiently explored in the literature. While authors extensively describe what constitutes a good problem statement and document common errors, few studies systematically investigate why these errors persist. Young et al. (2019) provide some insight by noting that doctoral advisors often adopt mentoring styles based on their own experience as PhD students, and that a lack of training or preparation by institutions leaves the acquisition of mentoring skills to individual faculty members. This gap in structured pedagogical guidance may contribute to the persistent difficulty students face in formulating research problems. However, comprehensive studies examining the institutional, pedagogical, and epistemological factors underlying weak problem statements remain scarce.

In summary, the existing literature provides substantial guidance on the definition, attributes, and importance of the problem statement in social science research. It also documents the prevalence of errors and deficiencies in problem formulation among novice researchers. However, significant gaps remain in understanding the root causes of these deficiencies—whether related to inadequate methodological training, conceptual confusion, time pressures, mimicry of flawed models, or local academic cultures. It is precisely these blind spots that the present study seeks to address, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how and why the statement of problem is frequently missing in social science research.

## Theoretical Framework

To analyse how and why the statement of problem is frequently missing or poorly formulated in social science research, this study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: academic socialisation, academic literacies, and sociocultural learning theory.

**Academic Socialisation and the Structure of the Academic Field:** The first perspective builds on Bourdieu's (1988) sociology of the academic field. According to this framework, higher education operates as a specific "field" governed by implicit rules, norms and expectations. Mastering these rules including the ability to formulate a research problem recognised as legitimate requires the acquisition of specific forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Students with limited exposure to research culture, fewer role models, or inadequate guidance about academic codes are less likely to develop the habitus aligned with disciplinary expectations. From this viewpoint, the recurrent absence or weakness of problem statements reflects unequal access to academic capital and tacit field norms, rather than individual failure alone.

**Academic Literacies:** The second framework draws on the academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998), which conceptualises student writing not as a neutral technical skill but as a situated social practice shaped by power relations, disciplinary conventions and institutional cultures. The problem statement is not merely a formal paragraph; it is a site where knowledge is constructed, research gaps are negotiated, and the writer positions themselves within scholarly discourse. Many documented weaknesses such as vague formulations, overuse of jargon, or reliance on personal opinion can be understood as symptoms of tension between students' existing literacy practices and the often implicit expectations of academic writing. Novice researchers may treat the problem statement as a formulaic requirement rather than a genuine epistemic move requiring critical engagement with the literature.

**Sociocultural Learning and Communities of Practice:** The third perspective is rooted in sociocultural theories of learning, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice. Formulating a research problem is a complex, higher-order cognitive activity that develops through guided participation, scaffolding and legitimate peripheral participation in a research community. When supervision is inconsistent, mentoring informal, or expectations remain implicit, students may never receive the structured, iterative feedback needed to internalise what a robust problem statement looks like. The recurring weakness of problem statements can thus be read as a consequence of insufficient scaffolding and limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in communities where problematisation is explicitly discussed and modelled.

In synthesis: Together, these three frameworks offer a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon. Academic socialisation highlights structural inequalities and the role of the academic field; academic literacies foregrounds writing as a socially situated practice; and sociocultural learning underlines the importance of mentoring and scaffolding. This combined lens supports an interpretation of the problem not as a simple technical deficit but as the outcome of broader institutional, cultural and pedagogical dynamics shaping how research problems are learned, taught and valued.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the main findings of the documentary analysis in two steps. The first examines how the absence or weakness of the statement of problem manifests itself in social science research. The second discusses why these weaknesses persist, using the three theoretical lenses outlined above.

### **How the problem manifests ?**

The literature shows a high frequency of vague, overly broad or poorly focused problem statements in student work and research proposals. Hatipone and Machiridza (2023) note that many novice researchers formulate topics on the basis of an “imagined research gap” or personal opinion, rather than on systematic engagement with the literature, which leads to sophisticated-sounding topics that lack a clearly documented problem. REPOA’s analysis of 240 proposals submitted between 2000 and 2004 illustrates the consequences of such weaknesses: only 16% of proposals were accepted outright, while 38% were rejected outright and the remainder required minor or major revisions (REPOA, 2007). Although rejection rates decreased over time, this was due mainly to an increase in conditionally accepted proposals, indicating that fundamental issues in proposal writing especially problem formulation remained pervasive.

Several recurrent patterns emerge from the documentation of common errors. Elk Consulting (2020) highlights tendencies such as failing to get to the point, making the reader believe the answer is already known, covering extraneous but irrelevant issues, and stating what “we should do” instead of what the researcher wants to know. These practices blur the distinction between problem, purpose and research questions, and result in texts that resemble position papers more than research proposals. Similarly, Goh (2022) identifies a lack of compelling justification for the study, insufficient persuasion that the problem deserves investigation, and a weak nexus between the stated problem and the designed study. In many cases, there is a clear purpose statement but no equally clear problem statement (Goh, 2022).

The technical qualities of problem statements are also frequently deficient. University guides emphasise that a robust problem statement should demonstrate clarity and precision, identify a researchable issue, define boundaries and limitations, and convincingly answer the “So what?” question (Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019; University of Southern California Library, 2024). Yet many examples documented in the literature fall short: they rely excessively on jargon, contain long descriptive passages without explicit articulation of the problem, or offer lists of citations without a coherent line of argument (Elk Consulting, 2020). Instead of delineating a specific, literature-grounded problem, such texts provide diffuse background that leaves the reader uncertain about what is actually at stake.

### **Why the problem persists ?**

Using the theoretical framework, these manifestations can be interpreted as the outcome of deeper structural, cultural and pedagogical dynamics rather than as isolated technical errors. From the perspective of academic socialisation, the ability to formulate a strong problem statement depends on access to the implicit rules and forms of capital that structure the academic field (Bourdieu, 1988). Students who lack early exposure to research practices, who do not have supervisors modelling rigorous problematisation, or who come from educational trajectories where critical engagement with literature was limited may enter postgraduate studies without the habitus required to “see” and articulate researchable problems. The persistent confusion between topic, problem and purpose documented by Hatipone and Machiridza (2023), Elk Consulting (2020) and Goh (2022) can thus be understood as a symptom of incomplete socialisation into the norms of research design.

The academic literacies perspective further suggests that weak problem statements reflect tensions between students’ existing writing practices and the often tacit conventions of academic discourse. Lea and Street (1998) argue that student writing is a social practice shaped by power relations and institutional expectations. In the case of problem statements, novice researchers may be encouraged explicitly or implicitly to demonstrate originality, sophistication or alignment with fashionable themes, without being shown how to translate

these pressures into a precise, literature-based research problem. This can lead to the production of jargon-heavy, citation-dense paragraphs that aim to sound “academic” but fail to articulate a clear problem or research gap. The errors identified by Elk Consulting (2020) and Goh (2022) over-reliance on quotations, abstruse arguments, and lack of clear justification are consistent with this interpretation.

Sociocultural theories of learning and mentoring add a third layer of explanation. Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development and Lave and Wenger’s concept of communities of practice highlight the importance of guided participation and scaffolding for mastering complex academic tasks (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Empirical work on doctoral education shows that supervisors often adopt mentoring styles based on their own experience and may receive little formal training in advising and mentoring (Young et al., 2019). In such contexts, the teaching of problem formulation may remain implicit, fragmented or subordinated to technical questions of method and data. Students are then left to infer what a problem statement should look like from limited feedback, template documents or peers’ theses, which can entrench weak models. The high proportion of proposals requiring major revision in REPOA’s data (REPOA, 2007) suggests that, even when institutional capacity-building efforts exist, systematic, iterative scaffolding around problem formulation is often lacking.

Taken together, these findings support the idea that the frequent absence or weakness of problem statements in social science research is not merely a matter of individual carelessness or lack of talent. Rather, it reflects (1) unequal and incomplete academic socialisation into the norms of research design; (2) tensions between students’ literacy repertoires and the implicit conventions of academic writing; and (3) insufficient mentoring and scaffolding within supervisory and institutional structures. Recognising these underlying dynamics is essential for moving beyond purely technical “tips and tricks” towards more structural and pedagogical responses aimed at strengthening the central place of the problem statement in social science research.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the paradox that, although the statement of problem is widely recognised as the cornerstone of any research design, it remains frequently absent, vague or weak in social science work. The literature shows that many novice researchers formulate topics on the basis of personal impressions rather than rigorous engagement with the literature, and that proposals suffer from diffuse backgrounds, lack of a clear “So what?” and confusion between topic, problem and purpose (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023; Elk Consulting, 2020; Goh, 2022; Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019; University of Southern California Library, 2024; REPOA, 2007). The high proportion of proposals requiring major revision or outright rejection, as documented in empirical studies such as the REPOA analysis, confirms that problem formulation is a systemic weakness rather than an isolated difficulty (REPOA, 2007). By mobilising three complementary theoretical lenses academic socialisation, academic literacies and sociocultural learning this article has argued that these weaknesses are best understood as the outcome of broader structural, cultural and pedagogical dynamics (Bourdieu, 1988; Lea & Street, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Unequal access to the tacit norms of the academic field, tensions between students’ existing literacy practices and disciplinary expectations, and insufficient mentoring and scaffolding in doctoral and master’s programmes all contribute to the persistent absence or weakness of problem statements (Young et al., 2019; Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023). Rather than attributing the problem solely to individual shortcomings, the findings highlight the need to rethink how problem formulation is taught, modelled and valued within institutions. In doing so, this study contributes to the

literature in two ways. First, it brings together methodological guidance, empirical evidence on proposal quality, and sociological and pedagogical theory to offer an integrated explanation of why the statement of problem is so often missing in social science research. Second, it shifts the focus from purely technical “how-to” advice towards a more structural understanding of the conditions under which researchers learn or fail to learn to identify and articulate research-worthy problems. This perspective opens space for institutional, curricular and supervisory reforms aimed at strengthening problem formulation as a central, explicitly taught component of research training.

## Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, several recommendations can be made for different actors in the academic field.

- **For universities and departments**, there is a need to make the teaching of problem formulation an explicit and assessed component of research training. Methodology courses should devote specific sessions to the structure and functions of the statement of problem, with concrete examples of strong and weak formulations and opportunities for students to draft, receive feedback on and revise their own problem statements (Point Loma Nazarene University Library, 2019; University of Southern California Library, 2024). Evaluation grids for theses and proposals should include clear criteria related to the clarity, justification and feasibility of the stated problem, thereby signalling its centrality in the research process. Institutions can also build capacity by offering workshops for staff on supervising and assessing problem statements, rather than assuming that all supervisors spontaneously possess these skills (Young et al., 2019).
- **For supervisors and mentors**, the literature suggests the importance of providing structured, iterative scaffolding around problem formulation. This includes explicitly distinguishing between topic, problem, purpose and research questions; modelling how to move from a broad area of interest to a precise, literature-grounded problem; and giving targeted feedback on successive drafts of the problem statement (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023; Elk Consulting, 2020; Goh, 2022). Supervisors should treat the statement of problem not as a preliminary formality but as a central object of supervision, revisiting it throughout the project as the student’s understanding of the field evolves. Creating opportunities for collective discussion of problem statements in research seminars or writing groups can also strengthen communities of practice where problematisation is shared, critiqued and refined (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lea & Street, 1998).
- **For students and early-career researchers**, the findings underline the need to approach problem formulation as a demanding intellectual task rather than a box to tick. This implies investing time in systematic, critical reading of the literature, focusing on how published articles articulate their research problems, and practising the formulation of concise statements that clearly identify a gap, justify its importance, and delimit the scope of the study (Hatipone & Machiridza, 2023; SF Edit, 2024). Actively seeking feedback on draft problem statements from supervisors, peers and writing support services is crucial, as is being willing to revise initial ideas in light of evidence, rather than clinging to preconceived topics. In this way, learning to write a robust statement of problem becomes part of a broader process of entering, with increasing confidence and legitimacy, into the community of social science researchers.

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