



Clients Focused. Results Driven

Tobit Research Consulting



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CONCEPT PAPER TRAINING

TOBIT RESEARCH CONSULTING

Presenter:



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PRESENTATION ROADMAP

What We Will Cover Today

A structured journey through the essential components of developing a rigorous and compelling concept paper.

01 Introduction

Understanding the critical importance of concept papers and common pitfalls to avoid.

02 Background Search

Mastering the art of topic selection through systematic literature review and gap identification.

03 Problem Statement

Crafting clear, evidence-based problem statements that establish research significance.

04 Research Objectives

Developing measurable objectives that directly address your research problem.

05 Practical Exercise

Hands-on application: Draft your own topic, identify gaps, write problem statements, and develop objectives.



01

Introduction

Understanding the Foundation of Strong Concept Papers

Why Concept Papers Matter



What is a Concept Paper?

A concept paper is a brief document that outlines the essential elements of a proposed research project before full proposal development. It serves as a preliminary blueprint that demonstrates the viability and significance of your research idea.



When is it Required?

- Before developing a full research proposal
- When seeking initial supervisor approval
- For grant funding applications
- During thesis/dissertation planning phase



What Supervisors & Funders Look For

1

Clear Research Focus

A well-defined topic with precise boundaries and identifiable variables that can be systematically studied.

2

Evidence of Gap

Demonstration that the research addresses a genuine gap in existing knowledge or practice.

3

Feasibility

Realistic scope considering time, resources, data availability, and methodological constraints.

4

Significance

Clear articulation of why the research matters and who will benefit from the findings.

5

Logical Structure

Coherent flow from background to problem to objectives, showing clear alignment between elements.

Common Mistakes Students Make

Choosing Topics Emotionally

The Mistake: Selecting topics based solely on personal interest without considering research viability, data availability, or academic significance.

Impact: Leads to unfocused research, difficulty finding literature, and potential project failure.

Writing Background Without Focus

The Mistake: Creating lengthy background sections that describe general context without clearly leading to the research problem.

Impact: Confuses readers, obscures the research gap, and weakens the overall argument.

Weak Problem Statements

The Mistake: Stating problems as complaints or observations without evidence, clear scope, or articulation of consequences.

Impact: Fails to establish research necessity and undermines the entire proposal's credibility.

Objectives That Don't Match Problem

The Mistake: Developing research objectives that are misaligned with the stated problem or investigate different variables.

Impact: Creates logical inconsistency, making it impossible to adequately address the research problem.

Additional Critical Errors

- Ignoring feasibility constraints (time, budget, access)
- Failing to demonstrate significance or contribution
- Using vague or immeasurable objectives
- Neglecting to cite current literature (last 5 years)

Key Takeaway: Awareness of these common pitfalls is the first step toward developing a strong concept paper. Each section of this presentation addresses how to avoid these mistakes systematically.

02

Background Search for Topic Selection

The Critical Foundation Where Most Students Fail

Characteristics of a Strong Research Topic



Researchable

Can be investigated using systematic research methods within available constraints



Relevant

Addresses current academic, practical, or policy needs in the field



Feasible

Achievable given time, resources, expertise, and access limitations



Clear Variables

Independent and dependent variables are explicitly defined and measurable



Data Availability

Required data sources are accessible and sufficient for analysis



The Interconnection of Characteristics

A strong research topic must satisfy ALL five characteristics simultaneously. A topic may be highly relevant but not feasible due to data constraints. Another may be researchable but lack clear variables, making it impossible to develop testable hypotheses.

Example of Strong Topic: "Effect of mobile banking adoption on financial inclusion among rural populations in Kenya"

Why It Works: Clear variables (mobile banking → financial inclusion), data available (CBK reports), feasible scope (rural Kenya), highly relevant

Where Research Topics Come From

1 Industry Problems

Real-world challenges faced by businesses, organizations, or sectors that require evidence-based solutions.

Example: High employee turnover in the hospitality sector → "Factors influencing employee retention in 4-star hotels in Nairobi"

2 Policy Gaps

Unaddressed areas in existing policies or the need to evaluate policy effectiveness in specific contexts.

Example: Universal Health Coverage implementation challenges → "Barriers to UHC enrollment among informal sector workers"

3 Literature Gaps

Identified deficiencies in existing research through systematic literature review—missing variables, contexts, or methods.

Example: Most studies on e-commerce focus on urban areas → "Adoption of e-commerce platforms among rural SMEs"

4 Professional Exposure

Personal work experience revealing patterns, problems, or opportunities that warrant systematic investigation.

Example: Teacher observing student engagement issues → "Impact of gamification on mathematics performance in secondary schools"

Emerging Trends

5

New developments in technology, society, or the economy that create novel research opportunities. Example: Rise of AI tools → "Effect of ChatGPT usage on academic writing skills among university students"

Conducting Effective Background Search

What is Background Search?

- ✓ **Preliminary literature review** to understand the current state of knowledge
- ✓ **Situational scanning** of the research landscape in your area of interest
- ✓ **Identifying trends** in methodologies, variables, and theoretical frameworks
- ✓ **Gap identification** to position your research contribution

Key Sources for Background Search

Academic Databases

- Google Scholar (broad coverage)
- Scopus (peer-reviewed focus)
- JSTOR (humanities & social sciences)
- PubMed (health sciences)

Statistical Data

- KNBS (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics)
- CBK (Central Bank of Kenya)
- WHO, World Bank databases
- Sector-specific data repositories

Policy & Reports

- Government policy documents
- NGO and institutional reports
- International organization publications
- Industry white papers

Institutional Sources

- University research repositories
- Corporate annual reports
- Professional association publications
- Conference proceedings

Strategic Reading: What to Focus On

1

Current Issues

Focus on last 5 years

2

Variables Studied

What relationships exist

3

Context

Where studies conducted

4

Findings

What was discovered

5

Gaps

What's missing

Identifying Research Gaps

1 Geographical Gap

Location-based deficiency

Definition: Research has been conducted in other locations but not in your specific geographical area of interest.

Example: "Most studies on mobile money adoption focus on East Africa, with limited research in West African contexts."

2 Methodological Gap

Approach-based deficiency

Definition: Existing studies use limited or inappropriate methods; alternative approaches could yield different insights.

Example: "Previous research relies solely on quantitative surveys; qualitative exploration of user experiences is lacking."

3 Theoretical Gap

Framework-based deficiency

Definition: Theories or models have not been tested in specific contexts, or competing theories need reconciliation.

Example: "Technology Acceptance Model has not been validated in developing country healthcare settings."

4 Contextual Gap

Setting-based deficiency

Definition: Research exists but in different contexts (populations, sectors, organizational types) than your focus area.

Example: "Leadership studies concentrate on large corporations; SME contexts remain underexplored."

5 Variable Gap

Definition: Relationships between specific variables have not been examined, or moderating/mediating factors are unexplored. **Example:** "While job satisfaction and performance are linked, the role of organizational culture as a mediator is understudied."

From Idea to Researchable Topic

The Topic Refinement Process

1 TOO BROAD

"Digital banking"

- ✘ Impossible to research—no clear focus, variables, or boundaries



2 NARROWER

"Digital banking and customer satisfaction"

- ⊖ Better, but still vague—no specific relationship or context defined



3 RESEARCHABLE

"Effect of digital banking adoption on customer trust among commercial banks in Kenya"

- ✔ Clear IV → DV relationship, specific population, geographical scope

Feasibility Checklist

Access to Respondents

Can you reach and recruit your target population? Do you have contacts or entry points?

Time Constraints

Can the study be completed within your program timeline or funding period?

Budget

Are resources available for data collection, tools, travel, and analysis?

Ethical Concerns

Can you obtain ethical approval? Are there sensitive populations or data issues?

Final Topic Checklist

Clear independent and dependent variables identified

Specific geographical or organizational context defined

Research gap clearly articulated from literature

Data sources accessible and sufficient

Scope manageable within available resources

Significance and contribution clearly stated

03

Writing the Problem Statement

Crafting a Clear, Evidence-Based Research Problem

What is a Problem Statement?

Definition

A problem statement is a **clear, concise description of a researchable issue** that identifies the gap between the current state and desired state, supported by evidence and articulating the consequences of inaction.

Key Characteristic: It transforms a general observation into a specific, investigable question that your research will answer.

What It Is NOT

Not a Topic

"Digital banking" is a topic, not a problem. It lacks specificity, variables, and context.

Not a Complaint

"Many customers are unhappy with digital banking services" is a complaint without evidence or researchability.

Not a Question

"Why do customers prefer digital banking?" is a research question, not a problem statement.

The 4-Part Structure

1 Ideal Situation

What should be happening or what is theoretically expected.

2 Current Situation

What is actually happening, supported by evidence and data.

3 The Gap

The specific discrepancy between ideal and current situations.

4 Consequences

The negative outcomes if the problem remains unaddressed.

Writing Strong Problem Statements

✘ WEAK EXAMPLE

“Many banks are adopting digital banking but customers are not satisfied with the services. This study will investigate digital banking in Kenya.”

- ⚠ No specific variables or relationships
- ⚠ Lacks supporting evidence or statistics
- ⚠ Vague scope—“digital banking” too broad
- ⚠ No clear gap or consequences stated

✔ STRONG EXAMPLE

“While digital banking adoption in Kenya’s commercial banks has increased by 340% since 2018 (CBK, 2023), customer trust remains low with 67% of users expressing security concerns (FinAccess, 2022). This gap threatens financial inclusion goals and bank competitiveness. This study examines the effect of digital banking security features on customer trust...”

- ✔ Clear variables: security features → trust
- ✔ Supported by specific statistics and sources
- ✔ Specific context: commercial banks in Kenya
- ✔ Articulates gap and consequences

🔍 What Supervisors Look For

- 1 Evidence & Statistics**
Concrete data from credible sources demonstrating the problem exists
- 2 Clear Gap Articulation**
Explicit statement of what is missing or problematic in current knowledge/practice
- 3 Logical Flow**
Seamless progression from context → evidence → gap → significance
- 4 Researchable Scope**
Problem that can be addressed with available methods and resources

📋 Problem Statement Checklist

- ✔ Does it identify specific variables?
- ✔ Is it supported by recent evidence?
- ✔ Does it clearly articulate the gap?
- ✔ Are consequences of inaction stated?
- ✔ Is the context (where/who) specified?
- ✔ Can it be addressed with your methods?
- ✔ Does it lead logically to objectives?

04

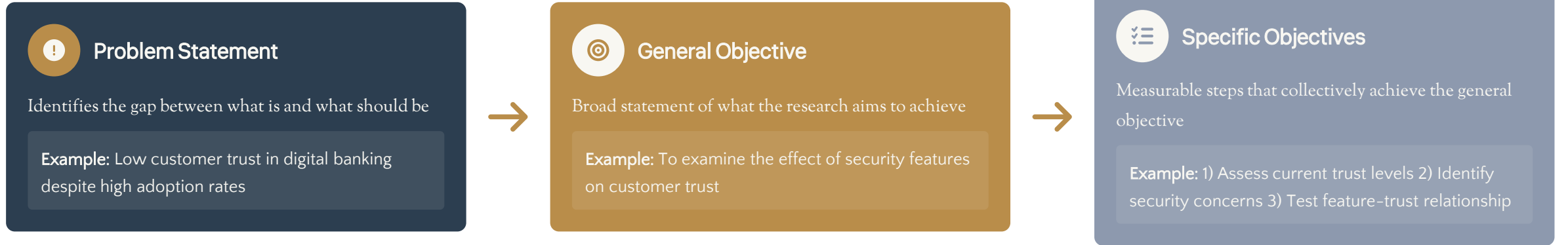


Developing Research Objectives

Creating Measurable, Aligned Research Goals

Linking Objectives to the Problem

The Logical Flow



General Objective Structure

Standard Formula

"To examine the effect of **X** on **Y** in **Z**."

- X** Independent Variable (what you manipulate/measure)
- Y** Dependent Variable (what you observe/measure as outcome)
- Z** Context (population, location, setting)

Specific Objectives Requirements

- Measurable**
 - Must be quantifiable or observable—use metrics, indicators, or clear outcomes
- Aligned to Variables**
 - Each objective should address specific variables identified in the problem
- Clear Action Verbs**
 - Use precise verbs: assess, determine, examine, compare, analyze, evaluate
- Collectively Comprehensive**
 - Together, specific objectives should fully address the general objective

Common Mistakes in Objectives

✘ Vague or Immeasurable

"To understand customer behavior"

Why It's Wrong: "Understand" is subjective and cannot be measured. What aspects of behavior? How will you measure understanding?

✔ Revised: Clear & Measurable

"To assess the frequency of mobile banking usage among rural customers"

Why It's Better: Specifies what (frequency), of what (mobile banking usage), and among whom (rural customers)—directly measurable.

✘ Too Many Objectives

Listing 8-10 specific objectives for a master's thesis

Why It's Wrong: Demonstrates unfocused scope. Each objective requires data collection and analysis—too many leads to superficial treatment.

✔ Revised: Focused Scope

3-5 specific objectives that directly map to research questions

Why It's Better: Allows adequate depth for each objective. Quality over quantity—better to thoroughly address fewer objectives.

⚠ Mismatched with Problem

Objectives investigate different variables than those identified in the problem statement

⚠ Weak Verbs

Using passive or unclear verbs: "to look at," "to consider," "to explore" (without specificity)

⚠ Methodology Confusion

Stating objectives that describe methods rather than outcomes: "To conduct surveys..."

Remember: Objectives are about **what you will achieve**, not how you will do it. They should be SMART: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound.

05

Practical Exercise

Apply What You've Learned

Practice Activity

Apply the concepts covered in this presentation to develop your own concept paper elements

1

Draft a Topic

Start with a broad area of interest and refine it using the characteristics of a strong research topic

2

Identify a Gap

Conduct a brief background search and identify one type of gap (geographical, methodological, etc.)

3

Write Problem Statement

Use the 4-part structure: ideal situation, current situation, gap, and consequences

4

Develop 3 Objectives

Create one general objective and three specific objectives aligned to your problem



Time Allocation: 15-20 minutes for drafting | 10 minutes for peer review