

Definition

Theories are formulated to explain, predict, and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumptions. The theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study. The theoretical framework introduces and describes the theory that explains why the research problem under study exists.

Reference: Abend, Gabriel. "The Meaning of Theory." *Sociological Theory* 26 (June 2008): 173–199; Swanson, Richard A. *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2013.

Importance of Theory

A theoretical framework consists of concepts and, together with their definitions and reference to relevant scholarly literature, existing theory that is used for your particular study. The theoretical framework must demonstrate an understanding of theories and concepts that are relevant to the topic of your research paper and that relate to the broader areas of knowledge being considered.

The theoretical framework is most often not something readily found within the literature. You must review course readings and pertinent research studies for theories and analytic models that are relevant to the research problem you are investigating. The selection of a theory should depend on its appropriateness, ease of application, and explanatory power.

The theoretical framework strengthens the study in the following ways:

1. An explicit statement of theoretical assumptions permits the reader to evaluate them critically.
2. The theoretical framework connects the researcher to existing knowledge. Guided by a relevant theory, you are given a basis for your hypotheses and choice of research methods.
3. Articulating the theoretical assumptions of a research study forces you to address questions of why and how. It permits you to intellectually transition from simply

describing a phenomenon you have observed to generalizing about various aspects of that phenomenon.

4. Having a theory helps you identify the limits to those generalizations. A theoretical framework specifies which key variables influence a phenomenon of interest and highlights the need to examine how those key variables might differ and under what circumstances.

By virtue of its applicative nature, good theory in the social sciences is of value precisely because it fulfills one primary purpose: to explain the meaning, nature, and challenges associated with a phenomenon, often experienced but unexplained in the world in which we live, so that we may use that knowledge and understanding to act in more informed and effective ways.

Reference : **The Conceptual Framework**. College of Education. Alabama State University; Corvellec, Hervé, ed. *What is Theory?: Answers from the Social and Cultural Sciences*. Stockholm: Copenhagen Business School Press, 2013; Asher, Herbert B. *Theory-Building and Data Analysis in the Social Sciences*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984; **Drafting an Argument**. Writing@CSU. Colorado State University; Ravitch, Sharon M. and Matthew Riggan. *Reason and Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research*. Second edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2017; Trochim, William M.K. **Philosophy of Research**. Research Methods Knowledge Base. 2006; Jarvis, Peter. *The Practitioner-Researcher. Developing Theory from Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

Strategies for Developing the Theoretical Framework

I. Developing the Framework

Here are some strategies to develop of an effective theoretical framework:

1. **Examine your thesis title and research problem.** The research problem anchors your entire study and forms the basis from which you construct your theoretical framework.
2. **Brainstorm about what you consider to be the key variables in your research.** Answer the question, "What factors contribute to the presumed effect?"

3. **Review related literature** to find how scholars have addressed your research problem. Identify the assumptions from which the author(s) addressed the problem.
4. **List the constructs and variables** that might be relevant to your study. Group these variables into independent and dependent categories.
5. **Review key social science theories** that are introduced to you in your course readings and choose the theory that can best explain the relationships between the key variables in your study [note the *Writing Tip* on this page].
6. **Discuss the assumptions or propositions** of this theory and point out their relevance to your research.

A theoretical framework is used to limit the scope of the relevant data by focusing on specific variables and defining the specific viewpoint [framework] that the researcher will take in analyzing and interpreting the data to be gathered. It also facilitates the understanding of concepts and variables according to given definitions and builds new knowledge by validating or challenging theoretical assumptions.

II. Purpose

Think of theories as the conceptual basis for understanding, analyzing, and designing ways to investigate relationships within social systems. To that end, the following roles served by a theory can help guide the development of your framework.

- Means by which new research data can be interpreted and coded for future use,
- Response to new problems that have no previously identified solutions strategy,
- Means for identifying and defining research problems,
- Means for prescribing or evaluating solutions to research problems,
- Ways of discerning certain facts among the accumulated knowledge that are important and which facts are not,
- Means of giving old data new interpretations and new meaning,
- Means by which to identify important new issues and prescribe the most critical research questions that need to be answered to maximize understanding of the issue,

- Means of providing members of a professional discipline with a common language and a frame of reference for defining the boundaries of their profession, and
- Means to guide and inform research so that it can, in turn, guide research efforts and improve professional practice.

Adapted from: Torraco, R. J. "Theory-Building Research Methods." In Swanson R. A. and E. F. Holton III , editors. *Human Resource Development Handbook: Linking Research and Practice*. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 1997): pp. 114-137; Jacard, James and Jacob Jacoby. *Theory Construction and Model-Building Skills: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. New York: Guilford, 2010; Ravitch, Sharon M. and Matthew Riggan. *Reason and Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research*. Second edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2017; Sutton, Robert I. and Barry M. Staw. "What Theory is Not." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 40 (September 1995): 371-384.

Structure and Writing Style

The theoretical framework may be rooted in a specific theory, in which case, your work is expected to test the validity of that existing theory in relation to specific events, issues, or phenomena. Many social science research papers fit into this rubric. For example, Peripheral Realism Theory, which categorizes perceived differences among nation-states as those that give orders, those that obey, and those that rebel, could be used as a means for understanding conflicted relationships among countries in Africa. A test of this theory could be the following: Does Peripheral Realism Theory help explain intra-state actions, such as, the disputed split between southern and northern Sudan that led to the creation of two nations?

However, you may not always be asked by your professor to test a specific theory in your paper, but to develop your own framework from which your analysis of the research problem is derived. Based upon the above example, it is perhaps easiest to understand the nature and function of a theoretical framework if it is viewed as an answer to two basic questions:

1. **What is the research problem/question?** [e.g., "How should the individual and the state relate during periods of conflict?"]

2. **Why is your approach a feasible solution?** [i.e., justify the application of your choice of a particular theory and explain why alternative constructs were rejected. I could choose instead to test Instrumentalist or Circumstantialists models developed among ethnic conflict theorists that rely upon socio-economic-political factors to explain individual-state relations and to apply this theoretical model to periods of war between nations].

The answers to these questions come from a thorough review of the literature and your course readings [summarized and analyzed in the next section of your paper] and the gaps in the research that emerge from the review process. With this in mind, **a complete theoretical framework will likely not emerge until after you have completed a thorough review of the literature.**

Just as a research problem in your paper requires contextualization and background information, a theory requires a framework for understanding its application to the topic being investigated. **When writing and revising this part of your research paper, keep in mind the following:**

- **Clearly describe the framework, concepts, models, or specific theories that underpin your study.** This includes noting who the key theorists are in the field who have conducted research on the problem you are investigating and, when necessary, the historical context that supports the formulation of that theory. This latter element is particularly important if the theory is relatively unknown or it is borrowed from another discipline.
- **Position your theoretical framework within a broader context of related frameworks, concepts, models, or theories.** As noted in the example above, there will likely be several concepts, theories, or models that can be used to help develop a framework for understanding the research problem. Therefore, note why the theory you've chosen is the appropriate one.
- **The present tense is used when writing about theory.** Although the past tense can be used to describe the history of a theory or the role of key theorists, the construction of your theoretical framework is happening now.
- **You should make your theoretical assumptions as explicit as possible.** Later, your discussion of methodology should be linked back to this theoretical framework.

- **Don't just take what the theory says as a given!** Reality is never accurately represented in such a simplistic way; if you imply that it can be, you fundamentally distort a reader's ability to understand the findings that emerge. Given this, always note the limitations of the theoretical framework you've chosen [i.e., what parts of the research problem require further investigation because the theory inadequately explains a certain phenomena].

Reference : The Conceptual Framework. College of Education. Alabama State University; Conceptual Framework: What Do You Think is Going On? College of Engineering. University of Michigan; Drafting an Argument. Writing@CSU. Colorado State University; Lynham, Susan A. "The General Method of Theory-Building Research in Applied Disciplines." *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 4 (August 2002): 221-241; Tavallaei, Mehdi and Mansor Abu Talib. "A General Perspective on the Role of Theory in Qualitative Research." *Journal of International Social Research* 3 (Spring 2010); Ravitch, Sharon M. and Matthew Riggan. *Reason and Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research*. Second edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2017; Reyes, Victoria. *Demystifying the Journal Article*. Inside Higher Education; Trochim, William M.K. Philosophy of Research. Research Methods Knowledge Base. 2006; Weick, Karl E. "The Work of Theorizing." In *Theorizing in Social Science: The Context of Discovery*. Richard Swedberg, editor. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 177-194.

Writing Tip

Borrowing Theoretical Constructs from Elsewhere

An increasingly important trend in the social and behavioral sciences is to think about and attempt to understand research problems from an interdisciplinary perspective. One way to do this is to not rely exclusively on the theories developed within your particular discipline, but to think about how an issue might be informed by theories developed in other disciplines. For example, if you are a political science student studying the rhetorical strategies used by female incumbents in state legislature campaigns, theories about the use of language could be derived, not only from political science, but linguistics, communication studies, philosophy,

psychology, and, in this particular case, feminist studies. Building theoretical frameworks based on the postulates and hypotheses developed in other disciplinary contexts can be both enlightening and an effective way to be more engaged in the research topic.

Reference: CohenMiller, A. S. and P. Elizabeth Pate. "A Model for Developing Interdisciplinary Research Theoretical Frameworks." *The Qualitative Researcher* 24 (2019): 1211-1226; Frodeman, Robert. *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Another Writing Tip

Don't Undertheorize!

Do not leave the theory hanging out there in the introduction never to be mentioned again. Undertheorizing weakens your paper. The theoretical framework you describe should guide your study throughout the paper. Be sure to always connect theory to the review of pertinent literature and to explain in the discussion part of your paper how the theoretical framework you chose supports analysis of the research problem or, if appropriate, how the theoretical framework was found to be inadequate in explaining the phenomenon you were investigating. In that case, don't be afraid to propose your own theory based on your findings.

Reference: Fleetwood, Steve and Anthony Hesketh. "HRM-Performance Research: Under-theorized and Lacking Explanatory Power." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 17 (2006): 1977-1993.

Yet Another Writing Tip

What's a Theory? What's a Hypothesis?

The terms theory and hypothesis are often used interchangeably in newspapers and popular magazines and in non-academic settings. However, the difference between theory and hypothesis in scholarly research is important, particularly when using an experimental design. A theory is a well-established principle that has been developed to explain some aspect of the natural world. Theories arise from repeated observation

and testing and incorporates facts, laws, predictions, and tested assumptions that are widely accepted [e.g., rational choice theory; grounded theory; critical race theory]. A hypothesis is a specific, testable prediction about what you expect to happen in your study. For example, an experiment designed to look at the relationship between study habits and test anxiety might have a hypothesis that states, "We predict that students with better study habits will suffer less test anxiety." Unless your study is exploratory in nature, your hypothesis should always explain what you expect to happen during the course of your research.

The key distinctions are:

- A **theory** predicts events in a broad, general context; a **hypothesis** makes a specific prediction about a specified set of circumstances.
- A **theory** has been extensively tested and is generally accepted among scholars; a **hypothesis** is a speculative guess that has yet to be tested.

Reference : Cherry, Kendra. [Introduction to Research Methods: Theory and Hypothesis](#). About.com Psychology; Gezae, Michael et al. [Welcome Presentation on Hypothesis](#). Slideshare presentation.

Still Yet Another Writing Tip

Be Prepared to Challenge the Validity of an Existing Theory

Theories are meant to be tested and their underlying assumptions challenged; they are not rigid or intransigent, but are meant to set forth general principles for explaining phenomena or predicting outcomes. Given this, testing theoretical assumptions is an important way that knowledge in any discipline develops and grows. If you're asked to apply an existing theory to a research problem, the analysis may include the expectation by your professor that you should offer modifications to the theory based on your research findings. Indications that theoretical assumptions may need to be modified can include the following:

- Your findings suggest that the theory does not explain or account for current conditions or circumstances,
- The study reveals a finding that is significantly incongruent with what the theory attempts to explain or predict, or

- Your analysis reveals that the theory overly generalizes behaviors or actions without taking into consideration specific factors [e.g., factors related to culture, nationality, history, gender, ethnicity, age, geographic location, legal norms or customs, religion, social class, socioeconomic status, etc.].

Philipsen, Kristian. "Theory Building: Using Abductive Search Strategies." In *Collaborative Research Design: Working with Business for Meaningful Findings*. Per Vagn Freytag and Louise Young, editors. (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), pp. 45-71; Shepherd, Dean A. and Roy Suddaby. "Theory Building: A Review and Integration." *Journal of Management* 43 (2017): 59-86.