

4.2 Justify an Interdisciplinary Approach

Evaluation

1.1: *Does the author define the problem or state the research question clearly and concisely?*

The student identifies the general topic of globalization, and of financial markets, and suggests an examination of the effects of one on the other.

1.2: *Does the author clearly define the scope of the study?*

The student narrows the scope of the course topic study to the more particular topic of the ability of nations to regulate financial markets.

1.3: *Does the author avoid the three tendencies that run counter to interdisciplinary process (disciplinary bias, disciplinary jargon, and personal bias)?*

The student's reference to "financial markets" *runs the risk* of privileging the discipline of economics.

1.4: *Does the author answer the "so what?" question?*

Yes. The importance of financial markets to the wider economy is stressed.

STEP 2: Justify Using an Interdisciplinary Approach

STEP 2 is to justify using an interdisciplinary approach. Though it is straightforward and closely related to STEP 1, it should be considered a separate STEP for undergraduate projects. This STEP requires the student to devote another sentence or two to explaining why a particular research project should take an interdisciplinary approach. As we have noted in previous chapters, there are many research questions for which a single disciplinary approach is adequate. The student needs to indicate why the particular project requires interdisciplinary analysis.

Commonly Used Justifications

Practitioners frequently include a statement in their introductory remarks justifying an interdisciplinary approach. There are just a handful of reasons that are usually provided; authors often point to more than one of these:

- The problem or research question is complex.
- Important insights into the problem are offered by two or more disciplines.
- No single discipline has been able to address the problem *comprehensively*.
- The problem is an unresolved issue or unmet societal need.

The Problem or Research Question Is Complex

Complexity, as we have often noted, is a key criterion that justifies interdisciplinarity and is frequently cited by practitioners as a primary justification for using an interdisciplinary approach. There are two reasons for this:

- Complexity means that the topic or problem has parts that fall within the research domains of two or more disciplines.
- Complexity means that the topic or problem needs to be studied using *both* interdisciplinary process *and* disciplinary methods.

Recall that interdisciplinary process is an overarching approach for dealing with complexity *and is open to using multiple disciplinary methods for studying the problem*. This criterion is important because in some work that claims to be interdisciplinary, the author privileges one of the participating disciplines by using its preferred research method to study the problem while rejecting or subordinating other disciplinary methods. The result is a study that is more disciplinary (because of its reliance on a particular disciplinary method) than it is interdisciplinary. *In work that is truly interdisciplinary, interdisciplinary process is creatively applied to the problem and no one disciplinary method dominates.*

Important Insights Into the Problem Are Offered by Two or More Disciplines

A second criterion that practitioners use to justify an interdisciplinary approach is that two or more disciplines have produced insights into the problem. These insights typically reflect the perspectives (i.e., assumptions, epistemologies, concepts, theories, and research methods) of the disciplines that produce them. This means that the insights typically conflict in multiple ways:

- In their understanding of the problem (e.g., is it primarily a sociological problem or an economic problem?)
- In the methods they use to study the problem (e.g., quantitative or qualitative)
- In the language or discourse they use (e.g., using, perhaps, the same concepts but with different meanings)

The point is this: *Only interdisciplinary process is able to work with conflicting insights in a way that is evenhanded and that does not privilege any one discipline or its perspective.*

No Single Discipline Has Been Able to Address the Problem Comprehensively

The key word in this criterion is *comprehensively*. A comprehensive study takes into consideration all relevant insights regardless of the disciplines that have produced them. It should come as no surprise that a complex issue such as terrorism is the subject of intense study by many disciplines including religious studies, cultural anthropology, criminal justice, economics, history, law, political science, psychology, and sociology. Yet despite these efforts and with rare exception, each community of experts has failed (a) to consider the research of experts from other communities and (b) to produce an explanation that is inclusive of all insights. The unfortunate result is the creation of multiple “islands of specialized insights” in a sea of information on the subject of terrorism. *Only the interdisciplinarian using the interdisciplinary process is able to address the problem comprehensively. And only the interdisciplinarian “sees” the particular constraints imposed by individual disciplines on understanding the problem as a whole* (Boix Mansilla, Dillon, & Middlebrooks, n.d., p. 60).

The Problem Is an Unresolved Issue or Unmet Societal Need

The fourth criterion is that the problem is an unresolved issue or unmet societal need. One possible reason for a problem to remain unresolved is that it may have been the object of biased treatment (e.g., disciplinary, personal, or ideological) that left all sides unsatisfied and even more entrenched in their respective positions. What the interdisciplinarian offers is an approach that is balanced, inclusive, and more comprehensive than what narrow disciplinary and ideological advocates are capable of offering. This criterion also speaks to the significance of the problem and answers the ubiquitous “so what?” question that readers and audiences demand of research.

Instrumental interdisciplinarity, as noted earlier, is concerned with what interdisciplinarians call **problem-focused research**. This type of research draws upon basic research (e.g., laboratory experiments or surveys) or pure theoretical research in order to address societal needs and practical problem solving. Examples include how to *evaluate* the feasibility of a new residential development on prime agricultural land, how to *manage* a valuable natural resource such as a forest in a sustainable yet economically beneficial way, and how to *design* a community space that is ecologically friendly, architecturally beautiful, and able to meet the needs of the community’s residents. These types of problems often generate an abundance of disciplinary or specialized research. But what is often lacking is an overall approach that integrates the specialized insights and constructs a more comprehensive understanding of the problem. In the absence of such understanding, satisfying solutions to the problem may not be achievable.

(Note: While the initial justification of an interdisciplinary approach may only take a sentence or two, the student should ensure that evidence for these arguments is provided in the body of the paper. If students speak of complexity, they should discuss which parts of the problem are studied by different disciplines. If students have asserted that the problem

is addressed in multiple disciplines, they must clearly identify insights from more than one discipline. If students argue that no discipline has comprehensively addressed the problem, they must show the limitations of each insight discussed. If students have claimed that the problem is unresolved, they must identify remaining challenges.)