

CRAFTING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

A successful research proposal accomplishes three key aims:

- 1) It describes clearly and completely what you want to do and how you plan to do it.
- 2) It shows that this work is original, significant, and your own (i.e. not your professor's project).
- 3) It communicates your ideas in ways that people outside your field can understand and appreciate.

All research proposals generally follow a set format. Proposal writing is its own genre, and just like you wouldn't write a short story and wait to introduce the main character until the end, there is an expected order that you should follow: Introduction, Background, Literature Review, Methodology, Preparation, and Conclusion. This guide is designed to help you through these sections.

While this format may seem strict and creatively limiting, it doesn't mean that you start this way. The key, at first, is to generate good ideas. Although you are limited to two single spaced pages in your final version, it is always a good idea to write far more when you begin. Get everything you can possibly think of that is relevant down on paper, and then begin the process of figuring out what best helps you to tell the story you need to tell. The writing process itself will be so important in helping you to think through and clarify your ideas. Once you know what you need to say and how best to say it, fitting it into this format is a much easier process. In other words, create good stuff first, and then make it fit into the proposal genre.

A good place to begin is with questions: What do you want to study, and why? How is it significant within your field, and what problems will it help solve? How does it build upon (and hopefully go beyond) work already in your field? What exactly do you plan to do, and can you get it done in the time you've got? Do you have the knowledge and skills to actually do the project? What do you hope to have learned by the end, and do you expect it to turn into a senior thesis, conference paper, performance piece, etc.? How does this project fit into your larger goals here at Northwestern and beyond?

In the end, your proposal should express both your knowledge of the topic and your enthusiasm for doing it. We want to be left feeling – wow, that is exciting and I can't wait to see how it turns out!

INTRODUCTION

Your introduction is your initial pitch. By the end of this paragraph, we should have a strong sense of your overall project, and we should be able to feel your passion for the topic. You can think about it in three sections.

FIRST: What is the problem at the core of your project? (1-3 sentences).

Example A: “This study seeks to expand our knowledge of why girls in India are more at risk for unhealthy and uneducated lives than boys. Imagine what happens when one of every six girls in a nation fails to see her 15th birthday. Or despite a national policy mandating primary education, 190 million girls in India are still illiterate. The declaration ‘Children are the future’ stops making sense.”

Example B: “As a musician, I became fascinated by differing cultural interpretations of what seems like a psycho-temporal constant—the organization of time. As a performer

of Western art music I conceive of musical time in terms of equal, measured beats arranged quantitatively around a strong downbeat, or 'beat one.' However, musicians in Ghana perceive of musical time in a radically different way."

SECOND: What is your topic, and what methods will you use to approach your problem? (1-2 sentences)

Example A: "This study will (a) explore the health conditions of girls aged 5-15 years in a village each in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Maharashtra, India (b) examine a correlation between the health and education level of girls and of their mothers, and (c) determine if there is a gender preference among mothers that translates into bias in food allocation between sexes."

Example B: "The purpose of this project is to determine the effect that Ghanaian cultural perceptions of time have on the organization of time in Ghanaian music. For eight weeks, I will live in the village of Ho and study Ghanaian music and dance. I will also conduct an ethnographic study of the way the villagers perceive time through, interviews, observation, and participation in the culture. I will then relate the results of this study to my understanding of Ghanaian music."

THIRD: Why is this important research, and why should I care about it? (1 sentence).

Example A: "The insights gained from this research will help illuminate the possibility of setting up an incentive-based program that would boost the status of girls in their families, which in turn would lead to enhancement of their living conditions."

Example B: "The culmination of my studies will be a performance of a traditional Ewe dance-drumming piece at my senior recital, the Music Performance major's equivalent of a senior thesis."

IMPORTANT: You want to make sure you clearly state your specific goals (when, where). Don't just speak in general, abstract terms.

BACKGROUND

This section is where you explain the context of your project. Since the people reading your proposal will be from all over the University, you can't assume they will know your subject as well as you do. You must give the basic information about your research topic to help them understand what you want to do. This section is not an essay going over every thing you have ever learned; instead, you must choose what is relevant to help explain what your goals are.

Scientists, for example, might explain the manner in which cancer cells reproduce to help readers understand why a chemical might inhibit growth. Social science researchers might give information about their research subjects: Who are the people you study? Where do they live? What do they do? Researchers in the humanities could provide background information about the people, literary texts, or other cultural and historical items to be studied. Who are/were the people you will study? What were the conditions in which the items (buildings, literary texts, films, etc.) were created? Who made them?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Connected to background is your review of what research has already been done in this field. You want to place your project within the larger whole of what is currently being explored, while allowing you to demonstrate that your work is original and innovative. What questions have other researchers asked, and what is your understanding of their findings? What do you think is still missing, and how has previous research not explored the questions/issues/topics that your study addresses?

If no studies in your area exist, look to parallel or broader ones. For example, if you are looking into a particular social movement in Mexico that has never been explored, you might look to studies of other social movements in Latin America or to more theoretical literature on social movements. It is not enough to say that your research is brand spanking new. You must connect it to other works, so we can better understand where your project sits in your field and how it can help to move it forward.

This part may seem overwhelming, but you probably already know key works that helped you to find your topic in the first place. In addition, your faculty advisor can be a great help directing you to review things that can help situate and refine your project.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What questions does your project want to answer? (4-5 sentences) Now that you have given the background and context for your project, it is time for you to more fully explore your goals. This section is an elaboration of the ideas you presented in your introduction. There, you established your overall goal, and here, you will delve deeper into the heart of your project, beginning with the core questions that you hope to answer/explore. These types of questions will look into how you plan to get after your overall objective. If you are proposing a creative project, use this section to explain in detail the themes you will explore. In other words, this section asks: what do you want to know?

METHODOLOGY

This section answers: how are you going to find it out? It is now time to explain exactly how you plan to do your research, and it is important to be specific. Will you run a lab experiment to generate data? Tell us what you will be doing. Will you be going to an archive to read primary documents? Tell us where, when, and for what you are looking. Will you be conducting interviews? Tell us who you will speak with, and what you plan to ask them. Remember that we don't know your project like you do, so you must walk us through how the research will unfold. How will you locate people for interviews? Who will give you access to the archive? What lab techniques will you use?

This section should tell us the **exact scope and length of the project** – how big is the project, and how long will it take? For the scope, describe the number of interviews, experiments, or surveys to be conducted or the amount of materials to be examined. In terms of the project's length, give a brief timeline of when the research will be carried out. Remember that these two should match; we want to see that you can actually complete your research in the time you have. Mapping the human genome was a worthwhile research project, but I believe it took longer than a quarter to complete.

Finally, this section tells how you will eventually analyze or process the research data. Will you code, graph, or otherwise manipulate the data to find patterns? To which ends will you study your chosen materials? What criteria will you use? Do you have a working hypothesis? Can you project

possible findings?

IMPORTANT: Your research questions and methodology must ‘match.’ That is, make certain that the way you plan to run your study will actually allow you to answer your research questions. If what you plan to do won’t help you answer your questions, then one of them needs to be revised.

PREPARATION

Why you? Why now? This section needs to show that you are qualified to complete your project by describing specific examples of previous training, experience, and coursework. What relevant courses have you taken and, more importantly, what did you learn in them to help you complete the research? Do you have experience conducting interviews or manipulating data sets? Tell us when and where. Do you speak the necessary foreign languages? If you will travel, have you established contacts in your place of research? Scheduled appointments for interviews? Have you begun the process of obtaining human subjects research (IRB) clearance?

You don’t want to simply list courses, since there will be a place for that in the online submission process. Instead, explain the set of skills that you have (or will learn) that will help you to complete your project.

You want to be completely honest here – don’t claim skills that you don’t have. Remember that this is a learning experience. If there are gaps or shortfalls in your knowledge, address them head-on. Just explain what you are planning to do about it, since you obviously need the skills to complete your project. Your faculty advisor is a resource for you in this regard; s/he can either help fill that gap or can direct you to where you can. Therefore, it is important that you choose a faculty advisor who can help you with your own knowledge or experience gaps.

CONCLUSION

What’s next? Instead of summary conclusion, use this section to look forward. What do you hope to do with this research once it is complete? Are you planning on doing a senior thesis? Do you hope it will help you prepare for (or get into) graduate school? Do you hope to see this research continue? In what way? Give us a picture of how you see this project fitting into your larger academic or career goals.

Please understand that writing a successful research proposal is a process. It is a process to both develop your thoughts and ideas, and it is a process to make it work within the specific format of a research proposal. Many drafts and re-writes are standard. Get feedback from your advisor. Get feedback from Peter and Jana at Undergraduate Research Grants (urg@northwestern.edu). It takes time, but it is well worth the effort.

In the end, you need to find the right balance in a research proposal – the balance between clear and precise renderings of your project and the passion and commitment you feel for the topic. Only you can decide where that balance point is, but you don’t want a proposal that is all head and no heart any more than you want one that is all heart and no head.