



## Discipline Specific

# Research Proposals

**NOTE:** Each discipline and granting agency has its own guidelines for writing research proposals, so please consult your professor/advisor along with this handout! Undergraduate Research Projects will also have different guidelines than Graduate Projects; stay in close contact with your advisor!

**The role of the research proposal in a research project:** The research proposal can serve many useful functions. The most important is that it helps you to think out the research project and predict any difficulties that might arise. For those who aren't sure what their focus will be, the research proposal can be a space to explore options. Writing multiple proposals or drafts will help you to develop and focus your inquiry and to decide how to proceed efficiently.

**Uses of research proposals once the research has begun:** Once you have begun your research project, a research proposal can help you to remain on track and can also remind you why you started this project in the first place. Researchers very often begin to lose heart about two-thirds of the way into a project when their research hits a snag or when they are having problems developing a thesis, organizing the ideas, or actually starting to write. Rereading the initial research proposal, especially the "Significance" section, can reenergize the project or help the researcher to refocus in an effective manner.

### Sample Organization of a Non-Discipline Specific Research Proposal

- **Title page**

Give your project a working title, which may or may not stick.

- **Statement of purpose**

Explain what you hope your research will find or show. State your question or series of questions before you begin your research.

- **Background**

Explain your interest in and experience with this topic. Describe any previous research you have conducted on this or related topics, any classes you have taken on this or related topics, or any reading you have done in the field. If you have personal experience that has led you to want to do more research, describe that here, too.

- **Significance**

Explain why this topic is worth considering, or why this question or series of questions is worth answering. Answer the following: why should your instructor let you select this topic? What do you hope to learn from it? How or what will you contribute to the field of knowledge that exists on this topic? What new perspective will you bring? What use might your final paper have for others in the field or in the general public? With whom might you decide to share your findings once the project is complete?

## Sample Organization of a Non-Discipline Specific Research Proposal (continued)

- **Methodology**

Describe the kind of research you will conduct to complete this project (library research, internet research, interviews, observations, ethnographies, etc.). Explain how you will conduct your research in as much detail as possible. If you will consult other sources (such as a statistician, an ethnographer, or a librarian) explain what role they will serve and how you hope they will enhance your development of an appropriate methodology for this project. Discuss the kinds of sources you hope to consult and the methods you will use to extract and process the information you gather in as much detail as possible. (As the project is underway, you might find the need to revise your methodology, explore new types of source material, and/or adopt new methods of gathering and processing data. If this happens, revise this section of the proposal.)

- **Problems**

Describe the problems you expect to encounter and how you hope to solve them. For example, texts might be unavailable, necessitating travel to other libraries or use of inter-library loan facilities; the time frame may limit the amount of research or the quality or specificity of research you are able to do; people you had hoped to interview might be unavailable or unwilling to participate, requiring that you select other interviewees or change the focus; internet sites might be down or no longer available, etc. (Try to anticipate every major problem. Make contingency plans so that the project doesn't become derailed.)

- **Bibliography**

Make a list of texts you plan to consult. Many sources initially seem relevant, but turn out not to be, so it is always better to have a long list of sources that might be of interest. As you eliminate sources, cross them off of this list. Mark sources that are particularly useful, and add new sources as you come across them.

- **Again, make sure you consult the appropriate sources for the format of your proposal.**

Some organizations/committees have very specific guidelines for the information they want, and approval of your proposal, in part, will depend on whether or not you've completed the proposal requirements.

## Some Common Mistakes in Proposals

- Inadequate description of context for the research question
- Failure to define the boundaries of your research (questions are too broad)
- Failure to cite landmark studies/ideas
- Failure to include the theoretical and empirical contributions of other researchers
- Failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research
- Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues
- Too many citation lapses and incorrect references
- Too long or too short
- Failing to follow the appropriate style
- Sloppy writing (proofread!)

### **Resources used for this handout:**

Jamieson, C. Sandra. "Guidelines for writing non-discipline-specific Research Proposals." Drew University, Feb. 1999.  
<[http://users.drew.edu/~sjamieso/research\\_proposal.html](http://users.drew.edu/~sjamieso/research_proposal.html)>

Wong, Paul T.P. "How to Write a Research Proposal." Trinity Western University. 8 May 2002.  
<[http://www.meaning.ca/articles/writing\\_research\\_proposal\\_may02.htm](http://www.meaning.ca/articles/writing_research_proposal_may02.htm)>