CRAFTING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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 in a research proposal: Introduction, Background, Literature Review, Research Questions, Methodology, Preparation, and Conclusion. This guide is designed to help you through these sections, even though you won’t ultimately need to use named section headings in your final version.

First and foremost, research grant proposals must be written to an educated, but not specialized, audience. You are not addressing it to your lab or to the professor who taught you a seminar on this topic. The URG Review Committee is made up of faculty from across the University, and so your proposal must make sense to people who are not familiar with your specific field.

There are three main arguments that your proposal will need to successfully make. The first argument comes through the Background and Literature Review sections, and this argument convinces us that there is a need for this project. Has this work already been done? Is there a compelling reason to do it now? You make this argument by providing your knowledge of the subject matter and research currently being done as well as demonstrating that there is a hole in this research that your project will fill.

The second argument comes through the Research Questions and Methodology sections, and it convinces us that you have a clear project that can be successfully completed. What specifically do you hope to learn by doing this particular project? What will you do to learn it? The project needs specific questions to answer and a means of collecting data that will help you to answer those questions. We need to leave this section believing your project can work.

The final argument comes through the Preparation and Conclusion sections, and it convinces us that you are capable of successfully finishing the project. We need to know that you have the skills necessary to do what is proposed, and we want to know how this experience will help you achieve your academic and professional goals.

When the reviewers read your proposal, they will be looking for it to answer these 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? Yes, it is not an insignificant list, but if you use the proposal format effectively, it will work.

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 project is exciting and I can’t wait to see how it turns out!

INTRODUCTION

Your introduction is like a movie trailer for your entire project. At the end of this single paragraph, we need to know the problem at the core of your project, what you plan to do, why we should care about it, and how this project will help you achieve your academic and professional goals, such as a senior thesis or gaining needed research experience. Yes, that is a tall order, but remember – it is a movie trailer, not the movie itself. You will have the rest of
the proposal to fill in the critical details, but by the end the introduction, we will need to know what specifically you will be doing in your project. You can’t leave that information for the Research Questions and Methodology sections because without that crucial frame, we won’t know how to appropriately read the Background and Literature Review sections.

At its core, your introduction should present the best bits of the three main arguments that your proposal will present. In this way, we recommend that you not write your introduction until you have drafted the rest of the proposal. It is hard to make a movie trailer for a film that isn’t finished. Work through and clarify the important parts first, and then discern the best way to present them in your introduction in simple, but compelling terms.

#1: WHY IS THIS PROJECT WORTH DOING?

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. The key is relevance – in this section, you only need to discuss the background that helps make your specific project make sense. Keep it focused.

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 in a way that allows 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 of your specific topic 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 your project can help to move the field 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.
In the end, the key take-away from this section needs to be that your project will fill an important hole in the current research into this subject. We want to leave this section feeling that this project needs to be done.

#2: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**
What specific questions will your project answer? These questions are not the big-picture ones; these questions are the ones that you plan to be able to answer when this project is completed. These types of questions will look into how you plan to accomplish 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 needs to communicate what specifically your project will help you learn.

**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 whom you will speak with, why those people, 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 what you will be doing during this specific grant period.** 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, walk us through the research period you are proposing. If what you are proposing to do is part of a larger project (ongoing work in a lab, a senior thesis, etc.), remember that you need to focus on what you will be doing during **this grant period.** Yes, you will want to connect it to the larger project, but you are asking for money for this part now. Also, make sure that your project is actually achievable in the time frame proposed. Mapping the human genome was a worthwhile research project, but I believe it took longer than a summer (or an academic year) to complete.

Finally, this section tells how you will analyze or process the research data. **Do not stop your methodology at data collection; we need to know what you plan to do with this data.** Will you code, graph, or otherwise analyze the data to find patterns? What criteria will you use? Do not just say you will “analyze” the data, and leave it at that. We need to know how you will analyze it and why you are choosing to analyze it this way.

**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 stated research questions. If what you plan to do won’t help you answer your questions, then one of them needs to be revised.

#3: CAN/SHOULD YOU DO THIS PROJECT?

**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. Have you done the necessary preparation work in order to successfully start your project? 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 grant is considered 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. The Committee wants to see how this project will have life for you after it is completed.

While this format may seem strict and creatively limiting, it doesn’t mean that you start writing 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. 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 the grant advisors at Undergraduate Research Grants ([undergradresearch@northwestern.edu](mailto:undergradresearch@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.