

# How to Write a Good Proposal



## Advice from CES Undergraduates

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# The Art of Proposal Writing

- This is a skill that can be developed like any other
- Key task is to convince your audience that yours is an interesting, feasible project
- Helpful guides:
  - CES's How to Write a Good Proposal
  - Social Science Research Council (SSRC)  
<http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/7A9CB4F4-815F-DE11-BD80-001CC477EC70/>

# Format of the Proposal

For a summer travel grant, 5 pages of main text is usually sufficient

- Introduction
- What is known about the question
- What you will add
- What you will do, how and where
- Budget
- Possible appendices

# Introduction

- This sets out **your** research question.
- It should capture the reader's attention – spark his or her interest
- Should be free of disciplinary jargon (true of whole proposal): consider your audience
- Do not let excessive detail in this part obscure the clarity of what your question is

# What we know already

- A major component of your proposal should in essence be a literature review
- What do people in the field say about the topic
- You should be synthetic and analytic: show what the controversies in the field are as they relate to your topic or show how different fields approach the problem differently
- Very effective to show what is missing, what could be reconciled, where there are gaps, etc.

# Need some help with literature reviews?

Here are some places on the web you can go to get help on lit reviews; there are many more out there:

- <http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html>
- [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature\\_review.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html)

# Need some help with finding the actual literature?

What are the best places for your sources?

- Reading lists from your courses
- Suggestions from professors and TFs
- Bibliographies from sources you've already read or consulted
- Literature searches
  - [www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com) (make sure to set scholar preferences for the Harvard library)
  - [JSTOR](http://www.jstor.org)

# What your project will add

- Show a clear link between what you've said in the literature review and what you are planning to do
- Transition to the description of your project:
  - “Against this backdrop...”; “I attempt to bridge this gap...”; “My project takes these debates into account to answer the question...”; To reconcile these divergent views, I propose to...”

# How will you do it?

- How are you **operationalizing** the concepts?
- This is linked to the idea of your methodology.
  - Questions are best answered with appropriate methodologies
  - Certain methods tend to be more common in specific disciplines and they can be combined
    - Archival research
    - Interviews / surveys
    - Secondary data analysis
    - Observations

# How will you do it?

- Research questions are answered with evidence
- What kind of evidence will you gather and use to answer your question?
- You must show why your evidence will, in fact, help answer the question
- How are you **defining** the concepts that the evidence speaks to?

# Where will you do it?

- It is important to tell us what exactly you think you will be doing once your plane lands
- Proposal is greatly enhanced by some preliminary logistical research:
  - Which archives will you be visiting; what do the collections hold?
  - Who (or what sorts of people in what positions) will you be interviewing?
  - What kinds of communities or events will you be observing, where are they, why them?

# Need help with some of the logistical questions?

- There are many resources around campus and the internet
  - To find out about collections in libraries and archives abroad:
    - Web, research librarians at Widener, grad students
  - Contacting interview subjects
    - Faculty members, grad students and visiting scholars can help you make contact and connections

# Human Subjects

- Why do we need Human Subjects Review?
- For information on the use of human subjects, visit the Committee on Human Subjects in Research:  
[http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~research/hum\\_sub/index.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~research/hum_sub/index.html)

# The Budget

- Use sites like Expedia to price out your plane ticket and don't forget internal travel
- Use modest per diem rates
- Try to find some evidence of housing costs
- Don't underestimate the time needed
- Don't forget costs for things like xeroxing, which is often much more expensive
- Equipment cost are usually not covered

# Possible appendices

You may wish to include some things in an appendix:

- Bibliography
- Sample interview guide
- If you have a long list of archives or interviewees, that can go in an appendix
- Photos or other multimedia

# General advice

- Start early so you can do more than one draft
- Show a relatively polished draft to at least one letter writer – not just for feedback but so that his or her letter is strong
- Make sure each component is logically related to the others – especially important: link between the literature and your question, and how what you propose to do actually will answer the question you've posed
- Don't fret that your project might change over course of research, it absolutely will
- Follow up with people who have helped you

# In a Bit of a Panic?

## Here are some CES resources

- CES Seminar on Senior Thesis Research with Juliet Wagner and Kyoko Sato. Tues, Feb 7th 6:30 to 8:00pm
- Please RSVP to [ksato@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ksato@fas.harvard.edu)
- Monday through Thursday during the week of Feb 13, 10am-12pm, they will have office hours in CES. You can bring a draft of your proposal and get feedback.
- [ksato@fas.harvard.com](mailto:ksato@fas.harvard.com), [jwagner@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:jwagner@fas.harvard.edu)

# Need more advice or did you forget to ask something?

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**GOOD LUCK!**

