The Organization of a Good Research Proposal
Suggestions to Students

Research proposals are written documents that differ in many ways from more familiar research papers or term papers. The primary difference is that a proposal focuses on an original effort that will be undertaken by the author rather than emphasizing the results of others’ completed work. A proposal also represents a bit of “marketing”—proposals argue that the pursuit of a particular study using specific methods is highly meritorious. In most real-world cases, proposals seek to obtain funding for the writer. Proposal writing is not simply an academic activity but is important in many professional endeavors; in academia and government-agency environments proposals bring direct funding and in the private sector they win contracts for work. Proposal writing is, therefore, an important part of your professional development.

TITLE
The importance of the title is commonly overlooked. The title is how your work will be referred to by you and by others. The title needs to be a statement that encompasses the intention of the proposed project. Nonetheless, short titles are best; if you cannot remember your title the next day, then pick a new one.

INTRODUCTION
Short, sweet, and complete! At the end of the introductory section, the reader must know the nature of the problem you are addressing and/or the hypothesis (hypotheses) that you are testing. In other words, the reader should not need to read any further in order to know what this project sets out to accomplish. One paragraph may suffice. More than two paragraphs commonly suggest a loss of focus. A possible two-paragraph scenario introduces the topic/problem in a very brief first paragraph and then lets the objective of the project carry the second paragraph with a topic sentence like: “The objective of this study is...”, or “The hypothesis to be tested in this study is...”. Some writers prefer to reverse the order of these two paragraphs by stating the hypothesis first and then indicating how it relates to a critical problem; either approach can be effective.

BACKGROUND
The background section has two purposes. First, it brings the reader up to speed on the previous work that is pertinent to your project and what controversies need addressing or cutting-edge contributions are awaited (i.e., what your project is all about). Second, it shows the knowledgeable reader/reviewer that you know the pertinent work in the field and have a firm foundation for your own proposed effort. This could be considered the easiest part of the proposal to write because it is based on library research and, seemingly, resembles a term paper. The key, however, is not to regurgitate all that is known but to keep the background brief and focused on the information that is truly pertinent to your proposed work. This can be tough in thesis proposals because you always want to summarize all of those dozens of papers that your advisor made you read; you want to see some value to having spent all that money on coffee to wade through those papers. The value, however, lies in what you learned and store in your brain ready to use in your research, not in the number of pages this reading yields in your proposal. Never, ever let the background parts of a proposal be longer than the explanation of what you plan to do!

It is appropriate to digress for a moment and consider the role of literature review in the preparation of a research proposal. There is no question that a firm understanding of past work is prerequisite to proposing a new investigation. A formal literature review (including an analysis and synthesis of past work) is considered an essential part of research design in some fields, especially in the social sciences. Whether this review should be part of the proposal is, however, dependent on the audience. For example a literature review may be expected as part of a thesis proposal but is rarely expected in funding proposals submitted to external agencies.
STUDY AREA
Some projects involve collection of data by going out into nature. If so, then this section serves three purposes. First, it tells the reader where you are going to work. Second, it tells the reader what the field characteristics are and what work has been done there previously (focus only on what's relevant to what you want to do; an exhaustive description is rarely required). Thirdly, and most importantly, it explains to the reader/reviewer why this study site is sooooo good for addressing the problem/hypothesis that is driving your research.

RESEARCH PLAN
The research plan is the most important part of the proposal. Many people can state a problem or a testable hypothesis. A true scholar, however, knows how to tackle the solution. This section explains what you will do — the real nuts and bolts of the research. It goes beyond simply methods, however, because you also need to explain how the collection of a particular type of data really addresses the problem or tests the hypothesis. It cannot simply be: “Gee, let's do this and that and a little of this as well, because, after all, I’ve learned or heard about all of these standard sorts of things that I think are cool to do.” Keep the focus on your objective(s) and how the methods used to collect data will satisfy that objective. You usually do not need to explain how each analytical instrument or data-collection method works unless your proposal includes an innovation in one or the other. This does not mean, however, that you should not know how these instruments function and how the methods are employed; otherwise you run the risk of proposing to apply the wrong approach to collect the data you plan to evaluate (and good reviewers will catch this error to your detriment).

WORK PLAN or SCHEDULE
The work plan is a brief section, which is sometimes presented in table form or as a list. This section simply indicates when the various research activities are planned to be accomplished. It serves to let the reader evaluate if you have realistically allocated time for your efforts and are undertaking different tasks in an appropriate and logical order. Rome was not built in a day and if someone proposed to do so it would not be a credible proposal. Making the schedule is sometimes a real eye-opener for really appreciating what you’re obligating yourself to do and it may require re-examining the research plan if the work plan seems too ambitious.

SIGNIFICANCE
This is certainly an optional section but it is sometimes worth including, especially in proposals seeking funding. The Introduction set up the significance of the problem to which you are pursuing solutions. Now that the readers/reviewers have read the research plan, hit them over the head with it again — point out why what you're doing is important.

BUDGET
Most proposals in the real world have in mind the idea of raising or obtaining funds; therefore most proposals include a budget. If you are preparing a budget, be sure that it is exactly consistent with the research plan. It is surprising how many budgets fail to include funds for a method that is deemed important in the research plan (so, is the investigator really not going to collect these data?) or contain line items that have no obvious relationship to the work plan (fluff? poorly conceived research plan?).

QUESTION: HOW LONG SHOULD MY PROPOSAL BE?
Answer: As long as is absolutely necessary and not a smidgen more. A cop-out answer? Not really. The length of the proposal generally scales with the complexity of the problem, the number of hypotheses to be tested, and the variety of methods to be employed. The critical ingredients MUST be there: Continuity between problem, significance, hypothesis, and approach. But—there shouldn't be anything else. Every sentence should be examined to be sure that it is relevant, that it conveys something that the proposal reviewer needs to know; otherwise, chuck it. Proposals more commonly err on the long side than being too short, usually because there is way too much background stuff presented. In the real world, long proposals are disadvantageous because reviewers lose interest in finding within the proposal the key things that determine thumb up or down. Most funding agencies and organizations place page limits on
proposals or provide a fill-in-the-blank template for this reason. This does not mean that the proposal should be shortened at the expense of providing all of the necessary context to understand each concept, idea, and method but rather that the content must remain focused at all times.

Illustrations can lengthen proposals but if figures are carefully selected (or drawn) and accompanied by effective captions, they can actually shorten the proposal. Some figures are essential, anyway; maybe to show study areas and all geographic features mentioned in the text. Remembering that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” it is commonly effective to use schematic diagrams to illustrate concepts and aspects of the research plan (e.g., organizational or flow charts). Not only can the illustrations and their captions substitute for text but also an effective drawing commonly conveys complex ideas (and the relationships between ideas) much more readily than text. But like text, every figure (or table) must be essential to the document; don’t add figures simply for color or to break up what look like monotonous pages of text.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?
You can’t start the proposal without first defining your problem or hypothesis. From there, you need to acquaint yourself with how others have approached this, or a similar, problem. Some of what is learned from the necessary literature search and review may end up in the Background part of the proposal. Next, you need to list and describe the kinds of information or data that are needed in order to attack the problem or test the hypothesis. This information will become the nuts and bolts of your Research Plan section. Be sure that you understand how to use each of your methods and how they relate to your problem/hypothesis.

When you’re ready to start writing, you should know:
• WHAT you’re going to do.
• WHY it’s important to do it.
• HOW you’re going to do it.
• WHERE you’re going to do it (e.g., lab, field site, library/archives).
• WHO you’re going to work with.

And — all of those things should then be obvious to someone else reading the completed proposal.

A FEW GENERAL SUGGESTIONS ABOUT THE WRITING:
• Use lots of cited references (they show that you know your stuff—or at least give the impression that you’re well-read—and assure the reader that you have acquainted yourself with the relevant literature).
• Use numbered lists or bulleted lists (like this one) whenever possible. Proposal reviewers are usually swamped with proposals to read and, let’s face it, they skim. Make it easy for them.
• Use sub-headings wherever you can. This goes hand in hand with the previous suggestion. If a reviewer just reads headings and subheadings and numbered/bulleted lists (and those superb topic sentences that lead off each paragraph), then will they pretty much know what you are doing? Subheadings also make it easier for a reviewer to go back into the document to find information.
• Proofread, proofread, and proofread. That includes reading it aloud to yourself to catch awkward wording and run-on sentences (if you run out of breath reading a sentence, it’s probably too long). Nothing turns off a reviewer more than something that is written in a very sloppy manner.