

Developing Research Proposals

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Agenda

- Introductions
- Defining “research proposals”
- Proposals that you’ve written or need to write
- How (not) to write a research proposal
- Templates and examples of successful proposals
- Breakdown of a proposal and suggestions for each section
- Questions and discussion

Research Proposals

- Research proposals may be called many different things.
- Discipline-specific requirements.
- They may be more important in some fields than in others.
- Word counts and page limits will vary substantially.
 - Writing different versions of the same document is fundamental to life in academia.
- The instructions may also vary a lot, at least on the surface.

What sort of research proposals have you had to write, or will you need to write in the future?

(What discipline/program are you in?)

How did (or will) you go about writing your proposal?

How (not) to write a research proposal

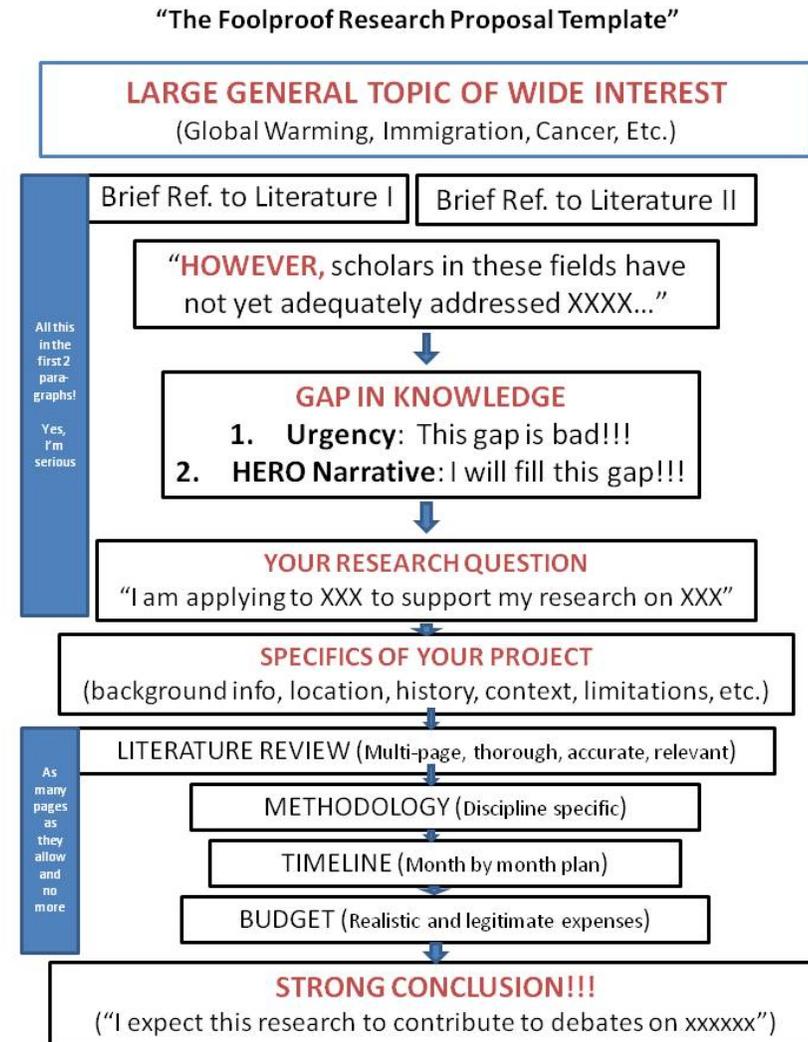
- Fellowship application instructions:
- *The statement should address the importance of the student's work in the beginning two or three sentences. The statement should include the theoretical framework of the dissertation, its specific aims, methodologies (how the student is conducting the research), originality, and the significance and contribution of the project to the field. Fellowship committees place strong emphasis on this statement. The statement should be written with an interdisciplinary faculty review panel in mind; i.e., reviewers will NOT necessarily be familiar with the technical vocabulary of a specific field. (1,500 words)*
 - <https://rackham.umich.edu/funding/funding-types/rackham-predoc-fellowship-program/>

How (not) to write a research proposal

- Starting to write a research proposal without adequate planning and discussion with colleagues/collaborators.
 - Excessive ambitions for the project, and the scope of a proposal.
 - Writing a proposal that required additional training and expertise that I didn't have.
 - Assuming, initially, that this wouldn't be an issue, and that a friend who worked in a different lab would be able to handle this part of the work.
- Grappling with multidisciplinary
 - Dealing with collaborations.
 - Formal procedures and planning.

Templates and examples of successful proposals

- Karen Kelsky's foolproof research proposal template:
<http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/>
- “effective grant-writing, like all other professional academic writing, is at its root completely formulaic.”



Templates and examples of successful proposals

- Ask people you know to share successful proposals that they have written.
 - People ahead of you in your program, people at other institutions, post-docs, faculty members.
- Check the website of the professional association in your field.
 - They may post successful proposals and abstracts; they may also have instructions and guidelines about good proposals and abstracts.
- CIHR Awards Database (includes abstracts): http://webapps.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/funding/Search?p_language=E&p_version=CIHR
- NSERC Awards Database (include abstracts): http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/ase-oro/index_eng.asp

Template of a Research Proposal

- Basic components of a research proposal are pretty standard.
- Again, there may be differences in standards between fields.
- Be sure to follow specific instructions and guidelines.
- The handout we're distributing has a template of the basic components.
 - Complete the individual components, and then put what you've written together into a complete draft of the proposal.

Getting Started: Planning.

- Start well in advance – you need time.
- Organize in advance to get feedback – so other people can plan their time.
- Be prepared to be very adaptable and open to trial and error.
- Get your template organized.
- Talk to people – your supervisor/boss; post docs; dept. members.
- Don't have to start at the beginning – can start anywhere and work out of order.
- Get your references/citations ready and your reference software.
- Keep track of EVERYTHING.

Getting Started: Know Your Audience.

- A fundamental issue to consider before writing your proposal is the audience that will be reading and assessing it.
 - This will typically be clear from the instructions and guidelines that go with the proposal.
- Sometimes you will be writing for a general, educated audience, rather than for specialists in your field.
 - This will mean avoiding or explaining technical language and abbreviations that you will want to use.
- The less specialized your audience will be, the more you will need to demonstrate the significance of your project.

Different Audiences: Some Examples.

- Medical Research Council – Government.
- The Royal Society – Professional body.
- The Wellcome Trust – Charity.
- British Heart Foundation – Charity.
- The Dorothy Hodgson Trust (for women only) – Professional body.
- Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council - David Phillips Fellowship – Government.

Defining the Research Question

- Good questions develop over time by working with your materials and evidence.
 - Literature, experimental data, interviews, observations, etc.
- Make a list of the ideas and questions, big and small, that occur to you as you work with your data/evidence/results.
- Does the question pass the “so what” test?
 - Why does it matter?
 - It’s not enough simply to say that no one has answered the question before.
- Is the question one that you can plausibly hope to answer in the time that you have to spend on the research project?

The Literature Review

- Literature reviews can often seem daunting.
 - You really do need to read widely across scholarship on your topic.
- But, realistically, the literature review you write will focus mostly on a smaller body of recent scholarship that you deem most important.
 - Depending on your field, give yourself a cutoff date for the age of scholarship that you are going to discuss.
 - If you have already published relevant work, it is often appropriate to cite and discuss this.
- Figure out which journals and publishers matter most in your field.
 - Impact factors, citation counts, reputation.
 - Ask other people in your field if you're not sure.

Literature Review

- The key point in the literature review is identifying the gap in existing scholarship that you are trying to fill.
- This will help to establish the importance of your work.
- (For more on writing literature reviews, attend the session tomorrow from 10:00 to 11:50 in this room.)

Methodology/Methods

- This section will not provide a full description of the research you are doing so someone can repeat the experiments you are doing.
 - Methodology will often be more important in Sciences than in Arts.
- It will simply show that you have a plan for what you are doing, that you have anticipated likely problems, and have the expertise to do the work.
 - In an Arts field, the methodology may simply involve what sorts of literature and scholarship you will be reading, with emphasis on the languages and the types of theory with which you are familiar.

Abstract

- Write this last, after everything else is done.
- Read examples of successful proposal abstracts.
 - NSERC and CIHR websites; published abstracts in conference proceedings, journals.
- Template
 - Beginning: identify the problem/question that you are addressing, and the impact of your work.
 - Middle: explain your methods and/or the steps in your argumentation.
 - End: Return to the impact in the last sentence.
- Style
 - Short sentences, succinct and punchy.
- (For more on writing abstracts, attend the session tomorrow from 1:00 to 2:20.)

Use of Language

- Be careful about sensationalizing, absolute language.
 - Absolutes invite criticisms from reviewers
 - “we will show for the first time...”
 - “there is no evidence to suggest...”
- Think about word choice and how definite you should be.
 - “This study aims to show...”
 - “This study will show...”
 - “This study hopes to show...”
- Use of personal pronouns (I, we)
 - Field-specific conventions.
 - Know your audience and the conventions of your field.

Use of Language

- Especially if writing is a slow process for you, keep a notebook or list of sentence frames and connecting/opening words that you can use and refer to.
 - “This research will demonstrate...”
- Grammar, punctuation, and spelling don’t need to be perfect in early drafts.
 - Organization and ideas matter more.
 - Get words written. Go back and fix them later.

General Tips

- Figure out what matters in your field.
 - There are going to be deal-breakers and red flags in every field. Some of these will apply to all fields (e.g. not following directions for the proposal; an incomplete or out-of-date bibliography and literature review). But others will be specific to your field.
- Don't isolate yourself and your work process.
 - Seek out readers, and more experienced people in your field who can provide good advice.
- Don't take criticism personally.
 - Helpful feedback and criticism will be directed towards the proposal you have written, rather than you as a person.

General Tips.

- Proofread and edit.
 - Get people you know to read it.
 - Sloppy writing makes a proposal less convincing and less successful.
- Stick with the word count and the page count.
 - Don't submit a document that is substantially longer than what is asked for.
 - This will never impress readers and reviewers. It may often be an automatic deal breaker.
- Learn from previous proposals that you have submitted.
 - If a previous proposal was rejected, address the feedback and criticism that you received.
 - Keep copies of rejected proposals. You can often reuse substantial parts of them in future applications.
 - Sometimes proposals are rejected simply because of the nature of the competition, not because the proposal was poor.

General Tips.

- Seek out advice and help from others.
 - Other students, faculty members, family and friends (where relevant).
- Writing Support Appointments.
 - Work one-on-one with a writing tutor.
 - <https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/student-success/writing-support>
- Graduate Writing Community
 - Mondays and Thursdays from 1:00 to 4:00.
- Academic Support Appointments at Student Success Centre.
 - Book online at success.ucalgary.ca.

Questions and Discussion