13

Crafting Proposals

Laura Dutson

Learning Outcomes

- Identify the proposal as a distinct genre of writing in Social Science disciplines and elsewhere
- Recognize the potential benefits of the genre in current field of study, in future career, and in life
- Understand the need for genre analysis in determining specific organizational principles for each proposal
- Learn the driving questions and principles that must be addressed in all proposals and prospectuses
- Feel empowered to persuasively and professionally leverage the proposal genre to achieve goals in the Social Sciences and in life

Introduction to Proposals

Before I dated my husband, when I imagined true love, I envisioned sappy notes tucked under my windshield wiper and sweet nothings jotted on sticky notes stuck to my bathroom mirror. But as I started falling for Jason, my desire for written flirtation was left unanswered—my windshield wipers and mirrors were perpetually empty. As a words gal (I teach writing for a living; you can guess my primary love language), I craved words on a page as a final persuasion that I should fully dive into a relationship with a guy who had me smitten in just about every other way.

The two of us about an hour after I accepted my now-husband's written marriage proposal. (Courtesy of the author.)

Luckily for me, and our two girls who wouldn't be here without us,

Jason knew his audience. And so on the night he proposed, while we sat cozy on the bench seat in a truck parked on the side of the road, he gave me the first and only love letter that I've ever received from him. The letter genuinely detailed his feelings and what he hoped for our future. He loosely outlined a problem—racing-heart, weak-knees, dizzy-head love—and a solution—his hope that I would agree to a life-and-beyond partnership and commitment. I said yes. I'm oversimplifying the decision just a bit, but essentially, the love letter sealed the deal.

When we face life's sticky issues, whether they be, ahem, marriage relationship decisions, or more broadly—civic problems, community projects, research ideas, social concerns, or heck, even a lengthy school essay, it's often difficult to tackle a complex project alone. As we start to visualize solutions to problems, we often discover we need buy-in from someone else (or a group of someones) to make stuff happen.

A proposal is one way to get buy-in from the people you need to make things happen. We write proposals to persuade an audience to support a suggested action plan. You'll find proposals that ask for dollars to finance a project, skills and resources to boost a venture, or simply permission to proceed. A proposal asks a specific audience to address a specific problem by supporting your efforts on a specific course of action. Specificity is key.

Local school districts submit proposals to receive federal government funding for Head Start, a research-backed program for early childhood education

The uses of a proposal document are as diverse as the problems they address. To flood you with examples—charity organizations submit grant proposals to various donors asking for funding to initiate a new projects or sustain efforts; contractors submit bids (proposals) to complete work on construction projects; city councils file proposals asking for funding to improve city infrastructure; entrepreneurs request investment money for business start-ups; teachers write grant proposals asking for additional classroom equipment; venues pitch their location for an event; employees suggest ideas for solving company problems to higher-ups; academics submit proposals seeking permission to present at professional conferences; researchers seek funding to conduct research; graduate students ask for go-ahead from faculty to proceed with a large project.

At times, proposals are submitted as part of a competitive process—only the best proposals are given the nod. Other times, proposals are a stepping stone to ensure preparation and readiness

before the wish is granted. Proposals can be solicited as part of an official process or program to award funding or support. Or they are sometimes submitted to an audience unsolicited, delivered on the guts and prayers of the writer.

Proposals in Your Life

Consider a time when you've requested something specific from someone— a proposal of sorts. How did you ask for the support?

Proposals in the Social Sciences

As a social scientist, proposal documents will help you rally support from the right people as you move from a question or gap in the literature into experimentation, from uncovered research into papers or presentations, and from established conclusions into real-life applications. Social science is social. Use proposals to bring the social, the right people and resources, to your science. There are many types of proposals, and the categories blend and blur, but here are a two broad types of proposals you might encounter in the social sciences: research grants and prospectuses.

Research Grants

Discovering and documenting ideas has a cost, and often that cost can be measured in dollars and cents. In the social sciences, thinkers (students, faculty, researchers, etc.) often request funding to complete a research project through grants. The money can be used to subsidize time, travel, materials, experts, and other resources needed. Research grants are offered by universities, by invested organizations, and government agencies. For example, see grants.gov for lists of federal funding grants.

Undergraduate Research Grants

Budding student social scientists can submit proposals to apply for research grants specifically available for undergraduate research within colleges and departments and/or through university libraries. Many of these opportunities require collaboration with a faculty member, which deepens the possibilities and enriches the experience.

Have a good idea for a project? Find a faculty member who is willing to back you up, write a solid proposal using this chapter, and you have a decent chance of getting funds to make it happen.

A recent BYU student research project looked at shyness and its effects on romantic relationship expectations and satisfaction. The funding for the project was achieved through submission of a proposal.

Talk to faculty, college advisers, and librarians to discover these undergraduate opportunities for project funding. Be on the lookout for posters and emails within your college department advertising deadlines and requirements. Even university libraries often offer

research funding for using their materials to complete a project.

You can find Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library undergraduate research grant information [here](). And to access specific examples of undergraduate-faculty collaborative research projects completed with grant funding at Brigham Young University, visit the [Journal of Undergraduate Research](), which publishes the final write-ups of funded projects in each department.

Prospectuses

A proposal to write a substantive research paper or book is often called a prospectus. Social scientists write this type of proposal when dealing with written research projects or books.

A prospectus is a proposal that pitches a research project, often written to seek approval from a faculty mentor.

At its heart, a prospectus is about getting on the same page with

faculty who will support your project. It's the same with proposals as a whole—getting on the same page with those who have the power to support your project.

In graduate programs and upper-level undergraduate courses, you might find students working on prospectus documents that detail their ideas and plans to complete a large research project, a master's thesis, or doctoral dissertation. These prospectuses pitch a topic and plan for the larger writing/research project.

A prospectus document is usually submitted to a faculty member or committee who has the power to approve project plans and give the student go-ahead and support. A prospectus is used to ensure student preparation, determine student focus on a significant issue worth researching, and establish student/faculty agreement on a feasible plan before a student is released to dive headlong into databases and drafting.

As subsets of proposals, we'll talk about both research grants and prospectuses under the broader title, proposals, in the rest of the chapter.

Creating a Proposal

Each opportunity to write a proposal will be distinct. Some calls for proposals will have specific templates; some won't. They will differ in expectations regarding page count, section headings, and detail level. We can't tackle—nor do I know—all the nuances and requirements of each and every proposal.

But this I do know: as a proposal writer, you're expected to uphold specific expectations and comply with any diverse specifications that might be required by your audience, the people with the power to bestow a blessing of resources, funding, or permission. Your ability to

meet and exceed an audience's unique expectations will determine how willingly they say yes.

So don't write a proposal before doing homework: read all provided instructions, use the provided template if given one, talk to those with experience on the specific proposal, and scrutinize successful proposal examples in each unique circumstance to determine your audience's expectations.

Proposals are written in the mode of problem and solution. Your job is to demonstrate that there is a problem for which you have a unique solution. And then your job is to present the solution—propose and pitch the solution and course of action—to the specific problem. So, identify a specific problem or question in your area of interest. Then design a plan, study, or project to address it. And finally describe the plan and method in detail in a proposal for the big-wigs.

Understanding Proposal Requirements

Which of the following options are good ways to find out and meet the specific requirements of a proposal opportunity?

a. Review examples of past successful proposals for the specific opportunity.
b. Talk with decision-makers who will review the proposals to discover their expectations for the document.
c. Find and mimic any provided templates for the specific proposal opportunity.
d. Ask those who have submitted proposals in the past for advice.
e. Read and re-read the posted "call for proposals" information to understand decision-maker priorities.
f. All of the above.

Proposal Sections

As I've said, proposal formats vary widely. But more than likely, most proposal specifications will ask you to create a document with sections to address the main core questions. Let's consider some of the common sections you might encounter and how they address questions that you need to answer. Obviously, order and specific headings will vary in each proposal depending on the listed requirements.

Title

Most proposals ask you for a title. Create a vibrant, engaging title with specific, clear articulation of your problem and/or solution to make your audience want to learn more. Think of your title as the hook to get your audience to continue. Two-part titles with a colon allow more space for specificity. Be sure to follow capitalization rules for titles in the desired writing style (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.).

Introduction/Purpose

What is the proposed action or solution? What does the writer want to do?

Here you include a brief overview of the purpose of the proposal. You establish the proposed action or solution in general terms—your goal at the outset. Sometimes, this section doesn't have an obviously marked header, but is rather the first paragraph(s) to launch the document.

When writing a proposal for a possible research paper (a prospectus, as we discussed earlier), you likely won't know the full nuance of your thesis or conclusions exactly. But you should have questions about your topic that have narrowed your scope of exploration. Announce an aim, goal, and/or scope as a starting point.

Set-up your stylistic voice and tone right away. While you should write

appropriately for the circumstance and audience, avoid dull or diluted writing. Be clear, vibrant, and direct. In a competitive proposal process, reviewers may only read the title and introduction before deciding whether to give more consideration to the proposal. Be interesting; don't let them stop reading.

Problem/Question

Why is it proposed? What is the problem, question, need, or goal to address? And how is it important to both the writer and the decision-makers?

This section establishes the need and importance for the proposal—a why for the proposal.

In this section, explain how you recognized a question begging for an answer, a problem itching for a solution. If personal reasons are driving your question or problem, in some proposal circumstances it is appropriate to detail these motives in this first section. Read through sample proposals in similar circumstances to see if personal motives are appropriate to include in yours.

You will also want to use this section to demonstrate your understanding of the conversation surrounding the question, problem, need or goal; show that you've reviewed the literature/research/conversation surrounding your topic. You can do this by incorporating ideas and context from other researchers or thinkers on the issue. As you do, suggest how your project is distinct from others, but how it fits in the context of a larger conversation. If you've written a review of literature around a certain question or topic prior to drafting a proposal (which you can read more about in the Literature Review chapters of this book), you would incorporate an overview of your literature review conclusions in this section.

Be aware that proposals might ask you to include more than just an overview of your literature review conclusions in your proposal. Some proposals require a separate, more lengthy literature review discussion as part of your submission to demonstrate a more thorough understanding of context. If so, it is likely to be included earlier or later in the proposal document as a separate section and thus would be less likely to be included here in this section. As always, follow the specific guidelines for each unique proposal opportunity to decide how to include literature review content. Include a reference page in the appropriate citation style as necessary.

By seeking to understand the relationship between punk music and activism specifically in Belfast, Ireland, one proposal writer sought to illuminate how music generates and motivates activism generally.

And as a final, most important, step in this section, persuade the audience that the question, problem, need, or goal is (or should be) important to them. As with all good writing, a writer is most effective when writing toward the values and concerns of their audience. This is especially important when the audience holds power to determine your (or your project's) fate. In providing your audience with a statement or narrative of the problem, present convincing evidence that the problem matters now and the time to address the problem is

now. Make a solid case that the problem is ripe, ready to be addressed—and you are the one for the job.

Objectives/Solutions/Outcomes

How will the proposed action/solution effectively solve the problem, answer the question, meet the need, or achieve the goal that the audience now agrees is important?

In this section, identify what you plan to produce, specifically any tangible outcomes you anticipate. Outline the specifics of your end product, contribution, or solution, which might be a publication, presentation, performance, invention, new metric achievement, lecture, physical object, or a paper. For starters, as an undergraduate proposing a research paper, you might anticipate presenting your project at an undergraduate research conference—many universities have them in each department.

If you are writing a proposal for a paper (a prospectus), you will likely outline the thesis, organization, and contents of your eventual project. Some writers incorporate a traditional outline here—roman numerals and all. For a longer project, you might break-down a book chapter-by-chapter with summaries. Or this section simply might be a single paragraph with sentences addressing each sub-topic of your project. Show your audience that the output of your efforts will make an impact in resolving the specified need.

Method/Schedule

Is the writer capable of planning, managing, and completing the proposed action?

We've come to the broadest section—and the most varied in style and

requirement across the proposal spectrum. This section asks you to breakdown a plan to generate your end product, using concrete information such as method, timelines, data, steps, cost, equipment or facilities needed, wages or personnel required, feasibility, consequences or expected results. Graphs, charts, bulleted schedules or timeline goals, and budgets are not unusual here. Show how, where, and when the work will be completed.

Committing to a timeline will demonstrate your ability to complete the proposed project.

For a proposal that pitches a large project or paper, you will likely outline a timeline estimating your agenda for completing the phases of research and drafting. As you draft your timeline, consider prior commitments you've made in other areas of your life and plan accordingly. Write a month-by-month, week-by-week, or day-by-day schedule with how you plan to complete your project, depending on the scope. The timeline must be a realistic vision of your ability to complete the work in the time. You might consider giving deadlines

for the following intermediate steps: beginning research, assembling a preliminary bibliography, taking notes, writing a first draft, gathering feedback, and writing a final draft.

Including a task timeline is especially helpful if your research is complicated with interviews, surveys, data collection, and other primary research methods. In research and statistics classes within your field you will learn various methods for creating quantitative and qualitative data. Outline your specific, statistically-sound plan for generating data within this section. Get down to the nitty-gritty of how you're going to get the job done.

Qualifications

Does the writer have qualified personnel involved?

You don't need to be Einstein; you don't need to be brilliant (well, more than you already are). As a student in your field, you are qualified to address a problem, question, need, or goal in your field. Briefly list your education and directly relevant previous experience. It might be just a sentence or two. This section may or may not be necessary when drafting a proposal for a fairly straightforward project.

If you are engaging in complex statistical research or another project that demands technical skills or specific abilities, you might need to persuade your audience that you are qualified by noting any specific background, training, or expertise you have (or will get) that will help you do your work well.

You will also want to briefly introduce other people who might be involved in your action plan. If you are writing a proposal for a collaborative project, address your colleagues' qualifications and abilities briefly as well. Some undergraduate research grants require the participation of a full-time faculty mentor. You will outline their

position, college, department, and research interests here.

Resources

Does the writer have the necessary resources, background context, and/or knowledge to begin? Is the cost (if any) of the proposed action reasonable considering potential benefits?

A solid plan and qualified personnel are not the only two ingredients for a successful project. Projects might also demand materials, instruments, travel, equipment, and compensation.

Often, it comes down to money. When discussing resources in a proposal, prepare a proposed resource and cost budget down to the dollars. Budget fairly to show a close estimate of costs you will face and/or resources you will need. Demonstrate good planning by identifying accurately what's needed, where the resources are available, and what it will cost. Your audience will be looking to see if the costs seem reasonable considering the anticipated results of the project. Often, this section might include a spreadsheet or list showing how resources will be allocated and applied.

Literature Review/Bibliography

Because you likely won't need more than articles, journals, and books to begin a major research paper, the literature that you annotate, summarize, and incorporate is the primary resource to consider in your proposal for that paper. Thus, you might be asked to include additional literature review (a survey of relevant sources—the "literature") or a bibliography of sources, which may or may not be annotated with the sources' argument and your anticipated use. Your review of the literature will also support the Problem/Question

section, as detailed above. Literature reviews are discussed at length in a prior chapter.

Outlining your supporting documents in the proposal, wherever your literature review content is included, will demonstrate you have access to the solid, relevant sources, the resources you need to begin. Any sources that you cite in your earlier sections should be included in this review of the literature or annotated bibliography. As with any time you cite sources in a formal document, use a consistent and appropriate citation style which fits the audience's expectations (APA, MLA, Chicago, Turabian, etc.).

Conclusion

While some proposals won't ask you for a conclusion, when they do, use your conclusion to summarize your main points and create a final appeal to your audience. Reiterate the established need and your proposed solution. Ask clearly for the desired course of action: dollars to finance a project, skills and resources to boost a venture, or simply permission to proceed. Emotionally emphasize the vision. Make it personal for your audience at your close.

Understanding Proposal Structure

True or False: Proposals rigidly follow the sections listed above. You should always plan to include each and every section, in the order listed above.

a. True—exactness matters with proposals and you should always seek to follow the above sections exactly.
b. False—each unique proposal circumstance will demand different sections and topics to address in varying orders, which may or may not include some of the sections above.

Final Considerations

As you finish your proposal, here are some final things to consider.

- Be consistent and clear as you design your headings and structure. Make sure your design fits with the expected look for the specific situation and audience. Look at examples to see what looks best to you.
- Revise and edit carefully to establish your credibility. Your audience wants to trust your abilities and they will see them reflected first in your attention to detail in the proposal. Submit a proposal with clean grammar and close adherence to the specifications provided.
- Before you submit a proposal, seek feedback. If you can, ask for reviews from people who have evaluated similar proposals or prospectuses as decision-makers. Or, at the least, ask for feedback from peers who may have been successful before. Ask them to read it quickly, even skim it. Does it make sense? More than likely, your audience will be reading a pile of proposals rapidly. You want the clarity and vibrancy of yours to stand out right away.
- Without alternate instructions, the default is to submit by official email as a PDF—always as a PDF to avoid formatting hiccups.
- Don't miss deadlines for submission. They often come just once a year.

For me, a written paper proposal given with a glittery ring in a small wooden box marked the end (the start!) of a pretty magical love story. Yes, yes, and again yes, I said to by now-husband in response to the most important proposal I've gotten to date. My husband and I teamed up to tackle life's roller coaster, and thus far, it's been thrilling. Yes, I'm stretching a bit putting my engagement story into the mix. But I'm convinced that like a one-knee, shaky-hands, big-kiss

proposal, written proposals have the power to link the right people and resources to a project, even a marriage in this case.

Likewise, if we think about the proposals we write as vibrant documents written about actual problems or questions to real people who can make decisions (not to face-less bureaucratic organizations), we'll be more likely to make profitable connections with an audience who has the extra boost of power to make things happen. With the right resources sent to the best projects, we see questions answered, problems solved, needs met, and goals achieved. I have to admit, it feels a little bit like magic.

Dutson, L. (2020). Proposals. In C. C. Charles, *Writing in the Social Sciences.* EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/writing/proposals