

Some Candid Suggestions on the Art of Writing Proposals

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Writing proposals for research funding is a peculiar facet of academic culture. A proposal's overt function is to persuade a review committee that it shines with four kinds of merit: conceptual innovation, rich and substantive content, methodological rigor, and feasibility. But to make these points stick, a proposal writer also needs a feel for the unspoken customs, norms, and needs that govern the evaluation and approval process. For the most part, these customs arise from a review committee's efforts to deal with its own problems: diverse backgrounds and perspectives, work overload, and the challenge of equitably judging proposals that reflect varied social and academic circumstances.

Writing an academic research proposal is an art and quite different than writing papers, articles, or books. Proposals are a very specific genre. Successful proposals are those that get their merits across because they address the unspoken needs and norms as well as the overt rules and criteria of the review process. These pages will give proposal writers some sense of these normally unspoken customs and needs.

Capture the Reviewer's Attention

While the form and organization of a proposal are matters of taste, you should keep in mind that every proposal reader constantly scans for clear answers to four questions:

- What are we going to learn or achieve as the result of the proposed project that we don't already know?
- Why is it worth knowing?
- How will we know that the conclusions are valid or the goals will be achieved?
- Does the author have the means to complete the project?

Working through a lengthy proposal, or still worse, a tall stack of proposals, reviewers should not have to search for hidden answers. Therefore say what you have to say immediately, crisply, and forcefully. The opening paragraph, or the first page at most, is your chance to grab the reviewer's attention. Use it. This is the moment to overstate, rather than understate, your proposal's rationale, organization, and goals. You can add the conditions and caveats later.

Clearly posed questions are an excellent way to begin a research proposal: Are strong party systems conducive to democratic stability? Was the decline of population growth in Brazil the result of government policies? These should not be rhetorical questions; they have effect precisely because the answers are not obvious—and they signal to the reviewer that you will be presenting a plan to reach an answer.

Alternatively, stating your central point, hypothesis, or interpretation is also a good way to begin: Workers do not organize unions; unions organize workers. The success, and failure, of Corazon Aquino's revolution stems from its middle-class origins. Population growth coupled with loss of arable land to plantation crops, game farms, and urban sprawl threatens South African food security.

Obviously some projects are too complex and some conceptualizations too subtle for such short messages to capture. Sometimes only step-by-step argumentation can define the central problem. But even if you adopt this strategy, make sure to leave the reviewers with something to remember, a message that will remain after reading many other proposals. "She's the one who claims that Argentina never had a liberal democratic tradition" is how you want to be referred to during the committee's discussion, not, "Oh yes, she's the one from Panama."

Aim for Clarity

Remember that most review committees are composed of people from different disciplines and with different perspectives. Reviewers expect the proposer to meet them at least halfway. Try to provide a brief but lucid guided tour of the relevant research frontiers of your field. Avoid jargon as much as you can, and when technical language is really needed, restrict yourself to those new words and technical terms that truly lack equivalents in common language. Also, keep the spotlight on ideas, concepts, and what, quite concretely, you plan to do. When additional technical material is needed, consider putting it in appendices if possible.

Establish the Context

Your proposal should tell the reviewers not only what will be learned or accomplished as a result of your project but also what will be new about it. The proposal should summarize the current state of knowledge and current debates on the topic. It should also include an up-to-date bibliography that provides a concise view of the specific body or bodies of knowledge or practice to which you will add. Reviewers often treat bibliographies as a sign of the applicant's seriousness. A good bibliography testifies that the author did the preparatory work to assure that the project will complement and not duplicate other people's efforts. Incomplete or outdated references can be very costly if they fail to include directly relevant literature. Proposal writers with limited library resources should correspond with colleagues and libraries elsewhere in the early stages of proposal writing. Resource guides such as Dissertation Abstracts International and Social Science Periodical Index are highly recommended. For many disciplines, annual reviews (e.g., Annual Review of Anthropology) offer state-of-the-art discussions and rich bibliographies. Some disciplines have bibliographically oriented journals, for example, Review of Economic Literature and Contemporary Sociology. There are also valuable area studies-oriented guides: Handbook of Latin American Studies, International African Bibliography, and others. Familiarizing yourself with them can save days of research.

What's the Payoff?

Disciplinary norms, institutional goals, and personal tastes for justifying research differ greatly. Some reviewers are swayed by the claim that a topic has not been studied (e.g., a historian may argue that no book has been written about a particular event, and therefore one is needed), while others may reflect there is a good reason why not. Nevertheless, the fact that little is known about one's research topic can work in the proposer's favor. Citing the importance of the phenomena or events to be studied is another approach. Turning points, crucial breakthroughs, central personages, key institutions, and the prospect of generating new knowledge, helping to meet important social goals, and contributing to better policy formulations can be effective as appeals to the importance of research if they are argued, not just asserted. Appealing to immediate public concerns about an issue or problem can also work, as in the following examples: democratic consolidation in South America, issues of aging societies, mobility and migration, and the rise of drug-related violence along trafficking routes.

It is crucial to convince reviewers that such topics are not just currently fashionable but will illuminate some wider or more abiding problem. Both theoretical interest and practical value can be convincing. Theoretical justifications need not go back to the roots of your discipline but should situate the proposal in terms of its relevance to current theory or theoretical debates. Explain how your research will put established ideas or practices to the test. Your project should aim to develop new facts, understandings, interpretations, practices, or skills. Proposals that replicate others' work or simply aim to prove a foregone conclusion fare badly. Reviewers will fear that data will be cherry-picked and interpretations biased to support an initial position. Demonstrate both your critical stance and your intellectual flexibility. Admit the possibility of unexpected results, surprises, and the need to shift gears. Good proposals show an awareness of multiple viewpoints and practices. Argue your position, but remain open to unanticipated discoveries. In doing research you are entering new terrain. Make it clear you are open to change, and avoid pressing a single sectarian tendency indifferent to possible alternatives.

Use a Fresh Approach

Surprises, puzzles, and apparent contradictions can be convincing of the value of a project, even for reviewers committed to systematic model building or formal theorizing: Given its long-standing democratic traditions, Chile was expected to return to democracy before other countries in the Southern Cone, and yet . . . Is it because these traditions were already extinct by 1973 or because the assumption on which this prediction was based is false? Everyone expected that One Big Union—the slogan of the movement—would strike and win wage increases for workers. Yet statistical evidence shows just the contrary: strong unions do not strike but instead restrain workers' wage demands.

It is often worthwhile helping reviewers understand how research needs grow out of the intellectual, institutional, and political history of a country. The chance to see intellectual history or institutional innovation in the making is another motive to which proposals can legitimately appeal.

Keep in mind that currently popular issues, both theoretical and in the so-called real world, are likely to be a crowded field. Competitors will be more numerous and the competition more intense than in less recognized terrains. Unless you have something very original to say, you may be well advised to avoid research topics of current interest to your discipline. Usually these are topics about which everyone is writing, and the reason is that someone has already made the decisive and exciting contribution. By the time you write your proposal, obtain funding, do the research, and write it up, you might wish you were working on something else. Thus if your instinct leads you to a problem far from the course that the pack is running, follow it, not the pack. Nothing is more valuable than a really fresh beginning.

Methodological Issues

Research methods are often discipline-specific and vary widely even within some disciplines. Yet two things can safely be said about methodological appeals. First, the proposal must specify the research operations you will undertake and how you expect to analyze the results of these operations in relation to your central problem. Do not just tell what you mean to achieve; indicate how you will spend your time while doing it. Second, a methodology is not just a list of research tasks but an argument as to why these tasks add up to the best attack on the problem. An agenda by itself will normally not suffice because the mere listing of tasks to perform does not prove that they add up to the best feasible approach.

Some frequently used phrases fall short of identifying recognizable research operations. For example, "I will look at the relation between x and y" is not informative. We know what is meant when an ornithologist proposes to look at a bird, but looking at a relation between variables is something one only does indirectly, by operations like digging through dusty archive boxes, interviewing, observing, and taking standardized notes, collecting and testing statistical patterns, and so on. Make clear how you will tease the relationship of underlying forces from the mass of experience.

The process of gathering data and moving to interpretation tends to follow disciplinary customs, more standard in some fields than in others. Help reviewers from other fields recognize which parts of your methodology are standard and which are innovative. Describe the activities you will undertake to collect information, how you will assure its accuracy and validity, and how you will analyze and interpret it. Research proposals often fail because they leave reviewers wondering what the applicant will actually do. Tell them! Be as concrete as possible. Specify the archives, sources, respondents, and proposed techniques of analysis.

Research designs proposing comparisons between cases often have special appeal. In a sense all research is comparative because it must use, implicitly or explicitly, some point of reference. Making the comparison explicit raises its value. Reviewers may ask, Are the cases sufficiently comparable that their similarities and differences can really illuminate the central question? And is the proposer in a position to execute both legs of the comparison? When both answers are positive, the proposal may fare particularly well.

The proposal should show that the researcher either possesses or cooperates with people who possess mastery of the technical matters the project entails. For example, if a predominantly literary project includes an inquiry into the influence of the Tupian language on rural Brazilian Portuguese, the proposal will be checked for the author's background in linguistics and/or indigenous languages, or the author's arrangements to collaborate with appropriate experts.

Feasibility

Review committees rarely have enough funds to support all the worthy proposals before them. Thus feasibility becomes another key selection criterion. Does the applicant have the capacity—the training; skills; experience; language competences; contacts; institutional, collegial, or supervisory support; and access to materials (archives, data sets, subjects to be interviewed, etc.)—to carry out the project? Can the project be accomplished in the time allotted and with available financial resources? Research projects often stretch out over several years, and reviewers will seek evidence of the applicant's commitment to stick it out, to get it done. Does the proposal consider the relevant ethical and security issues for researcher and research subjects, if any? Answers to these questions can be crucial to the success of a proposal and often justify a modest autobiographical section in a proposal. Think of this as a kind of “track record”—beyond the accompanying CV—indicating why and how the issues interest or excite you, and what prior research or activities you have already done in this regard. Don't be boastful, but don't sell yourself short. Assert your seriousness and commitment to the project.

Specify Your Objectives

A well-composed proposal, like a sonata, usually ends by alluding to the original theme. How will the research finally connect with the central question or issue? How will you know if your idea or plan was wrong or right? What matters is to convince readers that something is genuinely at stake—that something really needs to be discovered. It is important to show that the project is not moving toward a preconceived end, and that the element of the unknown may well yield interesting or important new understandings, propositions, or practices.

Proposals should normally describe the final product of the project: an article, book, chapter, or dissertation. Spell out your plans. Specify the kind of journal in which you hope to publish, or the kind of people you hope to address or train. While planning and drafting your proposal, read and reread the application criteria or funding guidelines you need to meet. If you have specific questions about them, consult with the appropriate supervisor, officials, or funding agency staff—but do so well before the deadline. And make sure to include all the requested enclosures and appendices.

Final Note

To write a good proposal takes a long time. Start early. Begin thinking about your topic, the issue, or your plan well in advance. Make it a habit to collect ideas and references while you work on other tasks. Write a first draft at least three months in advance, revise it, and show it to colleagues. Let it gather a little dust, collect colleagues' comments, and revise it again. If possible, share it with a seminar or similar group. The ensuing comments and discussion should help you anticipate what reviewers will eventually think. Revise the text again for substance. Go over the language, style, and form. Resharpen your opening paragraph or first page so that it drives home exactly what you mean, and mean to do, as effectively as possible.

Good luck.



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