

CRAFTING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The research proposal includes several key components to convince an interdisciplinary audience of intelligent academics who are not necessarily specialists in your field that the research project will produce original results with implications beyond that field of expertise.

INTRODUCTION

FIRST: Present the reader with a contradiction, paradox, problem or surprising set of conditions that create the context and/or subject of your project (1-3 sentences). For example:

“In Africa and elsewhere, scholars systematically refer to farming as the transformation of the ancient economy that enables subsequent social, political and cultural change. In south central Africa, however, communities classified as ‘farmers’ by archaeologists nonetheless continued to hunt and gather, elaborating on this feature of their economy whilst continuing to farm.”

In the creative fields, create a sense of drama about your project’s subject by emphasizing some quality that makes it unique. Is it a subject that was forgotten? That only exists for a small segment of the population? That one would not usually consider a subject for ‘art’? For example:

A recent winner decided to walk a medieval pilgrimage trail, recording mementos left behind by modern-day pilgrims.

SECOND: Briefly (1-2 sentences) explain your research topic and methods to explore the topic, problem, or contradiction you just introduced. For example:

“My project uses the methodology of historical linguistics to reconstruct three thousand years of wild resource exploitation by farming communities in order to understand how people in the past drew on both economic activities as they elaborated social, political and cultural life.”

In the creative fields, here is where you would explain how you will produce a project related to the topic. For example:

In the project listed above, the student used the mementos as material from which she wrote original poetry for a degree in creative writing.

THIRD: Explain the importance or significance of the research to a general academic reader (1 sentence).

FOURTH: Provide the specific research dates and place of the project (1 sentence).

BACKGROUND

Give basic information about the subject to understand how your project works. What do we need to know about these items to understand how you will be studying them? What information/data will they give you?

Scientists might elaborate on, for example, how cancer cells reproduce as background knowledge to understand why a chemical might inhibit growth or how black holes are formed so that we can understand how you plan to measure their size, etc.

Humanities and social science researchers would give additional information about the research subjects- who are the people you study? Where do they live, what do they do, what aspect of their activities (work, play, social behaviors, etc.) do you plan to focus on ? Or, for cultural items (buildings, films, literary texts, etc.) what are the conditions in which the items were created- who made them, when, why and in what genre?

LITERATURE REVIEW

What scholarly research has been completed on the topic and how is your research new and different from previous work? This is not the same as describing your research subject as you do in the background section; here you try to elaborate on the theory and practice of previous researchers. What did they leave out of their studies and why is that important to understanding the topic as a whole?

The lit review can be the most difficult section of the grant proposal as it requires mastery of a large body of previous creative and research work, theory, and methods. However, you already know someone who can help you understand this body of work and quickly identify how your research is innovative: your advisor. We strongly urge you to ask your advisor(s) at the Office of Fellowships for help with this section.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In 4-5 sentences, what are you asking of your data? What do you think it will tell you about your subject that is new and interesting? The holes, gaps, contradictions and limits of previous research that you have outlined in your lit review should lead naturally to a more detailed explanation of precisely what you seek to learn about your subject.

For creative projects, explain in detail what you will do and how to better enable the committee to assess the merits of your project.

METHODOLOGY

How will you go about getting the information you will analyze in your research paper or creative project? Will you run a lab experiment to generate data, go to an archive to read primary documents, conduct interviews?

You have explained what information you want to collect and how you will obtain it. Now, how will you analyze or process it? Will you code, graph, or otherwise manipulate the data to find patterns and by what criteria?

PREPARATION

Prove that you are the most qualified person to undertake this research. What courses have you taken? Do you speak the relevant language(s)? Do you have experience manipulating data sets? Do you have contacts in your research country? Do you have appointments interviews?

Have you begun the process of obtaining IRB clearance, necessary for all funded research? How does the research fit into your academic career? Is it an honors thesis, independent study, or preparation for graduate school?

CONCLUSION

Return to that contradiction or paradox from your introduction. Remind us of the broader implications of your research for both academics and non-academics. For a short research proposal (2-3 pages), it is entirely normal not to have enough space for a conclusion.