

# HNRS 2000

## RESEARCH & EXHIBITION

### How to Write a Research Proposal

Yet again, the title above is somewhat deceptive, because there is no “one true formula” for writing a research proposal. Specific proposal formats vary based on the funding agency, so right there a proposal for the exact same research idea may look very different depending on where you go.

But regardless of the final outline or format, effective research proposals tend to share a common flow of ideas. The key is to express this flow clearly and connect the dots in a compelling manner.

#### The “Flow” of a Proposal

1. *The setup: How did you get here?* A research proposal must effectively communicate how the project emerged. What knowledge was gathered? Has similar work been done before? What was missing among the works seen? You want to show the reader that you have expertise in your research area, and that your idea was not born in a vacuum.
2. *The question: What are you investigating?* Somewhere in the proposal, typically as soon as you have provided enough background, you want to clearly state your research question. What are you trying to learn or create?
3. *The task: What do you plan to do?* Having established some background and the question at hand, you then want to describe how you will seek to answer this question. Valid approaches here do of course vary by discipline—here is, yet again, another area where your mentor can provide critical guidance.
4. *The product: What artifact(s) will emerge from your work?* Most of the time, this is simply a paper reporting on your results, and in that case need not be specified as such. Sometimes, however, you do expect to produce something else: a collection of photographs; a screenplay; software. For these kinds of projects, it is worthwhile to state “what comes out” of your work.
5. *Necessary resources: What do you need?* And now we come to the proposal’s *raison d’être*: what is frequently nicknamed “the ask.” Your task will

need resources, and you don’t necessarily have them—that’s why you’re making this proposal after all! The resources you request should have a clear connection to the task you described previously, and of course should fit within the bounds specified by the funding agency. Detail and specificity are desirable here—in many ways, a proposal is a sales pitch, and as such, you want to be very clear about what you’re selling.

Note how these points feed naturally from one into another; that’s the important part. You want to establish expertise/background first—this gives you credibility and authority when framing the research question. Then, the work you propose to do should make sense in light of the question: the reader should see why it makes sense to approach the question in the manner that you’re proposing. Finally, the resources you are requesting should correlate clearly with the work.

Sometimes, these elements may not emerge in strict logical order. For example, before you even have a research project, you might hear about an opportunity that offers something that you want—e.g., a particular amount of funding, some equipment that you’d like to acquire, etc. Only then might you start thinking about a project that may motivate the acquisition of those resources.

This “opportunity before inquiry” does happen, and it’s alright that it does—what matters is that, once you do have your research idea determined and proposal written, *the proposal must still flow in the direction that was specified*. In other words, in its final form, your proposal must never appear fixated on just acquiring the resources that are up for grabs: it should always, always, always present an inquiry well-grounded in literature, to be investigated using activities that make sense, and producing a result that looks to answer the question in a compelling manner. Then, *and only then*, can the case be made for the requested resources: they must correspond well to the research activities being proposed. One might even say that your “ask” should be set up so that *there is no other way* to accomplish your proposed work without the resources being requested.

## The Format for this Class

In the end, however, we need to settle on some kind of format. So this is what we want for the purposes of this class:

- *Title page*—title, author, abstract; abstract should have a maximum of 200 words
- *Narrative*—outline below; 1200–1500 words
- *References/works cited*—No limit; not included in word count
- *Budget*—No limit; not included in word count

The proposal narrative should follow this outline—note how it follows the aforementioned “flow” pretty closely:

1. *Introduction*—Set up the topic or research area for an educated but non-specialized reader. Typically the introduction ends with your research question, concisely stated.
2. *Background/Related Work and Motivation*—State and describe the previous work that led you to your proposal. What are the foundational works? What have other people done? What was missing? In a sense, this can be viewed as a detailed version of the introduction—still a part of “the setup” from the above flow.
3. *Methods*—This corresponds directly with “the task.” What do you propose to do? Remember to connect this very well to the question that you asked: the educated but non-specialized reader must be able to see how the activities you propose will progressively lead you closer to answering the research inquiry.
4. *Expected Results*—This somewhat corresponds to “the product,” but will of course vary depending on the discipline and type of product. In the common case where the research may lead to new information that would be written up as a paper, “expected results” don’t pertain to the paper itself, but what one might see in that paper. If something else may come out of the work, like software, creative work, or different media, then that should be described in this section as well.
5. *Conclusion*—Wrap it up. This is largely a recap of what came before, something to tie everything together now that the reader has seen the whole thing. Repeat the flow concisely.

Throughout your narrative, cite sources whenever applicable. In general, any statement you make that may be met with skepticism by your reader—e.g., specialized knowledge, certain views or opinions, important assumptions—should have one or more supporting citations. The full listings for these references then appear in the references/works cited section. Where/when would you have found these references, you might ask? Why, your annotated bibliography of course! Still, be open to adding new references if they come up; the annotated bibliography can be considered a living document in this regard—always potentially growing, never really completely finished.

Finally, the budget specifies your necessary resources. In addition to having clear and logical connections with your methods, your budget should also have an adequate degree of specificity. If your proposed work requires travel, then go through the motions of planning the trip, jotting down costs as you go. If your work requires time spent, then quantify that amount of time. If your work requires equipment or other materials, then act as if you are about to buy those items but of course stop just short of buying them—that’s why you’re writing this proposal after all! Instead, take notes on price and possibly shipping and taxes; these would then go to your budget.

Although the proposal you are writing for this class is not directed at a particular funding agency or call/request for proposals (frequently abbreviated as a CFP or RFP), it should produce enough material such that if you *do* find an RFP that is a good match for the work that you want to do, it shouldn’t be too hard to just adapt this assignment instead of starting over from scratch.