Research Proposals

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

A proposal outlines your plan for a research project. It shows your reader the value and direction of your research. This handout focuses on proposals for academic papers and research projects; grant and policy proposals follow different formats.

Regardless of format, most proposals will include the following elements:
- A title that reflects the issue you're going to research or the argument you are likely to take
- A research question and a description of its context and significance
- A brief overview of existing research on the topic to increase credibility and support the direction of your argument
- A bibliography, sometimes annotated, to demonstrate your familiarity with central and current existing research on your topic
- Many proposals will also include a tentative thesis or hypothesis.

Proposal formats

Arrange the information you want to present in a logical way. Be as specific as you can: even though you have not completed the project, you will build credibility by making connections to existing research and by showing why your tentative argument and plan are reasonable.

You can base your proposal on the following model or organize it to best reflect your material.

Three-section proposal

Purpose: summarize the issue, explain why the topic is important, and state your research question

Method and literature review: describe the steps you will take and tools you will use to complete your project and why they are appropriate. Methods may include academic research, outside interviews, field work, or archival research. If appropriate, you may discuss if your methods will be quantitative or qualitative. For a research paper, you may include a literature review to provide a basis for your own research. Discuss the connections, contradictions, and gaps in prominent pieces of existing research (see our Literature Reviews handout for more information).

Implications: explain why your project is significant for the field and how it will contribute to the academic conversation. How might your project change how the issue is viewed or how future research will be affected?

End with a bibliography.