

## **They Said “Yes!”: The Research Proposal**

A research proposal, also known as a research prospectus, describes a project’s intended course and its intellectual merit. In the process, you are expected to explain its historiographical context and how you intend to complete it. A well-written proposal should demonstrate that your project is unique and necessary.

### **The Parts of a Research Proposal**

**The Introduction:** What is the focus of the study?

**The Research Project:** What is your take on the subject?

**The Literature Review:** How have scholars addressed this subject?

**The Significance:** What is new about your study?

**The Methodology:** How will you investigate this topic?

### **Step 1: Describe the Research Project**

This section should be the easiest to write. You want to address the following aspects in one paragraph:

- **The Subject:** Clearly state the focus of your study. Use this space to introduce the importance or salient details of the place, person, product, project, idea, or organization at the center of your study. The reader should have a very clear idea of the who, what, and where of your project.
- **The Periodization:** Give your study a specific beginning and end. It will be useful to think of other periodizations for the same subject. Historians often expand the temporal parameters of their study due to insufficient primary sources.
- **The Approach:** Clearly state the type of history you intend to write. Will your paper be a social, economic, political, intellectual, or gender history? Is there an overarching theoretical framework (e.g. critical social theory, gender theory, or post-structuralism) or theorist (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, or Lefebvre) that will inform your analysis?

### **Step 2: Review the Literature**

When discussing the historiography, you do not have to prove that you have read the entire field. Instead, focus only the works that *directly and significantly* address your topic. By concentrating on the most important texts, you will have more room to discuss two aspects of this critical section:

- **Describe Previous Approaches:** How have scholars addressed the topic you are working on? Divide the historiography into groups (such as by theoretical approach, date of publication, or archives used) and describe their contribution.

- Address the Gaps: Balance your compliments of the previous scholarship with criticism. Make sure you discuss the time periods, personalities, relationships, events, or archives that have been ignored, undervalued, or misunderstood. This approach will allow you to discuss deficiencies of the existing research without getting bogged down in the details of each work, while still showing the reader how your study will provide new insight into the field.

### **Step 3: Explicate the Project's Significance**

The success of your proposal rests a great deal on its significance. For this reason, it is important to articulate why your topic deserves and requires in-depth research in primary documents. When writing this section, constantly ask yourself, "So, what?"

### **Step 4: Explain Your Methodology**

This is perhaps the least complicated part of the proposal. The methodology section should convince the reader that the project is feasible and, more importantly, that you can do it. In this section, lay out for the reader how you intend to research your topic.

- Primary Sources: Tell the reader the primary sources you will use. If you plan to use archival sources, mention the archives you will visit, when you will visit them, and the specific collections you will examine. If you are using published materials, explain what they are and how you will use them.
- Special Training: Be sure to mention any special training or experience you might have that will help the research process, such as previous research experience or language training.
- Timeline for Research: Develop a tentative calendar for research. Ask your advisor if your schedule makes sense. Presenting a calendar will suggest to the reader that you have thought about the research process.

### **Step 5: Write the Introduction**

The goal of the introduction is to grab the reader's attention and frame the rest of the proposal. A good introduction should tell the reader your proposed study and allude to its significance. It might seem counterintuitive to write the introduction last. If you write the introduction first, it might not fit with rest of your proposal, which will confuse the reader. Since a proposal is a short work, every part should fit together seamlessly. Writing your introduction last will help achieve this goal.

### **Step 6: Put it Together!**