How to Write A Proposal: A Didactic Document
by Homay King
Last updated 10/27/2023

With Relevance to Senior Theses, MA Theses, Dissertations, Grants, Fellowships, Scholarships, Internships, Jobs, Conference Papers, Publications, Books, and any other competitive or accept/decline situation

Section 1: What Is a Proposal?

A proposal is an invitation to support my project. It is something I write not for my own health, but when I want something from someone. Even though writing my proposal is an onerous task and I may not enjoy it, I will never forget that I am asking for something, that nobody is forcing me to write it, and that I stand to gain much if I write a good one. My proposal should be written in a way that convinces my reader to give me what I am asking for, whether that something is a high grade, mentorship and academic support, a green light to continue my studies, a fellowship or internship, a job, grant money, access to something, or a publication or opportunity to present my work to an audience. While my proposal aims to impress, it at no point suggests an air of entitlement to any of these things.

A proposal is not just a brainstorm, but nor is it a completed treatise. It usually describes a project that is in an early to middle stage: not yet finished, but sufficiently formed and researched that it is more than just an idea. Its tone is anticipatory; it may use the future tense. At the same time, it indicates that the project is already at least partially underway.

Every proposal (or cover letter, or application statement) is also a writing sample. If my proposal is poorly written, my reader will assume, rightly or wrongly, that my final project will also be poorly written. Even if my final project is not a written one, it will presumably be communicated in some form eventually. My proposal is an example of how well and clearly I can communicate.

A proposal is like a travel guide excerpt that describes a place I care passionately about — a place that I am trying to convince my reader to visit.

A proposal is like a small-scale business venture. I am not only trying to convince someone of how great I am, but asking them to join their efforts and resources to my own, and to make a commitment to me that may last anywhere from a few weeks to a lifetime. This means I must demonstrate that I, too, will contribute something to the partnership and fulfill my end of it.

A proposal is like an effective movie trailer. It is tightly polished and appealing, and creates a desire to see the entire film. It tells us who is in it, its genre and tone, and shows us a glimpse of the narrative, but it does not need to give away the entire plot, nor does the editor copy and paste whole scenes from the finished film into the trailer. It understands who its audiences are and speaks their language: a trailer for an experimental film about an art museum will not be shown to an audience expecting a blockbuster action film, and vice versa.

I will try not to take it personally if my proposal is rejected or criticized. It is not me who is being judged; it is this one project I want to undertake. My reader(s) may have any number of reasons for turning down my proposal that have absolutely nothing to do with me, nor even necessarily with the quality or importance of my project. If my proposal is turned down, it is a learning experience. I can take the opportunity to consider how I can frame it better next time.

Section 2: Who Is My Audience?

The entire proposal should be written with a specific reader or readers in mind. I should find out who they are and what their stake in my work is, to the best of my knowledge. The proposal's length, language, tone, level of discourse, and degree of "insider" terminology will be tailored entirely to this hypothetical reader. I assume that this reader is qualified to evaluate academic work, but I do not assume *anything* else without prior knowledge.

Here are some questions I will ask myself about my reader. Is my reader already familiar with me and my work, or not? Will my reader be someone who knows my topic as well as I do, or someone who needs it described in more general terms? Will they likely be reading hundreds of proposals, dozens, or just a few? Will these other proposals be on similar topics, or will my proposal be compared to others in different fields? Will my reader be predisposed to like/approve my proposal, or will I have to persuade more forcefully of its significance and quality? Are there additional factors, considerations, pressures, or requirements that will influence their decision? If so, how can I anticipate and try to address them?

When writing my proposal, I will keep my hypothetical reader in mind at all times. I will attempt to entice this reader, and describe my project in terms that they will find interesting and befitting of their support or sponsorship.

Under no circumstances will I mischaracterize my project, say it is something it isn't, or exaggerate its state of completion. If I do so, my bluff will eventually be called. But I will spotlight those elements of it that are likely to be most relevant and persuasive to my reader, and I may choose to place less attention on those that are not.

With each word, my proposal will reassure my reader that accepting/approving/funding me is a great idea. My tone will not be defensive, but I will anticipate possible objections, concerns, or counter-arguments that my reader may have and endeavor to alleviate them.

If I don't have the time to re-write my proposal for my specific reader, I accept that it may be overlooked. If I feel my ideas can only be conveyed in dry, verbose, convoluted, or jargon-laden language, I accept that my reader may get bored, confused, or even insulted that I have made their reading task so arduous. If I have qualms about "advertising" or "selling" my work—with great subtlety, of course—I accept that I will be competing with others who lack those qualms, and that their proposals may look more exciting than mine. If my proposal doesn't even sound convincing to me, either because it lacks clear ideas or because I haven't done enough background research for it, I accept that it will likely not be approved or chosen—and that these readers may even decline to review future proposals from me. If I fear this may be the case, I

will consult with a trusted peer or advisor, and consider deferring my application and working further on it to submit at a future time.

<u>Section 3: How Do I Describe My Project? (Note: not all bullet points need apply, and their order may be shuffled)</u>

• The title of my project goes at the top. The title should indicate what my topic is, and it should allude to my particular take on it. The title should aim to roll off the tongue, so that faculty and evaluators discussing my project will be able to pronounce it.

• When thinking of a title, I will imagine the following situation: a reader who is interested in my topic does a keyword or internet search using related words. Will my title show up in this search? If not, I need to change my title. It should contain common, indexible search terms, even if part of my goal is ultimately to question or complicate those terms. Although it may be tempting to use a purely creative title, I will include one or more such keywords and/or subject headings drawn from the Library of Congress, or cognates thereof. These can go in the subtitle if they clutter up my primary title.

• First paragraphs are often dull. Readers tasked with reviewing large numbers of proposals in a short amount of time will often be making a decision within the first page. Therefore, I will use my brightest, clearest, most enticing prose in my first paragraph.

• My project addresses the following questions. Make them succinct, and list them.

• My topic is most relevant to field X, but it also has stakes for fields Y and Z. It is timely and relevant right now for the following reasons (list them).

• Other authors who have written on my topic or materials have tended to discuss it in certain ways. Name them. I discuss it in these other ways. Be specific.

• In years/decades X and Y, famous scholars wrote X about my topic. More recently, scholars such as A and B have tackled it differently. Don't get me wrong: they are all wonderful in their own ways! But the problem is that none of them address Z. Z is the area that my project addresses.

• I see myself as in a conversation with these previous scholars. Here are some people or books that have shaped my thinking about this project: from whom I borrow concepts or information, whose work I expand upon, and/or in whose spirit this project proceeds. I acknowledge them by name; I do not simply mimic their vocabulary or assimilate their ideas into my own, both because I do not want to be suspected of plagiarism, and because my readers may have also read, or may know (or even be!) these people. If the latter, they may be inclined to support projects that acknowledge and think intelligently with their work (even if critically), and disinclined to support those that borrow from it without attribution.

• Here is why this problem is an important one, and why many people both in my own field and outside of it will be concerned about and interested in it.

• Here is a synopsis of the chapters/sections of my project. They all have titles and are sequential. This synopsis not only outlines the project, but explains how the chapters build on one another, and demonstrates as concisely as possible that I know lots about my topic and have done a fair amount of work on it already.

• This synopsis also contains searchable names, titles, years, countries, etc. of my primary sources that will help my reader figure out how best to classify my project. This synopsis informs my reader of whether any pieces of my project have been funded, have been published or accepted at conferences, whether I encounted the documents I cite at any special archive or place, etc. The synopsis accomplishes all of the above in a clear, inviting prose style, and avoids clunky phrases or jargon that may cause my reader's attention to falter.

• Here, by way of conclusion, are some directions for further thought that I anticipate pursuing when the project is further along or perhaps when it is finished.

Section 4: How Do I Send It Off?

• Follow any guidelines or submission requirements to the letter and character count. Use appropriate forms, if required. Include any additional documents they request. Do not include any documents they do not request.

• Be sure to follow guidelines about file format, subject lines and salutations, to use standard fonts, and to eliminate font styles or images that may not come through if not in pdf form. It's helpful to employ a header on every page such as "Surname, date, page X of Y." Your readers will be working closely with these documents and will need to be able to refer to page numbers and to verify that they have the most recent versions of them. Your surname at the top will also help ensure that at no point will they accidentally confuse you with the hundreds of other applicants they may have just been reviewing.

• If your readers are interested in your proposal, they may contact you and ask you for more information. For example, if you indicate that you have completed an introduction and two chapters, they may ask for copies of them. Be sure you have such things ready to send at a moment's notice.

Section 5: What Do I Do Now That I've Sent It Off?

• Do not pester reviewers, editors, or granting agencies for updates on your proposal unless 1) an indicated deadline for reply has passed, or 2) you have time-sensitive new information to convey ("I have received an offer from X institution and they would like an answer from me by next Friday. However, I am still interested in Y at your institution. I would be grateful if you could let me know whether my application is still under consideration, and if so, what is the timeline for your decision.").

• Reports about the status of your submission from peer-reviewed journals and academic book publishers in the humanities may take six months or longer. This is because they reviewed by at

least two readers from the editorial board or advisory committee, and both reports must be submitted before a decision is reached. In cases where there is a split decision, the manuscript may go to a third reviewer, increasing the delay. Because most readers are also full-time working professors and are not compensated or provided time away from other duties for their editorial work, they may not be able to review manuscripts until breaks or sabbatical. In addition, some journals and presses make their editorial decisions at meetings by vote or consensus, not on a rolling basis as submissions come in. The meetings may occur quarterly, semi-annually, annually, or at odd intervals due to difficulties in scheduling. Many presses are not able to issue a book contract until it has been approved by vote at an in-person board meeting, even if they have positive reader reports in hand and have given you a verbal acceptance.

• Be patient, and understand that a long lag time does *not* necessarily indicate anything negative about your proposal/submission/application. It is likely due to the factors above: a combination of overworked reviewers and structural issues like meeting schedules. Should six months pass without a response, at that point it is appropriate to contact the managing editor or equivalent and inquire about the status of your submission.

• For a proposal for a not-yet begun or completed project: continue to work on your project, or the parts of your project that you are able to, while waiting for a response. Do not stop work while you await a reply if you intend to complete it regardless of whether or not the particular proposal in question is accepted at this time.

• For a fully completed article or chapter awaiting a decision: do **NOT** continue to work on the project while it is under review. Work on something else, or do additional research without tinkering with the manuscript itself. Wait to see what your readers' reports say. They will be working from the version of the document that you submitted for review, and their comments and suggestions for revision will apply to that version, down to the line number. Even going through and correcting typos or making minor changes in prose can cause problems, such as increased word counts, which end up costing the publisher money, or throwing off page layout. A manuscript with significant changes in it is not the same as the one that your reviewers have "accepted"; the acceptance may be voided by your changes. If for some reason you *must* continue to work on the manuscript before receiving a reply, do so in a different, clearly labeled version of the document.

Section 6: What Do I Do When I Finally Get a Response?
First, congratulations! Share the news with your primary advisor and celebrate. That said, your work is not yet complete. Several stages of revision and follow-up may be needed, and there are more and less effective, efficient, and considerate ways to move through these stages. There is complex etiquette for accepting or declining opportunities, and, if necessary, negotiating, asking for additional time to make a decision, asking whether a deferral is possible to pursue other activities, etc. Consult with trusted advisors and senior peers who have been through these experiences before hitting "send" or signing a contract.