

How to Write a Research Proposal in the Social Sciences & Humanities

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Elements of a SURF Research Proposal



- Statement of Purpose (175-200 words)
 - *“Here is a summary of my proposal”*
- Background / Justification (1.5-2 pages)
 - *“This question is important because”*
- Research Plan (1.5-2 pages)
 - *“This is what I will do to find an answer”*
- Qualifications (0.5 page)
 - *“I am the best person to do this because”*
- Bibliography (not included in length limit)

Statement of Purpose: Overview



- **175-200 words**
- Give us the big picture, draw the reader in
- What specific topic will you be working on?
- Why is it important?
- What kind of methodology will you use?
- What might be some larger implications of your findings?

Statement of Purpose: Narrowing Your Topic



You have so many options! Do you want:

- The most interesting slice?
- The slice that's most agreeable to your support network?
- The slice with the most available data?

Shop your ideas around and get feedback!

Statement of Purpose: Exercise



Take a minute and write down what it is you want to do:

“I want to find out...”

Background & Justification: Overview



- **1.5-2 pages**
- What is already known about this field of research?
 - Cite references where applicable!
- How does your research project fit in? Are you...
 - Filling a gap in existing knowledge?
 - Engaging or adjudicating an existing debate?
 - Synthesizing theories or approaches?
 - Extending an approach to a new case?
 - Improving on an existing model?
- Don't just summarize what's been done—make the literature work for you!

Background & Justification:

Tips



- Look at syllabi from courses you've taken
- Use databases like Google Scholar & JSTOR
- Keep an eye out for review articles
- Ask your faculty mentor, other professors and/or GSIs for suggestions

Background & Justification: Exercise



Take another minute and think about the thing you just wrote down:

“It is important that we find out/know about _____ because...”

Project Plan: Overview



- **1.5-2 pages**
- What will you do to answer your research question?
- Provide a timeline
- Be as specific as possible
- Things may change, but try to think through the details
- Make sure the data you gather answers your question of interest

Project Plan: Human Subjects



- Does your research involve people?
- Complete the CITI online course
- Submit your human subjects protocol by:
 - March 14 (vulnerable populations)
 - March 22 (most other proposals)
- Think about this component when designing your project
- Get started now—you won't find out if you've been accepted to SURF until early March!

Project Plan: Budget



- Optional, but recommended for complex projects with large expenses
- Speaks to the feasibility of your project

Project Plan: Exercise



Take two minutes:

“To answer my question, I will...”

Make a bullet-point to-do list

Project Plan: Exercise



Now look at the list and identify:

- *Items that you can't do alone*
- *Items that require special skills*
- *Items that require money*

These are all things that you have to take into consideration when planning your project.

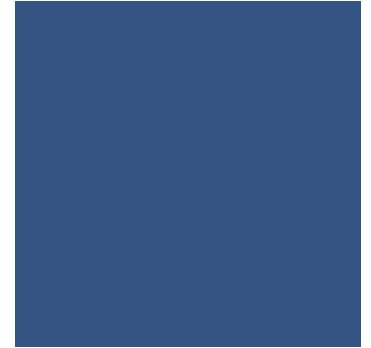
Qualifications:

Overview



- **0.5 page**
- Why are you the best person to do this research?
 - Academic training?
 - Other skills? Languages? Methodology?
 - Extracurricular or life experience?
 - Access to resources/institutions?
 - Attach letters of support, if possible
 - Access to guidance?
 - Attach letters of support, if possible
- If you don't have necessary skills, explain how you will acquire them before you start your project!

Qualifications: Exercise



Take one minute:

“I am particularly well-suited to do this project because...”

Bibliography:

Overview

- Not included in the 5-page limit
- Use the accepted manual of style in your field
- Select the most important, recognized, widely cited and/or relevant works
- Try not to exceed ~10 works



Exercise Conclusion: Putting It All Together



Look at your answers from the previous exercises:

- *I want to find out...*
- *It is important that we find out/know more about _____ because...*
- *To answer my research question, I will...*
- *I am particularly well-suited to do this research because...*

If you can complete these four sentences, you have the very beginnings of research proposal!

Next Steps

- Check out the SURF website for more resources.
- If you're still searching for an idea, take the paragraph you wrote during the exercises, and start meeting with potential faculty mentors or anyone who can give you feedback.
- If you have your idea, crank out a quick draft of the whole proposal, even just in rough outline form. The sooner you can start shopping your draft around, the better it will be when you finally submit it.
- Come see an advisor in office hours!

