Writing the research proposal

Thinking through process

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Elements of the SURF proposal

1. **Statement of Purpose** (150-200 words)
   “Here is a summary of my proposal”

2. **Background / Justification** (300-400 words)
   “This question is important because...”

3. **Research Plan** (450-700 words)
   “This is what I will do to find an answer”

4. **Qualifications** (150-250 words)
   “I am the best person to do this because...”

5. **Citations** (not included in length limit)
Thinking through the whole

The point of the proposal is to walk the reader through what you are doing, why it matters, how you will get the data you need, while showing how you are prepared to do this work.

Even though each section is separated out, the whole should hang together and have a logical flow.

**Being able to concisely pitch your research is a very important skill - it takes practice!**
1. Research Statement

- 150-200 words - short, concise!
- Capture the big picture
  - What you want to find out, how you’ll do it, and why it matters.
  - (You’ll develop each in more detail in the following sections.)
- Consider:
  - What’s the most interesting “cut” onto your themes?
  - What do you think you have data for?
- Probably the hardest to do well, and also the most important!
  - Ask around, get feedback!
  - Consider writing last?
Exercise 1: What’s it all about?

Take a minute to jot down your topic/themes of interest. Share your topic with a partner, then together:

A) Try to come up with some key question(s) for each topic - “I want to find out...”

B) Try to decide on some frames or hooks - “What is this a case of?”/“Why would someone outside my field care?”
2. Background

- 300-400 words (one of your longer sections!)
- What is already known about your field(s) of research?
- What conversations, debates, history exists - what are you engaging, how are you contributing?
- This section answers the why question: why is your project needed?
- Cite cite cite! (literature review!)
  - Not exhaustive, but “signposting” - show us you understand the “state of the field”
Where does your project fit?
Exercise 2: “Daisy”

● First, make a list of all the fields you think you’re engaging.
  ○ Try to be specific: not just “Literature” or “Ecology,” but “rangeland science” or “Modern Irish novels”

● Narrow these down to a small handful of the most important and relevant (maybe 3-5).
  ○ If your work were published in an edited volume or journal, where would it “fit”?

● Draw your daisy! (And hang onto it!)
3. Research Plan

- This is your methods section, showing us *how you will carry out the research to gather the data you need.* (450-700 words)
- Think about the **how**, **where**, and **when**, the logistics and nitty gritty!
- Give us a **timeline**, either by week or in phases, showing what you plan to accomplish at each stage.
  - There may be a logical flow to this, or it may be a question of access (i.e. I need to get this data at the same stage because I’ll be in the city where I can get it!)
  - Show when and how you’ll check in with your mentor!
- This is a **plan** - *it will change!*
Exercise 3: Brainstorm

- On a piece of paper, make two columns.
- In one column, make a list of all the data you might want to try to gather.
  - This should answer your questions from before.
  - Think about types of data, data sources (locations, groups of people)
  - Can be broad or specific at this stage (though the more specific the better!)
- In the other column, write how you might go about *collecting* that data.
  - Interviews? Archival work? Surveys? Literature reviews?
  - This will depend on your field and training, but also should stem from the data you need!
4. Qualifications

- Your final section brings us back to you - why are you a good fit to do this work? (150-250 words)
- You may be tempted to be humble or underconfident - don’t be! You’ve put in thought to prepare, and no one else is out there doing quite what you are.
- Think about skills acquired (research methods?), field familiarity (classes, literature reviews, past experience?), and anything else that might apply.
  - If you’re missing key things in your research plan, consider noting how you’ll fill those gaps!
- Also include partners/collaborators.
  - Who are you working with? Who will vouch for you?
  - Also include permissions acquired or intended - human subjects?
Exercise 4: Preparations brainstorm

- Given what you’ve already listed in your methods brainstorm, how are you already prepared to do this research?
- If you aren’t, what do you need to do between now and when you start your research?
- Think about classes to take, skills to learn, connections to establish…

- If some of this seems too hard to do between now and summer, go back and reconsider the questions you are asking and what data you need!
5. Citations

- **Cite. Your. Sources.**
- Use the style appropriate to your field - consistency!
- Focus on key references in fields you’re engaging (part 2) as well as any additional texts central to your framing.
- Keep to a page or less! (~10 or fewer works?)
Putting it all together

You should hopefully be able to answer:

- “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 sentences, you are well on your way to a research proposal!
Bonus round: human subjects?

- Does your research involve people? Which groups?
- [https://cphs.berkeley.edu/](https://cphs.berkeley.edu/) ← Read up, come talk to me!
- We will have an info session on IRB/Human Subjects issues in a few weeks: **Wednesday, February 27, 2:00pm – 4:00pm, Durant Hall, Room 9**
- But start now! Get advice from SURF advisors or going to CPHS directly.
Bonus round: Letter of recommendation

- *Professors are busy people - start as early as you can!*
- Reach out, explain your ideas, and work with them to refine them. They may have great suggestions to help you put it all together!
- They will write the letter per suggestions on the SURF website - consider sending them the link: http://surf.berkeley.edu/surf-ls-apply
Come get advice...

Once you have thought through all this, come say hello and get advice for your proposal!

SURF advisor information can be found here: http://surf.berkeley.edu/advisors

My office hour sign ups can be found here: https://www.wejoinin.com/EmilyRemirez
Thank you!

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