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Writing a Research Proposal

Our agenda

- **Overarching proposal structure**
- **Getting Started**
 - Choosing a topic
 - The research question
 - Rationale
 - Narrowing it down
- **The heart of the proposal**
 - Background and Justification
 - Plan and Budget
- **The framing**
 - Statement of purpose
 - Qualifications
- **Wrapping up**
 - The big picture
 - Strategy: writing, getting feedback, staying positive

Overarching proposal structure

Proposal element	Purpose	Length
Statement of purpose	Quick overview	½ p.
Background and justification	Defend choice of case, show influences and contribution	1 ½ - 2 p.
Plan+Budget	Show feasibility	1 ½ - 2 p.
Qualifications	Show you have the required skills and support	½ p.

Choosing a topic: new and old

New enough to be exciting, let you explore new areas

BUT

Old enough that you have foundation of knowledge, skills to build on

What are the “aha” moments you’ve had in your favorite classes? Follow that clue.

OR

Topic within jurisdiction of your favorite prof?

The research question: What do you want to find out?

- **Science:** We know A, B, and C about this topic but not yet D; based on this preliminary evidence we think this may be the case.
- **Engineering:** Current tech has these advantages and disadvantages; will this alteration lead to the desired improvement?

The research question: What do you want to find out?

Non-STEM: you should not know the answer to your question yet – “detective”, not “lawyer”

- **Humanities:** What is the meaning of this cultural object/motif?
- **Art:** What issues will you be exploring?
- **Social Science:** Choose a “why” question; not just “what happened?”, but “what caused it to happen?”, “What is the effect?”, or “what is the meaning?”

Rationale

Short but essential part of S of P, B+J:

Larger implications/applications of your findings?

Social science:

Policy or social intervention implications?

Natural science:

Medical or agricultural implications?

Engineering:

Industrial or environmental implications?

Humanities, pure math, etc:

Theoretical implications for similar topics?

Narrowing it down: strategies

Narrow is good!

Too broad is overwhelming, infeasible, superficial, unsatisfying.

Humanities/other interpretive textual analysis:

- Focus on meaning of specific theme/s within 1-2 texts by 1-2 authors

- Most influential or clearest examples of theme

Ex. Before: Sexuality in work of female authors

After: Sexuality within Woolf's *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*

Narrowing it down: strategies

Comparative/historical questions (“What happened and why?”)

Narrow the topic by chronology, geography, theme

Ex. Before: “China’s economy”.
After: “Shanghai’s Toymaking Industry in the 1990s: Explosive growth at what cost?”.

Choose which “causal arrow” will be your original contribution.

Narrowing it down: strategies

All topics, but esp. lab settings

Which way of narrowing the topic is most supported by your guidance network? For which will they be able to support you the most?

- You propose a topic, they counter-propose
- OR
- They assign you a topic, you counter-propose

Make sure you'll have some authorship.

Write proposal with "I", not "we".

Narrowing it down: strategies

Which narrowing strategy provides the most data?

History/Archeology:

- 1) Which archives/digs/collections are related to your general question? What materials do they have?
- 2) Which questions could be answered with these materials?

Ethnographic questions

(social meanings understood via qualitative interviews/observation/participation)

Available data = What social settings can you access easily? What questions can they help you answer?

Background and Justification, pt. 1: Justification of Choice of Case

**Identify your choice of case, then justify choice
(about 1/3 of Background and Justification section)**

- Is it typical of a trend?
- An anomaly that violates expectations or dominant theories/trends?
- An influential example of a certain phenomenon?
- A good model organism b/c easy to work with/
analogous to people?
- A good choice for some other reason? (Note: access to data is discussed in qualifications or methods, not here)

Background and Justification, pt 2: Your contribution in relation to existing literature

- How are you *building on* existing literature?
- How are you *departing from* existing literature?
- What hasn't been done yet, and how does your project fill this gap?

Background and Justification: Don't get overwhelmed!

Hints

- **Survey library DBs** by subject; make list; approach faculty to help prioritize your list
- **GoogleScholar:** which items on your list get cited more?
- **What is cited** in your lab's grant proposals, publications?
- **Review articles**, e.g. "Recent Research on (Your Topic)" summarize recent writings on topic, put them in "clumps"
 - Look in specialized journals, ask [reference librarians.](#)
- Found good articles? **Trace the bibliographies**

Background and Justification: Rhetorical Strategies

- **Adding a piece to the collective puzzle** – esp. science
(We know A, B, and C, not yet D; based on these clues we think this is the case).
- **Debate and Adjudication** – esp. quantitative and policy-based social science
(Some people think A is the cause, others think it's B; I want to find out who's right).
- **Synthesis** – esp. social science/humanities
(I'll borrow this from theory A, this from theory B, and this from theory C to create a new approach).

Background and Justification: Rhetorical Strategies

- **Improving upon an existing model** – esp. engineering, public service proposals

(This model is useful in these ways, but has this drawback. With this alteration, we think we could improve it in this way).

- **Extending a theory to a new case** – esp. linguistics

(This approach works well to explain this type of cases; how does it need to change to explain this other kind?).

Background and Justification: Sequence

- Describe first the authors whose work is farthest from your own (but still relevant);
- then those closer to yours,
- then those closest to yours – but still not quite right;
- then your own hypothesis/approach and how you derived it (=“grand finale paragraph”).

Background and Justification: Format

- More “air time” as approach gets closer to yours
- STEM proposals: from macro to the micro and from older to newer findings
- For each approach named:
 - What do you use from it?
 - Why is it still insufficient to answer your Q?

Background and Justification: Example – Q + choice of case

- **Question:** What is the effect of democratization on human rights?
- **Case Study:** Colombia, 1984-1992
 - Why a good choice?
Anomaly: Democracy → more violence
(Also I had access; described in qualifications, not B+J).

Background and Justification: Example – Q + choice of case

- **Focus on regions where democracy → violence trend most salient:**
- Rural+strong social movements+guerrillas+Leftist parties
- **Comparison:**
 - 2 regions where democracy → violence
(produced bananas, coca)
 - 2 regions where democracy → peace
(produced oil, palm oil)

More focused Q:

Why different regional outcomes if same national reform?

Background and Justification: Example – Literature Debate

Democratization theory:

- +Addressed effect of democratization on social movements
- Urban only

Peasant social movements theory:

- +Addressed ways political economy shapes social movements
- Does not address effect of democratization

Rural Democratization theory:

- +Explains why different regions have different outcomes of democratization
- Does not address how guerrillas complicate issue

Background and Justification:

Example – “Grand Finale Paragraph”

Democratization theory:

- +How democratization affects social movements
- ~~-Urban only~~

Peasant social movements theory:

- +How political economy shapes social movements
- ~~-Does not address effect of democratization~~

Rural Democratization theory:

- +Why different regions have different democratization outcomes
- ~~-Does not address how guerrillas complicate issue~~

ME:

- Draw on and combine “+” parts of all three
- Add my own predictions on how guerrillas complicate things

Plan: Overarching principles

- **Be specific**– even if it might change – instructions for person who will do this research on your behalf
- **Be chronological, orderly, logical**– “best manual you’ve ever read”
- **Timeline** covers background research through final product; most of airtime to data collection

Plan: Main body

For each phase of research:

- What is the phase called?
- When will the phase take place ?
- What specifically will you do during this phase?
- Why is this the best choice for what you are trying to accomplish?
- What will you learn from this phase?

Human subjects? Include submission and revision of human subjects protocol in timeline.

Budget

Same principles as plan: Be specific, orderly, logical

- Follow rules carefully of what items/amounts permitted
- Include quotes of exact amounts and how you got them.
- Put items in categories; subtotals and totals
- Give this part the same attention as the plan – not an afterthought.
- Carefully planned budget reflects carefully planned research.

TOTAL PROPOSED BUDGET							
Category Totals	Travel	Equipment	Supplies	Services	Other	GRAND TOTAL	
Proposed spending	\$2,315.00	\$2,084.00	\$0.00	\$200.00	\$400.00	\$4,999.00	
Total Expended						\$0.00	
Refund owed to Haas Scholars Program						\$4,999.00	
EXPENDITURES RECORD							
Item Description	Purchase Date	Amount (non-USD)	Exchange Rate	Amount (USD)	Category	Amount Remaining	PLS WRITE ONLY IN THE GREEN COLUMNS -- OTHERWISE YOU WILL ERASE FORMULAS
						\$4,999.00	Notes/justification: These expenses cover what I expect to be spending over the summer (2.5 months) in Brazil. My current housing/ transportation/ food situation in Mexico is accounted for through my participation with UCEAP
Flight from CDMX- Belo Horizonte				\$625.00	Travel	\$4,374.00	I will book two separate flights: from CDMX- Rio de Janeiro and from Rio de Janeiro- Belo Horizonte. Booking the flights directly to Belo Horizonte is \$250 more.
Flight from Belo Horizonte- SFO				\$825.00	Travel	\$3,549.00	I will book two separate flights: from Belo Horizonte- Rio de Janeiro and from Rio de Janeiro to SFO to save around \$200.
Lodging				\$625.00	Travel	\$2,924.00	2.5 months in Belo Horizonte; I found cheaper student housing options through a page on Facebook
Laptop: Lenovo Thinkpad X1 Carbon				\$1,794.00	Equipment	\$1,185.14	My laptop is over 5 years old and I will need a reliable one for this project.
Public transportation (2.5 months in Belo Horizonte)				\$200.00	Travel	\$985.14	One way bus/ metro rides is approximately \$1 one way
Creole Translator				\$200.00	Services	\$785.14	Most Haitians I've been working with at Sin Fronteras speak a good amount of Spanish and Portuguese, so I don't anticipate needing a translator for most of my interviews.
Voice Recorder				\$70.00	Equipment	\$87.19	To record in depth interviews: https://www.bestbuy.com/site/sony-px-series-digital-voice-recorder/5774900.p?skuld=5774900
Payments to Subjects				\$400.00	Other	-\$312.81	In-depth interviews over dinner or coffee (including myself) and will include a small gift; budget reduced since I am now aiming for at least 20 interviews with Haitians instead of 30
E-Visa (for Brazil)				\$40.00	Travel	-\$352.81	Brazil's visa process has recently changed and is now easier to get.
External Hardrive				\$220.00	Equipment	-\$572.81	https://www.bestbuy.com/site/acie-rugged-2tb-external-thunderbolt-and
						-\$572.81	
						-\$572.81	

Statement of Purpose

Brief (1/2 p.) overview, “Soundbite” of each section; write it last

- **Purpose/final product**—Senior honors thesis? What major? Other product? Be specific

- **Research question/public service objective/(art) issue to explore**

- **Background and Justification**—justify choice of case; what theories will you build on/depart from? What will be your contribution?

- **Plan**—How will you narrow down your case? Procedure type of method you’ll use? Sequence of phases?

- **Rationale**

Qualifications – ½ page max

Remember your application also includes your transcript and recommendations; don't be redundant

- Relevant academic qualifications – courses taken, previous research
- Relevant skills you've mastered needed for the research
- Life experiences that indicate special knowledge/interest in topic
- Access to people, tools, institutions needed to complete your proposed project (attach letters of support if permitted)
- Access to guidance

The Big Picture

Proposal element	Purpose	Length
Statement of purpose	Quick overview	½ p
Background and justification	Defend choice of case, show work you build on, show originality	1.5-2 p.
Plan	Show feasibility--time	1.5-2 p.
Qualifications	Show you have skills & support to carry out project	½ p.
Budget	Show feasibility--\$	(not part of page count)

Strategy

Proposals are a different genre of writing:

OK and normal to feel intimidated!

Solution:

- Push past the sweaty palm stage!!
- Write and share *rough* drafts, fragments of drafts, anything!
- Get feedback & support early and often – faculty, staff, peers (UROC, OURS peer advisors, current undergrad researchers)
- Revise, revise, revise!

Give yourself credit for taking on a new challenge!