

How to Write a History Research Proposal : HISTORY 499: Professor Jaffe

(Adapted from Paul T. P. Wong)

Most students and beginning researchers do not fully understand what a research proposal means, nor do they understand its importance. To put it bluntly, one's research is only as good as one's proposal. An ill-conceived proposal dooms the project. A high quality proposal, on the other hand, not only promises success for the project, but also impresses your advisor about your potential as a researcher.

A research proposal is intended to convince others that you have a worthwhile research project and that you have the competence and the work-plan to complete it. Generally, a research proposal should contain all the key elements involved in the research process and include sufficient information for the readers to evaluate the proposed study.

Regardless of your research area and the methodology you choose, all research proposals must address the following questions: What you plan to accomplish, why you want to do it and how you are going to do it.

The proposal should have sufficient information to convince your readers that you have an important research idea, that you have a good grasp of the relevant literature and the major issues, and that your methodology is sound.

The quality of your research proposal depends not only on the quality of your proposed project, but also on the quality of your proposal writing. A good research project may run the risk of rejection simply because the proposal is poorly written. Therefore, it pays if your writing is coherent, clear and compelling.

There are 4 major elements to a satisfactory research proposal:

1. Title:

It should be concise and descriptive. For example, the phrase, "A history of . . ." could be omitted. If possible, think of an informative but catchy title. An effective title not only pricks the reader's interest, but also predisposes him/her favorably towards the proposal.

2. Introduction:

The main purpose of the introduction is to provide the necessary background or context for your research problem. How to frame the research problem is perhaps the biggest problem in proposal writing.

If the research problem is framed in the context of a general, rambling historical discussion, then the research question may appear trivial and uninteresting. However, if the same question is placed in the context of a very focused and current research area, its significance will become evident.

Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules on how to frame your research question just as there is no prescription on how to write an interesting and informative opening paragraph. A lot depends on your creativity, your ability to think clearly and the depth of your understanding of problem areas.

However, try to place your research question in the context of either a current "hot" area, or an older area that remains viable. Secondly, you need to provide a brief but appropriate background of the historical literature in the area. Thirdly, provide the contemporary context in which your proposed research question occupies the central stage. Finally, identify "key players" and refer to the most relevant and representative publications. In short, try to paint your research question in broad brushes and at the same time bring out its significance.

The introduction typically begins with a general statement of the problem area, with a focus on a specific research problem, to be followed by the rationale or justification for the proposed study.

3. Development:

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