

# Form and Rhetoric in Grant Proposals

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The narrative of a grant proposal has a rhetorical form unlike the other kinds of academic writing in which you have been trained. It is not a research essay, a dissertation prospectus, or an abstract. A research essay aims to articulate and justify a thesis, a prospectus describes a project to be done, and an abstract summarizes work completed. A grant proposal must convince the reader that:

1. the question motivating the research is interesting and important,
2. the research answering the question is feasible, and
3. the author has the expertise or skills necessary to carry out the project.

In this sense, a grant proposal seeks to justify a project or research question. There is an underlying form—a logic, if you will—to the argument that supports a grant proposal. The form consists in answers to four questions in the following order: What? Where/when? How? Who? Particular grant applications may ask for information in a different order, but the underlying logic is the same for all research grant proposals. While write-up proposals, post-doc proposals, and book proposals are slightly different (details below), they can be seen as extensions of the logic of a research proposal.

An additional feature of a grant proposal's rhetoric arises from its distinctive audience. The readers of a research paper or dissertation prospectus have substantial relevant background knowledge. If they lack it, the author can expect that the reader will go elsewhere to learn the basics of the field. More importantly, the readers already think questions like yours are interesting and important. By contrast, proposal reviewers often do not share the author's training, and they can't be expected to do the background reading. Hence, there is a premium on clear, direct expression. Write for an audience of educated people who know nothing about your discipline. While technical vocabulary is acceptable, even necessary sometimes, be sure to briefly explain what the terms mean.

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\*These remarks draw on the experiences of the faculty of the Laney Graduate School's Grant Writing Program, particularly Ivan Karp, Cory Kratz, Devin Stewart, and Martine Brownlee.

## *What?*

The first section of the narrative should specify the broad question that your research will address. Use relevant literature from your *field* (not just your discipline) to frame the question.

“Framing the question” means several things. It means limiting the inquiry to a manageable domain (*not* “life, the universe, and everything”). It means showing how the question or issue relates to existing work in the field (not just your discipline). And perhaps most importantly, it means explaining why the question or issue is important enough to fund.

When asked “What is the topic of your research?”, graduate students (and faculty too!) often answer with a proper noun. Stereotypically, a philosopher will answer with the name of a Great Dead Guy, an anthropologist with the name of their Favorite Island, and a historian will put the Dead Guy(s) on an Island. In the sense we are driving at, *this is NOT what your research is about*. The “What?” section must articulate a question. It must be important enough and deep enough to reach across disciplinary boundaries. Important questions constitute fields of research. So think about how your Favorite Island or Great Dead Guy fits into a larger field of inquiry to which many disciplines contribute. Sociology is not the only discipline to study the status of women; philosophers are not the only ones who study meaning. It is often useful to think of the literature you are reviewing as a conversation. While addressing the broad question, authors have responded to each other. Your research is the next contribution to this conversation.

A good grant proposal has the narrative form of a mystery story. A mystery story begins with a puzzle or problem to be solved. A body was found in the library; who done it? The “What?” section of the narrative begins your mystery story, and like any good mystery, it should intrigue the reader and encourage her to continue reading.

### *Two notes for "scientists"*

- Some research takes the form of theory testing. The theory is not the "What" of your proposal. The theory was devised to answer a larger question: this is the "What"
- The "Significance" of a project is not the same as the "What." When an application asks for significance, it is typically asking for the practical implications. Why is the world a better place because of your research? The "What" is the intellectual merit of your project. How will your research expand human knowledge?

### *Where/when?*

This section further specifies the broad intellectual issues raised in the “What?” section. It narrows the question down to one that can (and will!) be answered by your proposed research. If the issues raised really are important, then they arise in a variety of intellectual contexts, times, and places. The “Where/when?” section shows how the bigger question is manifest in a particular domain and why that domain is a compelling one through which to address the larger issue.

The broad intellectual problem of the "What?" section is variously specified in different disciplines. In cultural anthropology, area studies, history, and some kinds of sociology and political science, the “Where/when?” is a specific part of the planet. For example, your research might examine the people of the Trobriand Islands (Where) in order to shed light on the ways individual agency is related to social structures (What). Similarly, historical research in its various forms (including art history, intellectual history, and historically oriented studies of literature and philosophy) locates broad intellectual issues in a particular time period, place, and/or person(s). Studies of literature, music, and art locate their issues in specific genres, texts, corpora, artists, or authors. Even systematic philosophy, theology, and other purely theoretical enterprises need to answer the “Where/when?” question. The eternal questions of epistemology, ethics, or metaphysics are expressed in specific intellectual debates, arguments, periods, schools, or authors.

The main goal of the "Where/when?" section is to express the specific question that your research will be asking, and to show that it is significant (interesting, important). Part of this work is already done by the "What?" section insofar as it has asked a larger question to which your specific research question will contribute. If the reader was interested in the larger "What?" question, and you explain why this place (or time, people, objects, texts, ...) can provide answers to a more specific version of that large question, then the reader will see that your research question is interesting. Thinking again of the mystery story format, the detective begins looking for clues in some place (Where/when?) in order to solve the mystery (What?).

By the end of the “What?” and “Where/when?” sections, your research question should be crystal clear. A good research project will have exactly one main question, and you ought to be able to express it in a single sentence with interrogative form. It should be narrow enough to be answerable, and broad enough to be interesting. There may be secondary questions—questions that

you answer on the way to answering the main question—but their relevance to the main question must be explicit.

In both the “What?” and the “Where/when?” sections, you are demonstrating your competence in the field (again, not just your discipline). You are showing that you are aware of the literatures directly relevant to your research question. Do not feel that you have to spray references, but do refer to relevant texts, especially if they are very closely related to what you will be doing. Show that you are aware of the range of literatures that bear on your project, even if they are not written within your specific discipline.

Most grants available to students in humanities and social science support study in some off-campus location. You must argue in the “Where/when?” section for the importance of this location for your research. What is available in this place that is unavailable at Emory? As information globalizes, this question becomes more difficult to answer. Archival sources are available on the web; specialists in the field can be consulted by email or telephone. Why is it necessary that you live there for six months?

### *How?*

This part of a grant proposal is sometimes called “methodology,” and it strikes fear into the heart of many writers. Calm yourself. Think not of methods like discourse analysis, focus groups, or multiple regression analysis. In the methodology section, you must explain to the audience *how* you will go about answering the question posed in the “What?” and focused in the “Where/when?” sections.

There are four sub-questions that must be answered in this section, and the order is again a logical priority:

1. What are the data sources? Where will you be gathering the information relevant to your main question?
2. How will you obtain the material or contact the relevant persons?
3. What will you do with the data? How will it be “analyzed” or “interpreted”? If there are different kinds of data, how will they be related to one another?
4. What does the methodology as described in 1-3 have to do with the main research questions? How will they provide information that will help answer them?

Some research projects will require substantial elaboration on one or more of these; sometimes you may be brief. If, for example, you will be working with a small number of specific sources in an archive, you may answer (1) with the name of the archive and the relevant material it holds. But in this case, you may need to elaborate a detailed answer to (2) and (3).

*Always* answer question (3) in as much detail as you can muster. Remember, again, that you are writing for an interdisciplinary audience. They may not know what you mean by “close reading,” “content analysis,” or “multiple regression.” You may need technical terminology that will require elucidation. Do not think of yourself as defining terms for a naive reader, but as explaining how you will use the data to answer your question. Your data is a source from which you will extract information relevant to the research question. How will this information be extracted?

If you will have multiple sources, you must answer (3) for each, and you have an additional burden. You must explain how the various sources are related. Will they answer different parts of a complex question? Will they be integrated or synthesized in some way? How?

Your answer to (3) is also important for displaying your methodological competence. If you know what to do with the resources, then you will be able to explain it. You are giving the granting agency confidence that you are going to get interesting results from the research.

Grant applications often call for a research timeline. The methodology section is where it belongs, unless the granting agency has a more specific requirement. Be realistic and as concrete as you possibly can.

The answer to (4) is the single most important piece of the grant proposal, so important that in the LGS Grant Writing Program we call it the “killer paragraph.” You have set the stage for your mystery, introduced the puzzle, and scattered clues. You have explained what you are going to do to uncover the bits of information that will finally resolve the problem: how you will find the missing clue. Now you close the loop. A good “killer paragraph” should produce an “Ah Ha!” response in the audience. They suddenly see that if we had the information you will be gathering, we could answer the specific research question and thereby shed light on the outstanding intellectual puzzle with which your proposal began.

*Two notes for "humanists"*

- Do not be offended by the word “data.” Not all research is based on observation, but all research has some kind(s) of source(s). Philosophers begin by reading the arguments of other philosophers, and in the sense intended above, a recent essay in the *Journal of Philosophy* is “data” for philosophical research. (Perhaps only the pre-Socratic philosophers did their thinking without consulting antecedents, but then perhaps their precursors are merely lost to history.) For those who work in the humanities, much of your “data” is in the library or archive.
- Humanities research often considers the intersection of two literatures. We use Heidegger to understand 19<sup>th</sup> C Argentinean prisons, post-colonial novels to understand tropical disease discourse in *The Lancet*. This is a method in the relevant sense. It means that you have to explain why we should expect that this particular intersection of literatures will reveal insights. It also means that there may be some degree of blending of the How? and Where/when? questions, since these same literatures are often the "Where" of some humanities proposals.

***Who?***

Your intellectual problem is compelling and the research question is well formed. You have useful sources of information and appropriate modes of analysis. But why should you be the person to do it? In this part of the grant proposal, you display your relevant credentials and training. This includes anything you might need to succeed: languages, experience with or training in specific methods, previous visits to the site, and so on. You should talk about your background, but do not be too autobiographical. Nobody cares that your mother was a sociologist and your father gave you an inside glimpse of machine politics in Chicago. (Unless, of course, you are analyzing your mum’s unpublished writings or interviewing your dad’s old cronies.)

It is often useful to reverse engineer the "Who?" section. Take a cold hard look at the proposal so far. Ask: what expertise and skill set would be ideal for this proposal? Each bit of expertise or skill should follow from specific needs of the project. Now look at yourself. Do you have this expertise and skill set? Describe these aspects of your CV in the "Who?" section. If you don't yet have the skills or expertise, be honest about it and explain what you'll be doing between now and the beginning of the research to get it. If you can't get it, then you should change the proposal into one you *can* do.

### *Other kinds of grant proposal*

The rhetoric and logical structure of grant proposals, described above, focuses on research grants. It is designed to convince the reader that your research question is interesting, the research feasible, and you are the person to do it. Grants can take many forms, and not all grants are for research. With a little thought, it is not difficult to see how this underlying logic applies to a wide variety (perhaps all?) grant proposals.

Two other kinds of grants to which graduate students apply are training grants and write-up grants. Let us briefly consider each.

A training grant supports your education in some specific way, such as learning a language or methodological technique. Why do you need this education? Because you are engaged in a specific research project. It is important, then, to explain to the reader what that research project is and why it is significant. This, again, is just the "What?" and "Where/when?" sections of a research proposal. The important difference is that you are not asking for funds to do research, but funds to learn a skill or gain relevant expertise. The "How?" section thus explains why this educational program will provide exactly the skills or expertise you need to carry out your dissertation research.

The fundamental difference between research grant proposals and write-up grant proposals is temporal perspective. In a research grant proposal, you are looking forward. You are trying to justify support for a project that has not yet been done. In a write-up grant proposal, you are looking back on the research and justifying support for some time to finish writing your dissertation. Where a research grant uses the future tense (I will show...), a write-up grant use the past (I have shown...). Write-up granting agencies want to support the most interesting and important projects. So again, the "What?" and "Where/when?" questions have to be answered in a way that convinces the reader that your project is interesting and important. And since you've already done a good bit of work, you are (should be) in a position to include some of the actual results you've gotten. The "How?" section may still need to explain how you gathered your data and the analytical techniques you are using on the data. But now it should also include the writing (or continuing data analysis) that you will be doing. A good write-up proposal has a plausible and clear timeline for finishing the dissertation within the time of the fellowship.

### *Some general advice*

A successful grant proposal requires several, perhaps many drafts. You cannot write it the week before it is due.

Have as many people read and comment on your proposal as you can. Look for help from people who are not in your discipline. If a randomly chosen student in the Laney Graduate School cannot understand your research and why it is important, you need to rewrite.

A concrete example, story, or image is *sometimes* valuable in the opening section. A well chosen, a good example can quickly and vividly illustrate your intellectual problem for readers. On the other hand, examples, stories, and images can strike readers differently and sometimes have unexpected connotations or implications. Poll your friends and colleagues—especially those in other disciplines—for their responses to the example.

If you have done preliminary research, site work, pilot projects, etc., be sure that they are mentioned. It strengthens your proposal to show that you have already achieved some results (or are familiar with the territory, or have relevant contacts), and that your current project is informed by past work.

Write as plainly and as clearly as possible. Save the disciplinary jargon for disciplinary journals. You are writing for an interdisciplinary audience that is not familiar with your discipline's favorite tropes and dead metaphors.

Do not be cute. The reader is working through a big stack of these proposals, other projects are pressing, it is late at night, and s/he is probably feeling pretty irritable. Cute examples or clever turns of phrase can come across as smug and irritating.

Organize, and make the organization plain with headings. “What?”, “Where?”, “How?”, and “Who?” are not section titles, they are questions you must answer for the reader. Choose section titles that are informative.

Break your grant narrative into crisp paragraphs with topic sentences.

Use white space.

Be concise.