

Components of a Successful Research Proposal

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A successful research proposal is divided into four parts.

1. “What”

The description of the project specifies the topic of research independently and without reference to the temporal, spatial, or formal and generic contexts of research. This is customarily referred to as the “Review of the Literature,” and in this section the applicant describes the state of play with respect to a field of knowledge that usually encompasses more than a single discipline. This section of the proposal provides evidence that there is a problem or gap in knowledge on which research can make an important contribution. For some research agencies, it can be valuable to specify what is to be learned in terms of propositions called “hypotheses.” For other agencies this would be very counterproductive and a more discursive style is associated with successful grants. It is very important to describe your project in terms that the particular funding committees find to be comfortable.

2. “Where” or sometimes “When”

This section of the proposal specifies the spatial or temporal contexts of the research. This may be a region, such as the American South, a time, such as the Renaissance, or, usually both—for example, “Renaissance Florence,” or “Precolonial Western Kenya.” It includes a description of what forms of human behavior, culture or society are to be investigated—for example, “The Epic Among the Precontact Quechua Speaking People of Ecuador,” or “Political Consensus in the European Parliament.” In this section the applicant presents what is known, what aspects of the knowledge base are contested, and describes what the research will find out. Customarily the temporal or geographical scale of this section starts out large and moves to smaller scale topics that will be the actual research topic. Thus a proposal might move from “Democratic Politics in Africa,” to “Multiparty Elections in Kenya,” or an art historian might start with the iconography of religion in Renaissance art and wind up with a study of municipal buildings in Sienna. In this section the applicant specifies his or her contribution to understanding social, cultural and formal processes in a broadly defined place and/or time and moves to more specific locales. This is a critical part of the proposal for many applicants wishing to conduct international research, since many of the committees that fund this type of research are composed of an interdisciplinary array of scholars who are held together by a shared commitment to place, such as African Studies or Latin American or European Studies. They want to know what the payoff is not for a specific discipline, but for knowledge of a region and/or time.

3. “How”

Commonly called methodology, this section of a proposal specifies the methods that will be used in the research. The selection of methods is determined almost entirely by the nature of the research and not by a predetermined set of methods learned in a course. This means that you have to justify each and every method by its relationship to the topic, place and time of research, and, especially, the nature of what is to be studied. Fulfilling this requirement, which is vital for a successful proposal, can only be achieved when the “How” section refers continually to the specifics of the research context. It is not enough to say that “I will do close readings of archival materials.” Instead the applicant specifies the archive, describes the materials in it, and provides an account of what he or she will do with the materials.

An ideal methods or **How** section has four components to it:

- A. Specification of Data Sources
- B. Methods of Data Collection
- C. Description of Data Analysis
- D. Synthesis with the “What” and “Where” sections presented above

4. “Who”

This section justifies to the funders why the applicant is the person to do the research. It is not a life history and account of moral development, unless that is specifically asked for. Instead it provides an account of the applicant’s qualifications and how they were acquired, **or will be acquired**. Included in this section can be descriptions of course work, methods training, work on languages, time spent at the research site doing preliminary research, and progress made on research clearances, where that is relevant. The applicant may also want to describe how the research will relate to an academic, research, or other kind of career that he or she anticipates taking up.

Supporting Materials

The following are the kinds of supporting materials often asked for by specific funding agencies. It is important to know ahead of time which materials the funding agencies want and to plan to put your proposal together well ahead of time. If, for example, you are going to conduct research in a language not available at Emory, then you must make arrangements to be tested elsewhere. In some cases this testing can be done when doing preliminary research in the field. Other kinds of supporting materials can include letters from the archives at which you wish to conduct research and letters from the scholars who may be your supervisors, as well as documents granting you permission to do research.

1. Letters of Recommendation
2. Evidence of Language Training and Competence. SSRC and Fulbright have specific forms.
3. Certificates of Training
4. Evidence of Access to Research Materials
5. IRB Certification