

Craft of Undergraduate Research Proposals

**Office of Undergraduate Research, Scholarship,
and Creative Activity**

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Before writing an undergraduate research proposal, you should have a **research question, scholarly inquiry, or creative endeavor** which you are propositioning to explore.

Where do I get a question or endeavor?

Your idea may be inspired by:

- Personal interest
- Digging deeper on a course topic
- Conversation with peers or faculty
- Assisting a faculty member on their own research
- Popular culture and news
- Literature
- **Much more!**

How do I explore my question?

- Simply **research on your own**, with no timeline, objectives, or outcomes, using University Library System and free University resources like access to scholars and lectures...
- Receive credit through **independent or directed study** with Dietrich School departments within a semester, pursuing learning objectives and outcomes with a faculty guide...
- Receive **fellowships, awards, field studies, and prizes** to support your inquiry

Before applying, we encourage you to discuss your idea and the opportunity with **faculty mentors and librarian specialists.**

Faculty guidance

- Meeting with a faculty member can provide **disciplinary insight and direction** on your question or endeavor.
- Explain your interest in applying to an opportunity and **request their faculty mentorship** in the process.
- *If you do not have a close relationship with a faculty member.... Search faculty in the related area and email to introduce yourself.*
- Reach out to an [OUR Undergraduate Mentor](#) to discuss your ideas.

Librarian guidance

- There is a **Librarian Subject Specialist** for every academic discipline.
- Like faculty mentors, Librarian Subject Specialists can acquaint you on the **current conversation within the academic literature** surrounding your idea.
- Make an appointment with one!

Once you have an idea, faculty guidance, and program to which you hope to apply, you can begin **writing the proposal.**

The research proposal genre

- Proposals are a **unique genre** and are unlike most other writing. It possesses a unique **form** and **voice** – like cookbooks, detective fiction, or a classic research paper.
- Proposals are written across the Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts.
- And as a genre, proposals share **common components...**

Research proposal components

1. Disciplinary Context
2. Your Specific Question or Endeavor
3. Your Objectives
 - Approach/Method
 - Timeline
 - Outcomes
4. Larger Significance/Impact

Components: Context

- **What is known.** Do you demonstrate knowledge of existing scholarship related to your topic? Is your project timely and/or responding to a new trend?
- **Hint: ULS Librarian Subject Specialists and faculty mentors help here.**
- **Another hint: If a proposal reader sees your awareness of existing scholarship, they are more likely to believe you are prepared to achieve your desired outcomes within a specific timeframe.**

Components: Your Project

- **What is unknown or timely.** Your idea. Sometimes called the needs or problem statement. What makes your inquiry unique? How will your inquiry contribute new knowledge to the field? What will your creative endeavor produce?

Components: Objectives

- **Approach to fill gap of knowledge.** How will you answer this question? What does your research or creative work look like? What are the parameters of the question or endeavor?
- **Outcomes.** What will be learned, made, developed, created? A paper? A sculpture? A theatre production?
- **Timeline.** What is the length of this study? How much time will be devoted per week? Are your goals realistic for the timeframe?

Components: Significance/Impact

- **Larger picture.** How does this research impact the society, the disciplinary field, the University, the environment, your personal learning or goals?

Proposal form*

- 3—4 pages
- Double-spaced, size 12-pt font, Times New Roman
- Include a title and name
- Follow your discipline's preferred style

**Always refer to specific application requirements.*

Most effective proposals consist of some or all
of these **qualities**.

Clarity

- Is your language free of jargon? If you need to use a term specific to your discipline, have you defined it? Is your proposal organized in a way that makes sense? For instance, have you clearly articulated your inquiry or plans in one or two sentences? Finally, will someone outside of your discipline be able to understand your proposal?

Originality

- An obvious way to make your proposal feel unique is through the use of language. Does your opening paragraph engage the reader, and does your final paragraph leave the reader with a memorable impression?

As with any writing, it is crucial to understand
your **audience**.

Who is reading this, anyway?

- Proposals are often reviewed by a committee of interdisciplinary **academics and staff**.
- Read your proposal as if you were someone outside of your discipline. Watch out for jargon and explain your acronyms.

Writing for an audience

- **Read it out loud!** Are your sentences strong? Are you boring yourself? Use Curiosity Hours!
- **Ask a friend** outside of the discipline to read your proposal. Are there places they did not understand your project? Where is your language weaker, stronger?
- Is every word and sentence **intentional**?

Now let's review the **proposal writing process.**

- 1. Have a general idea.**
- 2. Find supportive program.** Review application requirements and deadline.
- 3. Meet with office offering opportunity and former recipients.**
- 4. Meet with a faculty member.** Pitch your question and program you're applying to.
- 5. Meet with a librarian.** Pitch your question and request current literature on topic.
- 6. Write draft, revise, repeat.**
- 7. Apply.**

And now you write. And write.

- Expect many drafts.
- Back-plan dates by which you hope to **complete proposal drafts**, starting with the deadline.
- Set dates with your faculty mentor to share proposal drafts.
- After each meeting, ask your faculty mentor to provide revisions to better shape the proposal.

Getting Stuck? Reach out!

- Not many undergraduates write proposals for funding. This is not a simple task at any academic level!
- Your faculty mentor, OUR Mentors, and OUR staff can assist thinking through your research proposal.
- Make an appointment with the Writing Center.

Some former O.U.R. students have kindly made shared their proposals as **examples**.

- **Proposal Biology**
- **Proposal Chemistry**
- **Proposal English Literature**
- **Proposal FLMST HAA**
- **Proposal Linguistics**
- **Proposal Psychology**
- **Proposal Religious Studies**

Questions? Reach out to the O.U.R.
at our@pitt.edu.

Thank you!