

Theory

The proposal's theoretical section occupies a critical, but subsidiary position in the proposal's text. You must at once demonstrate disciplinary mastery, highlight critical theoretical debates, point to shortcomings in existing research and approaches, and indicate how your work will help fill the void. All without miring your proposal in a swamp of disorienting sources, sub-themes, and subtleties. While the specifics of a proposal's theoretical section must, of course, be determined by a fellowship's requirements, the following points may prove helpful in maintaining your focus and clarity.

Establish the context. The primary purpose of your theoretical review is to demonstrate your familiarity with present intellectual currents and concerns. Your review should not, however, be a general survey of the field. Your discussion must quickly situate you and your work within the context of the field's theoretical themes. If you intend to conduct cross-disciplinary research, you should highlight points of intersection between various theoretical fields and justify why you are drawing on what some skeptics may consider obscure sources. At all times, keep in mind that your theoretical review must justify your research question and help determine your research design.

Point out debates and disjuncture; expose the cracks and highlight the payoffs. Your second primary task in reviewing existing theory and literature is to justify the need for and interest in your proposed research. Justification for research can come from a variety of sources. At one level, new events or developments may justify an empirical review of a long-accepted theory's empirical foundations (e.g., why no democratization in places with a strong middle class?). You may also highlight rival claims within the literature of your field that can only be resolved through empirical work (e.g., some claim peasants are motivated by economic forces, others say they are not). Regardless, attempt to highlight seeming paradoxes or internal contradictions in the existing literature. Then demonstrate how your work will contribute to their resolution.

Privilege elegance over expansiveness. Graduate students tend to use the theory section as a thorough review of past approaches while pointing to minor subtleties and differences. Unless yours is a purely theoretical project, the theory section is intended to provide only the foundation and justification for your research, not a treatise on the theory itself. As with the rest of the proposal, aim for a clear and democratic tone that is accessible without being shallow.

Show your knowledge and expertise without being pedantic or dismissive. As with the rest of the proposal, you must demonstrate your expertise and qualifications without being dismissive of others' work and ideas. (See also the section on style for more on tone). Many students stereotype or 'straw man' past approaches in an effort to highlight weaknesses and shortcomings. Committee members may interpret the too easy dismissal of previous works as lacking respect or appreciation for the field. You also run the risk of offending committee members who are attached to a particular approach or author. For all you know, one of the people you criticize could be reviewing your proposal. As Przeworski writes, "Good proposals demonstrate awareness of alternative viewpoints and argue the author's position in such a way as to address the field broadly, rather than developing a single sectarian tendency indifferent to alternatives." Hyperbole and hubris will, needless to say, go unappreciated. Without low-balling your qualifications, avoid presenting yourself as your discipline's savior or prophet.

The Research Question

Your research question is the most critical part of your research proposal—it defines the proposal, it guides your arguments and inquiry, and it provokes the interests of the reviewer. If your question does not work well, no matter how strong the rest of the proposal, the proposal is unlikely to be successful. Because of this, it is common to spend more time on the researching, conceptualizing and forming of each individual word of the research question than on any other part of the proposal.

To write a strong research question you will need time. Step away from your computer; consider what drew you to your topic. What about it animates and matters to you? Listen to yourself and start formulating your question by following your own interests. Remember, you will spend a lot of time researching and writing about the proposed project: if it does not interest you in the beginning, it will certainly become very difficult to write about in the end.

Next, extensively research your topic. What have people said about it? How have they framed their research? What gaps, contradictions, or concerns arise for you as you read, talk to people, and visit places?

After you have done this you can go back to your computer or note pad and start crafting the question itself. When you do, consider that a strong research question should be *evocative, relevant, clear, and researchable*.

The research question should be evocative.

Evocative questions are ones that catch the interest of the reviewer and draw her/him into the proposal. Equally important, they easily adhere in the reviewers' memory after reading the proposal. Questions tend to be evocative because of *the ways they engage with challenging topics*: they pose innovative approaches to the exploration of problems, and because of this the answers found are far from obvious. There is no single way to form a conceptually innovative question. However, some of the following qualities are common to successful proposals.

Make it timely. Evocative questions are often distilled from very contemporary social or theoretical concerns. For example, questions regarding the energy crisis, international tribunals, nationalism, or the rise of anti-globalization protests are likely to peak the interests of others because they are questions whose relevance will be clearly discernable for reviewer.

Frame it as a paradox. Frame your question around a provocative paradox. For example, why have indigenous organizations in Bolivia markedly declined while the number and quantity of funding sources has increased? Or why have violent conflicts over forest resources increased in the last ten years while the very people involved in these conflicts have become less and less dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods? There are many potential answers to these questions, and your research may ultimately challenge your own expected explanation—but this in itself is a relevant discovery. These types of paradoxes pull the reader into the proposal and set up a situation whereby the research will fill in a provocative piece of the puzzle and make clear a much-needed broader understanding.

Take a distinctive approach. Finally, a question that approaches an old problem in a refreshingly new way, or proposes a surprising angle of analysis on a difficult dilemma, is likely to prove evocative for reviewers. This could involve a new methodology, a new conceptual approach, or the linking of two previously disparate fields of knowledge. These innovative approaches both develop confidence in the

intellect of the researcher and hold promise for new understandings and insights to old and difficult questions.

The research question should be relevant.

Questions that clearly demonstrate their relevance to society, a social group, or scholarly literature and debates are likely to be given more weight by reviewers. Of course the relevance of a research question, not to mention the question of who finds it relevant, will vary widely according to the funding source. As a general rule, research is more likely to be funded if it is seen as *part of a larger intellectual project* or line of inquiry, not just a way for the researcher to get a degree. Below are two common ways to demonstrate this in your proposal.

Fill in the missing piece. If your proposal can lay out a given field or dilemma and then point to a specific portion that is *missing* in that field or dilemma—a gap which will be filled by the answer to your research question—your research is likely to garner a great deal of support. Reviewers will note its importance and recognize its relevance to a larger community of researchers.

Make connections. Even if you are working on a narrow topic or in a specific place, ask questions that help relate the research to broader trends, patterns, and contexts. Doing this will help show how funding a seemingly distinct research project helps fuel larger debates. For example, show how someone working in a small town in Outer Mongolia will help understand the broader process of post-Soviet economic transformations.

The research question should be clear.

Clear questions tend to be short, conceptually straightforward, and jargon-free. This does not mean they have to be overly simplistic; but save your theoretical gymnastics and abstract disciplinary language for the analysis. Work to keep your questions as lucid and simple as possible. This may be easier in some cases than in others, but some of the strongest and most theoretically sophisticated proposals we reviewed were framed by some of the simplest, most straightforward research questions. In contrast, the most complicated questions tended to appear in proposals where the researcher seemed more interested in demonstrating his/her theoretical knowledge than in engaging the research itself. Below are simple ways to keep your question clear.

Ground the questions. Keep your questions close to the topic or place you are researching. Questions that are too abstract or obtuse make it difficult for the reader to determine your question's relevance and intent. You must still link your question to a larger context, but ground that connection in temporal and spatial specifics.

Limit variables. If a question is burdened with too many variables or too many clauses it becomes both difficult to read and difficult to research. Here are two contrasting examples from the SSRC web site: a question like “Was the decline of population growth in Brazil the result of government policies?” is much easier to understand than “Was the decline in population growth in Brazil related more to sex education, the distribution of birth control, or resource depletion?” You may talk about all these factors in your proposal, but the first question allows the reader to focus on the *central aspect* of your research rather than the variables surrounding it.

The research question should be researchable.

Research questions need to be clearly “doable.” One of the most common rationales for rejecting proposals is that the question is simply too expansive (or expensive) to be carried out by the applicant. There are many questions that you will need to ask yourself to avoid this pitfall. Above all else, **consider your limitations**. Many very practical questions need to be considered when choosing your research question. First among them is: How long will the research take to carry out? Next, do you have the appropriate background to carry out the research? Are there ethical constraints? Is the project likely to be approved by your advisor and your university’s committee for the protection of human subjects? Can you obtain the cooperation from all the necessary individuals, communities and institutions you need to answer the question you have asked? Are the costs of conducting the research more than you will be likely to raise? If I can’t complete this project well, can I break it down and address the most important component? Remember that writing a research question is an iterative process and such concerns need to be carefully considered in your research design and budget.

Research Design

Creating an effective research design is likely to be one of the most difficult and eminently useful tasks in drafting a proposal. An effective research design links abstract and stylized concepts and questions with the empirical world's complexities and challenges. A research design must at once be specific and highly flexible. It must be expansive enough to adapt these very complexities while still pointing you towards relevant data.

The methods you use should be extensions of your substantive question and epistemological orientation. Contrary to some disciplinarians' claims, there is no single research model that one can or should follow. Numerous alternatives must always be considered and choices made. What follows is a set of general principles and questions to consider in making those choices. Whether or not these questions help ensure funding, they will help guide you as you start to navigate "the field."

Identify the kind of research you intend to do. Depending on discipline, project, and personal inclination, social science research projects may contain a wide range of empirical and theoretical objectives. While most researchers hope to explore and document some form of "reality"—something important in the real world—the reasons for doing so vary tremendously. Identifying your normative motivations and your theoretical foundations will considerably influence how you design your research: where you go, for how long, with whom you talk, and the kind of questions you ask. Deciding if you intend to test or elaborate existing theory or are trying to build a new, grand theory, or are using existing theory in a new way, has implications in the kind of information you need to collect.

Be realistic. The world is infinitely more complicated than anything you can possibly represent in a comprehensible text, be it your proposal or dissertation. Given the technical, financial, and chronological restraints you will face in conducting your research (see fieldwork, below), you are going to have to make choices. Conducting a household survey may mean that you cannot also do participant observation, an in-depth ethnography, and extensive archival research. Such questions become even more complicated when conducting research at multiple sites or with ethnically or linguistically diverse populations. Selecting and justifying a limited number of approaches will demonstrate that you have thought through your agenda and the kind of information you need to make your point. Demonstrating that you have the technical skills to execute these approaches will only make your statement stronger.

Be precise. Social scientific discourse, both methodological and substantive, is rife with neologisms and jargon. As with any concept you hope to use, you must be prepared to tease out and concretize the methods you select. If you intend to conduct open-ended interviews, you must ask a whole series of secondary questions:

- What do I want to get out of these interviews?
- With whom am I going to conduct these interviews?
- How do I know they will talk to me?
- How many interviews must I do?

The same goes for "process tracing" (e.g., what process, where do I see this process, etc.), "archival research" (what archives, what sources, what about accessibility? reliability?), or with any other approach. Not all of your answers to these questions need to go in the proposal, but demonstrating that you have considered them will only help.

Be flexible. While realism and precision require excluding some possible approaches, a research design that is too strictly curtailed raises its own set of hazards. In the words of King, Keohene and Verba, "the first-rate social scientist does not regard a research design as a blueprint for a mechanical process of data-gathering and

evaluation. To the contrary, the scholar must have the flexibility of mind to overturn old ways of looking at the world, to ask new questions, to revise research designs appropriately, and then to collect more data of a different type than originally intended” (1994:12). It may be useful to consider what you will do if you cannot access a certain data set, speak to a particular official, or live among a certain group of villagers. Developing a research design that allows you to incorporate these contingencies will help persuade grant-makers that you are ready for what lays ahead.

As much as possible, test your methods in advance. Trying out drafts of your questionnaire, interviewing technique or skills at facilitating focus group discussions can prove invaluable. Ideally, this would be done “in the field” on a pre-dissertation trip, but most of us are not lucky enough to get such a chance. You may be surprised, however, at just how quickly you can eliminate or refine particular questions or approaches by trying them with strangers at home. Moreover, you can help see what methods you realistically think you will be able to use. Doing this ahead of time will not only save invaluable time when you get to the field, but can help you decide what methods you are most comfortable (and most competent) using. Not everyone, for example, is prepared to go undercover in a meatpacking factory as a participant-observer. Being able to specify what you are going to do, and why you are the person to do it, are central to convincing potential funders that you are a worthy grantee.

Consider revising your research question; consider revising your methods. For some, research design and methodology are seen as ways of operationalizing a research question. Others, often those with more technical leanings, choose a research question that highlights their methodological prowess. There are merits to both approaches. A research question must be answerable by the methodological tools available to you, the researcher. Conversely, the methods, however sophisticated, must help you to answer a question of significance to both you and your discipline. As you consider what you can do practically, it may be worth thinking about reformulating or “spinning” your question in a way that will allow you to provide an effective answer. Similarly, as your thinking evolves and your research question changes, you must be prepared to reformulate your research design.

Cited: King, G., Keohane, R. O., Verba, S. (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Background and History

Whereas the theory section provides the intellectual context for your research, the background and history highlights its empirical foundations. In many ways this section of your proposal is deceptively straightforward. On one level, the purpose of a background/history section is to give the reader the relevant facts about your topic and/or research site so that they understand the material or case that you are writing about and how it links to your theoretical question. This section must not, however, simply provide the general context, but must direct the readers' attention to the empirical details through which your research topic and questions are lived and made relevant. As such, they must not just fill in details of the place or topic you are researching, but implicitly illustrate the need for and importance of your research. There are three simple, overlapping concepts to keep in mind when writing your background or history section that will help you do to this. *Engage* your readers with broader themes and topics that *illustrate* your concepts, questions, and theory and *demonstrate* your knowledge and passion.

The history/background should engage your readers with broad themes and topics. This involves connecting details to concepts. The history should be easy to read and compelling both for its relevance and for its fresh approach. Few want to read the details of textile handicrafts in southern Mississippi simply to learn about weaving. If, on the other hand, you show how this craft is linked to a history of racial tensions, changing economic conditions, or gender relations, the details of handicraft cooperatives and techniques can be engrossing and make the reader want to know more.

The background/history should illustrate your concepts, questions, and theory. To do this, try to ensure a tight fit between this and the proposal's other sections. Your history should be the empirical embodiment of your theoretical section. This requires you to make explicit links between the story you tell and the questions and theoretical approach you are using. If, for example, you are writing on indigenous land rights struggles in Bolivia, you should not just include a history of events, but a history that is tightly linked to your theoretical concerns and the research question you are asking. Trace the major actors, sources of change, and point to potential outcomes. If you do this, your history section offers a chance to expound on (for the benefit of others' understanding) the broader topic through the details of your story.

The history/background should demonstrate your experience, knowledge, and passion. What you write about and how you write can reveal a great deal about your knowledge and interest in your subject. This is true in all parts of your proposal, but perhaps most so in this section. Use the back-ground section as an occasion to show the depths of your knowledge of the topic by demonstrating your fluency in accepted understandings and literature as well as your fresh insights and approaches. You may also use this review to implicitly reveal what has drawn you to the topic in the first place. Doing this well will help convince the reader that your interest in the topic is justified and that you are likely to sustain that interest over the time required to complete the project.

As with the theoretical review, the historical and background section must be precise and measured. Too passionate, too political, or too lengthy a historical review may cause some readers to lose focus or question your capacity to be detached and analytical. You must also be careful in *choosing your citations* as proposal readers from your field or region are likely to look carefully at your bibliography. If you are writing on New Mexico forest politics, for example, and the classic authors and works are not cited, it will likely appear to your reviewers that you have not done your homework. Similarly, you must show that you have read authors from across the theoretical or ideological spectrum. While simply putting the "right" people in your bibliography should not be the focus of your work, it is important to demonstrate that you have done your research and that you know your field.

Budgeting

Budgeting is a natural and critical extension of your research design. A realistic and detailed budget is also often a prerequisite for convincing potential funders that you know what you need to accomplish your research and how you are going to conduct it. Not all funders require a budget, and those that do often require specific formats or include particular conditions. These need to be considered seriously or your proposal may be prematurely dismissed. Even so, some general considerations may prove useful.

Demonstrate that your budget is realistic by specifying costs for each line entry. Doing this well may include extensive and difficult research into the real costs in your country of study. Consulates or tourism offices may help, but you will probably be better off speaking to recently returned researchers who are more likely to have dealt with the problems you are going to address. Be wary of budgeting from guidebooks or past experience as prices may have skyrocketed due to inflation or monetary devaluation. Prepare for continued devaluation or possible price rises. It will also help your readers if you include subtotals of various budget categories (e.g., transportation, living expenses, supplies, and research assistants). See samples below.

Consider every possible expense. You are not just funding your research, but your life for the time you are in the field. Any expenses you incur in the field will have to be paid by someone and if you don't ask for adequate support, your research will be compromised and you may come home even poorer than when you left. When sitting down to write a budget, think about all of your daily expenses at home, from the big-ticket items like tuition and books to the more trivial expenses like taking the bus to class. Something costing as little as three dollars a day will add up to over a thousand dollars in a year. Also consider those things that you may get for free at home but will have to pay for overseas. These costs may range from things as major as health care to expenses as seemingly minor as charges for photocopies, computer use, or printing documents. When asking for money, however, be careful. Make sure that the funds you are requesting are only for expenses that will be incurred during the research period and that the items you intend to buy are allowed (e.g., many grantors will not fund computer or automobile purchases).

Compare your budget to available funds. If your actual budget is likely to be higher than that which a particular funder is likely to support, indicate how you will make up the difference. To do this, you may want to mention other fellowships for which you are applying, university support to which you are entitled, available private funds, or payments you expect to receive for consulting. If you already have other funding secured, be upfront about it and detail which funder will cover what costs. It is far better to show that you have other funding that to submit a budget request that is far below what will be realistically needed to complete your research. Similarly, you may raise suspicions if your total expenses are perfectly matched to the maximum grant on offer.

Sample Budget One

Travel

Three trips to the National Archives, Washington, D.C. @ \$275 roundtrip airfare.	\$825.00
Ground Transportation	\$65.00
Per diem @ \$64, for 10 days	<u>\$640.00</u>
<i>Sub-total, Travel</i>	\$1,530.00

Communications

Telephone	\$250.00
Postage	<u>\$80.00</u>
<i>Sub-total, Communications</i>	\$330.00

Materials and Supplies

Printing and Duplicating	\$150.00
Miscellaneous supplies	<u>\$100.00</u>
<i>Sub-total, Materials and Supplies</i>	<u>\$250.00</u>

TOTAL **\$2,110.00**

Source: Rubin (1983)

Sample Budget Two

Estimated Resources at Present

At present, I have secured no funding earmarked specifically for the proposed project. It may become possible to upon personal savings to supplement an awarded fellowship for an amount no greater than \$1,500.00

Estimated Total Expenses for Fellowship Period

The following budget indicates travel and research expenses association with the completion of the project outlines in the attached narrative. Although my fieldwork will be executed entirely within Tanzania, the project involves time spent at three discrete locations: the capital, Dar es Salaam, and two yet to be determined village settings in Rukwa district. As such, the budget details the rail, bus, and accommodation funds required for my frequent relocations. Also included are fees to obtain a cellular telephone and email address. Such services are central to the maintenance of contacts and the collection of information during my time in Western Tanzania where the telecommunications infrastructure is poorly developed and unreliable. The airfare reflects the average of quotes obtained for student tickets from a number of discount travel services. In country expenses (transportation and otherwise), are based on inquiries undertaken while previously in Tanzania.

Food and Personal Maintenance (\$18/day)	\$4,860.00
Accomodations and Storage	\$3,375.00
University Fees/Tuition (Dar es Salaam)	\$3,000.00
Health Insurance and Medi-vac (\$300/month)	\$2,700.00
Round-trip airfare from San Francisco to Dar es Salaam	\$1,400.00
Communications (e-mail, telephone)(\$60.00/month)	\$540.00
Translator/Research Assistance (Rukwa)	\$600.00
Ground Transportation in Tanzania	\$700.00
Photocopying	\$250.00
Survey expenses	<u>\$250.00</u>
TOTAL	\$17,925.00

Potential Sources of Alternate Funding

Fulbright-IIIE	Rejected
Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation	Pending
Institute of International Studies, University of California	Pending
Joint Center for African Studies, Stanford-Berkeley	Pending

Source: The preceding budget was written for an application to the Institute for the Study of World politics.

Style

You have only one chance with most grant reviewers, so the way you present your ideas is central to the success of your proposal. The people who read your proposal will sometimes be reviewing hundreds of others and are likely to be overburdened with other projects as well. Your goal is for the reviewers to be able to understand your research purpose and judge its relevance and importance without having to work to do so. Regardless of your project's intellectual merits, a proposal that puzzles reviewers with complex syntax, ill-defined terms, or inelegant prose is not likely to win a favorable rating. Without style, your proposal's substance is likely to be ignored. With this in mind, the following four central criteria may help you make your proposal as lucid and explicit as possible. You may also wish to refer to George Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (viewable at this website).

Clarity

Clarity is the most important aspect of style for proposal writing. The clearer your proposal, the easier it will be for the reader to understand and follow your logic and writing. The following are some suggestions for enhancing your proposal's clarity. (See also "The Art of Writing Proposals" by Adam Przeworski and Frank Salomon, at the Social Science Research Council website.)

Think first. The first step of clear writing is clear thinking. The clearer the ideas are in your head, the clearer they will be on the page. Thinking through your proposal should leave you with a solid understanding of what you are proposing to research, how you plan to accomplish it, and its broader relevance to scholarship and to the world. After you have written a draft, leave yourself time to think it over and then, without looking at the original draft, see if you can say what is important in a clearer for accessible way. Many of the students we spoke with told us that doing this not only made the writing much easier and more satisfying, but also helped integrate the overall structure and logic of the proposal.

Use Outlines and Sketches. If you work well from outlines, lay out your thoughts in that structure to organize and direct a logical flow for your proposal. While you may or may not follow this outline exactly or even use it as you write (though we suggest that you do), thinking through the overall structure and logic of your proposal will help focus your writing and lead to a clearer proposal. You may also want to sketch out certain parts of the proposal or ideas before you start writing. If you are reviewing a particular concept, for example, it may help to write out what you mean by the term on its own. This allows you to test out ideas and logical connections without having to integrate them into your broader argument. If these ideas are clear to you before you write, your proposal is likely to benefit.

Be explicit. A proposal should not read like a mystery novel where the key to the story comes at the end. Never assume that the reader knows what you mean or where you are going with your prose. State your research question and objectives early on and make it clear that you are doing so. If you haven't gotten to it by the first paragraph, make sure it comes on the first page. While you need to leave your position open to reconsideration, present your argument (or your hunch) in the most straightforward manner possible. It is hard to overstate this piece of advice. Many reviewers will spend only a brief few seconds searching for the main purpose of your research. Making it hard for them makes it much less likely that they will read the rest of your proposal.

Write simply. As the saying goes "write to express, not to impress." This often means writing in short, simple sentences using simple language (see below). When possible, write short paragraphs that begin with informative topic sentences that tell the reviewer what you are going to do in the

paragraph; then do it. Use simple verbs and place them next to the subjects to which they pertain and, whenever possible, eliminate complex clauses or language that may be open to multiple interpretations. Use subsections and verbal maps that orient the reviewer “up front” to your direction and purpose.

Minimize jargon. As a general rule, keep your proposal as jargon-free as possible. Too often, language used to impress proposal reviewers obscures more than it reveals. Keep in mind that what is considered conceptual precision to one reviewer might be alienating and impenetrable to another. If you feel that there are terms that may be foreign to some readers but are conceptually critical for your argument, briefly define them in your text to avoid alienating anyone. Try to use language that is widely recognized and used in different disciplines to improve the likelihood that a reviewer from another field or subfield will be familiar with the terms you are using. The best way to ensure your text’s ‘democratic’ credentials is to have it read by colleagues from other disciplines (see below).

Be brief. It enhances clarity if you convey the maximum information in the minimum number of words. For example, substitute “now” for “at this point in time,” “whether” for “whether or not,” “to” for “for the purpose of,” etc. Perform an “efficiency review” of your proposal with the aim of deleting words and phrases that are not crucial to the meaning. This helps eliminate wordiness, which gives you more room to convey important information and helps communicate your ideas more clearly.

Share. We highly recommend talking through and sharing your ideas with others at different stages of your proposal writing. This is absolutely essential when you have a working draft written, but talking to others is also helpful when conceptualizing and outlining your proposal. Doing so helps you see early on the potentials and pitfalls of a given project and lets you hone your argument. When choosing casual reviewers, select people who will bring different strengths and perspectives to their reading of your work. People from outside your field, those with good editing skills and those with strong theoretical and/or empirical backgrounds are likely to prove particularly useful.

Tone

An inappropriate tone—one of arrogance or apology—can condemn a substantively sound proposal. Remember that the reviewers are not just funding your research idea; they are investing in you and in the likelihood that you will be able to carry out the proposed research. The tone in which you express yourself is likely to influence the reviewers’ estimation of you and your capacities.

Be confident. Your writing should convey a respectful confidence. Expressing a measured confidence in your research and yourself is likely to enhance the reviewers’ faith in your ability to carry out a rigorous academic investigation. To do this, use straightforward language and simple verbs (avoid using the subjunctive or excessive conditional clauses). Instead of, “If I am funded I would hope to conduct interviews during the final phase of my research,” say “I will conduct interviews during the final phase of the research.” Avoid the passive voice as much as possible. The passive voice avoids specifying who or what did, does, or will do the action of the verb. The result in most cases is a less direct and often less confident tone. Rather than, “the research will be conducted over a one-year period,” write, “*I will conduct* the research in one year.”

Be passionate. Do not hide your passion for your project. There are few graduate students in the humanities and social sciences in search of fame or fortune. Indeed, most care deeply about their work, are often normatively engaged with it, and are truly excited for the opportunity to do original research. When these attitudes are expressed through your writing, they may help pique the interest of even the most jaded reviewer. Communicating this passion is easier for some than for others and must always be done carefully. It may help to start by reflecting on what made you interested in your topic

when you first got involved and why you are still keen on the research. Do not state your feelings in the proposal directly, but express your passion in the way you frame and tell the reviewer of your story, your approach, and your work's import. The key is to express these sentiments while maintaining a respect for the formality of the proposal format.

Avoid arrogance and apology. One of the fastest ways to estrange a reviewer is to write your proposal in an overly arrogant or apologetic tone. You must find and respect the line between being pompous and being confident; apologetic and modest; passionate and unprofessional. Make sure the information you convey about yourself is information that the reviewer really needs to know for your role in the project and is not simply thrown in to impress. Express your enthusiasm through your topic or approach, not through personal information about yourself. Do not apologize for what you do not know, but focus on what strengths you bring to the research and how you will systematically overcome your shortcomings (e.g., language training). Finally, get friends, preferably close, honest friends, to read your proposal with tone in mind and ask them for candid comments.

Coherence

Proposals are frequently the products of innumerable drafts and revisions. While the linkages between and among the sections may be clear in your head, they may not always be so evident to readers of your proposal. As you revise, concentrate on ensuring a high degree of coherence, the logical and smooth integration of the text's various sections. For your proposal to be successful, it is essential that the research question you propose is logically linked to the methods you plan to employ, and that your theoretical frame adequately justifies the empirical cases and context which you hope to explore. And these linkages must be made explicit. The following paragraphs point to four common sources of discontinuity and disconnection. As with everything else, the only way to ensure continuity is to have others read your proposal.

Questions and Methods. Your research question (or questions) will be one of the most scrutinized sections of your proposal. Reviewers will closely consider whether the methods you propose to use are adequate to gather the information you need to answer the question(s) convincingly. We suggest that you place each question on one side of a sheet of paper and carefully map out *how* the methods employed will help you gather the information needed to answer each question.

Case and Theory. After taking years of course work and preparing for qualifying exams, researchers tend to organize their proposals around their theory. This can be all too apparent in the proposal itself and can result in the history or description of the research site and background seeming disconnected from the research itself. Often in these situations, a researcher will attempt to make the case or topic fit their theoretical framework too neatly exposing their ignorance of what is certainly a complex reality. Conversely, many students offer theoretical frameworks that come across as weak justifications for spending time in a place that interests the researchers. Such attempts are often very transparent and may raise a red flag to reviewers. To avoid this, carefully justify why you have chosen your case and how this selection relates to a broader theoretical debates and concerns. Similarly, make an effort to emphasize why this theoretical frame is particularly well suited to the trends and patterns unfolding in your area of interest.

Project and Time. One of the easiest ways to determine if researchers are realistic is to look at what they intend to do in the allotted time. Most first-time researchers, eager to overcome the shortcomings of past efforts, drastically overestimate what they can accomplish. Your timeline—a concrete part of your research design—must persuade the reviewer of two things. First, you must demonstrate that you have a good idea of what conditions are going to be like on the ground. If you cannot travel long distances during the rainy season, you must schedule this into your plan. Second, you must show that

you have prioritized the methods and approaches you are going to use. If answering your research question depends on a particularly kind of data, a good portion of your timeline should be dedicated to its collection. Speaking to others who have recently completed similar project or even trying out some of the methods at home will help you realistically understand the time needed to complete your proposed project. For more on this, refer to the research design page at this website.

Budget and Project. Quite often researchers have lofty ideas and ambitious goals, but the proposed budget appears insufficient to complete the research. Skimping on the money you ask for does not increase the chances of getting funded. Moreover, if your budget does not match the cost you will incur in your project, it conveys the impression that you do not realistically understand your research and may cause your proposal to be rejected because the project appears infeasible. If you need more money than the funding source offers, mention other sources you will be approaching for funds. Be specific about what costs you are asking a particular grantor to fund and what parts of your budget you are asking other donors to fund. To assure coherence between your budget and your proposal, be honest, realistic, and transparent in matching your budget to the actual work you will need to do to carry out the research. For more on budgeting, and sample budgets, refer to the budgeting page at this website.

Presentation

Academics pride themselves on their substance and seriousness. Such concerns can not, however, lead you to overlook your proposal's physical appearance. Proposals that are easy to read are simply more inviting to the reader. After a reviewer has looked at dozens of proposals, most from qualified, competent candidates, a clearly presented proposal can literally be a sight for sore eyes.

Readability. Make your proposal easy and inviting to read. Although researchers commonly give a great deal of attention to the presentation of a curriculum vitae or resume, they often neglect the esthetics and presentation of a proposal. Leaving lots of white space on pages and being clear and consistent with your style headings and subheadings, boldface, underlining, capitals, or italics can help the reader to visually navigate your prose. Finding a font that is easy to read and that leaves enough spacing between letters and words will only help in this regard. Avoid narrowing your margins or reducing the font size (in the text or in the footnotes) just to squeeze more words on the page. Try cutting out words instead. Attention to these fine points of presentation can help reviewers work less to see the gist of your argument and even enhance their comprehension of your more difficult substantive concepts.

Length. The desired proposal length varies greatly from one foundation to another. Some want shorter more conceptual proposals while others will ask for more robust research proposals of the type included on our examples page at this website. In either case, it is important to stay within the specified page or word limit or limits. Many foundations are very strict about these page limits and some will not review proposals that exceed the requested length. Do not simply adjust the line spacing, font sizes, or margins of your proposal to fit within the allotted length. Respect the funders' requests and shape your text so that it will fit within the required length utilizing standard margins, font sizes, and line spacing. Following the funders' guidelines by providing a concise statement of your research agenda is only going to help you to earn a favorable review.