

# Developing Research Proposals in the Arts

Presented by Dr. Jared Secord, Coordinator of Scholars Programming

May 2, 2023



# Agenda

- Introductions
- How (not) to write a research proposal
- What I wish I knew in graduate school about research proposals
- Templates and examples of successful proposals
- Breakdown of a proposal and suggestions for each section
- General tips
- Questions and discussion

# How (not) to write a research proposal

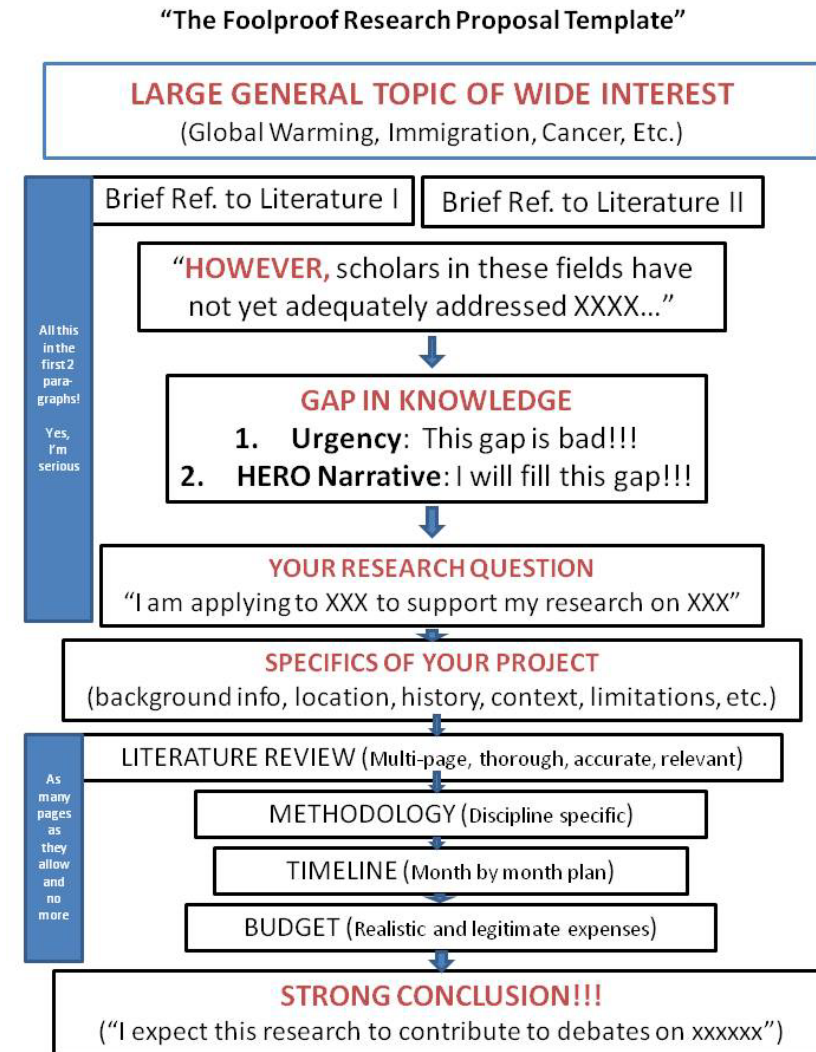
- Fellowship application instructions:
- *The statement should address the importance of the student's work in the beginning two or three sentences. The statement should include the theoretical framework of the dissertation, its specific aims, methodologies (how the student is conducting the research), originality, and the significance and contribution of the project to the field. Fellowship committees place strong emphasis on this statement. The statement should be written with an interdisciplinary faculty review panel in mind; i.e., reviewers will NOT necessarily be familiar with the technical vocabulary of a specific field. (1,500 words)*
  - <https://rackham.umich.edu/funding/funding-types/rackham-predoctoral-fellowship-program/>

# What I Wish I Knew in Graduate School

- Writing a successful research proposal shouldn't be a solitary process.
  - Don't buy into the myth that academics are solitary geniuses.
- Other people are happy to help with the process.
  - Writing doesn't need to be "perfect" before it gets shared with someone else.
- Writing a research proposal is a lot easier if you are working with a template/model of a successful proposal.

# Templates and examples of successful proposals

- Karen Kelsky's foolproof research proposal template:  
<http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/>
- “effective grant-writing, like all other professional academic writing, is at its root completely formulaic.”



# Templates and examples of successful proposals

- Ask people you know to share successful proposals that they have written.
  - People ahead of you in your program, people at other institutions, post-docs, faculty members.
- Check the website of the professional association in your field.
  - They may post successful proposals and abstracts; they may also have instructions and guidelines about good proposals and abstracts.

# Template of a Research Proposal

- Basic components of a research proposal are pretty standard.
- Again, there may be differences in standards between fields.
- Be sure to follow specific instructions and guidelines.
- The document I shared has a template of the basic components.
  - Complete the individual components, and then put what you've written together into a complete draft of the proposal.

# Getting Started: Planning.

- Start well in advance – you need time.
- Organize in advance to get feedback – so other people can plan their time.
- Be prepared to be very adaptable and open to trial and error.
- Get your template organized.
- Talk to people – your supervisor; post docs; dept. members.
- Don't have to start at the beginning – can start anywhere and work out of order.
- Get your references/citations ready and your reference software.
- Keep track of EVERYTHING.



# Getting Started: Know Your Audience.

- A fundamental issue to consider before writing your proposal is the audience that will be reading and assessing it.
  - This will typically be clear from the instructions and guidelines that go with the proposal.
- Sometimes you will be writing for a general, educated audience, rather than for specialists in your field.
  - This will mean avoiding or explaining technical language and abbreviations that you will want to use.
- The less specialized your audience will be, the more you will need to demonstrate the significance of your project.

# Defining the Research Question

- Good questions develop over time by working with your materials and evidence.
  - Literature, experimental data, interviews, observations, etc.
- Make a list of the ideas and questions, big and small, that occur to you as you work with your data/evidence/results.
- Does the question pass the “so what” test?
  - Why does it matter?
  - It’s not enough simply to say that no one has answered the question before.
- Is the question one that you can plausibly hope to answer in the time that you have to spend on the research project?

# The Literature Review

- Literature reviews can often seem daunting.
  - You really do need to read widely across scholarship on your topic.
- But, realistically, the literature review you write will focus mostly on a smaller body of recent scholarship that you deem most important.
  - Depending on your field, give yourself a cutoff date for the age of scholarship that you are going to discuss.
  - If you have already published relevant work, it is often appropriate to cite and discuss this.
- Figure out which journals and publishers matter most in your field.
  - Impact factors, citation counts, reputation.
  - Ask other people in your field if you're not sure.

# Literature Review

- The key point in the literature review is identifying the gap in existing scholarship that you are trying to fill.
- This will help to establish the importance of your work.

# Methodology/Methods

- This section will not provide a full description of the research you are doing so someone can repeat the experiments you are doing.
- It will simply show that you have a plan for what you are doing, that you have anticipated likely problems, and have the expertise to do the work.
  - In some fields, the methodology may simply involve what sorts of literature and scholarship you will be reading, with emphasis on the languages and the types of theory with which you are familiar.

# Abstract

- Write this last, after everything else is done.
- Read examples of successful proposal abstracts.
- Template
  - Beginning: identify the problem/question that you are addressing, and the impact of your work.
  - Middle: explain your methods and/or the steps in your argumentation.
  - End: Return to the impact in the last sentence.
- Style
  - Short sentences, succinct and punchy.

# Use of Language

- Especially if writing is a slow process for you, keep a notebook or list of sentence frames and connecting/opening words that you can use and refer to.
  - “This research will demonstrate...”
- Grammar, punctuation, and spelling don’t need to be perfect in early drafts.
  - Organization and ideas matter more.
  - Get words written. Go back and fix them later.

# General Tips

- Figure out what matters in your field.
  - There are going to be deal-breakers and red flags in every field. Some of these will apply to all fields (e.g. not following directions for the proposal; an incomplete or out-of-date bibliography and literature review). But others will be specific to your field.
- Don't isolate yourself and your work process.
  - Seek out readers, and more experienced people in your field who can provide good advice.
- Don't take criticism personally.
  - Helpful feedback and criticism will be directed towards the proposal you have written, rather than you as a person.



# General Tips.

- Proofread and edit.
  - Get people you know to read it.
  - Sloppy writing makes a proposal less convincing and less successful.
- Stick with the word count and the page count.
  - Don't submit a document that is substantially longer than what is asked for.
  - This will never impress readers and reviewers. It may often be an automatic deal breaker.
- Learn from previous proposals that you have submitted.
  - If a previous proposal was rejected, address the feedback and criticism that you received.
  - Keep copies of rejected proposals. You can often reuse substantial parts of them in future applications.
  - Sometimes proposals are rejected simply because of the nature of the competition, not because the proposal was poor.

# General Tips.

- Seek out advice and help from others.
  - Other students, faculty members, family and friends (where relevant).
- Writing Support Appointments.
  - Work one-on-one with a writing tutor.
  - <https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/student-success/writing-support>
- Graduate Writing Community
- Academic Support Appointments at Student Success Centre.
  - Book online at <https://elevate.ucalgary.ca/home.htm>.

# Conclusion

- Writing a research proposal doesn't have to be an agonizing, solitary process that drags on for months.
- Instead, a research proposal can be the start of a project that serves as your entrée into a larger academic world.
  - People in academia are often more helpful and generous than they might seem to be.
  - Don't be put off if people don't respond to your email or otherwise seem distant.
- Work from a template, get help from others, and surround yourself with a supportive community.

# Questions and Discussion

- Please feel free to email me at [jared.secord1@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jared.secord1@ucalgary.ca)