

The Genre of Grant Proposals: Considerations of Form and Rhetorical Force

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The narrative of a grant proposal genre unlike the other kinds of academic writing in which you have been trained. It is not a research essay or a dissertation prospectus, neither a book nor its abstract. According to the ancient art of rhetoric, a genre can be defined in terms of the audience of the work, and the way one intends to *move* that audience. Grants have both an audience and a rhetorical force distinct from other kinds of academic writing. Failure to understand the genre of grant writing is perhaps the primary reason why applications are unsuccessful. Unless the audience understands and is compelled the value of your work, you will not get the grant—if even if the project is brilliant. This brief essay will describe the characteristics of the audience and the underlying form (logic, if you will) of a grant proposal.

Considerations of Audience

The audience grant proposal is importantly different than the audience(s) who will read your research results. The readers of a research paper or book typically 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. Indeed, they put the effort into digging your work out of the library because they *wanted* to read it. You can expect that the reader will put some effort into understanding the argument and conclusions.

Proposal reviewers differ from ordinary academic consumers of research results in two ways. First, they typically do not share the author's training, and they can't be expected to do the background reading so as to catch up. Many grant proposal review panels draw on readers from multiple disciplines. Indeed, program officers often make an effort to make their panels diverse.

* These remarks are based on Ivan Karp's *Components of a Successful Research Proposal*, which is available on the Laney Graduate School Grant Writing Program web page. They also draw on the collective wisdom of the faculty of the Laney Graduate School's Grant Writing Program, particularly Ivan Karp, Cory Kratz, Devin Stewart, Ulf Nilsson, and Martine Brownley.

Therefore, there is no guarantee that there is someone from your discipline, and if there is, the person is unlikely to be in your subfield.

The second difference between grant readers and the ordinary academic audience concerns their motivation and goals. Someone who reads a published book or essay generally *chooses* that work to read. They are motivated by an interest in the content, and they want to figure out what you have to say. By contrast, the reader of a grant proposal is reading your work because it is the next application on the pile. Imagine, for a moment, what this involves. The reader's job is to winnow the field from 60 (or 600) applications to the top 5. Since most of the proposals are excellent—you are in an extremely competitive environment—the reader can afford to throw away some good ones. This means that s/he can afford to make the mistake of rejecting a proposal that, if s/he had just read it two or three times, s/he would have recognized as important. The next one on the pile is also significant and well grounded.

These two features of the audience have several consequences for the genre of the grant proposal. You must motivate the problem; explain why it is significant. Since the reader does not share your background, s/he will not understand why anyone would bother to do the kind of work to which you are devoting your life. Moreover, the lack of a shared background puts a premium on clear, direct expression in grant writing. The reader will not know the common tropes and jargon. Write for an audience of educated people who know nothing about your discipline. While technical vocabulary is acceptable, even necessary sometimes, be sure to either explain what the terms mean, or use the context to make it clear.

The lesson of the foregoing paragraph applies most directly to grants with multi-disciplinary panels, such as the Fulbright, SSRC, ACLS-Mellon Dissertation Completion Fellowship. Most grants and fellowships available in the humanities and social sciences have multi-disciplinary panels. There are, however, grants and fellowships with more specialized panelists. Many of the NSF directorates, for example, will have panelists who work in the same field. And there are a few grants that are quite field-specific. In these cases, you can presuppose a bit more background knowledge. However, it is very easy to overestimate background knowledge. Panelists from the same field might have quite different areas of expertise. It is better to have illuminated something that is common knowledge in your sub-field than it is to leave a reader in the dark.

Considerations of Form

A research essay aims to articulate and justify a thesis, a prospectus describes a project to be done, and an abstract summarizes work completed. Its aim is to convince the audience that the thesis is true or that the interpretation well grounded. By contrast, a grant proposal must convince the reader that:

- A. the question motivating the research is interesting and important,
- B. the research answering the question is feasible, and
- C. the author has the expertise or skills necessary to carry out the project.

In this sense, a research grant proposal seeks to justify a project or research question, rather than a thesis. The underlying logic of a grant proposal is designed to convince the reader of all three points above. That logic consists in answers to four questions in the following (logical) order: What? Where/When? How? Who?

It should be emphasized that the order of the questions, What?—Where?—How?—Who?, is a *logical* deep structure, not the surface form. These questions generate the argument of the proposal. Depending on the particulars of your proposal, it may be best to start with a description of the place, and then tack back and forth between the “what” and the “where” of the proposal. Some proposals ask you to answer specific questions or provide specific information. No matter what the surface form, you need to convince the reader of the three points above. That means that the underlying argument remains the same.

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, they can be seen as extensions of the logic of a research proposal. In this section, I will begin by describing research proposals. In the next section, I will discuss how write-up proposals and other similar proposal forms differ.

What?

The first section of the narrative should specify the broad question that your research will address, the *so what?* of a proposal. 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 of “what” we are driving

at, *this is NOT what your research is about*. The “What?” section must articulate a broad question, one that interests a range of scholars who address it from different perspectives. It must be important enough and deep enough to reach across disciplinary boundaries. Ask yourself: when the project is finished and published, what readers *outside of your discipline* will read it? And why will they find it interesting?

Important questions constitute fields of research, where a field is understood as a network of researchers with shared interests. (Disciplines, by contrast, are researchers who receive similar training, and they are often institutionalized as departments of a college.) So think about how your Favorite Island or Great Dead Guy fits into some 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 “What?” section will describe this broad area of inquiry and highlight the way in which your research fits.

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.

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 broad issues raised in the “What?” section are really 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 how it is significant (interesting, important) to people who study this part of the world, this time period, or these texts. This is the part of the proposal where you describe the specific debates or conversations to which your work will *directly* contribute. The reader is unlikely to know what is at stake in these debates—why do you and your immediate colleagues care so much about this little fragment of text or pottery? Remember that you are not arguing for a conclusion. If you knew the answer, you wouldn’t be asking for research money. You are arguing for a *question*, indeed, for the specific question your research will address. The argument of the “Where?” section is that, given the current state of scholarship in the field, yours is the next important question to answer.

Two notes for "scientists"

- Some research takes the form of theory testing. The theory is not the "What" of your proposal. The theory is the “where” of theory testing research. The theory was devised to answer a larger question: that is the "What"
- In NSF terms, the “What?” of a proposal corresponds to the “intellectual merit,” not the “Impact” or "Significance" of a project. 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" addresses how your research will expand human knowledge.

The “Where?” section has a further function in many grant proposals. 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. It must be the best place on the planet to do this work, and not because it's sunny and the seawater is warm. 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?

Both “What?” and “Where?” work toward convincing the audience of point (A) above: that your work is significant and interesting. The “What?” section 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, data set, texts, ...) can provide answers to a more specific version of that large question, then the reader will see that your research question is interesting and important. 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 specific 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 (which is not to say that it ought to be expressed in the 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.

What about “hypotheses?”

- So far, I have only talked about research questions. But, I hear you cry, isn’t a basic tenet of scientific method that we derive hypotheses and test them? Yes, but the language of hypotheses is easily converted into the language of questions (but not vice versa, which is why the latter is used here). In hypothesis testing the research question is simply “is my hypothesis true?” And in fields that think in terms of hypotheses, readers will expect to see explicit statements of what is to be tested, often set apart with numbers or bullet points.
- Remember, a hypothesis is interesting and important only if it is derived from an interesting and important theory. In this sort of proposal, the “Where?” section is often conceived as giving the current state of the science. Note that the “What?” section cannot be ignored. NSF calls this out as the intellectual merit. You are trying convince an outsider that your work has broad intellectual consequences.

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 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.

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 specific question posed in the “Where?” section. In so doing, you will convince your audience of point (B) above: that the project is feasible.

There are four sub-questions that must be answered in the “How?” section, and the order is again a logical priority, not necessarily the surface structure:

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 detailed answers to (2) and (3).

Always answer question (3) in as much detail as you can muster. Remember, again, that you are writing for an multidisciplinary audience. They may not know what you mean by “close reading,” “content analysis,” or “two tailed T-test.” In this section, 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 have a special name for 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. S/he suddenly sees 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. The mystery would be solved.

Two notes for "humanists"

- Do not bristle 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 19th 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 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 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.

Training Grants

A training grant supports your education in some way. One kind of training grant is designed to support your broad education. They may provide several years of tuition and stipend support, and they typically are intended for graduate students at the beginning of their careers. Others are aimed at some specific kind of education, such as learning a language or methodological technique. And of course there are hybrids.

On the surface, training grants may seem to point the narrative in an entirely different direction than a research grant. You are trying to convince the audience that you should be supported to get some kind of training. But now, 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. We come right around again to the underlying logic of a research proposal: this is the "What?" and "Where/when?" sections of a research proposal.

The important difference between training grants and research grants is that you are funds to learn a skill or gain relevant expertise. There is, therefore, a focus on *you* that is important. The "How?" section needs explains why this educational program will provide you exactly the skills or expertise you need to carry out your interesting research project. Since you don't have the relevant skills yet, the "Who?" section needs to show that you are capable of undertaking the work. To do so, write about what you have already done that makes you ready for this phase of your training.

Write-up Fellowship Proposals

Write-up fellowships provide living expenses to complete your dissertation. They are intended to pick up where graduate school stipends leave off, that is, in the fifth or sixth year. The goal, however, is for you to *finish during the fellowship year*, not simply to provide more funding. Therefore, in order to be competitive, you need to make a further argument, in addition to (A)-(C) above: that you are in a position to finish.

The fundamental difference between research grant proposals and write-up fellowship 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 fellowship proposal, you are looking back on the research and justifying support to finish writing your dissertation. Where a research grant uses the future tense (I will show...), a write-up fellowship proposes uses the past tense (I have shown...). Even more importantly, where a research grant proposal argues that you will find a significant result, in a write-up fellowship proposal, you are arguing that you have found it. **It is *absolutely essential*, then, that you formulate the thesis or main research finding of the dissertation in clear, direct, and succinct language.**

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 thesis or research finding is interesting and important. Everything said above

applies, but bear in mind the difference of temporal perspective. Where in a research proposal you were arguing for the significance of the *question*, you are now arguing for the significance of the *answer*. It may still be helpful to motivate the question, but the real interest is the result. Since you've already done a good bit of work, you should be in a position to include some of the actual results you've gotten. And if you don't have any sense of results or interpretations yet, then you are probably not in a good position to apply for write-up fellowships.

The "How?" section may still need to explain how you gathered your data and the analytical techniques you are using on the data. But since you have (or are getting) something out of these analyses or interpretations, the "How?" section can take on the structure of an argument for your thesis. You've gathered the evidence, you've done the interpretation, and you are showing how the evidence supports your thesis (the coolness of which you have already established in the "What?" and "Where?" sections). In general, the discussion of methods in a write-up proposal can be much shorter than a research proposal. The goal in a write-up proposal is to assure the reader that your main thesis or result is well grounded.

There is a temporal oddity about write-up fellowships: the proposals are due approximately one year before the fellowship begins. This means you will be writing the proposal at least 18 months before you graduate—more if you start early, as you should. So, you may not *really* have nailed down the result you anticipate. Remember, this is true for everyone who is applying. All grant proposals involve a little bit of projection. You need to take what you *have* gotten and project what you have excellent reason to expect. However, if you've got nothing, you aren't really in a good position to apply for a write-up fellowship.

Write-up proposals normally include a description of the chapters of the dissertation. The chapters provide a framework additional to the logic of What?—Where?—How?—Who?. Making these two frameworks work together is a special challenge of write-up proposals. If a proposal uses the chapters as the surface form (in the sense that organization of the proposal tracks the chapters), it is easy to lose the "What?" and the "How?" In general, then, it is probably best to begin with a more general discussion of the broad intellectual context (the What? of the proposal). This opening discussion should also state your main thesis or research result, and show why it has broad significance. Then you might turn to a description of the chapters. Because the "How?" aims to

convince the reader that your thesis is well grounded, bits of the methodology can be sprinkled among the chapter descriptions.

If you are going to be competitive, you not only need something to say, you need a clear path to finishing. Again, the funder is strongly interested in having the fellows complete their dissertations during the fellowship period. This adds a new dimension to the “Who?” section: you must convince the reader that you are ready to finish. This will be manifest in two ways. First, the “What?” “Where?” and “How?” sections of a good write-up proposal will show a maturity of thought convincing the reader that this is a candidate who has figured things out. If you are still groping for a conclusion, it will show. Second, write-up fellowship applications always include a timeline. Here, you need to be detailed and honest in order to be convincing. Dissertation chapters go through many phases: the research/analysis/reading gets completed, the chapter is outlined, a draft is underway, sometimes a part of the chapter draft is presented at a conference, your advisor reads the draft, you do revisions, the committee reads the draft, you do more revisions, finally the chapter is approved (pop the champagne!). Honestly, where is each of your chapters now in the process? Where will they be six, twelve, and eighteen months from now? There are many ways to present this information; the ACLS website has some examples, and there are probably others.

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.

Use section headings. They make the organization plain. "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.