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A Partial Guide to Producing a Research Proposal

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Writing is a major component of a college experience. The quality of your previous educational experiences is no excuse for failing to attend to the demands of college writing. You may have to put in some hard work to catch up to our expectations. Your professors and instructors expect you to write seriously and thoughtfully in their classes. An ability to write is central to the development of good communication skills, which you will find useful in many careers. Moreover, the ability to write expands and enhances your capacity to reason and participate in cultural and political life.

Proposals submitted in this class must conform to the author/date system of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, or a similar style associated with the discipline most closely approximating the content of your major, as well as the instructions contained in this guide. I characterize this guide as “partial” because of the need to use to use an accepted and appropriate style manual (along with manuals on grammar and punctuation, dictionaries, etc.) Accepted and appropriate style is not advisory. It is mandatory. The information contained herein (and in these other sources) will help you maximize the quality of your work in all your classes and in other areas of life and down the road.

Two resources may improve your writing:

- You need the right tools for the job. A dictionary, manual for proper grammar, general style manual (the *Chicago Manual* is the academic standard for social science), and thesaurus are invaluable means for improving writing mechanics, punctuation, spelling, good usage, effective sentence construction, and composition.
- Consult your teacher during the writing process if you are having difficulties. Early detection of writing deficiencies may permit interventions that could potentially improve course performance.

You should approach writing assignments with these thoughts in mind:

First, professors serve as referees and reviewers for publishers of various types. That means that we are the persons who decide whether a journal will publish an author's work. Think of your professor as the referee of a journal who is making decisions about whether your paper is publishable in a journal appropriate to the level of writing expected in the course or, more precisely for this particular assignment, a grant awarding body from who you are seeking to acquire the funds necessary to enable your research project to move towards realization.

Second, ask yourself: “Would I give a potential employer a cover letter and resume on anything other than clean white paper with clear dark ink, proofread, and consistent with an accepted format?” I suspect the answer is no. After all, you want the job. Why would you submit anything less to a college teacher? Professors gauge student interest and develop impressions of students by how students conduct themselves professionally. The quality of your written work indicates your level of interest in both the course and your professional development. Your professors not only care about your ideas, they also care about how you present your ideas. Shoddy or plagiarized work suggests to us that you may not be university material.

Although I have now moved to a mostly paperless process, prepare any component or final project for electronic submission as you would a hard copy. This means you are to prepare your proposal for production using clean, sturdy, white paper with black and legible print (no color print). There must be at least one inch, but no more than one and one-half inch margins on all sides the paper. Do not justify the

text (the text you are reading is justified, an example of what not to do). You must double space, but no more than double space, the text of your proposal, except where instructions indicate otherwise (the text you are reading is not double spaced, an example of what not to do). Preferred fonts are 12 points for Times New Roman and 10 points for Arial and Courier New. Because the size and spacing of the fonts are variable, assignments in my courses typically require a certain number of words instead of pages. Use the same font size throughout the proposal, including titles, section headings, footnotes, and endnotes.

Title Page and Abstract

The cover page contains the title of the project, followed by your name, institutional affiliation (for you this is the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay), and date you intend to turn in the proposal. This is centered, using the same size and style of font as the rest of the proposal. Do not title your proposal “Semester Project” or “Research Proposal,” etc. Create an original title that conveys the subject/theme of your proposal. This page does not have a page number.

The next page contains an abstract. The abstract is a short summary that presents the thesis, sketches the main arguments and expected findings (theories, concepts, and nature of facts), and briefly describes the methods used to develop arguments and reach findings. In sum, it is an overview of what will happen in your proposal. The abstract should be between 100-150 words contained in a single paragraph. This page does not have a page number. Do not put your name on this page.

Third Page of the Proposal

The body of your proposal will begin on the third page. Repeat the title. Do not put a page number on this page. Do not put your name on this page. There are to be no running heads throughout the proposal. The introduction to your proposal shall begin on this page. The character of the introduction and the rest of the body of the proposal are discussed in the next section.

The Body of the Proposal

After the third page, you must number all pages in the top, right-hand corner. No running heads, just numbers. Do not put an extra return in between paragraphs unless you are completing a section of your proposal and are not using section headings. This means that each subsequent paragraph in a continuous string of paragraphs shall not be any further from the last line of the preceding paragraph than the last line of the preceding paragraph is from the line immediate preceding it. The text you are reading has an extra return between paragraphs, an example of what not to do. The reason why there is a space in this document is because it is single spaced and the paragraphs are not indented.

All essays must have a proper introduction and conclusion. The introductory paragraph announces the thesis of the proposal, why it is important, and lets the reader know how the writer intends to present the thesis (theory, method, and so forth). The introductory paragraph is the first paragraph of the proposal. Avoid beginning a social science proposal with an anecdote or story. Never wait until the second paragraph to tell the reader what you are proposing to study. The conclusion of the proposal summarizes the proposal, reminds the reader of the thesis, and explains again why it’s important. The paragraphs in between the introduction and the conclusion develop and defend the thesis with argument and fact, or in the case of a proposal, what the study expects to be able to show.

Carefully construct your paragraphs. Be sure that each paragraph presents a main idea and that this idea relates to the theme of the proposal. The best way to organize the paragraph is to state a topic sentence and follow this statement with supporting statements. Supporting statements must link back to the topic sentence. Paragraphs must relate to one another in a logical manner. Take time to develop transitional phrases that link the paragraphs in a coherent chain. The length of a paragraph is somewhat arbitrary, but it should contain a topic sentence with several supporting sentences. Advice: work from an outline.

Avoid throat clearing devices such as “I think,” “I believe,” “as a matter of fact,” and “in my opinion.” Do not write things such as “I found an article in the library that stated that global warming is a myth, so I decided that this would make a good proposal.” Simply state the information from the source and then cite it. Avoid references to your personal life, such as “Just the other day I was talking to a friend and he said global warming was real,” or “It’s like my father used to tell us, some summers will be hotter than

others.” Never tell the reader things like “I spent a long time trying to decide what I should propose to study and I finally decided to write it on the subject of global warming” or “I was going to write about urban blight, but I decided global warming would be a better topic.” When you use the word “like” make sure you use it correctly and not when you mean “such as.”

Make sure to punctuate your proposal properly. The English we use in the United States is American English, not British English. This means, among other things, that commas and periods go inside the right quotation mark, except when using a parenthetical citation. A common error I see is the failure to put a space between the last word of a sentence and the left parenthesis of a citation. When you cite a source, you place the parenthetical before the period. If it is quote, the right quotation mark goes after the quoted material, followed by a space, then the parenthetical, then the punctuation. A block set off quote is the exception. This is where a good grammar and punctuation book and style manual come in handy.

Citing Sources

For the project, you must obtain academic or scholarly sources (books, articles) from the library, which may include texts found in databases. Do not use any source to which you do not have access (be prepared to use interlibrary loan services). When you use other people’s ideas, you must accurately cite them. Except where you are quoting, the words you use must be your own. Failure to do this, among other things, constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is using other people’s ideas without proper attribution. Plagiarism is academic misconduct. Plagiarism is a recognized form of theft and fraud. It involves stealing other people’s ideas and passing them off as your own. It is a serious offense and can result in a failed project, failed course grade, and even expulsion from the university. Plagiarism does not depend on whether you purposely plagiarize; plagiarism is a fact even when the offender doesn’t know she is doing it. Plagiarism is always intentional, since it falls into one of the standard categories of intentionality, which include purposeful, knowledgeable, negligent, or reckless behavior. Put another way, ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is no excuse for committing plagiarism. I have no responsibility to judge whether you plagiarized on purpose or with knowledge of the meaning of your actions. I do have the responsibility to hold you accountable for your actions.

Plagiarism is not just copying text without attribution. If you copy sections from a book, article, or any other source, do not put the material in quotes and do not properly cite the source of the material, then you have plagiarized. If you use a quote from one author found in a book or article by another author and do not cite the latter source, then you have plagiarized. If your paraphrases are too close to the original text, then you have plagiarized (they must be substantially different). Please visit www.plagiarism.org to learn about plagiarism. You will receive no credit for your proposal if you plagiarize any part of the proposal. Because I do not accept late proposals, there are no “do-overs.” Please consult the *Chicago Manual of Style* to learn how properly to cite material you use in your proposal. Here is a URL with some of the things you will find in the manual: <http://library.williams.edu/citing/styles/chicago2.php>.

The Importance of Knowing What’s Going On

Some students never bother to look at the directions, or, if they look at them at all, make little effort to understand what the instructions are directing them to do. There’s little more that I can do beyond providing written directions and emphasizing the substance of those directions in class and in e-mails. You have to read what I write and listen to what I say and ask questions when you don’t understand. There is no excuse for not knowing what’s going on. You can reach me any time of day via e-mail. If you have a question, you may ask it. In the end, you cannot tell me that you didn’t understand the instructions. You have to take responsibility for your education.