

A Guide to Writing: Grant Proposals & Research Statements¹

This document will guide you through the process of writing two common academic genres: the grant proposal and the research statement. Both are genres of persuasive storytelling that paint a portrait of the applicant as a suitable candidate. In each, your goal as an applicant is to articulate a long-term plan and to demonstrate how you're the right person to realize this plan.

Grant proposals and research statements are different writing genres with different uses:

- **Grant proposals** (GP) are used for applying to grants and fellowships (also called statement of grant purpose)
- **Research statements** (RS) are used for applying to academic jobs and graduate school (also called research proposals)

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1. Content & Similarities

The GP/RS² share many features. The basic formula of both is to tell a compelling story backed up with clear data and achievable objectives. By “story,” I mean a curated personal history that seeks to engage a particular reader. This story needs to demonstrate your expertise and convictions as a researcher, the stakes of your research, and a plan to conduct that research.

The categories below should be used as guideposts as you consider what to include in your GP/RS. What is the purpose of your research? Who is your audience for this application? What are the expectations of a hiring/granting institution?

Purpose: what are your research goals?

- Show that your work is important to you while convincing others that it is important to them.
 - What is the idea or problem your project addresses?
 - How does this project relate to your larger research goals?

¹ This guide was created for the Writing Place at Northwestern University in 2023.

² I will use “GP” and “RS” as shorthand for Grant Proposal and Research Statement, and “GP/RS” to refer to both.

- The structure of this story should be a trajectory of experiences as an academic that stretches from the near past to the future
 - Show a breadth of skills, aptitudes, research methods
 - Show a depth of knowledge and expertise
 - Demonstrate how a grant or position is a fitting and important next step, moving you towards your future goals
- How will you conduct your research?
 - What tools, methods, and other resources will you use?

Audience: who will read your application?

- Show that you can explain your work to an educated layperson, while including relevant details that will make your expertise apparent an expert in your field
 - In other words, whet the interest of your readers at first glance with a hook, while including a depth of info that will allow you to stand out in the final selection pool.
- You are also assuaging the fears of a committee, showing them that you're a worthwhile investment.
- Consider what information would be most convincing for your audience and deliver that.

Expectations: what are the desired qualifications and outcomes?

- Why are you the appropriate person to undertake this project?
- How will you use funding/resources made available to you for this project?
- How do you align with the values, mission, or goals of an institution, organization, department, etc.?

2. Structure & Differences

This section outlines unique (**RS** or **GP**) and shared (**Both**) elements of the RS/GP genres, structured in four sections: **Set-Up**, **Story**, **Stakes**, and **Length**. The boxes in this chart each contain recommendations and questions to consider as you compose your RS/GP.

| | Both | Research Statement | Grant Proposal |
|---------------|--|--|--|
| Set-Up | <p>In the first paragraph or two, set the stage. Try to be concise here, and plan to expand on your thoughts in the following sections of this document:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce yourself and your research topic. | <p>Your current project or recently completed project is one part of a larger research trajectory.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does this part relate to the whole? | <p>The project for which you are seeking a grant is in-process.</p> <p>What part(s) of this project will you be able to complete with grant funding?</p> |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grab the reader's attention with a hook. Why is your topic compelling? • Describe your objects of study and research methods. How is your project bracketed in time and space? • What is your expected outcome of this project? • What will these methods and tools allow you to achieve this outcome? • Address the "so what?" by articulating the impact and intervention for your field and community. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your long-term research goals? | Be specific about the amount of funding you are requesting and how it will be used. If you are asked to complete a proposed budget as a supplemental document, use that space to itemize your budget. |
| Story | <p>After this set-up, tell a longer story about your research trajectory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the story of your research in specific concise language • Help your reader by using a clear structure, signposting, and transitions • Share preliminary findings and data, setting the stage for future work • Place your research within a discourse, showing that your current and future research is in conversation with other work (e.g. a literature review) • Demonstrate your capacity to use relevant tools and methods for research, data collection, interviews, etc. • Articulate how far along you are in your project currently and the next steps you will undertake | <p>This storytelling will include your past experiences, the present stage, and then move to more a speculative mode. This speculation should take the form of long-term aspirations and goals, presenting future projects, collaborations, achievements, and a vision of the appointing institution that includes the applicant.</p> <p>For academic job applications, this future-looking agenda should demonstrate familiarity with the facilities, faculty, students, programs, and funding of the hiring institution.</p> <p>Demonstrate your career plan as a research professional, showing your capacity be creative and practical in your long-term thinking, with connections to specific aspects of the hiring institution.</p> | This storytelling will include your past experiences up to the present stage of your project. |

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|---------------|--|---|--|
| Stakes | <p>And finally, articulate the stakes of your project and the stakes of you receiving this grant/position:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the intended outcome of this project? Seek to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic/relevant, and timely/time-bound (also called SMART objectives, a mnemonic acronym of these terms) • Why is your research important? • What will it be able to demonstrate? • Why is this grant/position the fitting next step for you as a scholar? | <p>Collaborative/independent work – show that you can work with a team, lead projects, and differentiate yourself from your advisor’s research</p> <p>Joining the faculty of a program is like joining a team. Expect to be scrutinized for how well you fit with their ethos, culture, and values. This is a long-term commitment. When the fit is good, everyone will want it to work out. It is your job to articulate how and why you are a good fit.</p> <p>All hiring committees are seeking candidates who demonstrate their capacity to be a self-starter and a team player. How can your presence as a peer researcher foster or buttress the intellectual community of a program?</p> | <p>Consider the alignment of this work with the mission of the grant and granting institution. How does your work resonate with the goals of the grant and/or granting institution?</p> <p>Funders are keen to know the realistic benefit of your work. How will you verify that you have completed the intended work?</p> |
| Length | <p>When possible, aim for no more than two pages. Always defer to the listed requirement – and err on the side of concision.</p> | <p>Between 2-5 pages.</p> | <p>Between 1-2 pages.</p> |

3. Additional Considerations

Active language: Use active phrasing and “I” statements – and avoid hedging. Say how you will contribute to a department. Don’t say that you might be able to offer something to a department. Explain the specific ways in which the intervention of your research will change human understanding of a topic and why this matters to humanity. Don’t say that you think that your topic might be interesting to consider.

Scale: Keep the scale of the granting or hiring institution in mind. While an R1 research institution will likely focus on your capacity to lead research and secure grant funding, a

liberal arts college will likely deemphasize research to be more balanced with teaching. Similarly, an application to a regional grant competition may seek alignment with a regional identity, whereas national or international competitions may seek your capacity to be a global leader in your field.

Mission: A mission-driven institution, granting or hiring, will want to know how your work and values align with their own. Similarly, mission- and identity-driven grants will emphasize how you and your approach align with their objectives. Ultimately, you are applying to be a representative of their institution and want to know that you will be a worthy ambassador.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion: Some applications will ask for you to address diversity, equity, and inclusion as components of your research practice. These topics might be reserved for a dedicated diversity statement but could emerge elsewhere in application prompts. Spend time learning about the granting or hiring institution and how they discuss these issues.

Deviations: Some applications will offer recommendations or make requirements of your GP/RS that differ from what is written in this document. Always prioritize the demands of a particular application. When in doubt, reach out to the designated application contact.

4. Tips from Writing Place Fellows

While composing this guide, I surveyed Writing Place Fellows about their experiences working with students as they write research statements and grant proposals. What follows are kernels of wisdom excerpted from submissions from Writing Place Fellows.

Common issues and how to fix them:

- **Make your writing easy to read.** Realistically, committee members will skim your application. Help them get the most out of your writing by making it skimmable: concise, simple, and well-structured.
- **Signpost the structural sections** of your GP/RS early on and then follow that structure.
- **Demonstrate the importance or urgency** of your work.
- **Avoid repetition.**
- **Deliver a picture of your research** within the first couple of paragraphs.
- **Use thesis statements as structural tools.** As the first sentence of a paragraph, your thesis should articulate what you want a reader to understand in that paragraph.
- **Avoid jargon.** Consider your audience, likely committee members from multiple disciplines and backgrounds. Aim to make your writing legible to all of them.
- **Include a clear and itemized budget** (when relevant).

Trends observed in the correlation with disciplinary background:

- Humanities proposals often...
 - lack a big splashy “this is why this research change the field” statement
 - avoid addressing the “so what?” question
 - overuse jargon
- STEM proposals often...
 - lack a hook
 - do not describe research in concrete, action-oriented narration
 - overuse jargon

Tips and Tricks:

- Sell your project as the most reductive but correct version of itself.
- Be as explicit and as plain as possible.
- Inject enthusiasm for your topic into the application.
- Be bold in declaring the scale of your intervention.
- Have someone not in your discipline give you feedback. This is a great way to know what might need to be clarified to be understandable across disciplines.
- Start with the middle of the document. Elements like the introduction and conclusion, or an attention-grabbing hook or story, become much easier to write once you’ve done the description and storytelling that will make up the rest of the document.

5. Additional Resources

On the Research Statement:

Austin, Jim. “Writing a Research Plan.” *Science*. July 26, 2002. Accessed May 30, 2023.
<https://www.science.org/content/article/writing-research-plan>

“Graduate School Applications: Writing a Research Statement.” Purdue Online Writing Lab. Pursue University. Accessed May 30, 2023.
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/graduate_school_applications/writing_a_research_statement.html

Kivunja, Charles. “How to Write an Effective Research Proposal for Higher Degree Research in Higher Education: Lessons from Practice.” *International Journal of Higher Education*, v5 no. 2 (2016): 163-172. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1099810>

“Research Statement.” Graduate School. Cornell University. Accessed May 30, 2023.
<https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/prepare-for-your-career/take-action/research-statement/>

“Research statements for faculty job applications,” Career Services. University of Pennsylvania. Accessed May 30, 2023.
<https://careerservices.upenn.edu/application-materials-for-the-faculty-job-search/research-statements-for-faculty-job-applications/>

On the Grant Proposal:

“6 Professional Grant-Writing Tips for Graduate Students.” Beyond the Professoriate. Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://beyondprof.com/grant-writing-tips-for-grad-students/>

Monavarian, Morteza. “Basics of Scientific and Technical Writing: Grant Proposals.” *MRS Bulletin* 46, no. 5 (May 1, 2021): 455–57. <https://doi.org/10.1557/s43577-021-00105-4>.

“Proposal Writing: Research Grant Proposal Basics.” Office of Undergraduate Research. Northwestern University. Accessed May 30, 2023.
<https://undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/advising/proposal-writing/>

Vieira, Kate. “Planning and Writing a Grant Proposal: The Basics.” The Writing Center. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Accessed May 30, 2023.
<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/grants-2/>

Zakarin, B., “What goes in a proposal?” NuWrite. Northwestern University. 2009. Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://nuwrite.northwestern.edu/communities/writing-in-the-humanities/solving-common-problems/what-goes-in-a-proposal.html>

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