PROPOSAL WRITING

In a technical writing course, the proposal assignment is an opportunity for you to present an idea to a specific, named audience about an idea you have to improve a certain aspect of that company, organization, center, or other business. Whatever topic you choose, you must be able to conduct thorough scholarly research that you will integrate into your final report.

To begin planning a proposal, remember the basic definition: a proposal is an offer or bid to complete a project for someone. Proposals may contain other elements—technical background, recommendations, results of surveys, information about feasibility, and so on. But what makes a proposal a proposal is that it asks the audience to approve, fund, or grant permission to do the proposed project.

A proposal should contain information that would enable the audience of that proposal to decide whether to approve the project, to approve or hire you to do the work, or both. To write a successful proposal, put yourself in the place of your audience—the recipient of the proposal—and think about what sorts of information that person would need in order to feel confident having you complete the project.

As a form of persuasive writing, a proposal attempts to convince the recipient to act in accordance with the writer's intent and at the same time, it outlines the writer's goals and methods. There are multiple types of business proposals and one type of academic proposal—the research proposal. As different as these may be, they all follow a certain set of guidelines.

What is a Proposal?

In the book "Knowledge into Action," Wallace and Van Fleet remind us that "a proposal is a form of persuasive writing; every element of every proposal should be structured and tailored to maximize its persuasive impact."

In composition, especially in business and technical writing, a proposal is a document that offers a solution to a problem or a course of action in response to a need.

On the other hand, in academic writing, a research proposal is a report that identifies the subject of a forthcoming research project, outlines a research strategy, and provides a bibliography or tentative list of references. This form can also be called a topic proposal.

Research Proposals

When enrolled in an academic or writer-in-residence program, a student may be asked to write another unique form of proposal, the research proposal.

This form requires the writer to describe the intended research in full detail, including the problem the research is addressing, why it's important, what research has been conducted before in this field, and how the student's project will accomplish something unique.

Elizabeth A. Wentz describes this process in "How to Design, Write, and Present a Successful Dissertation Proposal," as "your plan for creating new knowledge." Wentz also emphasizes the importance of writing these in order to provide structure and provide focus on the objectives and methodology of the project itself.

In "Designing and Managing Your Research Project," David Thomas and Ian D. Hodges also note that the research proposal is a time to shop the idea and project out to peers in the same field, who can provide valuable insight into the project's objectives.

Thomas and Hodges note that "colleagues, supervisors, community representatives, potential research participants, and others can look at the details of what you are planning to do and provide feedback," which can help solidify methodology and importance as well as catch any mistakes the writer may have made in their research.

Informal and Formal Proposal

This may seem like a lot of work for what's considered an informal proposal. What must be involved in a formal proposal? Formal proposals require a title page (or cover memo), an executive summary, a table of contents, introduction, reference list, appendices, a glossary, and more.

Informal proposals may just have a few sections, as we've seen above, and don't necessarily need to bring a multitude of facts and evidence to the table (although they can). In a way, informal proposals are more related to memos.

There's also a difference in tone. Any time you're submitting a request to someone in a managerial position or an outside party, you want to write in a professional tone. Informal proposals allow for a little more leniency.