

## PROPOSAL TIPS & HINTS

This document is divided into four sections: I-Proposal Overview, II-Goals vs Objectives vs Tasks, III-Clarifying the Project Plan, IV- examples of timelines and V-Writing Effectively.

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### SECTION I: PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

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Important note about writing a proposal: Proposals are informative and persuasive writing because they attempt to educate the reader and to convince that reader to do something (give you money). The goal of the writer is not only to persuade the reader to do what is being requested, but also to make the reader believe that the solution (how you are going to answer your question) is practical and appropriate. In persuasive proposal writing, the case is built by the demonstration of logic and reason in the approach taken in the solution. The effectiveness of your proposal will depend on your ability to explain the nature, context and scope of your project.

As you are writing, ask yourself:

- 1) Is this information needed to understand how I will answer my question? If no – take it out!
- 2) Will this plan ACTUALLY answer my question? If no – rethink your plan!

Most proposals will have all of the following sections; although, a rare few may lack section 2. It is recommended but not required that you follow the listed order, sometimes a proposal flows better with sections in a different order (such as the background section first) – this is fine, just be sure that there is a logical flow to your writing. It is also recommended (read as required) that proposals use headers for each section.

REMEMBER: Reviewers have to read a lot of proposals – not just yours. They expect information in particular areas and to follow a set format – make sure information is where they expect to see it.

*Make it easy for reviewers to find and understand the information they need.*

Example: Reviewers will expect to see Discovery Day presentation in the “Anticipated results/Final Products and Dissemination” section. Be sure to put it there. If you put it in Timeline or Project Design – it may get missed and you will lose points.

Your proposal should consist of the following:

1. Research question or statement – Very clearly state what you will be studying in 1-2 sentences. The information on why, how, importance, etc will be in later sections. Be sure that this is understandable to someone who doesn't know much about your field of study. If needed, define terms. To test your explanation – give this to a friend not in your major. If he/she doesn't understand, try again!
2. Project Goal and Objectives - Goals and Objectives are often confused with each other. They both describe things that a person may want to achieve or attain but in relative terms may mean different things. Both are desired outcomes of work done by a person but what sets them apart is the time frame, attributes they're set for and the effect they inflict. Both the terms imply the target that one's efforts is desired to accomplish. (*Review Section II of this document for additional assistance with this section.*)  
Example:
  - Goal: Our after-school program will help children read better.
  - Objective: Our after-school remedial education program will assist 50 children in improving their reading scores by one grade level as demonstrated on standardized reading tests administered after participating in the program for six months.

NOTE: #1 and 2 are very important. They don't need to be long – one short paragraph should be enough – but they are critical. The rest of your proposal supports these statements and explains why you want to explore this question, how you will do it, and what it means to you.

3. Project impact, significance, or purpose - Keep the statement of significance brief (1-2 sentences) - be succinct! Details should be in section 4. Some things to consider for this section: what can your research be used for in the big picture; how is your research innovative, unique or different; how will your project increase knowledge in the field (is there a void that your project will fill); what is the bigger question that your question might help answer or how can it be used by others; is there a direct impact to the community, environment, or USC. In thinking about the significance, try to take the position of an educated newspaper reader. If she or he were to see an article about your project in the paper, how would you explain the importance or purpose of your project?
4. Background/Knowledge in the field/Literature review - Be succinct. This section should provide the information that the reviewer needs to know to understand what and why you are doing this project. Clearly support your research statement with documentation and references, and include a review of the literature that supports the need for your research or creative endeavor. Include a discussion of the present understanding and/or state of knowledge concerning the question/problem or a discussion of the context of the scholarly or creative work. This section presents and summarizes the problem you intend to solve and your solution to that problem. \*\*For most proposals, this section will have references – please see #8 below.

If your project is a portion of a larger project, the background should describe the research in general, on a large scale, but the Project Description should be all about what you are going to do. This section should also include how your project benefits or impacts the project as a whole and what knowledge is gained from your piece of the project.

5. Project Design or Methods - Design and describe a work plan consistent with your academic discipline. This may include scientific research in the physical or biological sciences, use of population samples, experimental and control groups, or other methods of data gathering and statistical analysis. The work plan may include archival research, translating, ethnographic fieldwork, solitary thinking, or other forms of analysis and synthesis of ideas and concepts in the arts and humanities. This section of the proposal should explain the details of the proposed plan. How will you go about exploring your research question? What will be your methods? If you are not the only person working on the project, who else will be involved? You can also include a brief overview of what you have already done on the project and/or what you will be doing after the project period is over, if your project is of longer duration.

Be specific on what you will be doing. The reasoning behind the Magellan program is to make sure that you have a meaningful experience. If the reviewer can't tell what part of a project you will be doing, he/she can't evaluate your experience.

*Review Section III of this document for additional assistance with this section.*

6. Project timeline – Provide an overview of the timing for specific steps of your project. This does not need to be a day to day list but depending on the length of your project, it may give an overview biweekly or monthly. Be sure to include time to review/synthesize your data or to reflect on the experience and time to write the final report. This section can include a pre and post grant period, if you have already started your project and/or plan to continue working on this after the grant period ends. *Review Section IV of this document for additional assistance with this section.*
7. Anticipated results/Final Products and Dissemination - Describe possible forms of the final product, e.g., publishable manuscript, conference paper, invention, software, exhibit, performance, etc. Be specific about how you intend to share your results or project with others including names of possible conferences or journals. This section may also include an interpretation and explanation of results as related to your question; a discussion on or suggestions for further work that may help address the problem you are trying to solve; an analysis of the expected impact of the scholarly or creative work on the audience; or a discussion on any problems that could hinder your creative endeavor. Be sure to include your Discovery Day presentation.

8. Personal statement – This section is read carefully by the reviewers and does impact their decision. Things to include: why you want to do this project, what got you interested in it, your career goals, and how this award would further those goals. While it is important, please remember that it shouldn't overpower the rest of the proposal. One-quarter to one-half of the page should be sufficient.
9. **\*\*Bibliography/References/Works cited** – Use the standard convention of your discipline including the author, title of article, journal title, volume, pages, and date. References are not included in (are in addition to) the 2 page max.

**Budget Form-** Your list of budget items and the calculations you have done to arrive at a dollar figure for each item must be summarized on the Budget form. This is a separate page from your proposal – use the form from the webpage. You should keep these calculations to remind yourself how the numbers were developed.

**Budget Narrative -** A narrative portion of the budget is used to explain the line items in the budget. Projects that include travel should be specific about benefit/reasons and locations and should include details on lodging, food, registration costs, transportation, etc. See the sample proposals for examples of budgets.

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## SECTION II: GOALS vs OBJECTIVES vs TASKS

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The words Goal and Objective are often confused with each other. They both describe things that a person may want to achieve or attain but in relative terms may mean different things. Both are desired outcomes of work done by a person but what sets them apart is the time frame, attributes they're set for and the effect they inflict. Both the terms imply the target that one's efforts is desired to accomplish.

Goals are generically for an achievement or accomplishment for which certain efforts are put. Goals are the vision of the project

Objectives are specifically for targets within the general goal. Objectives are time related to achieve a certain task. Objectives are measurable activities to achieve goals; the end points envisioned for the proposed project. These objectives might be, for example, development of a specified measurement capability that meets a prescribed accuracy, data rate, instrument packaging characteristics (size, weight, etc.), and other possible requirements. Analogies would be the goal line in a football game, and the mountain peak a climber plans to ascend. Objectives are achieved, or they are not. They are not performed or carried out. They do not yield results or data.

Tasks in a work (or research) plan are steps taken to achieve the stated objectives for the project. They are, for example, a sequence of experiments, analyses, field trials, etc., that together lead to attainment of the project "objectives." In the football game analogy, the tasks are a sequence of plays that culminate in getting the ball over the goal ("objective") line. To the mountain climber, the tasks are a series of actions (hiking up trails, crossing streams, climbing rocks, etc.) that bring the climber to the targeted mountain peak.

	Goal	Objective
Meaning	The purpose toward which an endeavor is directed	Something that one's efforts or actions are intended to attain or accomplish; purpose; target
Time frame	Long term	Short term
Measure	Cannot be measured	Can be measured
Example	I want to achieve success in the field of genetic research and do what no one has ever done	I want to give you the thesis on genetic research within this month
Type	Intangible	Tangible
Action	Generic action	Specific action
Plan	Broad plan	Narrow plan

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## SECTION III: CLARIFYING THE PROJECT PLAN

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The review committee has the difficult task of deciding which projects to fund. Their decisions are based solely on the information provided in your application so it is very important that all the information they need be clearly available and obvious.

The KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL:

1. Think carefully and logically through your project before writing AND
2. Articulate this plan in writing

This leads directly to two problems many students run into when writing a project description, particularly when they have come up with the project themselves. The first is that it's all there in your head but it can be difficult to put it down on paper (both clearly and logically). The second is that you may not know all the steps that you need to accomplish in order to answer your question. Both can be overcome by creating an outline of your project plan.

Your outline should have your question written at the top so that you can continuously refer back to it and to make sure that each step of your project will eventually lead you to the answer and doesn't veer off to something that may not be relevant. List each step that you will need to do to answer your question, even if it's as simple as "go to the library." Include why that step is important or what information you might obtain. Think critically about how you will accomplish each step – ask yourself questions about the step: which library, is it a special library, will I need to get permission to use these resources, who do I talk to and can I start getting that permission now? Share this document with your mentor, so that together you can identify steps that may have been missed.

### ***Questions to ask yourself or address in your plan:***

Do you really have a plan to answer your question?

- Take a step back and look critically at your question and the plan you are developing. Is what you are planning to do answer (or at least begin to answer) your question? If not, you may need to rethink your plan OR your question.

Do you have the skills or expertise needed for each step?

- If you already have experience in particularly difficult or unusual steps (like animal studies, special library resources, language skills, etc) be sure to emphasize this
- Is there something you will need to learn? Who will teach you or who will do it for you?
- Example: Making a documentary and don't know how to edit – who are you going to have do this or who will teach you?

Are you doing a project that involves more than one discipline?

- Would you and the project benefit from access to an expert or at least a contact in each discipline? Who will this be? Names are important, they show you are committed to a successful project.
- Example: Filming a documentary on the environment and your mentor is from Marine Science: consider involving someone with experience in Media Arts - a second mentor or someone with filming experience. Get them on-board before finishing your proposal because he/she may think of something that would be important to include and having a name in your proposal shows that you recognize the need for additional assistance.

Do you have the necessary contacts to complete your project?

- Who will you need to talk with, interview, etc?
- If you have names, list them. Start making contacts now – having this in your proposal shows your commitment to the project and emphasizes that you have thought through the process and needs of the project.

Does your project include people (interviewing, surveys, focus groups, etc.), information on or about people (medical records, governmental records, etc.), or vertebrate animals?

NOTE you must go through the appropriate approval process, see the Magellan Scholar guidebook for details. Be sure to include a sentence in your proposal (in the project design or timeline) indicating that you will be seeking or already have IRB or IACUC approval (see guidebook).

- Why are you using a certain population of people or animals?
- How will you get access to this population?
- Why are you using that number of subjects? (particularly when doing a retrospective study, there are statistical methods that indicate how many subjects you should evaluate, be sure to include this information)
- What type of information are you trying to get? You may wish to include examples of questions, a description of the data from the records, etc.
- Who will help you with: survey/question design, interviewing techniques, animal care or surgery, etc.

Are you doing a comparative study (will you be comparing one group to another, one place to another, etc)?

- How will you evaluate both/all groups, places, items, etc.
- What are you evaluating, comparing, or contrasting?
- Why are you comparing these particular two or more groups, places, etc. (“because it is convenient” or “because I want to go there” are generally not convincing reasons)
- Do you or your mentor have the expertise in this type of project or in the aspects that you will be comparing/contrasting?

Research while abroad? See the “Research abroad?” document on the Magellan Scholar webpage

Include as much of this as possible (and as appropriate) within the proposal to show that you have carefully and conscientiously thought through your project plan. This will demonstrate to the review committee that you have a reasonable chance of answering your research question or completing your project AND a plan in order to do it.

## SECTION IV: EXAMPLES OF TIMELINES

It is MUCH easier to read a bulleted list or table than a paragraph of text. It is STRONGLY recommended that you use one of the following timeline formats for your proposal. The timeline should be a very brief summary of your project design section. If you find yourself writing full sentences in the timeline, you probably need to move this info to the design section.

**Project Timeline:**

April – June                    continue review of current literature, intense background research  
 July                                excavation of site at Habitation Crève Coeur  
 August – November        analysis of statistical data from the site  
 October – March            writing and revising of report  
 January - May                prep for conferences and publications

**Project Timeline:**

Task description	Project Months													
	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May
continue review of current literature, intense background research	X	X	X											
excavation of site at Habitation Crève Coeur				X										
analysis of statistical data from the site					X	X	X	X						
writing and revising of report							X	X	X	X	X	X		
Prep for conferences and publications										X	X	X	X	X

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## SECTION IV: WRITING EFFECTIVELY

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**Getting Started** - Begin by brainstorming topics, collecting information, taking a lot of notes, and asking a lot of questions. Keep your notes and sources organized as you go. This data-gathering process makes the actual writing much easier. When developing your topic, look for patterns and relationships. See what conclusions you can draw. Try discussing your ideas with classmates or your teacher. A new perspective can help shake up your thinking, and keep your momentum going.

**Organize Your Writing** - Develop an outline to help you stay on track as you write, identifying your main points and what you want to conclude. Keep in mind basic essay and paper structure:

The introduction should give your reader an idea of the essay's intent, including a basic statement of what the essay will discuss.

The body presents the evidence that supports your idea. Use concrete examples whenever and avoid generalities.

The conclusion should summarize and make sense of the evidence you presented in the body.

**The Rough Draft** - You may find as you write that you end up with a different idea than the one you began with. If your first topic or conclusion doesn't hold water, be open to changing it. If necessary, re-write your outline to get yourself back on track.

### **TIPS:**

Leave enough time to show your draft to others -- use the writing center, if possible. A fresh perspective can help you polish your paper, and catch inconsistencies and mistakes.

Be sure that your project plan answers the question you want answered.

Describe a problem that is about the same size as your solution. Don't draw a dark picture of nuclear war, teen suicide and lethal air pollution if you are planning a modest neighborhood arts program for children.

Don't describe the absence of your project as the problem. "We don't have enough beds in our battered women's shelter" is not the problem. The problem is increased levels of domestic violence. More shelter beds are a solution.

Become familiar with the vocabulary of your subject. For example, when writing about fiction, drama, and poetry, critical writers use words such as: syntax, tone, attitude, voice, speaker, and thesis.

Facts must lead logically and inevitably to the conclusion and/or the solution presented.

Remember that proposal reviewers may come from a variety of disciplines and may not be familiar with your field of study. Reviewers may also have to compare proposals across disciplines and methodological lines. Keep this in mind when writing. Proposals should be directed toward a general audience and avoid excessive use of jargon!

### **Refine and Proofread**

When you're done, take a break so you can come back to your writing with fresh eyes. Ask yourself:

- Is the writing clear?
- Do the ideas make sense?
- Are all of the requirements fulfilled? YES following the guidelines is important.
- Did I avoid repetition (as much as possible)?
- Have I used proper grammar and spelling? YES spelling counts. Too many spelling/grammatical errors make it look like you don't really care about the award.
- How does it sound when read out loud?

**DOUBLE CHECK:** re-read your research question or statement and your methodology section. Will the steps or tasks that you are going to do answer your question? Be critical!!