Style and Form in Writing the Proposal

The writing style of the thesis or grant proposal may be the most important factor in conveying your ideas to graduate advisors or funding agencies. Even experienced researchers must critically evaluate their writing to ensure that the best laid plans are presented in a clear, straightforward fashion. The sections that follow represent primary concerns for proposal writers.

Praising, Exhorting, and Polemicizing: Don’t

For a variety of motives arising principally from the reward system governing other writing tasks, many students use their proposal as an opportunity to praise the importance of their discipline or professional field. Some use exhortative language to urge such particular points of view as the supposed importance of empirical research in designing professional practice. Others use the proposed research as the basis for espousing the virtues of particular social or political positions.

There is no need or proper place in a research proposal for such subjective side excursions. The purpose of a proposal is to set forth for a reader the exact nature of the matter to be investigated and a detailed account of the methods to be employed. Anything else distracts and serves as an impediment to clear communication.
As a general rule, it is best to stick to the topic and resist the temptation to sound "properly positive and enthusiastic." Do not attempt to manipulate the opinions of the reader in areas other than those essential to the investigation. The simple test is to ask yourself this question: "Does the reader really need to consider this point in order to judge the adequacy of my thinking?" If the answer is "no," then the decision to delete is clear, if not always easy, for the author.

Quotations: How to Pick Fruit From the Knowledge Tree

Too often, inexperienced writers are inclined to equate the number of citations in a paper with the weight of the argument being presented. This is an error. The proper purposes served by the system of scholarly citation are limited to a few specific tasks. When a document has all the citations needed to meet the demands of those few tasks, it has enough. When it contains more citations, it has too many and is defective in that regard. Reviewers deem the use of nonselective references as an indication of poor scholarship, an inability to discriminate the central from the peripheral and the important from the trivial in research.

The proper uses of direct quotation are even more stringently limited than the use of general citations for paraphrased material. The practice of liberally sprinkling the proposal with quoted material—particularly lengthy quotations—is more than pointless; it is self-defeating. The first truth is that no one will read them. The second truth is that most readers find the presence of unessential quotations irritating and a distraction from the line of thought being presented for examination. When quotations are introduced at points for which even general citations are unnecessary, the writer has displayed clear disregard for the reader.

There are two legitimate motives for direct use of another scholar’s words: (a) the weight of authoritative judgment, in which “who said it” is of critical importance, and (b) the nature of expression, in which “how it was said” is the important element. In the former instance, when unexpected, unusual, or genuinely pivotal points are to be presented, it is reasonable to show the reader that another competent craftsperson has reached exactly the desired conclusion, or observed exactly the event at issue. In the latter instance, when another writer has hit on the precise, perfect phrasing to express a difficult point, it is proper to employ that talent on behalf of your own argument. The rule to follow is simple. If the substance of a quotation can be conveyed by a careful paraphrase, followed, of course, by the appropriate credit of a citation, with
all the clarity and persuasive impact of the original, *then don’t quote*. In almost all instances, it is best for the proposer to speak directly to the reader. The intervention of words from a third party should be reserved, like heavy cannon in battle, for those rare instances when the targets are specific and truly critical to the outcome of the contest.

A beneficial technique for students who recognize their own propensity toward excessive quotation is to use the critical summary form of note-taking. In this format, after carefully recording a full citation, each article is critically examined and then paraphrased on reference cards in the student’s own words. During note-taking, a decision is made on whether the aesthetics of phrasing or the author’s importance in terms of authority justify the use of direct quotation. Except in rare instances, quoted material is not transferred to the note cards. Thus, direct quoting becomes less tempting during the subsequent writing phase when the student has recourse to notes. This technique also prevents unintentional plagiarism.

If using a computer for note storage and retrieval, similar precautions should be taken. When retrieving information from the computer, you should make certain that each item can clearly be identified either as your paraphrase or as a direct quotation. It is possible to lose this information as you switch back and forth between notes, computer, and proposal document. One way to ensure identification, which can be used both on the computer and on handwritten note cards, is to use quotation marks for all direct quotations, listing the page number on which the text was found in parentheses immediately after the closing quotation mark. As you work between notes, computer, and writing of the proposal, transfer all of this to your draft.

**Clarity and Precision:**

**Speaking in System Language**

The language we use in the commerce of our everyday lives is common language. We acquired our common language vocabulary and grammar by a process that was gradual, unsystematic, and mostly unconscious. Our everyday language serves us well, at least as long as the inevitable differences in word meanings assigned by different people do not produce serious failures of communication.

The language of science, specifically the language of research, is uncommon. The ongoing conversation of science, for which a research proposal is a plan of entry, is carried on in system languages in which each word must mean one thing to both writer and reader. Where small differences may
matter a great deal, as in research, there must be a minimum of slippage between the referent object, the word used to stand for the object, and the images called forth by the word in the minds of listeners and readers.

The rules of invariant word usage give system languages a high order of precision. Minute or subtle distinctions can be made with relative ease. Evaluative language can be eliminated or clearly segregated from empirical descriptive language. More important, however, the language of research affords the reliability of communication that permits scientists to create a powerful interdependent research enterprise rather than limited independent investigations. When a chemist uses the system language of chemistry to communicate with another chemist, the word “element” has one and only one reference, is assigned to that referent on all occasions, is used for no other purpose within the language system, and consistently evokes the same image in the minds of everyone, everywhere, who has mastered the language.

Various domains of knowledge and various research enterprises are characterized by differing levels of language development. Some disciplines, such as anatomy or entomology, have highly developed and completely regularized language systems, whereas others, particularly the behavioral sciences, employ languages still in the process of development. Irrespective of the area of investigation, however, the language of any research proposal must, as a minimum requirement, be systematic within itself. The words used in the proposal must have referents that are clear to the reader, and each must consistently designate only one referent. When the investigation lies within a subject area with an existing language system, then, of course, the author is bound to the conventions of that system.

Obviously, the researcher should be familiar with the system languages that function in the area of proposed investigation. Reading and writing both the specific language of the subject matter area and the more general languages common to the proposed methodology (statistics, experimental design, psychometrics, qualitative traditions, etc.) are clear requirements for any study. Less obvious, however, is the fact that research proposals, by their exploratory nature, often demand the extension of existing language into new territory. Operations, observations, concepts, and relationships not previously specified within a language system must be assigned invariant word symbols by the investigator. More important, the reader must carefully be drawn into the agreement to make these same assignments.

Advisors and reviewers misunderstand student proposals far more often than they disagree with what is proposed. The failure of communication often occurs precisely at the point where the proposal moves beyond the use of the existing system language. This problem involves a failure of careful invention rather than a failure of mastering technique or subject matter. The
following rules may be of some help as you attempt to translate a personal vision of the unknown into the form of a carefully specified public record.

1. Never invent new words when the existing system language is adequate. If the referent in established use has a label that excludes what you do not want and includes all that you do want, then it needs no new name.

2. If there is reasonable doubt as to whether the word is in the system or the common domain, provide early in the proposal the definition that will be used throughout. Readers may give unnecessary time and attention to deciphering the intended meaning unless you put their minds at ease.

3. Words that have been assigned system meaning should not be used in their common language form. For example, the word significant should not be used to denote its common language meaning of “important” in a proposal involving the use of statistical analysis. The system language of inferential statistics assigns invariant meaning to the word significant; any other use invites confusion.

4. Where a system language word is to be used in either a more limited or a more expanded sense, make this clear when the word first is introduced in the proposal. If local style requirements permit, this is one of the legitimate uses of footnotes to the text.

5. Where it is necessary to assign invariant meaning to a common language word to communicate about something not already accommodated within the system language, the author should choose with great care. Words with strong evaluative overtones, words with a long history of ambiguity, and words that have well entrenched usage in common language make poor candidates for elevation to system status. No matter how carefully the author operationalizes the new definition, it is always difficult for the reader to make new responses to familiar stimuli.

6. A specific definition is the best way to assign invariant meaning to a word. When only one or two words require such treatment, this can be accomplished in the text. A larger number of words may be set aside in a section of the proposal devoted to definitions. The best definition is one that describes the operations that are required to produce or observe the event or object. For example, note how the following words are assigned special meaning for the purpose of a proposal.

   a. A common language word is assigned invariant use:

      Exclusion will be deemed to have occurred when both of the following happen: The student no longer is eligible to participate in extracurricular activities under any provision of school district policy, and the student’s name is stricken from the list of students eligible for extracurricular activities.
b. A system language word is employed with limitations not ordinarily assigned:

*The curriculum* will be limited to those after-school activities that the current *School District Manual* lists as approved for secondary school students.

c. A system language word is operationalized by describing a criterion:

*Increased motivation* will be presumed when, subsequent to any treatment condition, the time spent in any extracurricular activity rises more than 10% of the previous weekly total.

d. A common language word is operationalized by describing a criterion:

*Dropouts* are defined as all participants who fail to attend three consecutive activity meetings.

e. A system language word is operationalized by describing procedure:

*Reinforcement* will refer to the procedure of listing all club members in the school newspaper, providing special hall passes for members, and listing club memberships on school transcripts.

f. A common language word is operationalized by describing procedure:

*Instruction* will consist of five 10-minute sessions in which the club sponsor may employ any method of teaching so long as it includes no fewer than five attempts for each student to complete the activity.

### Editing: The Care and Nurture of a Document

A proposal is a working document. As a primary vehicle for communication with advisors and funding agencies, as a plan for action, and as a contract, the proposal performs functions that are immediate and practical, not symbolic or aesthetic. Precisely because of these important functions, the proposal, in all its public appearances at least, should be free from distracting mechanical errors and the irritating confusion of shoddy format.

At the privacy of your own desk, it is entirely appropriate to cross out passages, add new ones, and rearrange the order of paragraphs. The series of rough drafts is part of the process through which a proposal evolves toward final form. When, however, the proposal is given to an advisor, sent to a funding agency, or presented to a seminar, the occasion is public and calls for an edited, formally prepared document. The document should be easy to read—for which a good printer and high-quality duplication are the first essentials.

Every sentence must be examined and reexamined in terms of its clarity, grammar, and relationship with surrounding sentences. A mark of the neophyte writer is the tendency to resist changing a sentence once it is written, and even more so when it has been typed. A sentence may be grammatically correct and still be awkward within its surroundings. The tough test is the
best test here. If, in reading any sentence, a colleague or reviewer hesitates, stumbles, or has to reread the sentence to understand the content, then the sentence must be examined for possible revision—no matter how elegant, obvious, and precise it seems to the author.

Aside from meticulous care in writing and rewriting, the most helpful procedure in editorial revision is to obtain the assistance of colleagues to read the proposal for mechanical errors, lack of clarity, and inadequacies of content. An author can read the same error over and over without recognizing it, and the probability of discovery declines with each review. The same error may leap at once to the attention of even the most casual reader who is reading the proposal for the first time. One useful trick that may improve the author’s ability to spot mechanical errors is to read the sentences in reverse order, thus destroying the strong perceptual set created by the normal sequence of ideas.

Although format will be a matter of individual taste or departmental or agency regulation, several general rules may be used in designing the layout of the document:

1. Use double spacing, substantial margins, and ample separation for major subsections. Crowding makes reading both difficult and unpleasant. Always number pages so that readers can quickly refer to a specific location.

2. Make ample use of graphic illustration. A chart or simple diagram can improve clarity and ease the difficult task of critical appraisal and advisement.

3. Make careful and systematic use of headings. The system of headings recommended in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001) is particularly useful for the design of proposals.

4. Place in an appendix everything that is not immediately essential to the main tasks of the proposal. Allowing readers to decide whether they will read supplementary material is both a courtesy and good strategy.

In Search of a Title: First Impressions and the Route to Retrieval

The title of the proposal is the first contact a reader has with the proposed research. First impressions, be they about people, music, food, or potential research topics, generate powerful anticipations about what is to follow. Shocking the reader by implying one content domain in the title and following with a different one in the body of the proposal is certain to evoke a strong negative response. The first rule in composing a title is to achieve
reasonable parity between the images evoked by the title and the opening pages of the proposal.

For the graduate student, the proposal title may well become the thesis or dissertation title and therefore calls for careful consideration of all the functions it must serve and the standards by which it will be judged. The first function of the title is to identify content for the purpose of retrieval. Theses and dissertations are much more retrievable than was once the case. In fact, they have become a part of the public domain of the scholar. The increasing use of the Internet has made the circulation of unpublished documents many times faster and far broader in geographic scope. Titling research has become, thereby, an important factor in sharing research.

In less sophisticated times, titles could be carelessly constructed and the documents would still be discovered by diligent researchers who could take the time to investigate items that appeared only remotely related to their interests. Today, scholars stagger under the burden of sifting through enormous and constantly increasing quantities of material apparently pertinent to their domain. There is no recourse other than to be increasingly selective in choosing which documents to actually retrieve and inspect. Hence, each title the researcher scans must present at least a moderate probability of being pertinent on the basis of the title alone, or it will not be included on the reading list for review. In short, the degree to which the title communicates a concise, thorough, and unambiguous picture of the content is the first factor governing whether a given report will enter the ongoing dialogue of the academic community.

Word selection should be governed more by universality of usage than by personal aesthetic judgment or peculiarly local considerations. Some computer retrieval systems classify titles according to a limited set of keywords. As we discussed in Chapter 4, researchers construct search plans that will identify all studies categorized by keywords known to be associated with their area of interest. Thus, both readers and writers of research reports must describe the research in similar terms or, in too many instances, they will not reach each other.

The title should describe as accurately as possible the exact nature of the main elements in the study. Although such accuracy demands the use of specific language, the title should be free of obscure technical terms or jargon that will be recognized only by small groups of researchers who happen to pursue similar questions within a narrow band of the knowledge domain.

Components Appropriate for Inclusion in the Title

What is included in a sound title will depend first of all on the type of research involved. The elements most commonly considered for inclusion in
the title of an experimental study, for example, are the dependent and independent variables, the performance component represented by the criterion task or tasks, the treatment or treatments to be administered, the model underlying the study, the purpose of the study (predicting, establishing relationships, determining differences, or describing a setting), a specialized environment in which the research was conducted (e.g., health care facility), and any unusual contribution of the study. In contrast, titles for qualitative field studies often give prominence to words that describe participants, physical and social context, and the particular research tradition that frames the analysis of data.

A clever author can, by careful selection of words, provide information in the title that a theory is being tested by using a word that often is associated with the theory. For instance, the title “Generalizability of Contingency Management and Reinforcement in Second-Grade Special Education Classes” implies that the investigator is testing the applicability of behavioral theory to a specific population. Much has been communicated by including the single word “generalizability” in the title.

The ultimate purpose of the study in terms of predicting, establishing relationships, determining differences, or describing a setting can be expressed without providing an explicit statement. For example, when variables are expressed in a series, such as “Anthropometrics, Swimming Speed, and Shoulder-Girdle Strength,” a relationship generally is implied. If the same study were titled “Anthropometrics and Shoulder-Girdle Strength of Fast and Slow Swimmers,” the reader would anticipate a study in which differences were determined.

Any aspect of the study that is particularly unusual in terms of methodology, or that represents a unique contribution to the literature, should be included in the title. A treatment that is unusually long or of great magnitude (e.g., “Longitudinal Analysis of Human Short-Term Memory From Age 20 to Age 80”), a method of observation that is creative or unusually accurate (e.g., “Hand Preference in Telephone Use as a Measure of Limb Dominance and Laterality”), a sampling technique that is unique (e.g., “Intelligence of Children Whose Parents Communicate with Hand-Held Devices”), and a particular site for measurement that sets the study apart from others (e.g., “Perceptual Judgment in a Weightless Environment: Report From the Space Shuttle”) are examples of such aspects.

Components Inappropriate for Inclusion in the Title

Such factors as population, research design, and instrumentation should not be included in the title unless they represent a substantial departure from
similar studies. The population, for instance, should not be noted unless it is a population never sampled before, or is in some way an unusual target group. In the title "Imbedded Figures Acuity in World-Class Chess Masters," the population of the subjects is critical to the rationale for the study. The population in "Running Speed, Leg Strength, and Long Jump Performance of High School Boys" is not important enough to occupy space in the title.

Similarly, research design and instrumentation are not appropriate for inclusion in the title unless they represent an unusual approach to measurement or analysis. The type of research method expressed in "Physiological Analysis of Precompetitive Stress" is common in studies dealing with stress, and surely some other aspect of the study would make a more informative contribution to the title. The approach in "Phenomenological Analysis of Precompetitive Stress," however, is unique and signals the reader that the report contains information of an unusual kind.

Mechanics of Titling

Mechanically, the title should be concise and should provide comfortable reading, free from elaborate or jarring constructions. Excessive length should be avoided because it dilutes the impact of the key elements presented; two lines generally should be adequate. Some retrieval systems place a word limitation on titles, thus enforcing brevity. Redundancies such as "Aspects of," "Comments on," "Study of," "Investigation of," "Inquiry Into," and "An Analysis of" are expendable. It is obvious that a careful investigation of a topic will include "aspects of" the topic, whereas the research report has as its entire purpose the communication of "comments on" the findings of a study. It is pointless to state the obvious in a title.

Attempts to include all subtopics of a study in the title sometimes result in elephantine rubrics. The decision to include or exclude mention of a subtopic should be made less in terms of an abstraction, such as complete coverage, and more in terms of whether inclusion actually will facilitate appropriate retrieval. One useful way to construct a title is to list all the elements that seem appropriate for inclusion, and then to weave them into various permutations until a title appears that satisfies both technical and aesthetic standards.