

# PROPOSAL TIPS & HINTS

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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. The effectiveness of your proposal will depend on your ability to explain the nature, context and scope of your project and how you will achieve your goals.

*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 (as it is written)? If no – rethink your plan or the wording of your question!*

Proposals are required to have the following sections. It is recommended but not required that you follow the listed order. Sometimes a proposal flows better with sections in a different order; this is fine, just be sure that there is a logical flow to your writing. Use section headings to make your proposal easier to read.

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 your 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. **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. 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. This section should include documentation, references, and a review of the literature that supports the need for your research or creative endeavor. **\*\*For questions regarding works cited, references, or bibliography, please see #8 below.**

*If your project is part of a larger project, how should this information be included?* It depends on what type of information you are including and how it applies to your project. Information can be included in the background to provide context and justification or as an introduction within the Project design/methods section (or in both sections, if appropriate).

2. **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 other sections. Be sure that this is understandable to someone who does not know much about your field of study. To test your explanation – give this to a friend not in your major. If he/she doesn't understand, try again!
3. **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 are set for and the effect they inflict. Both 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: Sections 2 and 3 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.

4. **Project impact, significance, or purpose** - Keep the statement of significance brief (2-4 sentences) - be succinct! 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?
5. **Project Design or Methods** - Design and describe a work plan consistent with your academic discipline. This may include musical, creative, lab, or field-based explorations; use of population samples; experimental and control groups; statistical analysis; surveys or interviews; archival research; translating; ethnographic fieldwork; case studies; or other forms of analysis and synthesis of ideas and concepts. This section of the proposal should explain the details of the proposed plan. How will you go about exploring your research question? What are your methods? Who else will be involved and how? You can also include a brief overview of what you (or others) 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.
  - a) Remember that literature reviews and understanding the current state of knowledge in your field or topic of interest is an extremely important part of ALL research projects.
  - b) If your project involves people or animals, be sure to state in this section that you are submitting for Animal Use/Human Subject approval and will comply with all rules, regulations, and training requirements.

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; 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. Consider addressing: why you want to do this project, what got you interested in it, your career goals, and how this project would further those goals. While it is important, please remember that it should not overpower the rest of the proposal. One-quarter 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 and Narrative** - 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. 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 and “Budget instructions” for more information and examples.

**DOUBLE CHECK:** 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?
- Did I avoid repetition (as much as possible)?
- Have I used proper grammar and spelling?
- How does it sound when read out loud?

Re-read your research question or statement and your methodology section. Will your proposed steps or tasks answer your question? Be critical and revise if needed.

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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 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 with 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.

An effective project proposal should include the key components listed below. Critically review your proposal by asking yourself the following questions and make sure your proposal addresses the questions that are pertinent to your project and situation.

### A. Literature Review or Background

What do the reviewers/readers need to know to understand this project?  
How does my project relate to or build on current knowledge?  
How has my project evolved out of previous work?  
Have I explained my project, its concepts, and why it needs to be done?  
Is this section readable to someone outside my discipline?

### B. Research Question and proposal goals/objectives (What do you hope to accomplish?)

Have I expressed my purpose in concrete, specific, and detailed language?  
What will be the final outcome or product of my efforts?  
Are my goals realistic and doable?

### C. Project Impact Statement (What is the significance or purpose of this project?)

What is the broader rationale for my project?  
How will the knowledge gained in this project be used in the future?  
Would my parents, friends, etc. understand why I'm doing this project or what I'm trying to do or accomplish?

### D. Methodology or Project Plan and Timeline (How will you answer your question?)

What do I need to do and when do I need to do it?  
What resources will I need and how will I get access to them?  
Whose support will be essential to my success, have they agreed to help me, and how will I work with them?  
What specific experiences or qualifications prepare me to undertake this project?  
Who can help me with the areas where I don't already have experience or how can I gain needed skills?  
If required, have I addressed the need for human subjects or animal use approval and protection?

Can I realistically get everything done in the timeframe I've given for each step and overall?  
Have I included time to synthesize data or report what I've learned?  
Double check: does my plan REALLY answer all aspects of my question?

#### E. Anticipated Results and Dissemination

Is it clear what I intend to produce or achieve with this project?  
How do I intend to share the results?  
Are there conferences, performances, journals, etc. where I can tell others about what I've done?  
Is Discovery Day listed?

#### F. Personal Statement

Why is this project of interest to me or how is it important to me?  
Is this a continuation of a project I have been working on?  
What are my career goals?  
How does this project intersect with what I want to do in the future?

#### G. Budget (How much will it cost?)

What materials, supplies, etc. do I need to accomplish my goals?  
What funding or resources are already committed to the project?  
Have I provided a fair estimate of my hours, the cost of materials or supplies?  
If travel is involved, where am I going? Have I estimated the cost of getting to my destination, the cost of lodging, food, entrance fees, transportation around town?

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## SECTION IV: EXAMPLES OF TIMELINES

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It is MUCH easier to read a 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 - STOP - you probably need to move this info to the design section.

Project Timeline:

Throughout project	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	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	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 V: REFINING YOUR PROPOSAL: A TROUBLE-SHOOTING CHECKLIST**

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Consider the following questions and use the suggested tips to strengthen your proposal. 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.

Have you followed the guidelines as described in the guidebook (including formatting) and included all sections?  
Double-check the guidebook and use the "Submission checklist" on the webpage. YES following the rules is important.

Will the tasks/plans outlined in the project plan actually or fully answer your question as written?  
Critically review your tasks to determine if the outcome of your plan will address every aspect of your project as described. Consider re-wording your question to better reflect the plan or add appropriate tasks.

Have you used proper grammar and spelling?  
Check for spelling and grammar. Read your proposal out loud. YES spelling counts. Too many spelling/grammatical errors make it look like you don't really care about the award.

Is your Impact Statement too long (more than a few concise sentences)?  
Much of this information can likely be moved to the Background section.

Is your background too long?  
Don't try to include everything you know about your topic. Instead, selectively provide your audience with a sufficient amount of information to understand what you are doing and why.

Does your proposal use a lot of discipline specific language or technical jargon?  
Define key terms in the background section if they are specific to a particular academic specialty or sub-specialty. *Be sure that your impact statement can be understood by anyone!*

Are you proposing to do research in an area where access (to research subjects, to information, to facilities, etc.) may be difficult (including language barriers)?  
Indicate what you are doing to address these concerns. Include letters of support as appropriate from individuals or institutions who can help you solve problems of access and/or indicate how you will address such problems in your proposal.

Have you shown that you have everything in place to accomplish project goals?  
In your project plan or background, briefly describe preliminary work underway that will contribute to the successful completion of your goals. If your project requires an outside agency, organization, or person, provide names and confirm their support and participation. Including this information shows your commitment to the project and emphasizes that you have thought through the process and needs of the project.

Do you have all the skills or knowledge needed AND have you stated this?  
Clarify your knowledge level. Either show that you have the needed skills OR indicate how you will gain these skills or knowledge. Describe how you will make use of mentors or other contacts to provide you with experienced guidance in new skills or knowledge areas. Specifics (names, etc) will strengthen your proposal.

Is your project question and plan appropriate in size or is it overly ambitious, unfeasible or vague?  
In detailed, specific and concrete terms, describe the procedure you will follow during the project time period to accomplish your goals. Imagining each step you will take will help you arrive at a realistic and do-able project plan. Remember big questions are not more impressive!



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

- Consider if you and the project would benefit from access to an expert or at least a contact in each discipline. If so, 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.

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).
- Be sure to include the following information in your project plan, as appropriate:
  - 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 or surveys, 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)?

Include the following information in your project plan, as appropriate:

- What are you evaluating, comparing, or contrasting?
- How will you evaluate both/all groups, places, items, etc.
- Why are you comparing these groups, places, etc. (“because it is convenient” or “because I want to go there” are not convincing reasons)
- Do you have the skills for this type of project or in the aspects that you will be comparing/contrasting (if not, who will be teaching/training you)?

Have you broken down your project plan into a specific timeline?

Make a general outline of each step in your project and estimate how long each step will take. Steps may overlap or you may have to provide time to go back to an earlier step based on results from later steps. Be sure to include time to gather, analyze, and synthesize results; write report; and prepare presentation.

Is your budget overly general or are specific items over-estimated or under-estimated?

Work on the budget with your mentor to accurately estimate the type and amount of expenses that will be incurred. Get estimates for materials, supplies, and travel.

Does your budget make sense for your timeline and tasks and are your expenses appropriate for your project?

Make sure that your budget is closely related to your project plan and timeframe and that each category of expenses is fully explained in the budget justification section on the budget form AND when appropriate, referenced or described in the project plan itself.

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