

## **Writing a Political Science, LSJ or Jackson School Paper Proposal**

The purpose writing a paper proposal is to give your professor, TA, and/or peers an opportunity to provide feedback on your topic, argument, and research goals. Perhaps most importantly, a paper proposal requires you to narrow your topic and begin formulating the argument you'll make. Paper proposals help students by possibly redirecting you away from a potentially unworkable topic and toward one that is answerable in a quarter's worth of research. The point is to avoid the problem of finding out too late that your topic/research question isn't going to work. However, to make the exercise meaningful, you need to do at least some real research before you write your proposal.

These are general guidelines; as always, you should follow any specific instructions from your professor or TA.

### **1. Description/Justification for your topic**

- Given the possible universe of things to research, why did you choose this topic?
- How is your topic relevant to this course? That is, what themes or issues from the course will be central to your research?

### **2. What is your Research Question?**

- If the assignment gives you a research question, you should obviously use it. But perhaps use a paragraph to consider the significance of the question; what answering it might help make sense of or illustrate course themes; how your response might gesture toward larger, more generalizable phenomenon; etc.
- Writing a strong research question that is neither too narrow or too broad is actually quite challenging. It is essential to get feedback from your TA or Professor to ensure that your question is in the right range.
- For more empirical investigations, "why" questions are often a good place to start: for example, "Why did the UN support to creation of a Israeli state in 1948?" or "Why were Democrats able to pass healthcare reform in 2010?"
- For more theoretical investigations, questions might take a different form, such as "Do Socrates and Aristotle agree on the definition and content of virtue? What are the assumptions and implications of their definitions? Whose definition is better, and why?"

- Make sure that there are enough sources on your topic that you can actually do research: if you are having difficulty locating sources, you may want to consider changing your question.

### **3. Thesis Statement: Your Answer to the Research Question**

- You will need to do some research before you can even begin to offer an answer here. For your paper proposal, you just have to do enough research to figure out the puzzle that remains unanswered: that will be your research question, and given what you already know, you can formulate possible answers.
- How do you explain the outcome that you are considering? (This is the Dependent Variable. The DV is the thing that your IV is trying to explain.)
- How did the event/movement/legislation you've chosen effect future events? (This is the Independent Variable (IV), which is one of many potential causes. In the hard sciences, the IV is the thing that YOU have control over.)
- Should be brief – Make sure your thesis statement addresses your primary research (“why”) question.
- Explain what you think happened and make sure to point toward causal mechanisms.

### **4. Preview your argument**

- Clarify what steps you will take to address your topic: identify sub-arguments you need to prove your larger argument true.
- Connect your theory to your examples – how will you measure things like corporate power or worker cooperation?
- Make sure that these steps will logically support the claim you make in your thesis statement.
- This should look like your outline in one paragraph – you are letting the reader in on how you've structured your argument.

### **5. Provide a preliminary list of sources**

- Focus on scholarly (peer-reviewed) sources: instructors will usually specify how many and what kinds of sources are required at this stage.
- For each source, explain how it contributes to your paper.
- List any interviews you've done/plan to do.