

The Research Proposal: A Summary
October 19, 2011

The Research Proposal in Writing 300 is an assignment which is both formal and informal, strictly scaffolded and open-ended. The following description represents a summary of discussions about this assignment over the last two days.

Instructors see the research proposal (or equivalent assignment) as an important turning point in the course of the semester, where students switch from exploring and developing skills (particularly summary, paraphrase, quotation, argument and thesis development) to exploring and developing an original research project. The document itself is, in some ways, a lower-stakes assignment than first two formal papers and the final research paper, in that students tend to revise the proposal, rather than failing it, and, while some instructors do assign letter grades, the assignment tends to be worth only 5-10% of the final grade for the course. It is also a relatively short piece of writing, tending to be no more than 3 pages in length, and commonly just two. Some instructors link the writing of the research proposal with the development of an annotated bibliography, but this is often not complete by the time the class has moved on from the research proposal to starting to draft the research paper.

Many instructors precede the formal research proposal with a Topic Commitment Memo or some other preliminary piece of writing where students identify an area that they are interested in researching. Generally, the formal research proposal assignment is also preceded by library visits, and by the students having identified, read and evaluated 2-3 scholarly sources, so that they can frame their own research project. Instructors often provide a detailed set of questions to help students develop the assignment. They are often provided with a structured set of review questions, which ask students to consider the focus of the assignment (students are often too broad in their original conceptions of their projects), the relevance of the assignment (how does it extend the existing conversation) and the potential audience. Students often focus their work on the research proposal around developing a central research question, and then subtopics and sub-questions that help them further refine their ideas. These subtopics/subquestions often become subheadings in the final research paper.

Some instructors start their one-on-one conferences with students at the time the students are working on the research proposal, while others leave these meetings until later in the semester. A common in-class exercise involves students working collaboratively, either in small groups or as a whole class, on narrowing down their colleagues' research questions into manageable projects for the 8-ish weeks remaining in the semester.

On the whole, instructors see producing the research proposal as an important process for students to engage in around the middle of the semester, but the product that the students produce, unlike all the other formal assignments, is not as important. Rather, instructors use the research proposal to train students' minds on the final product of the course: the research paper, and to help students identify a topic that they care about that forms a relevant and substantial (as well as appropriately sized) research project addressed to a particular audience (that is hopefully broader than just their instructor), and that can, indeed, be researched using scholarly sources.