

A Guide to Writing Paper Proposals

Purpose of a Paper Proposal

Before advancing on larger project, researchers often run their ideas by fellow scholars to see if their research topics and questions are going to be valid and significant contributions in the field. For example, before literary critics attend conferences and present their ideas to colleagues, they need to submit proposals to the conference organizers to see if their ideas are of interest to conference attendees. Similarly, before submitting a paper for publication, a literary critic often needs to submit an abstract—or summary—of her or his paper to an editor so the editor can determine if they should print the paper.

A paper proposal is essentially a persuasive short-form essay where you, the critic, attempt to make the case that your research and argument are important contributions to your field at this moment. This means that you, the literary critic, need to have both (1) a persuasive argument about how to interpret a text and (2) a good sense of what has already been written in the field to argue for your work's validity and significance. You may be filling a gap in research that needs to be explored or expanding on important ideas with a new method or new knowledge; in any case, you need to focus on writing persuasively and creatively.

Note that you will likely need to recognize that you are not the only one thinking about your particular topic—that is, you will need to rely upon others' interpretations to enhance your knowledge for this paper. Show your reader how others' ideas inflect and inform your interpretation of a literary work. This may mean that you will need to conduct research into biographical contexts (from diaries, letters, auto/biographies), other historical contexts, literary criticism, and theoretical/philosophical texts.

Most paper proposals are highly formulaic and many tend to follow this template:

1. big picture problem or topic important to literary critics.
2. brief thoughts on recent or important critical literature on this topic.
3. your project filling in a gap or need in the critical literature.
4. a delineation of the specific material you examine in the paper.
5. your original argument.

You do not need to follow this template closely, but if you are confused or unsure how to go about writing a project proposal, using a template like this is sometimes helpful. More information about following this template can be found here:

<https://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/12/how-today-how-to-write-a-paper-abstract/>.

Steps to Writing a Paper Proposal

I. Pick a fruitful topic

Begin by picking a specific text and topic. I would pick a text you either absolutely love or absolutely hate—something that gives you plenty to talk about. When you are picking a topic to explore within a text, try to be specific in your choice. Don't just talk generally about race and

racism in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, but something even more specific, like racialized depictions of Indian and Anglo-Indian men and women in *Cranford*.

II. Develop an argument through close-readings

After you have picked your fruitful topic, you should come up with a research question and answer based off of your close-reading of your text. Gather as many relevant quotes and passages from your primary source text as possible and figure out how you will group and organize them into a larger argument.

III. Conduct additional research

Use library resources and databases to conduct additional research into your topic. You will want to find peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books on the author, topic, history, and/or criticism related to your paper proposal. Sometimes additional information can be gleaned by reading your authors' published collections of letters, diaries, essays, or other writings. Focus on finding credible, reliable sources—peer reviewed or published from a university press is key.

IV. Summarize and synthesize others' research

After you have conducted research, spend a little time trying to generally summarize the contextual information and/or relevant literary criticism that you have found. You will need to synthesize that information for your reader and explain how your argument uses, aligns, or goes against the information that you have gathered in your research.

Make sure to...

I. Be aware of your audience

Assume whoever is reading this is a literary critic who has already read the text you are writing on and get to your original argument quickly. You should avoid wasting space or padding your paper with useless generic claims (“Since the dawn of time...”) or extended summarization (“*Middlemarch* by George Eliot follows the main character Dorothea Brooke alongside other secondary characters such as...”), especially at the critical beginning of your paper when you are trying to hook a reader into liking and thus finishing your paper.

Be aware that this proposal is supposed to persuade your reader to give you the go-ahead to begin writing your final paper. To that end, you want to show the extent of your preparation: you should have a very specific topic, an argument you generally want to pursue, a good sense of the contexts that will help you produce a rich interpretation of the text, and/or a strong sense of what makes this topic relevant or interesting.

II. Cite when appropriate using MLA

In a proposal you are not typically expected to do much citation. However, for the purposes of this course, you must include a References section that lists the resources you discuss in your introduction. If you want to quote directly from a text, you can find basic information about citing in-text here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/2/>. Make sure you use as much space—if not more space—analyzing the words you quote as you do presenting them; do not assume that your quotations are fully self-evident.

III. Focus on your analysis and interpretation

In a paper where you synthesize contextual information and/or literary criticism, it is easy to lose your own original argument. Remember that in your paper, you are trying to present YOUR original, significant argument, not someone else's. Don't just present someone else's ideas as the majority of the paper—your job is not to prove someone else's ideas right but make space for your own original interpretation. To that end, you may find that you only outline another critic's ideas in 3 or 4 sentences, sometimes even less!

As in your close-readings, this kind of paper would NOT be an appropriate time to use *evaluative or editorial statements* regarding:

1. your feelings about the work, that is, whether you like or do not like the text
2. your personal memories or past experiences
3. how successful the author is at doing or evoking something
 - a. absolutely avoid arguing things like “the author makes the experience of _____ realistic” or “the author successfully makes the audience feel sympathy for X or Y character/idea”

IV. Be specific and precise with your terms

Focus on interpreting the elements that are specific to the text itself (the word choice, the narrative perspectives, etc.) by being specific in your own language. For example, if you want to talk about violence in *Frankenstein*, avoid making generalizations about violence or using the term “violence” without thinking through what you mean. You should consider the many different kinds of violence: specifying emotional cruelty, physical abuse, and other kinds of interpersonal violence versus economic violence, social violence, and other forms of structural violence.

V. Offer more sophisticated readings

Make space to account for ambiguity and contradiction. Try to recognize and reflect on complications in the texts. The *least* interesting and *least* accurate close-readings are often those that: make simple one-to-one connections; use terms without defining them; recycle preconceptions or generalizations without reflecting on them; and/or accept statements at face value. Most things in life are full of complexity and subtle distinctions of meaning. This is not always the case, for sure, but most often there is value in locating the nuances behind ideas.

VI. Articulate an answer to the question: ‘so what?’

In your close-readings, you have already confronted the problem of articulating an answer to the question “so what?” In a paper like this, you will need to take a step further and try to explain how your project is relevant to others' who are also working on similar problems.