

# WRITING ESSAY PROPOSALS

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AN ESSAY PROPOSAL functions to outline a plan for writing a longer research paper. Writing out a tentative argument, any initial research, and a plan for moving forward compiles key elements for an essay so instructors can get a sense of where a paper is going.

Proposals also offer a focused piece of writing that can help you stay on track and give a sense of where the gaps are in your research as you work towards the final essay.

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## WRITING TIPS

- ▶ Keep the writing focused on how the sources and research will interact as opposed to beginning to write the paper. In proposals it is enough to paraphrase or summarize sources; save the quotations for the final essay.
- ▶ It is entirely appropriate to use the future tense in a proposal, for example:

*Mary Lance's documentary about the painter "With My Back to the World" and Clement Greenberg's early criticism about the developing minimalist movement I intend to situate Martin as distinct from other painters bonded by minimalism. Using her writing I will demonstrate her specific spiritual concerns that sit in opposition to the more formal concerns of her colleagues: Ad Reinhardt, Sol LeWitt and Frank Stella. I also intend to develop research to address Martin's position as a woman working among male career painters and explore how her identity operates when associated with a movement where the removal of authorship and of the painter's hand was prominent...*

"START  
WRITING,  
NO MATTER  
WHAT. THE  
WATER DOES  
NOT FLOW  
UNTIL THE  
FAUCET IS  
TURNED ON."

-LOUIS L'AMOUR

# BEFORE WRITING

## CONSIDERING AUDIENCE

Review your instructor's particular guidelines, and determine who your audience is—are you writing for your instructor/TA alone, or for a real/imagined audience outside of the class? Knowing who you are writing for can help you establish what kind of research is important to your topic and how you will write about it in the proposal.

## PROPOSAL LENGTH

Proposals are generally created for longer papers, but considering the length of the proposal and when it is due will help give a sense of what kind of research you need to include. A proposal due 6 weeks before the essay may only require a small amount of preliminary research, whereas a proposal due 2-3 weeks before the paper might be longer and would benefit from more extensive research, acting as an exercise that leads into writing the paper itself.

## FORMING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Losing interest or focus during your research will decrease your motivation to write. Choosing a topic that interests you and formulating a research question can help navigate and drive this part of the process. A research question can start off fairly broad, for example:

What are the main connections between Agnes Martin and the minimalist movement?

As you do more research, refine your question into something more specific and manageable for a 1500-2000 word paper, like:

Did Agnes Martin's line paintings, distinct from typical monochromes in the 60's, engage with the core ideals of the minimalist movement?

This question has elements that can be followed up on specifically; beginning with defining minimalism, researching Martin's practice and reading the research of others. Later, in answering the question, you can take a position which helps in developing a thesis.

## BEGIN TO BUILD A THESIS

After some initial research on your topic, you may develop a thesis statement—the hypothetical answer to your research question. In the later stages of writing your paper, you may either prove or disprove the thesis you included in your proposal! That is okay. Proposals offer flexibility to negate, go back on, or change things as the paper develops.

# WRITING + STRUCTURING THE PROPOSAL

Proposals are brief, generally between 3 and 4 short paragraphs. There is no perfect formula for how they should be written, but most proposals begin by introducing the topic, explaining how it is relevant to the assignment, and explaining why it is interesting. Successful proposals, give a clear sense of the writer's ideas and purpose in the first few sentences. For example:

Agnes Martin's line paintings are frequently included and critiqued under the umbrella of minimalist art of the 60's. But, while her paintings evoke a minimal look, Martin herself continually refused to be classified as a minimalist. In researching Martin's writing on mathematics and the practices of Buddhism and reflecting on Martin's position as a female painter in a typically male dominated

medium, her paintings can be understood to be distinctly separate from the movement.

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## PROPOSALS TYPICALLY INCLUDE:

*A brief summary of research you have done so far.*

*A list of any questions or gaps you have found in the research.*

*A plan for how you will continue your research.*