

ENGL 598 PROPOSAL ASSIGNMENT

Goals

- Design a lengthy, researched project;
- Articulate your proposed argument, methods, and contribution to scholarly (or creative) conversations;
- Use your knowledge of the text(s) and researched sources to explain why your project is important and thoughtful;
- Provide supporting bibliography of about 10 potential sources.

Background Discussion: Originality

I often have discussions with students about “the anxiety of influence” – the fear that your project has been “done before.” Most of the time, no two people approach the same topic in exactly the same way, so don’t give up on a project just because someone has published something similar. Consider your work as “in conversation” with theirs, and aim to show how you add to the critical discussion.

Consider whether your project falls into any of these categories – any of which would be deemed “original”:

- **Approaches new evidence in an old way:** you use a standard, recognized approach and apply it to a new text that relates the new to the old. That is, you show how X reading practice, applied to your text(s) that have never been read this way, produces Y important realization.
- **Approaches old evidence in a new way:** you develop a new way of explaining or approaching old data or texts. Example: There still aren’t many readings of medieval texts in light of postcolonial, environmental, or critical race theory.
- **Pairs old evidence with old approaches in a new way:** the “newness” in this kind of essay comes from linking evidence and approaches that have not been linked before. This approach benefits from interdisciplinary study. By adding to a traditional literary approach a new link to evidence from French sources, musicology, psychology, art history, etc., you may be able to forge something new.¹

Remember: I don’t expect you to take the world of medieval studies by storm. I do hope that you will develop something that can add to our classroom understanding of our texts/contexts, and/or the critical conversations you are familiar with from your research.

Additionally, if you find an article that has done something similar, it’s perfectly ok to acknowledge, “My approach here is similar to Jane Smith, Book Title, Publishing Information. However, whereas she is interested in X, my own interests focus on Y.” We see this all the time in published studies; it’s fine in student essays as well, as long as you explain how your work is related to another scholar’s research and that you are adding something new/different to the conversation.

CRUCIAL REMINDER: We are often asked to explain the scholarly conversation we are entering and contributing to. We often think this means to define our work against existing work, but such presentations can sound defensive or aggressive, or they could run the risk of alienating scholars in our field who do that work that we’ve just said is flawed, insufficient, etc. Instead, find a way to represent yourself as *adding to the conversation*, not closing off parts of it.

PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

¹ Classifications adapted from W. Belcher, *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* (Thousand Oaks CA, 2009).

These are based on guidelines for grant proposals (this can be an important and useful form of writing outside of academic contexts), and specifically on the Undergraduate Research Award application expectations. <https://ugresearch.ku.edu/student/fund/research-awards/proposal>

In other words, this assignment teaches you how to apply for this (and other) awards.

Length: approx. 2000 words, double-spaced narrative of the project, plus a single-spaced, alphabetized bibliography of at least 10 works, *added after the narrative that does not count for page length* (just citations, not annotated).

Structure (based on UGRA application): And, yes, it's advisable to follow their structure, because that will help your readers locate and process the crucial parts of the proposal. Some funding agencies require you to follow their structure.

Section 1: Abstract (short 2-3 sentences)

UGRA says: In one paragraph, summarize your proposal. Give the reader a general sense of the field, the problem or idea your work will address (*and your argument if you can propose it), and how you will accomplish this project (*methods).

In addition to using our *They Say/I Say* models, this template from Dr. Karen Kelsky may help you crystallize the most important things:

<http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/>

Section 2: Background and Introduction

UGRA says: This section has two goals: 1) summarize the work that's been done in your area and 2) explain how your work will contribute to this field of study. In many fields, this section is referred to as the literature review. It must include citations of previous research or creative work related to your topic.

(My advice: The key here is to not get bogged down in the previous work – give a good sense of what has been done, but keep your reader's focus on *you* as the mind synthesizing the previous work and as the voice adding new ideas to ongoing conversations. *They Say/I Say* strategies for summarizing and responding to scholars can be essential to modeling how to talk about others' work while still keeping your reader's focus on *you*. Give a sense of your argument and/or research question and what is at stake in your project.)

This can take varying forms. In my medieval research, I tend to begin with an illustrative example or other notion that grabs the reader's attention, then back up to explain medieval contexts and anything else the reader needs to understand what my text is and why it's important. Sometimes this might even include a brief summary of events or characters that are crucial to my analysis. This balance can be tricky, but readers need to know what your texts or genres *are* before they can understand what you are doing with them.

Then – in whatever order makes sense – I make sure this section conveys the scholarly consensus position or ways that my topic/text has traditionally been studied AND foregrounds what my argument is and how it adds something to the scholarly conversation. Often, we challenge the consensus positions or explore a text from a new perspective to fill a gap in scholarship.

On “citations” – they mean at least mention the names of scholars, whose works will appear in your bibliography. The UGRA application says that *if you do not cite sources and include bibliography, your proposal will be disqualified*. Aim for 5-10 major works.

Section 3: Methods and Approach

UGRA says: Describe what you will actually do for your project and why you will take this approach. Include a timeline of key project milestones.

This is the section where you persuade readers that you have thought through what it means for you to *do* research and are ready to begin the project. For our purposes: You do not need a timeline (but you can make one up if it helps you/as a professional exercise).

Here's where you explain whether you are studying sources, historical contexts, theoretical perspectives, or some combination thereof AND why these methods will allow you to contribute something new. Things to consider:

- How will your process proceed, or what are the major steps (e.g., I analyze the text against its sources to pinpoint where the author makes changes; then I show how those change specifically respond to the author's new historical context [with specific examples])? In other words, describe your research or creative process.
- Are there other studies that have used this approach? Again, clarify how you are adding to the conversation.
- How will your results allow you to make your argument/address your original research question?

Section 4: Applicant's Preparation

UGRA says: Describe your preparation and qualifications to complete this project.

This paragraph explains what you have done to prepare and addresses the necessary skills for completing the project successfully. *Show* them: have you already started some of the project in a class? Does it require you to know French and you're a French minor? Have you used a theory in your English 308 class and got an A, and you now want to apply that method to a new text or creative project?

Section 5: Conclusion

UGRA says: Show a clear connection between the different parts of your proposal. Summarize key points of your proposal for one final reminder of what you're doing, how you'll do it, and why. This is your final sales pitch to the reviewer and a good time to return to how your project relates to the big picture.

My advice: *Do not just repeat things you've said earlier.* Find another way to phrase the ways that your project and approach will help you achieve your research goals of understanding a text/context better, creating new knowledge, or creating a new artistic work. If you have plans to try to present at a conference or otherwise share your research, it's fair to mention it here.

Goal: Persuade your reader that the overall goals and argument of your project are important, and that your methods and plan will move you toward those goals. Finish strong (don't just trail off)

Section 6: Bibliography

UGRA says: List all the sources you have cited in the proposal.

For our purposes: I want to see about 10 cited or potential sources, regardless of whether you've put them in your proposal (though you must put *some* in the proposal itself).

UGRA wants only whatever you have cited, and nothing you haven't. That is not the case with most grants, which permit a bibliography that shows that you know which sources to consult, even if they are not the top 5 you're in immediate conversation with. This shows greater engagement with and awareness of the field.