

PROPOSING A SOLUTION

14

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- 14.1** To convince your audience that a problem exists and to propose a solution to the problem.
- 14.2** To use multimodal strategies to create effective proposal arguments.
- 14.3** To persuade your audience by writing an effective proposal argument.

Proposal arguments call an audience to action. They make a claim that some action should or ought to be taken. Sometimes referred to informally as *should arguments*, proposals are among the most common kinds of arguments that you will write or read.

Practical proposals focus on local, practical problems and generally target a specific audience (usually the person with the power to act on the proposal). For example, Lucy Morsen's proposal in this chapter advocates banning laptops and cell phones in classrooms (pp. 367–370). In the work world, many individuals and businesses generate new revenues by writing competitive proposals to solve a prospective client's practical problem.

Another kind of proposal, a **policy proposal**, addresses public policy issues with the aim of swaying public support toward the writer's proposed solution. Student writer Kent Ansen's proposal to institute mandatory public service for young adults illustrates a researched policy proposal (pp. 376–385).

The power of proposal arguments is often enhanced with images, which can appeal to both *logos* and *pathos*. In fact, proposal arguments sometimes take the form of striking multimodal texts such as **posters** or **advocacy advertisements** calling an audience to action. Additionally, proposal arguments can be delivered as **oral presentations** when, for example, a citizen presents a proposal at an open-mike public hearing.

Engaging Proposal Writing

This activity introduces you to the thinking processes involved in writing a proposal argument.

ON YOUR OWN

Identify and list several major problems facing students in your college or university. Then decide which problems are most important and rank them in order of importance.

IN CONVERSATION

Working in groups, share your lists and decide on your group's number-one problem.

1. Use that problem to explore answers to the following questions. Group recorders should be prepared to present answers to the class as a whole.
 - a. Why is the problem a problem?
 - b. For whom is the problem a problem?
 - c. How will these people suffer if the problem is not solved? Give specific examples.
 - d. Who has the power to solve the problem?
 - e. Why hasn't the problem been solved up to this point?
 - f. How can the problem be solved? Create a proposal for a solution.
 - g. What are the probable benefits of acting on your proposal?
 - h. What costs are associated with your proposal?
 - i. Who will bear these costs?
 - j. Why should this proposal be enacted?
 - k. What makes this proposal better than alternative proposals?
2. As a group, draft an outline for a proposal argument in which you:
 - a. Describe the problem and its significance.
 - b. Propose your solution to the problem.
 - c. Justify your proposal by showing how the benefits outweigh the costs.
3. Recorders for each group should write the group's outline on the board and be prepared to present the group's argument orally to the class.

14.1 Understanding Proposal Writing

Convince your audience that a problem exists and propose a solution to the problem.

All proposals have one feature in common—they offer a solution to a problem. For every proposed solution, there are always alternative solutions, including doing nothing. Your task therefore is to convince readers that the problem is worth solving, that your proposed solution will actually work, and that the benefits outweigh the costs. Accordingly, a proposal argument typically has three main parts:

1. **Description of the problem.** You must first demonstrate that a significant problem exists. Your goal is to make the problem vivid and real for your readers. Who is affected by the problem? What are its causes? Why hasn't it been solved before? What are the negative consequences of not solving the problem?
2. **Proposal for a solution.** This section describes your solution with enough detail to show how it would work and what it would cost. If you don't have a solution, you may choose to generate a planning proposal calling for a committee to propose solutions at a later date.
3. **Justification.** Here you persuade your audience that your proposal should be enacted. Typically you show that the benefits of your proposal outweigh the costs. You also need to show why your proposed solution is better than alternative solutions. Point out why other possible approaches would not solve the problem, would provide fewer benefits, or would cost significantly more than your proposed solution.

In the following sections, we examine the special challenges of proposal arguments and then show you a powerful strategy for developing the justification section of a proposal.

Special Challenges of Proposal Arguments

To get your readers to take action—the ultimate purpose of a proposal—you must overcome some difficult challenges. In the following chart, we examine the special difficulties people encounter when writing proposal arguments and offer strategies for overcoming them.

Strategies for Overcoming the Special Challenges of Proposal Arguments

Challenge	Explanation	What to Do
Giving the problem presence	To convince readers that a problem exists, you must make them <i>see</i> and <i>feel</i> the problem—give the problem <i>presence</i> .	• Use anecdotes or examples of people suffering from the problem. • Provide startling facts or statistics to dramatize the problem. • Include a photograph or other image that conveys the problem. • Use other appeals to <i>pathos</i>.
Appealing to the interests and values of decision makers	A proposal that benefits one group often creates costs for others. Decision makers may not share the sufferers' perspective on a problem. Solving your problem may simply cause more problems for the decision maker.	• Show decision makers how acting on your proposal will benefit <i>them</i> directly. • Use audience-based reasons. • If appropriate, appeal to idealism and principle (do the right thing, even if it will cause temporary grief). • Show how benefits to the sufferers outweigh costs to others.
Overcoming inherent conservatism	People are inherently resistant to change, often willing to live with a flawed but bearable situation rather than risk change that could make the situation worse. "Better the devil you know than the one you don't know."	• Emphasize the seriousness of the problem (give it <i>presence</i>). • Stress the benefits of solving the problem. • Emphasize the lost potential in not acting. • Show that the risks are minimal. • Show that negative consequences are unlikely.

Challenge	Explanation	What to Do
Predicting consequences	Often readers distrust the proposal writer's rosy scenario. They doubt that the predicted benefits will occur, or they fear negative consequences.	• Take care not to overpromise benefits. • Persuade readers that your predictions are realistic—show how the links in the chain lead directly from the solution to the benefits. • Cite cases where a similar proposal led to real benefits.
Evaluating consequences	Any solution that benefits one group may bring costs to another group. It is difficult to establish a common principle of measurement for weighing costs against benefits.	• In some cases, you can use money as measurement—the savings from this proposal will be more than the initial costs. • In other cases, emphasize that the benefits of increased happiness, less suffering, or saved time outweigh the initial dollar costs. • Emphasize the greatest good for the greatest number (more people will have benefits; fewer will bear costs). • Emphasize idealism and principle (this is the right thing to do despite the cost).

With these particular challenges in mind, we now set forth some strategies for making proposals as effective as possible.

Developing an Effective Justification Section

The distinctions between proposals and other kinds of arguments invite particular kinds of support for proposals. Writers often develop support for their proposals by using the three-strategy approach, which focuses sequentially on principles, consequences, and precedents or analogies, as explained here.

Strategies for Developing a Justification Section

Strategies	What to Do	Templates and Comments	Examples
Argument from principle	Argue that an action should (should not) be taken because it is right (wrong) according to some value, assumption, principle, or belief you share with your audience.	We should (should not) do (this action) because (this action) is _____. Fill in the blank with a belief or value that the audience holds: <i>good, honest, fair</i>, and so on.	"We should create publicly financed jobs for poor people because doing so is both charitable and just."

Strategies	What to Do	Templates and Comments	Examples
Argument from consequence	Argue that an action should (should not) be taken because doing so will lead to consequences that you and your audience think are good (bad).	We should (should not) do (this action) because (this action) will lead to these good (bad) consequences: _____, _____, and _____. Use consequences that your audience will agree are good or bad, as needed.	"We should create publicly financed jobs for poor people because doing so will provide them with money for food and housing, promote a work ethic, and produce needed goods and services."
Argument from precedent or analogy	Argue that an action should (should not) be taken because doing so is similar to what was done in another case, which turned out well (badly).	We should (should not) do (this action) because doing (this action) is like _____, which turned out to be good (bad). Use precedents or analogies that are similar to your proposed action and that will have good (bad) associations for your audience.	<i>Precedent:</i> "We should create publicly financed jobs for poor people because doing so will alleviate poverty just as a similar program has helped the poor in Upper Magnesia." <i>Analogy:</i> "...because doing so is like teaching the poor how to fish rather than giving them fish."

Each of these argumentation strategies was clearly evident in a public debate in Seattle, Washington, over a proposal to raise county sales taxes to build a new baseball stadium. Those favoring the stadium put forth arguments such as these:

We should build the new stadium because preserving our national pastime for our children is important (*argument from principle*), because building the stadium will create new jobs and revitalize the adjacent Pioneer Square district (*argument from consequence*), and because building the stadium will have the same beneficial effects on the city that building Camden Yards had in Baltimore (*argument from precedent*).

Those opposing the stadium created arguments using the same strategies:

We should not build the stadium because it is wrong to subsidize rich owners and players with tax dollars (*argument from principle*), because building a stadium diverts tax money from more important concerns such as low-income housing (*argument from consequence*), and because Toronto's experience with Skydome shows that once the novelty of a new stadium wears off, attendance declines dramatically (*argument from precedent*).

FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

Using Different Strategies to Develop Support

Working individually or in small groups, use the strategies of principle, consequence, and precedent/analogy to create *because* clauses that support (or oppose) the following proposals. Try to have at least one *because* clause from each of the strategies, but generate as many reasons as possible. Here is an example:

Claim	Spanking children should be made illegal.
Principle	Because it is wrong to cause bodily pain to children.
Consequence	Because it teaches children that it is okay to hit someone out of anger; because it causes children to obey rules out of fear rather than respect; because it can lead children to be abusive parents.
Precedent/analogy	Because spanking a child is like throwing dishes or banging your fists against a wall—it relieves your anger but turns the child into an object.

1. The school year for grades K–12 should/should not be extended to eleven months.
2. Our city should/should not require all restaurants to post the calorie content of every menu item.
3. Federal law should/should not ban assault weapons and large ammunition clips.
4. The federal government should/should not legalize marijuana.
5. The federal government should/should not enact a substantially increased tax on gasoline.

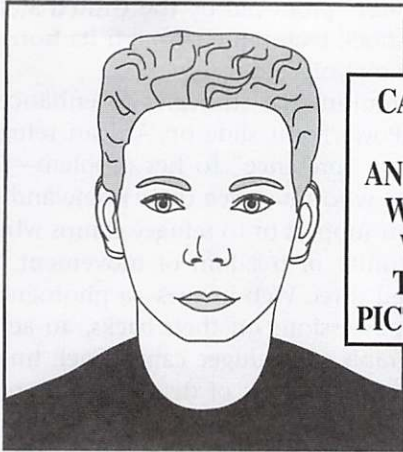
14.2 Multimodal Proposal Arguments

Use multimodal strategies to create effective proposal arguments.

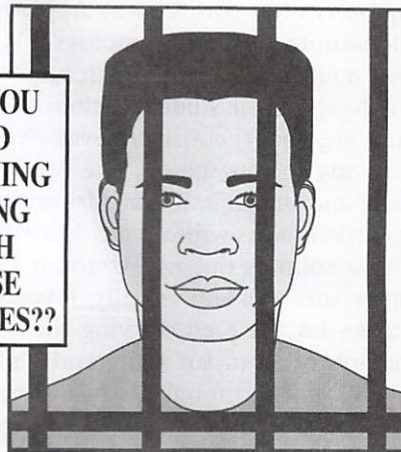
Proposal arguments can be particularly powerful in multimodal forms. In non-motion or print formats, verbal text can be enhanced by photographs, drawings, graphs, or other images. Frequently we encounter multimodal proposal arguments in the form of posters or flyers, paid advertisements in newspapers or magazines, brochures, or Web pages in advocacy Web sites. Their creators know the arguments must work fast to capture our attention, give presence to a problem, advocate a solution, and enlist our support. These multimodal proposals frequently use photographs, images, or icons that are arresting or in some way memorable and that appeal to a reader's emotions and imagination. Such arguments can be enhanced further in digital environments where videos or podcasts can employ the narrative power of sound and motion. Multimodal arguments can also be presented orally as speeches, often supplemented with presentation slides in PowerPoint or Prezi.

As an example of a one-page advocacy ad, consider Figure 14.1, which is sponsored by the organization Common Sense for Drug Policy. Note how the advocacy advertisement makes its view of the problem real and urgent to readers

WHITE KIDS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE USING (AND SELLING) DRUGS!



**CAN YOU
FIND
ANYTHING
WRONG
WITH
THESE
PICTURES??**



According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, he's 4 times more likely than his African-American classmate to be a regular cocaine user.

According to the Justice Department, if he's arrested on drug charges, he's 1-1/2 times more likely than his white classmate to be sent to prison.

White high-school students who are current users of cocaine: 4.1%¹

Chance of a white person ever trying an illicit drug in their lifetime: 42%²

Percent of felony drug defendants in state courts who are white: 37%³

Percent of white drug felons given probation or nonincarceration sentence by state courts: 32%⁴

Percent of white drug felons sentenced to prison by state courts each year: 27%⁵

African-American high-school students who are current users of cocaine: 1.1%¹

Chance of an African-American person ever trying an illicit drug in their lifetime: 37.7%²

Percent of felony drug defendants in state courts who are black: 61%³

Percent of black drug felons given probation or nonincarceration sentence by state courts: 25%⁴

Percent of black drug felons sentenced to prison by state courts each year: 43%⁵

BLACK KIDS ARE MORE LIKELY TO GO TO PRISON!

Note:

According to the US Justice Department and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, drug users typically buy their drugs from sellers of their own racial or ethnic background. Research of Ethnicity & Race of Drug Sellers and Users: US Dept. of Justice National Institute of Justice & the Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Crack, Powder Cocaine, and Heroin: Drug Purchase and Use Patterns in Six U.S. Cities," December 1997, p.1, 16, and p. 15, Table 16.

Sources:

¹ Data on drug use by high-school students: Youth Risk Behavior Survey 1999, Centers for Disease Control, reported in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Vol. 49, No. SS-5, p. 66, Table 24.

² Data on lifetime prevalence of drug use: US Dept. of HHS Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Summary of Findings from the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse," August 2000, p. G-13, Table G-13.

³ Demographic data on felony drug defendants in state courts: US Dept. of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 1996," October 1999, p.4, Table 3

⁴ Demographic data on felony drug defendants in state courts: US Dept. of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, "State Court Sentencing of Convicted Felons, 1996," February 2000, p. 13, Table 2.5

⁵ Demographic data on felony drug defendants in state courts: US Dept. of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, "State Court Sentencing of Convicted Felons, 1996," February 2000, p. 13, Table 2.5

Kevin B. Zeese, President, Common Sense for Drug Policy

3220 "N" Street, NW, #141, Washington, D.C. 20007 • 703-354-9050 • fax 703-354-5695 • info@cspd.org
For more information, visit www.cspd.org and www.drugwarfacts.org

FIGURE 14.1 A One-Page Advocacy Advertisement from a Magazine

by using disturbing black-and-white drawings, varied type sizes and fonts, and powerful lists of evidence. It also gains credibility through its documentation of sources, presented at the bottom of the page. For a multimodal argument with a stronger visceral impact, consider the part opener image shown on page 513. This poster, “BEWARE...Drink Only Approved Water” produced by the United States War Department in 1944, employs a visual shock technique through its horrific image of a reflected skull to warn against dinking infected water.

To show how a student writer can use multimodal strategies to enhance a proposal argument, consider Joyce Keeley’s PowerPoint slide on African refugee camps. Early in her speech, she wants to give “presence” to her problem—the transient and unstable life of African refugees who must flee their homeland either to urban slums without any humanitarian support or to refugee camps where they have support but no economic opportunity or freedom of movement. To dramatize this problem visually, Joyce selected three Web images—a photograph of refugees on the road carrying their life’s possessions on their backs, an aerial photograph of an urban slum, and a photograph of a refugee camp. Each image appeals to *pathos* through its heartbreaking connotations of disrupted life, poverty, and hopelessness.

WRITING

PROJECT

14.3

Persuade your audience by writing an effective proposal argument.

A Proposal Argument

Call your audience’s attention to a problem, propose a solution to that problem, and present a justification for your solution. You have two choices (or your instructor may limit you to just one): (a) create a practical proposal, with a letter of transmittal, proposing a nuts-and-bolts solution to a local problem; or (b) write a more general policy proposal, addressing a public issue, in the form of a feature editorial for a particular (state, local, or college) newspaper. If you choose (b), your instructor might ask you to do research and model your proposal after a magazine or journal article.

Generating and Exploring Ideas

If you have trouble thinking of a proposal topic, try making an idea map of local problems you would like to see solved. Consider some of the following starting points:

Finding a Proposal Issue

Problems at your university: parking, registration system, absence of recycling options, hours of cafeterias and eating facilities, too many activities on campus during the week, poor school spirit, problems with residence halls, availability of internships

Problems in your city or town: lack of bike paths, inadequate lighting, unattractive public parks or lack of public parks, zoning problems, inadequate support for public education, need for public transportation, conservation of water

Problems at your place of work: flow of customer traffic, inadequate staffing during peak times, unclear division of responsibilities, no policies for raises or training new employees, health care coverage, safety issues

Social problems and problems related to other aspects of your life: problems with credit card debt, need for financial literacy, physical fitness in the public schools, aid for victims of disasters, employment opportunities for college students, media consumption and awareness of current events

Another approach is to freewrite your response to these trigger statements:

I would really like to solve the problem of _____.

I believe that X should _____. (Substitute for X words such as *my instructor, the president, the school administration, Congress, my boss*, and so forth.)

Note that the problem you pose for this paper can be personal, but shouldn't be private; that is, others should be able to benefit from a solution to your personal problem. For example, your inability to find child care for your daughter is a private problem. But if you focus your proposal on how zoning laws discourage development of in-home day care—and propose a change in those zoning laws to permit more in-home day care centers—then your proposal will benefit others.

Using Stock Issues to Explore Your Problem

Once you have decided on a proposal issue, explore it by freewriting your responses to the following questions. These questions are often called *stock issues*, since they represent generic, or stock, questions that apply to almost any kind of proposal.

1. Is there a problem here that has to be solved?
2. Will the proposed solution really solve this problem?
3. Can the problem be solved in a simpler way without disturbing the status quo?
4. Is the proposed solution practical enough that it really stands a chance of being implemented?
5. What will be the positive and negative consequences of the proposal?

You might also try freewriting your responses to the questions in the “In Conversation” exercise on page 356. Although these questions cover much the same territory as the stock issues, their different presentation might stimulate additional thought.

Finally, try thinking of justifications for your solution by using the principles/consequences/precedents or analogies strategy described on pages 358–359.

Avoiding Presupposing Your Solution in Your Problem Statement

A common mistake of inexperienced proposal writers is to write problem statements that presuppose their solutions. As a restaurant server, suppose you notice that customers want coffee refills faster than servers can provide them. To solve this problem, you propose placing carafes of hot coffee at each table. When describing your problem, don't presuppose your solution: "The problem is that we don't have carafes of hot coffee at the tables." Rather, describe the problematic situation itself: annoyed customers clamoring for coffee and harassed servers trying to bring around refills. Only by giving presence to the original problem can you interest readers in your proposed solution, which readers will compare to other possible approaches (including doing nothing).

Here is another example:

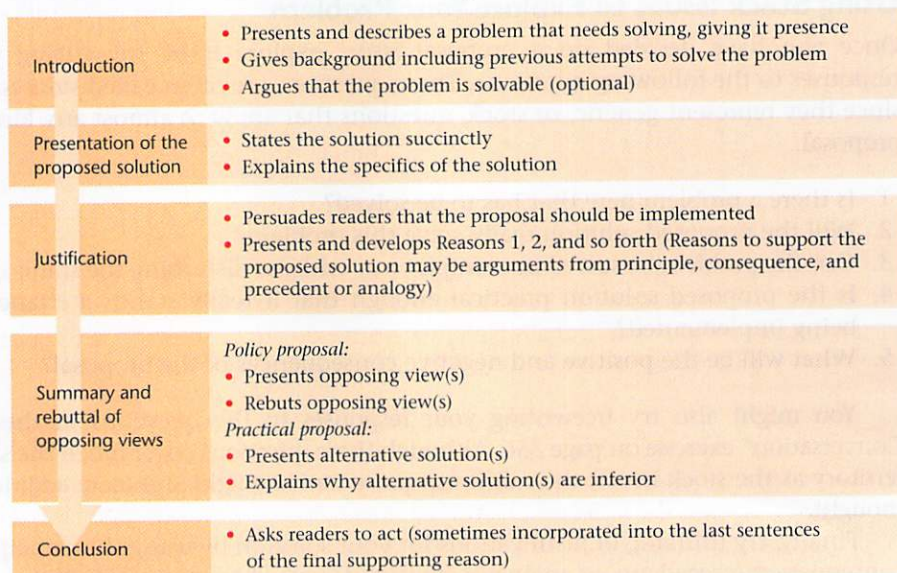
Weak: The problem is that the Student Union doesn't stay open late enough at night.

Better: The problem is that students who study late at night don't have an attractive, convenient place to socialize or study; off-campus coffee houses are too far to walk to at night; dorm lounges aren't attractive or conducive to studying; late-nighters make noise in the dorms instead of going to a convenient place.

Shaping and Drafting

In Figure 14.2, we show a typical organizational plan for a proposal argument that you might use if you get stuck while composing the first draft of your essay.

FIGURE 14.2 Framework of a Proposal Argument



Revising

After you have completed your first draft and begun to clarify your argument for yourself, you are ready to start making your argument clear and persuasive for your readers. Use the strategies for clear closed-form prose outlined in Chapter 16. At this stage, feedback from peer readers can be very helpful.

Questions for Peer Review

In addition to the generic peer review questions explained in Skill 15.4, ask your peer reviewers to address these questions:

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM:

1. How could the title more effectively focus the paper and pique your interest?
2. Where does the writer convince you that a problem exists and that it is significant (worth solving) and solvable? Where does the writer give the problem presence? How could the writer improve the presentation of the problem?

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

3. Does the writer's thesis clearly propose a solution to the problem? Could the thesis be made more precise?
4. Could the writer give you more details about the solution so that you can understand it and see how it works? How could the writer make the solution clearer?

JUSTIFICATION:

5. In the justification section, how could the writer provide stronger reasons for acting on the proposal? Where could the reasons be better supported with more details and evidence? How could the reasons appeal more to the values and beliefs of the audience?
 6. Can you help the writer think of additional justifying arguments (arguments from principle, from consequences, from precedent or analogy)? How else could the writer improve support for the proposal?
 7. Where does the writer anticipate and address opposing views or alternative solutions? How does the writer convince you that the proposed solution is superior to alternative solutions?
 8. Has the writer persuaded you that the benefits of this proposal will outweigh the costs? Who will pay the costs and who will get the benefits? What do you think the gut reaction of a typical decision maker would be to the writer's proposal?
 9. Can you think of other, unforeseen costs that the writer should acknowledge and address? What unforeseen benefits could the writer mention?
 10. How might the writer improve the structure and clarity of the argument? Where might the writer better apply the principles of clarity from Chapter 16?
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**WRITING
PROJECT****Multimodal or Online Options**

1. **Advocacy Ad or Poster** Create a one-page advocacy ad or poster that presents a controversial public problem and calls for action and support. Consider how you will use all the features of visual arguments—type sizes and fonts, layout, color, and images and graphics—to grab the attention of your audience, construct a compelling sketch of the problem, and inform your audience what course of action you want them to take. In this advocacy piece, you need to capture your proposal argument in a highly condensed form, while making it visually clear and memorable. Your instructor might ask you instead to create a longer brochure-length handout or a Web page.
2. **Proposal Speech with Visual Aids** Deliver a proposal argument as a prepared but extemporaneous speech of approximately five to eight minutes supported with visual aids created on presentation software such as PowerPoint or Prezi. Your speech should present a problem, propose a solution, justify the solution with reasons and evidence, and defend it against objections or alternative solutions. As you deliver your speech, use appropriate visual aids to give presence to the problem, highlight points, provide memorable data or evidence, or otherwise enhance appeals to *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. Although presentation software is commonly used in oral presentations, low-tech visual aids (for example, overhead transparencies or flip charts) can also be effective. Follow the guidelines provided by your instructor. As you contemplate this project, consider its three different components: creating the speech itself, designing the visuals, and delivering the speech.

Readings

Our first reading, by student writer Lucy Morsen, is a practical proposal entitled "A Proposal to Improve the Campus Learning Environment by Banning Laptops and Cell Phones from Class." Because practical proposals are aimed at a specific audience, they are often accompanied by a letter of transmittal that introduces the writer, sets the context, and summarizes the proposal. We reproduce here Lucy's transmittal letter followed by her proposal. We also show you the appearance of her title page.

April 26, 2010

Professor Ralph Sorento
Chair, Faculty Senate
_____ University
Street
City, State, Zip

Dear Professor Sorento:

1 Enclosed is a proposal that I hope you will present to the Faculty Senate. It asks the university to ban all laptops and cell phones from classes in consideration of those many students like myself whose educational experience is diminished by classmates who surf the Web or send text messages during lectures or class discussion. As I try to show in this proposal, the effect of laptops and cell phones in class is distracting to many students and may hurt the academic performance of students who think they can multitask without any negative effects. I use both personal experience and recent research reports on multitasking as support for my argument.

2 Banning laptops and cell phones from class would deepen students' engagement with course material and make for more lively and energetic class discussions. I argue that an outright campus ban would be more effective than leaving the decision up to individual instructors.

3 Thank you for considering my proposal. I am happy that this university has a Faculty Senate that welcomes ideas from students on how to make teaching and learning more effective.

Sincerely,
Lucy Morsen,
First-Year Student

A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE THE CAMPUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENT BY
BANNING LAPTOPS AND CELL PHONES FROM CLASS

Submitted to Professor Ralph Sorento
Chair of the Faculty Senate

Lucy Morsen
First-Year Student, Williamson Hall

If this were the actual proposal, it would begin on a new page following the cover page.

1 Although I am generally happy as a first-year student at this university, I wish to call the Faculty Senate's attention to a distracting problem: classmates' frequent use of laptops and cell phones during class. In many classes more than half the students have open laptops on their desks or are openly text-messaging on cell phones. Inevitably, laptop users multitask between taking notes and checking email, perusing Facebook, surfing the Web, looking at YouTube videos, playing a game, or working on an assignment for another class. (I have yet to see a student use his or her laptop solely for note-taking.) Even though I try to focus on class lectures and discussion, I find myself missing key points and ideas as my eyes are drawn to the animations and flashing colors on neighboring laptop screens. Other distractions come from the clicking of cell phone keypads—or the momentary vibration of a phone on a desktop—which can seem surprisingly loud in an otherwise quiet environment. When the person next to me continually picks up and sets down her phone to send and receive text messages, she not only distracts me from the lecture but also lets me know that she is not engaged in class, and seemingly has no interest in being so. My annoyance at my classmates and my frustration at not being able to focus undercut my enjoyment of class.

2 Given the extensive use of laptops and cell phones in class, I question the academic motivation of my classmates. As a student, I most enjoy classes when I and my classmates are actively interested and engaged in class lecture and discussion. Collective interest has a way of feeding on itself. I mean, we as students do not operate in isolation from one another, but instead we affect and influence one another in gross and subtle ways. Together with our professor we create a collective environment in the classroom, and just as we as individuals affect this collective environment, this collective environment influences us as individuals. The broad effects and consequences of this dynamic interplay should not be underestimated. Humans are highly social beings; we have the power to influence each other in both positive and negative ways. I believe that the distracting nature of laptops and cell phones is negatively affecting classroom environments. Any steps we can take collectively to help each other learn and succeed should be considered.

3 To address this problem, I propose a campus-wide ban on laptops and cell phones during class. I believe a campus-wide ban would be more effective than more limited measures some institutions have adopted, such as blocking wireless access from classrooms or allowing each professor to choose whether or not to ban laptops in his or her classroom. Blocking wireless access does not address the problem of cell phones or non-Web-based laptop distractions (such as computer games or other class work). Leaving the decision up to professors creates an added difficulty for them. I can imagine that professors, fearing resentment and poor evaluations from their students, would be reluctant to enforce a ban in their classrooms, even if they feel it would improve the classroom experience.

4 A campus-wide ban, on the other hand, would be easy to enforce, and students would more easily establish new habits—namely, not using laptops and cell phones during class. Over time, this could become the new campus norm.

5 Although many students might at first object to a ban, the decision to ban all laptops and cell phones in class would bring benefits not only to distracted students like me but also to current users of laptops and cell phones as well as to professors.

6 For one thing, the banning of laptops and cell phones would improve the learning atmosphere of a classroom. These technologies simply create too many distractions for students, and the negative consequences of these distractions are significant enough to call for institutional intervention. While some of my classmates may begrudge the ban, I believe they would quickly get used to it and notice improvements in their own classroom interest and performance. Many of my classmates may actually welcome the ban because they—like myself—are aware of the negative distractions laptops and cell phones create. In fact, an informal survey by a Georgetown University law professor who bans laptops in his classroom indicated that 70% of his students welcomed the ban (Cole, 2008).

7 Second, a ban might directly improve academic performance of current users of laptops and cell phones. A recent study at the University of Winona (Fried, 2008) found that laptop use in the classroom had a significant negative effect on class performance. In Fried's study, students who brought laptops to class received lower grades than their classmates who did not bring laptops to class. Moreover, those who brought laptops to class reported using their laptops for non-class purposes for nearly a quarter of class time.

8 Many of my classmates will likely argue that this study doesn't apply to them. They believe that they are skilled multitaskers who can continue to pay attention to a lecture while also engaging in these other activities. There is empirical evidence that they are in fact mistaken about their ability to multitask. A study by three Stanford University researchers found that persons who self-reported being heavy multitaskers were *more* easily distracted from a primary task than those who reported themselves as light multitaskers (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). The researchers conducted this study in a lab by giving multitasking tasks to a group of self-identified heavy multitaskers and then to a group of light multitaskers. This study suggests that a person's own perception of how well he or she multitasks may not be reliable. Moreover it suggests that large amounts of daily multitasking may actually decrease a person's ability to concentrate on a single task and suppress irrelevant information.

9 A handful of students will likely argue that they only use their laptops for class-related purposes, and that an outright ban on laptops in the classroom would be unfair because they would be prohibited from using them for note-taking. However, I am skeptical of any claims that students make of only using laptops for class-related purposes. I personally have never seen any evidence of this, and research is indicating that multitasking is overwhelmingly the common norm among laptop users in the classroom. In a study by Benbunan-Fich and Truman (2009), student laptop use was monitored for 28 classroom sessions of 80 minutes (with students' permission). The researchers analyzed how often the students toggled between screens, and whether the screens were class-related or non-class-related. They found that 76% of the time students toggled between screens that were non-class-related. On average, students toggled between computer-based activities 37.5 times per 80-minute session. This research suggests that the temptations of non-class-related activities are simply too

great for students *not* to engage in multitasking in class—it is just too easy to do a brief check of email or a quick Facebook scan with a swift click of a mouse.

University institutions may feel reluctant to propose a campus-wide ban on laptops and cell phones in the classroom for fear of seeming overly authoritative and unnecessarily limiting student freedom. After all, students might rightly claim that they have a right to do whatever they want in the classroom as long as they aren't harming anyone else. (I have already shown they actually are harming others.) While I believe that individual rights are an important concern—in general I believe university institutions should allow for a great amount of autonomy for their students—I think that laptop use has too many negative consequences to be allowed simply in the name of student freedom. (Of course, a professor can always allow laptop use for students with special needs.)

For these reasons, I propose that a campus-wide ban on laptops and cell phones in the classroom should be considered. A campus-wide ban would help to create more positive, cohesive classroom experiences, and it would provide a reprieve for students from the myriad of distractions this modern technological age presents us. A campus-wide ban would be easier on professors to enforce, and it would help to establish a new (and improved) norm.

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THINKING CRITICALLY

about “A Proposal to Improve the Campus Learning Environment by Banning Laptops and Cell Phones from Class”

1. What strategies does Lucy Morsen use to convince the Faculty Senate that a problem exists?
2. What strategies does Lucy employ to persuade the Faculty Senate that her proposal is worth enacting and that it is more effective than alternative solutions?
3. How does Lucy tie her proposal to the values and beliefs of her audience—college professors who are members of the Faculty Senate?
4. How effective is Lucy's use of research evidence to support her proposal?
5. If you were a faculty member, how effective would you find Lucy's proposal? How effective do you find it as a student? What are its chief strengths and weaknesses?