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How can I create a research proposal?

A research proposal—sometimes called a prospectus—is a formal presentation of your plan for your research writing project. A proposal helps you pull together the planning you've done on your project, identify areas where you need additional planning, and assess the progress you've made so far.

Unlike a research plan (see p. 24), which is designed primarily to help you decide how to collect information, a research proposal is addressed to someone else, usually an instructor, a supervisor, or a funding agency. Although the specific format for research proposals can vary widely across disciplines, a research proposal typically includes the following parts.

- A title page
- An introduction that identifies your topic issue, and/or research question
- A review of literature
- An explanation of how you will collect information
- A project timeline
- A working bibliography

In addition to these core elements, you can also provide an abstract or executive summary, offer an overview of key challenges, and include a funding request. You can read about how to develop each of these core and optional elements below.

Identify Your Topic, Issue, and Research Question

A title page and introduction offer your readers an overview of the topic and issue you'll address in your project document. Your title page should include the working title of your research writing project, your name and contact information, and the date. Your introduction should identify the topic you've chosen and the issue you've decided to address; state your research question and, if you have created one, your position on the issue (see p. 63); describe your purpose; and identify and describe your readers. It should also identify the type of document you'll create and explain how your choice of genre reflects your purpose, your understanding of your readers, and the contexts that will shape your work on your research project.

Provide a Review of Literature

A review of literature presents an overview of the key information, ideas, and arguments in the sources you've collected so far. You should identify the most useful sources you found during your exploration of your topic and explain why you found them useful. Keep in mind, however, that a review of literature goes beyond the simple list of sources that are typically found in a working bibliography

by offering a discussion of important approaches to your issue. That is, a review of literature focuses not so much on individual sources as on groups of sources and the shared ideas or positions taken by groups of sources. Focusing on general approaches to an issue, as opposed to the individual positions adopted in particular sources, can help you understand the major ideas that are being considered in the conversation you are planning to join. By understanding existing approaches to an issue, you can determine whether you agree with any of those approaches or whether you want to introduce a completely new approach. In turn, this will help you develop your own individual position on the issue.

For an example that illustrates how key approaches to an issue can be discussed, see featured writer Nicholas Brothers's review of literature on p. 54.

Explain How You'll Collect Information

Your research proposal should help your reader understand how you will collect information. Your plan should identify:

- the types of sources you intend to collect (such as books, journal articles, or opinion columns)
- the types of search tools (such as library catalogs, databases, and Web search sites) and research methods (such as browsing library shelves, consulting librarians, or conducting surveys) you want to use
- the types of strategies (such as simple and advanced database searches or field research) that you intend to use in your searches
- the schedule you will follow as you carry out your searches

Your research question will influence your decisions about how you will collect information. For example, you can use your research question—and, if you've developed one, your position on your issue (see p. 63)—to help identify keywords and phrases that might be used in database, catalog, and Web searches.

Identify Relevant Types of Sources. To identify relevant sources for your writing project, consider the nature of the conversation you are joining, the scope and timeliness of your subject, the information you'll need to develop your ideas, and the evidence you'll need to support your points. Ask yourself, for example, about the conversation you've decided to join. Does it focus on a highly specialized issue within a scholarly discipline, such as a discussion of gene splicing in biochemistry? If so, you're likely to find that the best sources will be scholarly books and journal articles. Does it address a subject that has broad appeal, such as transportation problems in your state or region? If so, you'll find it helpful to draw on a much wider range of sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, editorials and opinion columns, blogs, and Web sites.

You should also ask whether the issue you've decided to address is relatively broad or highly focused, and whether it is of enduring interest. Some issues, such as funding for higher education or reducing alcohol consumption by college students, tend to be discussed over an extended period of time in a wide range

of sources. If your subject focuses on a recent event, however, it might be best to turn to magazine and newspaper articles, the Web, blogs, observation, surveys, or interviews—that is, sources that are published or updated recently enough that they are likely to contain current information or observations about the event.

Consider what you need to learn about your topic and issue. If your topic or issue is relatively unfamiliar to you, look for sources that offer general overviews or discuss important aspects of the topic or issue. The introductory chapter of a scholarly book, for example, often provides a general overview of a topic, even when the rest of the book focuses on a specific issue. You can also look for overviews of a topic in magazine articles, in professional journal articles, and on the Web.

Finally, ask yourself about the evidence you'll need. As you reflect on what you want to say about your issue, think about the kind of evidence other writers have used to make their points. If you've found, for example, that most of the sources you explored use numerical data found in scholarly research reports, be sure to search for those kinds of reports. Similarly, if you notice that several writers tend to refer to expert opinion, search for sources written by recognized experts in a field.

Identify Appropriate Search Tools and Research Methods. Once you've identified the types of sources that seem most relevant, determine which search tools and research methods you might use to locate those sources. In general, you can use three sets of resources to locate information.

- Online search tools, such as online library catalogs, databases, and Web search sites, allow you to search and browse for sources using a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Online search tools provide access to publication information about—and in some cases to the complete text of—print and digital sources. You can read about online search tools in Chapter 8.
- Print resources, such as bibliographies, indexes, encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, almanacs, and atlases, can be found in library reference and periodical rooms. Unlike online search tools, which typically cover recent publications, many print resources provide information about publications over several decades—and in some cases over more than a century. You can read about print resources in Chapter 9.
- Field research methods, such as interviews and observations, allow you to collect information firsthand. In addition to conducting observations and interviews, you can correspond with experts, attend public events and performances, and view or listen to television and radio programs. You can read about field research methods in Chapter 10.

Featured writer Nicholas Brothers knew that his project would require the use of recent sources. As he thought about how to collect information, he decided to search databases for recent scholarly articles and to look for Web sites that provided access to recent reports and debates about the issue. To obtain the most up-to-date information, he also scheduled an interview with a professor at his university who was knowledgeable about the issue.

Develop a Project Timeline

A project timeline will give your reader an indication of the range of days, weeks, or months over which you will be completing your research and writing your document. Your timeline can range from a general description of the number of days or weeks you'll devote to your project to a detailed list of key project activities and the amount of time devoted to completing them. If you are working on a group project, a project timeline can be especially useful, since it will require discussion of individual responsibilities for completing tasks and deadlines for completing them.

Compile a Working or Annotated Bibliography

A working bibliography lists the sources you've collected so far. Sometimes you will be asked to create an annotated bibliography, which contains a brief description of each source. Your working or annotated bibliography should conform to the documentation system (such as MLA, APA, *Chicago*, or CSE) specified by your instructor, supervisor, or funding agency. For more information on bibliographies, see p. 113.

Clarify and Elaborate on Your Core Proposal

Depending on your purpose, your reader, and the scope of your research writing project, you can choose to include several optional elements.

- An **abstract or executive summary** provides a brief summary—usually fifty to two hundred words—of your project. It should allow your reader to gain a general understanding of your project and your plans for completing it.
- An **overview of key challenges** allows you to share your thoughts about potential problems you'll need to address as you work on your project. This section of your research proposal might discuss difficulties you're likely to encounter, such as locating or collecting specific types of sources, gaining enough knowledge about an issue to develop a credible position, or finding enough respondents for a survey. It also provides an opportunity for your instructor, supervisor, or potential funder to respond by suggesting strategies for meeting specific challenges.
- A **funding request and rationale** provides a budget that identifies costs for key project activities, such as conducting your search, reviewing the sources you collect, writing and designing the document, and publishing or distributing the document.

Writing a formal research proposal allows you to reflect on the work you've done so far and get feedback on your plans to carry out your project. Perhaps more important, it requires you to make decisions about the best strategies for completing your project.

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Nicholas Brothers
 English 108: College Writing and Research
 Dawn Terrick
 September 17, 2010

Research Proposal: Private Military
 Corporations and the War on Terror

Introduction: For my research project, I would like to explore the world of the modern private military corporation (PMC). Mercenaries have been used throughout history by countries all over the world. With few exceptions, they have suffered a poor reputation; seen as unprofessional and unreliable, they went unused by many first-world nations in the age of standing professional armies. Yet, in recent years, PMCs have morphed into corporate entities and gained new respect. But is this respect deserved? Throughout the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, the United States' use of private military corporations has increased to what I consider startling levels.

While I will strive to be as objective as possible when conducting my research, my prior personal interest in this issue has always put me at odds with the supporters of PMCs. Fundamentally, I believe that overreliance on contractors is a danger to national and international security. However, it is entirely possible that, with further study, I will gain a new appreciation for PMCs and their personnel.

My purpose is ultimately to build an argument about the United States' continued use of PMCs, to present my position on the issue, and will need to inform my readers about the history of PMCs and analyze the corporations' evolving role in our country's military engagements. My readers are my class peers (from many different backgrounds and studying different subjects) and my instructor. Although there is a wide range of scholarship and reportage on this topic, I believe the general public remains unaware of the pervasiveness of these corporations. It's my hope that upon reading my paper, the layperson will have a better understanding of how and why PMCs are involved in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I will be creating an academic essay and a brief presentation to convey my research and argument to my readers. The print format of the essay will allow readers to follow my logic at their own pace and reread sections of the essay as needed, and it will also provide them an easy way to look up the sources I use if they want to explore the topic further — which I hope they will. The presentation will allow me to explain a complicated issue in a more conversational format and answer any questions.

I plan to begin my paper with background information — mostly recent history unless I find something compelling from the distant

Discussion of purpose addresses the writer's intent and the readers' needs.

Position statement is clear and concise.

The literature review helps Nicholas think about his sources' different positions.

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past that I feel readers must know to better understand the present. I would like to explore the practical and moral costs of using PMCs. In doing so, I will likely focus on specific companies and incidents during the "War on Terror" years.

Research Question: What roles do private military corporations play in the US military's war on terror?

Review of Literature: The book that originally piqued my interest in this topic was Jeremy Scahill's *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, which depicts PMCs as very dangerous entities. Articles I've come across in publications such as *Salon.com* and *Mother Jones* also strongly criticize PMCs. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum are the corporate Web sites of the PMCs, which of course paint their contractors in only the most positive light.

I found a more evenhanded approach to the topic in a *Wall Street Journal* article, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, which provides a solid overview of the history of PMCs and explains their structure and functions.

Search Plan and Relevant Sources: I will need to continue to seek out a range of perspectives on PMCs as I develop my own argument. I plan to conduct some field research by interviewing people who have firsthand experience with or expertise on PMCs. My brother, Michael Brothers, is in the military and might agree to an interview, and I plan to look at the research interests of the political science professors at Missouri Western to see if anyone might be able to provide me with insight on the wars from an academic perspective.

I have already located three books on the subject through the library's online catalog, and by reading through the citations and sources used by the authors of these books, I have identified several other books that I might explore. In addition, I have used simple keyword and advanced searches on EBSCOhost, LexisNexis, and *NYTimes.com* to find several magazine, newspaper, and scholarly journal articles that provide contrasting viewpoints on the use of PMCs. They range from first-person accounts of PMC operations to academic articles analyzing the history and current use of PMCs.

I'd also like to take a look at some official government reports and read the actual language of some of the laws that surround PMCs. The Department of Defense Web site, as well as senators and representatives' Web sites, might be good places to start. Once my first draft is complete, I might conduct another round of research to help answer any new questions or expand on new supporting points that I've developed.

The research question is open-ended but focuses on a specific time and place.

Nicholas identifies both a general search idea and a specific plan to carry out the search.

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Project Timeline: I have a little more than one month to complete this project. I already have several solid sources and plan to have my first assignment (the background paper based on what I know so far) completed one week from today. The next week, I'll conduct my interviews and write an interview paper based on my conversations. From there, I will combine the background paper and the interview paper, synthesizing these two drafts along with any new sources I've found. I will receive feedback on my first draft from my classmates and instructor. Then, I'll conduct any additional research needed and revise the draft by the due date of Oct. 20th. After the final draft is submitted, I'll create a reverse outline and summarize my paper's most important points for a brief in-class presentation the following week.

Key Challenges: Finding knowledgeable first-hand sources will be the main problem I will encounter, but I have some candidates in mind in helping me to understand the perceptions of U.S. military personnel, the history of mercenaries, and the political ramifications of their present-day use by the United States. I will contact them soon to inquire about their willingness and availability. I feel that I have already amassed a good deal of research material and plans, but I am wary that my sources so far might be geared toward my inherent bias toward the subject. I would like to make sure I have real opposing views to explore and not just straw men; this is a goal I will continually have to work toward.

Time is another challenge. I have to conduct field research quickly and synthesize the results of the interview paper with the rest of my research in a short amount of time to create a first draft. I'm also concerned about focusing my topic enough for the paper to make sense—there are a lot of issues related to my topic that are intriguing, from the history of mercenaries to the legal status of PMCs and their lack of culpability for their crimes. Limiting the scope of my project could be difficult given the many aspects of the topic that seem worth addressing.

Writing down key challenges helps Nicholas avoid potential problems.

A general project timeline indicates the time devoted to each stage of the process.

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Working Bibliography

Scahill, Jeremy. *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. 2nd ed. New York: Nation Books, 2007. Print.

This book details the history of the private military corporation formerly known as Blackwater, with a focus on its controversial operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Scahill is a reporter for *The Nation* and has reported extensively on Blackwater. I will use this book throughout my research project, as Blackwater (now Xe Services) remains one of the most powerful, visible, and divisive PMCs in the world.

Singer, P. W. *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*. 2nd ed. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008. Print.

This scholarly look at the issue takes a balanced view. Singer is able to see the opportunities that PMCs provide while casting a critical eye at the potentials for abuse. I believe this will be an essential resource due to its balanced viewpoint and thoroughness.

Smith, Eugene B. "The New Condottieri and US Policy: The Privatization of Conflict and Its Implications." *Parameters: US Army War College* 32.4 (2002): 104. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.

Written before the invasion of Iraq, this academic article briefly outlines the history of the privatization of warfare and concludes that the United States should employ PMCs due to their track record. At the time of this article's writing, Eugene B. Smith was a lieutenant colonel in the United States Army and served in the United States Central Command area of operations. This article might be useful in understanding the mindset of the military command that has increasingly employed private contractors in the last decade.

The working bibliography summarizes sources and evaluates their usefulness.