

TIPS FOR REVIEWING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH PROPOSALS

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Many methods textbooks offer helpful advice for how to write social science research proposals. The literature less often includes information on how to review proposals. This check sheet is designed to help fill that gap. Below you will find tips for how researchers can offer a more rigorous and comprehensive evaluation of proposals written by others. This can also help proposal writers to turn a critical eye toward their own text.

Step 1 - Review the Call for Proposals and Proposal Review Guidelines; Conduct a Preliminary Scan of the Proposal

- What has the funder listed as “required” or “recommended” in terms of the proposal submission process?
- What do the proposal review guidelines suggest in terms of the approach to the review and the recommended review length and format?
- Scan the research proposal. Has the proposal writer included all necessary elements, such as the abstract, introduction, literature review, methods, analysis plan, budget, and references? If the submission is incomplete and you are part of a review panel, contact the program director to seek guidance about whether you should review an incomplete submission.

Step 2 - Review the Proposal

- Are the research questions or problem statements based on gaps in previous research or enduring challenges or questions in the field? Are the research questions clear and compelling? Do the questions lend themselves to the production of unbiased, novel, and interesting data?
- Has the proposal writer completed a [systematic literature review](#) to demonstrate that they are aware of ongoing debates, gaps in knowledge, pressing questions in the field, and so forth? If not, do you have suggestions for empirical or theoretical literatures they might engage?
- Are the [research questions well matched to the proposed methods](#) and overall [research design](#)? Do the methods identified seem reasonable and appropriate to answer the questions?
- Has the researcher convinced you of the significance of the study? Meaning, does this research seem like it will offer significant contributions to theory, policy, practice, or social change?
- Is the research setting(s) clearly identified? Is it clear how the researcher will gain access to the site, organization, or other entity? If the proposal involves post-disaster research, has the researcher carefully considered site access and safety issues?
- Is the target population clearly identified? Is the sampling frame and sample size justified? Is it clear how the researcher will gain access to the target population? Has the researcher carefully considered any potential issues related to respondent burden among disaster-affected populations or other groups likely to be studied frequently following a major event?
- If the research involves [potentially vulnerable and/or historically marginalized populations](#), have special considerations for the ethical conduct of research been included? Has the researcher carefully assessed and addressed other ethical concerns that may arise?

- Does the proposal identify the unit or units of analysis and the associated sampling approach? Is the sampling approach likely to be feasible if the proposal involves post-disaster research?
- Has the researcher carefully considered issues related to [cultural competence](#)?
- Does the proposal include a plan for analyzing the data that will be collected in the course of the study?
- Does the proposed timeline for project completion seem reasonable and feasible? Has the researcher already gained [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\) approval](#) for the study? If not, have they demonstrated a strong awareness of the [importance of the IRB](#) and included a timeline for submission?
- Does the proposal include a knowledge dissemination and/or outreach plan, including sharing outcomes with research participants, fellow researchers, and other potentially interested groups? Are the findings likely to result in broader impacts based on the proposed dissemination initiatives?
- Has the researcher demonstrated the feasibility or the “do-ability” of the study? What skills, knowledge, or resources might the researcher need in order to complete this study? Does the researcher or research team seem qualified to carry out the proposed research?
- Is the writing clear, readable, well-organized, and grammatically correct?
- Are all of the references that are cited in the body of the proposal included in the reference list?
- If required, does the proposal include a detailed [data management plan](#)?
- Does the budget seem appropriately scaled to the duration and complexity of the project? Have likely expenses for data collection, data analysis, and knowledge dissemination and outreach activities been anticipated?

Step 3 - Write Up the Proposal Review

- The best proposal reviews are clear and constructive. Reviewers should offer specific feedback on what could further strengthen the research questions, literature review, and/or research design. It is generally not helpful to offer vague statements like “The research design was underdeveloped.” It is more useful when reviewers offer clear and detailed suggestions regarding how specific sections of the proposal could be further developed or strengthened.
- Reviews should never include ad hominem attacks against the proposal writer. Focus on the substance of the proposal and ensure that comments are always professional.
- Remember to compliment the proposal writer on things that you liked in the proposal or those sections that you found especially compelling.
- In some situations, funders offer proposal writers the chance to revise and resubmit. Make sure you understand whether this is the case before you complete your review.

The above areas for consideration are not exhaustive, but the hope is that they can help guide proposal reviewers through the task at hand. Well-crafted proposals can result in transformative research, and we recognize the generous service of reviewers in advancing our field.

RESOURCES:

For additional advice on writing strong research proposals and carrying out ethical and rigorous research, see the CONVERGE Extreme Events Research Check Sheets series at: <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/check-sheets>.

For further information on writing a data management plan, see: <https://converge.colorado.edu/data/data-management>.

For CONVERGE Training Modules focused on Institutional Review Board (IRB) Procedures for Extreme Events Research, Cultural Competence, Social Vulnerability, , and other relevant topics, see: <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/training-modules>.

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