

Chapter One

Someone once said, “those who know *how* will always have a job, but those who know *why* will lead the way.” When you write a project proposal, you need to answer two critical “why” questions: “why do this?” and “why *this way* as opposed to some *other way*?” A key premise of this text is that you can only answer those “why” questions through research. Without research, you will not have knowledge (or, at least, you will not be able to persuade other people that you have knowledge), and without knowledge you cannot answer “why” in a way that persuades people to follow you.

We live in a society where knowledge is at the heart of the decision making process. In this “knowledge society,” as Peter Drucker has called it, “knowledge workers” need many complex skills and abilities to get things done. They need to be able to:

- guide their own learning to master new knowledge and skills,
- analyze new situations, assess information needs, and locate that information,
- understand and digest both factual and theoretical material,
- think creatively to combine or improve available ideas,
- harness knowledge to justify a plan,
- develop and explain complex plans of action to others, and
- manage people and resources by putting information into action.

Knowledge workers need to be prepared for the creative challenge of solving problems through research, and they need practice in communicating their research to others. Having the experience of writing a project proposal where they use research to rationalize a plan of action can be a great first step toward professional competence. This book is designed to help you through the process of writing such a proposal.

The Six Parts of the Project Proposal

Though formats differ from organization to organization, there are always six basic parts to any good project proposal:

- Patron (the person who will fund your proposal)
- Population (the people who will benefit from the it)
- Problem (the need or opportunity that your proposal addresses)
- Paradigm (the research rationale for your plan)
- Plan (the way you will address the problem)
- Price (the budget to implement your plan)

A good project proposal will always help a specific *population* address a *problem* by developing a *paradigm*-based *plan* of action that stays within the *price* that your *patron* is willing to pay. Though formats will differ from place to place, all strong proposals

will have these six basic elements. The difficult part of making a strong proposal is having all of the parts fit together into a coherent whole.

The Six P Formula can be used to organize both your written product and your writing process. The ideal process will follow the Six P's in order, more or less, focusing first on identifying a population to assist, a problem to solve, and a patron who would be willing to fund; then developing a paradigm through research that will help you design a well justified plan of action; and once you have your plan you can develop your budget.

Patron

Who will fund your project? This is the person to whom you will literally address your proposal, and therefore the person whose name will be on your cover letter or memo. He or she will be your chief audience or reader. This is the person you most need to persuade. The patron could be your boss, the people at headquarters, a government group, or any public or private foundation. Like the "patrons" of the arts who paid for public and private projects in the Renaissance, your patron is the person whose hand controls the purse. Recognize that the interests of your patron must ultimately influence the proposal. If you choose a source that is most compatible with your approach, you will have fewer problems justifying your plan to them.

Population

Who will benefit from your project? These are the people who will directly or indirectly benefit from your proposal. In a business setting, they may be your customers or people in your organization. In the case of a scientific project, the population should be thought of as both the people in your field who want certain questions answered and the people in the world who might benefit from your research. In any case, a persuasive project proposal will have a well thought out human dimension. After all, why should a proposal be funded if no one but you will benefit from it?

Sometimes students choose a project proposal (such as any reform at their college) where they themselves are part of the population to be served. If you do that, it is especially important for you to remain objective. No one wants to fund a self-serving project, and until you can imagine other beneficiaries for your work (the larger population of students to be served) you will not be able to make a persuasive case for funding.

Problem

What instigates your project? This could be a theoretical question (in the case of scientific research), or an opportunity not to be missed (in the case of an entrepreneurial endeavor), or a persistent issue that needs remedying (in the broadest sense of problem). All good proposals begin with a problem. If you find yourself beginning with a plan of action, then you have really jumped to conclusions. Before anyone should consider acting, after all, they need to be convinced that the problem is objectively real and that it needs to be addressed. You should first try to quantify or define your problem so that your patron can understand its scale, scope, and significance. In the case of a theoretical question, you will need to show how this question arose in prior research. In a business proposal, you will typically need to quantify the problem so that your patron can weigh

the costs and benefits of action and inaction. Why does the problem even need to be addressed? Ultimately, you need to provide evidence to answer that question.

Paradigm

Why is your plan of action the best one available for addressing the problem? To answer “why” you need a research-based rationale that answers these two questions: *How do you know* that your plan will solve the problem? And *why* try to solve the problem *this way* rather than any number of other ways? A good research-based rationale will show that you have a consensus within your field that justifies your approach. It might also show that the plan you want to implement has strong precedents to suggest it will succeed. This is basically what we mean by a “paradigm.”

The way we use the term “paradigm” today has been greatly influenced by the work of Thomas Kuhn. In Kuhn’s view, experiments form the basis of scientific knowledge by being what he called “exemplars” or models of how problems can be solved. The larger theory that explains why the models work, which he called the “disciplinary matrix,” often comes much later. But the part and the whole are mutually dependent. When there is a consensus within a field of endeavor that this model and this matrix agree with each other, you have a paradigm. In terms of writing a persuasive project proposal, a paradigm can be either a model of success (or benchmark) that you think should be imitated or it can be a theoretical framework for understanding why your plan should succeed. The ideal paradigm will feature both an exemplar and a disciplinary matrix: it will have both a model of success and a theory of why that model succeeds; it will have both the part and the whole.

Paradigms describe the rhetorical and conceptual spaces that practitioners of any discipline generally follow. In the sciences and some areas of social research, paradigms are so commonly shared that a shorthand has developed for describing them, so that many paradigms can be summed up in a phrase that names a theory within a specific discipline: “integrated pest management” in agriculture, or “experiential learning” in education, or “ecological risk assessment” in environmental planning, or “the broken window theory” in sociology or law enforcement. These terms grew out of exemplary practices that became common knowledge within a field of endeavor.

If you want to develop a paradigm for your project, you might ask these questions: How have other people solved this problem or addressed this question in the past? What models of successful practice are available to give me ideas and help justify a plan or experiment? What theories or ideas might help me develop a logical approach to this problem or to develop experimental procedures? How might language from my discipline help describe and understand the problem?

Once you have a paradigm, you will be able to construct your plan based on research. Without a paradigm you will be inventing your plan out of whole cloth with nothing but your own ethos to justify it, and that is not likely to take you very far with your patron.

Plan

Your plan might be a construction project, a training or education program, an experiment to test a hypothesis, a study to determine what course of action is best, or some other specific initiative. Since a good plan will have to grow organically out of the people, problem, and paradigm, it is generally not the first thing you will work on for the project. It has to be responsive to your research findings.

How you present your plan will depend upon your project, but you should strive to be as explicit as possible about all that will be involved. If you can find a way to visually organize this part of your proposal, it will help your reader understand it better. If the project will take place in a series of steps, you might be able to set up a calendar showing the sequence of events. If the plan requires construction, you will probably want to draw a diagram of the thing you are going to build. But a good plan needs to look back at its problem and paradigm: it should detail the specific ways you are going to address the problem and suggest how it follows logically from your models and research.

Price

Once you have your plan in place, you will need to calculate a budget. Often, your budget is restricted before you begin your project, and you should recognize the ways that price can have a strong influence over choices you make in dealing with the other five P's. If you are making a case for overall long-term savings from your project, you may want to include those in your calculations. If the materials for your project can be broken down and detailed, then do so. Find out the price of the materials you need, either by contacting suppliers or looking up prices online. Talk to people who have done this sort of work before if you can. Use your judgment if you are not certain of costs, but try to be as realistic as possible.

Other Considerations

The Six P's are not an exhaustive list, but they should handle the critical issues you need to cover in any good proposal. We could add some other P's here, and I would like to mention two more, since they often come up: Partners and Politics.

By partners I mean the people who will help you achieve your goals yet who will not necessarily be benefiting from the project or providing funding for it. They might be other organizations or other people in your company. They can sometimes be very important to discuss in your proposal since mentioning their support will show that you already have convinced other people that you have a good project idea.

By politics I mean the larger cultural, economic, legal, or political situation that may impact your proposal. As we know, projects that might gain support at one time or in one place will not gain support in another time or place. If your project runs counter to prevailing ideology, you may have a problem on your hands. For example, it would be politically difficult to get backing to promote the medical use of illegal drugs in a State with tough anti-drug laws; it would be difficult to organize a deer hunt to address a deer overpopulation issue in a community that is anti-hunting; it might be foolhardy to propose new accounting tricks in the wake of accounting scandals like Enron; and costly

projects will not be well received during times of fiscal difficulty. At the very least, you may need to give special attention to your rhetorical frame (that is, how you argue for your project) or you may need to adjust some of your assumptions to make your proposal more feasible given current realities (or “politics.”)

The Interdependence of the Six P’s

You should imagine the Six P’s spatially, as the parts of a coherent project that might come together in any temporal order. Making the Six P’s fit together can sometimes feel like building a structure with six interlocking parts. The Six P’s are completely interdependent entities, so choices in one area impact choices in other areas. You need to be open to revising the different parts of your project as it develops. How will decisions about the funding source (the addressee for your proposal) affect the way you approach the problem? How will the population to be served by the project impact the approach you might take?

For example, suppose your lab has expanded beyond its present capacity to give experimental space to all who need it. The people in charge of finding a solution to this problem will begin by asking themselves a number of questions:

- ❑ Patron: Where might we get money to solve this problem?
- ❑ Population: Who is most affected by the problem?
- ❑ Problem: What are some of the causes of the problem? What is its scope? What non-subjective evidence do we have that there really is a problem?
- ❑ Paradigm: How have other labs succeeded in solving this problem? What innovative approaches (such as time sharing) have they used? What areas of knowledge can be brought to bear on the problem?
- ❑ Plan: What plans are feasible given current fiscal and political realities?
- ❑ Price: How much do you think you might be able to raise to fund your project? How much have similar projects cost?

If you find a patron willing to give you whatever money you need, then that will make it possible to build additional space. But if your funds are limited and you need to make do with the space available, then that will clearly change your approach. In the case of limited funds, you may need to make decisions about which researchers should have priority over others, and so that will create a more narrow population that needs extra assistance. We could go on and on, but clearly at each step of your project you should recognize how your choices can have cascading effects down the line.

The Six Ps in Action

Because you are likely to make changes in your proposal at each step of its development, you should be prepared to revise your project as you go to make it more coherent. While not every project develops in a coherent step-by-step process following the order of the Six P’s, they all need to put the Six P’s together in a way that meshes. Some projects might actually begin with a plan (“I want to build a playground”) and then work

backwards in order to supply the paradigm, problem and people that will create a unified project (“Who else needs a playground? Who else might benefit from the project and want to get involved? Who might fund it? How do we justify the project to the funding source?”) Some projects begin logically but then require extensive revision to resolve conflicts between various areas of the Six P’s (as when the patron doesn’t like the price).

A Rutgers Computer Science student taking one of our professional writing courses – let’s call her Sandy – wanted to build a web page for a restaurant where she worked, but she didn’t see how that web page could be used to improve business. She had begun with the plan (“I want to build a web site”), and her dilemma was that she didn’t see the problem to be solved or the paradigm to solve it. But that didn’t mean she could not succeed in creating a fundable project proposal. She just had to go back to the beginning and ask some of the questions that had been skipped over in leaping to the plan of action.

Sandy already knew the funding source: the restaurant owners would pay to develop a good website. But she had not yet thought about the people to be served (who are our customers? do they even have access to the web?), or the problem (how could a web site improve business? what opportunities are we missing out on by not having one?), or the paradigm to guide her (what principles or models of success might give us ideas?) Without answers to these questions, the web site could very well become a waste of resources. She had to work on the Six P’s.

A good project always depends on good research. And what Sandy most needed was a paradigm to guide her research.

In her initial writings about the project, Sandy had made the textbook distinction between “target marketing,” which seeks to attract new consumers from a specific group, and “relationship marketing,” which involves improving loyalty among the base of consumers who already use your product or service. She suggested that the internet was probably more useful for relationship marketing than for target marketing because of how expensive and difficult it is to reach consumers who haven’t already heard of your business. In fact, she recognized it might be easier to attract people to the website by using the restaurant than to attract people to the restaurant by using the website.

What Sandy did not recognize right away was that the term “relationship marketing” describes a researchable concept, literally a marketing paradigm. Sandy had stumbled upon the term in her initial research, but because she was not a marketing major (she was a computer science major, after all) it had not occurred to her that she could explore that concept further through more focused research and reading. To do that, she needed to look at resources in the marketing field and examples of relationship marketing in action. A brief stop at the library index ABI Inform (which indexes business sources and even offers full text versions online) showed her that there was a wealth of source material within easy reach. A single search turned up almost 500 potential sources on “relationship marketing” alone. Though she found no examples of restaurants using the concept, she did discover quite a few service-sector models for using a web site to build relationships with loyal customers. One of the best examples she found, described at

length in one article, was of a dry cleaner that used a sophisticated web site not only to communicate with customers but also to offer other services that helped to develop a sense of community around the establishment. The site even had a singles meeting page that allowed people going to this dry cleaner to connect with local singles, many of whom would post their pictures both online and in the lobby of the establishment.

You might say that Sandy's paradigm was supported by both the exemplar (or example) of the dry cleaner and the disciplinary matrix (or theory) of "relationship marketing," two things she knew nothing about when she began her research. There were other approaches she could have explored (for example, there is a large body of research on building a "virtual community," a term coined by Howard Rheingold.) But the approach she found gave her what she needed. The idea Sandy ended up developing was quite creative and went beyond the things she had learned as a computer science major. In many ways, the project helped her to understand the human dimensions of her field.

After looking at how a number of other companies used their web sites to develop relationships with customers, Sandy was able to synthesize an original yet proven plan for her workplace. She decided to work on developing a sense of community around the restaurant, so that even when customers were not there they could participate in the social life of the institution, developing a relationship with it like the patrons of the television bar "Cheers." To entice current customers of the restaurant to visit the website, she would offer them online coupons, on the model of a number of other establishments. Customers visiting the site could find out more about the staff, e-mail suggestions directly to the chef, check out the calendar of upcoming events, join the restaurant "listserv" to receive announcements and advertisements, or check out what was going on at one of the live chat rooms. In a business so much built on loyal customers, a website that helped build loyalty was a concept worth implementing.

It took research to lead the way.

Bibliography

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Newspaper Exercise

Preparation

To participate in this exercise, you must read several newspapers and choose **one** article that could be the basis for a project proposal. The best articles will suggest a problem that you can imagine trying to address. The purpose of this exercise is *not* to get you to choose the topic that you will actually work on for this class (though it is possible that some of you might stumble upon your topic this way). Rather, this exercise is intended to get you to practice the process of project development. After reading the Chapter One, take notes on the Six P's that you can imagine developing from the article you have chosen. This will be collected and used in class discussions.

In Class

Get into groups of four or five, and do the following:

- 1) Each of you, in turn, should present your article to the other group members. Describe the article and explain how this might make a good project idea. (About 10 minutes)
- 2) After the individual presentations, decide, as a group, which of them would make the most interesting basis for a project. (About 5 minutes)
- 3) Elect a group leader. This person does not have to be the one whose article was chosen, but he or she will present your ideas to the class. (About 5 minutes)
- 4) Once you have elected a group leader, begin developing a project idea based upon the article and on your own general knowledge. Obviously, to develop a strong project you would have to do research, but do the best you can. Use the following questions as a guide to discussion: (About 20 minutes)
 - Problem. What is the basic problem your project will address? Why is it a problem? How could you illustrate the extent of this problem?
 - People. Who is affected by this problem? What specific population will your project serve?
 - Patron. Who might fund your idea? Why would they fund it?
 - Paradigm. What disciplines might be useful in addressing this problem? What research would help?
 - Plan. How might you address the problem you have identified? What is your plan of action? Who will carry out this plan? What resources or assistance will you need? How much do you think your project might cost?
- 5) Present your ideas to the class and answer any questions (5 minutes for each group).

Six P's Exercise

Use the following form in a class exercise as directed by your instructor to analyze your project idea or the idea of someone else in your class.

Patron

Who would be willing to fund this project? Why would they want to fund it?

Population

Who does the problem affect? That is, who has a stake in seeing that there is a solution to the problem? Does your population have the same interests as the Patron?

Problem

What are the main problems that need to be addressed? How could research shed light on these problems to emphasize their scale, scope, and significance? What sources of information about the problem would the patron find most persuasive?

Paradigm

Where might models be found to help shape the plan? What research would help? What disciplinary matrix will guide you?

Plan

What plans are some possible plans? If you are doing an experiment, what procedures will you use? What will you need to know in order to develop a logical plan?

Price

How might your budget be limited? How much do you think the project might cost? How can that spending be justified?

