

Background and History

Whereas the theory section provides the intellectual context for your research, the background and history highlights its empirical foundations. In many ways this section of your proposal is deceptively straightforward. On one level, the purpose of a background/history section is to give the reader the relevant facts about your topic and/or research site so that they understand the material or case that you are writing about and how it links to your theoretical question. This section must not, however, simply provide the general context, but must direct the readers' attention to the empirical details through which your research topic and questions are lived and made relevant. As such, they must not just fill in details of the place or topic you are researching, but implicitly illustrate the need for and importance of your research. There are three simple, overlapping concepts to keep in mind when writing your background or history section that will help you do to this. *Engage* your readers with broader themes and topics that *illustrate* your concepts, questions, and theory and *demonstrate* your knowledge and passion.

The history/background should engage your readers with broad themes and topics. This involves connecting details to concepts. The history should be easy to read and compelling both for its relevance and for its fresh approach. Few want to read the details of textile handicrafts in southern Mississippi simply to learn about weaving. If, on the other hand, you show how this craft is linked to a history of racial tensions, changing economic conditions, or gender relations, the details of handicraft cooperatives and techniques can be engrossing and make the reader want to know more.

The background/history should illustrate your concepts, questions, and theory. To do this, try to ensure a tight fit between this and the proposal's other sections. Your history should be the empirical embodiment of your theoretical section. This requires you to make explicit links between the story you tell and the questions and theoretical approach you are using. If, for example, you are writing on indigenous land rights struggles in Bolivia, you should not just include a history of events, but a history that is tightly linked to your theoretical concerns and the research question you are asking. Trace the major actors, sources of change, and point to potential outcomes. If you do this, your history section offers a chance to expound on (for the benefit of others' understanding) the broader topic through the details of your story.

The history/background should demonstrate your experience, knowledge, and passion. What you write about and how you write can reveal a great deal about your knowledge and interest in your subject. This is true in all parts of your proposal, but perhaps most so in this section. Use the back-ground section as an occasion to show the depths of your knowledge of the topic by demonstrating your fluency in accepted understandings and literature as well as your fresh insights and approaches. You may also use this review to implicitly reveal what has drawn you to the topic in the first place. Doing this well will help convince the reader that your interest in the topic is justified and that you are likely to sustain that interest over the time required to complete the project.

As with the theoretical review, the historical and background section must be precise and measured. Too passionate, too political, or too lengthy a historical review may cause some readers to lose focus or question your capacity to be detached and analytical. You must also be careful in *choosing your citations* as proposal readers from your field or region are likely to look carefully at your bibliography. If you are writing on New Mexico forest politics, for example, and the classic authors and works are not cited, it will likely appear to your reviewers that you have not done your homework. Similarly, you must show that you have read authors from across the theoretical or ideological spectrum. While simply putting the "right" people in your bibliography should not be the focus of your work, it is important to demonstrate that you have done your research and that you know your field.