



Women's Studies: Research Paper Proposal

Before you start writing your research paper, you must submit a proposal -- an explanation of what you are going to do. The point of doing the proposal is first to clear the topic with me: to make sure it is focused enough, relevant enough to women's studies etc. Secondly, researching and writing the proposal should serve to get you started with your reading, in time to recall sources that have been checked out of the library, find sources that are lost, and inter-library loan sources that are unavailable at Clemson. Grading the proposal also gives me an opportunity to provide you with important feedback, primarily bibliographic suggestions as to reference sources and additional indexes you should consult, books and articles you should be sure to include.

Your proposal should be 2-3 pages long, not counting bibliography and xeroxes and/or print-outs of bibliographic material which you should also attach. Before you turn in your proposal, you should have done an extensive bibliographical search on your topic, using specialized bibliographies and indexes listed in the "Getting Started" handout, as well as on-line services such as LUIS, CU Explorer, the MLA Bibliography, bibliographies in the textbook, and search engines such as Infoseek, or whatever else might be relevant. You do not have to type up a formal bibliography, but you do need to include your notes, xeroxes, and print-outs with most relevant citations highlighted and notes as to whether these sources are available at Clemson or not.

Your proposal should cover the following the following six areas, arranged in whatever format you find most useful:

1. Definition of topic and kind of project -- including its relevance to this class and women's studies in general. You must narrow your topic down to a do-able level of specificity. One way to do this is to define your topic in terms of questions you want to answer. You also need to tell me if this is to be a conventional resaearch paper, an interview, a creative project, a website, or some combination creature.

2. Status of bibliographic search -- Here you must tell me basically where you are in the research process. What did you start out knowing about the topic? Did you have to do some initial background reading in order to learn enough about your topic to know what to look up? You need to have looked up the topic in several indices or bibliographies and to have seen that there are enough books and articles about it. Are there enough resources in the Clemson library for you to work with? Do we have the books and the periodicals containing articles you need to consult? You should have probably already gone to the library stacks and actually put your hands on the sources that look most central. Do these sources have bibliographies or references that you can also use?

At the point of turning in your proposal, you probably will not have found every-thing you are going to find on your topic, but you should have made a good, solid start -- most bibliographies will list at least 15 sources, since a fair number of these are going to turn out to be irrelevant or not available.

3. Keywords -- This is part of the bibliographic process. What are the keywords that you are discovering are central to your topic? Under what subjects do you find references in LUIS, DORIS, and specialized bibliographies? What words in a title let you know that an article will be relevant to your topic? What journals tend to publish articles on your topic? Who are the most important experts?

4. Personal Commitment -- Why do you want to do this project? What is your personal investment in it? What in your past life experiences or studies has led you to want to know more about this issue? Are you interested in it enough to do more than just an adequate job?

5. Anticipated Problems -- Where do you think you are going to have the most trouble doing this project? What's going to get you hung up? Are you going to be able to deal with these problems? How?

6. Next Move -- Where are you going to go from here? What other sources are there that you haven't yet consulted? What other aspects of the topic do you need to take into consideration?

A Special Note for Interviewers

We have discovered from past experience that if you are going to base your paper on an interview (especially with a well known relative or family friend), it is very important that you do a fair amount of historical research into the major issues and concerns of the period before you do your interview. For interview papers, we ask that you make up a list of interview questions (to be included with the final paper) based on this historical research. Without these questions interviews tend to degenerate into telling familiar family stories; with them, both you and your subject often get into talking about serious issues you hadn't discussed together.

A Few Suggestions for Topics

1. How has the African American community responded to the Clarence Thomas/ Anita Hill confrontation? How do they feel that the media treatment of the hearings fell into and reinforced common stereotypes?

2. In all the arguments and fights over abortion is there any hint of a compromise position? Are there any people or groups working to find a middle ground?

3. What is the history of sexual harassment law in this country? Who is Catherine McKinnon and what is her contribution to the definition of sexual harassment? How is her concept of gender and the law similar to or different from that of our new supreme court justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg?

4. There is increasing controversy arising right now over the extreme anti-pornography ideas and tactics of feminist associated with Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon. What is their basic position on pornography? Who disagrees with them and why? Where do you stand on this issue.

5. Several recent articles, including one we read for class by Katha Pollit, question whether the influence of Carol Gilligan's thinking is feeding into a new kind of feminist essentialism. Read some of Gilligan's work. Do you think these charges are warranted?

6. In Women of Ideas & What Men Have Done to Them, Dale Spender lists over 100 important women in the history of feminism. Pick one of these women and find out who she was, what she did, and what we can learn from her today.

7. How do young women today feel about feminism? Is the backlash against feminism by Katie Roiphe typical of Generation X-er's?

