Chapter 10

Final project proposal memo

10.1 Goals—proposal writing, choosing the final project

The purpose of this memo is for you and your partner to propose your final project to us. We would prefer to have people work in groups of two for the final project, as it reduces the number of reports that we have to read, and gives you practice in working with another author on a document. Individual projects are quite acceptable, but groups larger than two usually are not.

Your proposal memo will allow us to respond and help you focus and organize your project. We will provide guidance in class about possible topics, and will try provide a list of possible projects around the department that need doing at the moment. The final project can be a description of a design project you have done, a detailed proposal for a senior thesis, user or maintenance documentation for existing software or hardware, or any other technical writing except in-program documentation. (Warning: each year someone tries to write a game specification, and each year the technical content and writing quality have been low—we will question closely any attempts at game specification.)

Ways to generate ideas are included in Huckin and Olsen [HO91, Chapter 2]. Their Section 16.2 offers guidelines for writing a short informal proposal, as well as a sample informal proposal. Their Section 16.3 discusses editing your proposal. Read these sections before attempting this assignment.

Because this assignment is the beginning of a sequence of assignments, including a document specification, a progress report, a formal technical report, and an oral report, you should read those assignments as well as this one. (That is, read Chapters 12–5 of this workbook.)

10.2 Audience assessment—the instructors

Your audience for this assignment is your instructors, and your purpose is to get our advice and approval for your final project. In order for us to give good advice, we need a clear idea of what you propose to do, and how you propose to do it.

Huckin and Olsen's guidelines cover a fuller proposal than you need write for this assignment. For our purposes, if you cover the three areas they suggest for the introduction to an informal proposal, that will be sufficient. These three areas are

1. the problem,
2. the objectives of the proposed work, and
3. the significance of the work.

To cover these areas adequately, you will have to do some preliminary research—you can't just name an abstract topic, like compiler design, and expect approval. Your poster presentation should have provided you with enough background to narrow the focus adequately—broad enough that you can find information to provide, but narrow enough that you can say something meaningful about the topic.

10.3 Writing process—informal proposals

Even though this memo should be relatively brief and to the point—a page or two at most—and even though it is an informal proposal, these facts do not mean it is casual. Even a memo like this requires planning and a simple outline.

Make notes or an outline of all the things that your supervisor (namely us) would want to know. You should indicate whether you are writing a formal proposal, reporting on an investigation, writing documentation, or doing a library research project. Next, include the subject and scope of your report, using the breakdown provided by Huckin and Olsen.

For joint projects, as most of yours will be, discuss how you propose to divide the work, being specific about exactly what each of you is going to do first, and giving us some idea of the division of labor for the rest of the project.

Bear in mind that you are aiming at an upcoming assignment, the document specification, where you will be making a completely specific division of labor for the whole project. If you are successful in this division of the work, you will not have to change it later, and each of you will do your fair share of the work.

Also keep in mind that most of the areas discussed in your proposal will reappear in your progress report, which is the assignment following the outline. It is normal procedure for your supervisor or sponsor to compare your first major progress report quite closely with your original proposal. We do not mean that nothing can be changed, but rather that you will need to tell us in the progress report what changes you have made in your goals. Reporting changes is discussed in more detail in the progress report assignment (Section 13.3 of this workbook).