Sample Paper Proposal

You will need to cover the following three topics. You should arrange your proposal so that it clearly deals with each of these topics with about the same level of detail as I have here:

1) THESIS:

   Chalmers’ argument that we will never be able to explain consciousness scientifically appeals to a standard of explanation that is not typical of contemporary scientific modes of explanation. When more typical standards of scientific explanation are invoked, the prospects for a scientific explanation of consciousness are not nearly as bleak.

   (Note: The thesis should present the basic conclusion you will be drawing or think you will be drawing in your paper. Your thesis can and probably will change as you think more about how you want to write your paper. It will almost certainly become more precise and may even change 180 degrees if you decide through your research that a stronger case can be made for the opposite thesis. So think of this as a tentative thesis. It is important, however, to have, at least, a tentative thesis as you think about how to write your paper as it is the thesis which gives your paper the proper degree of focus and unity. One of the ways I grade these papers is to ask after every paragraph I read, “How did that paragraph help to advance or defend the thesis?” If I can not see how it does, I judge it as irrelevant and my assessment of the paper is lowered. In order to write a good research paper you should be asking the same question of every paragraph you write and, if the answer is that you can not say how it advances the thesis, you need to cut it. To ask that question, however, you need to have a clear thesis. Hence, the importance of your thesis.)

2) ARGUMENT:

   Chalmers’ argument against the possibility of a scientific explanation of consciousness relies on what is basically a subjective understanding of what it is to explain something. Explanation is a matter of coming to a point where we can see how consciousness is implied by some set of neural functions in the brain. But this is just a matter of getting to a point where we believe we understand how the latter implies the former. But what we believe we understand is notoriously subjective. There are many examples in the history of science where scientists have believed they understood something clearly, but didn’t in fact have what we would regard today as a satisfactory explanation of it. A properly scientific explanation is more objective than this, involving the capacity to predict and control the phenomenon in question in precise and calculable ways. Though there is no guarantee that science will ever get to the point that it can predict and control consciousness through it’s manipulation of neural functions in the brain, the prospects for this sort of properly scientific explanation of consciousness are not nearly as bleak as Chalmers believes.

   (Note: The argument should tell me as much as you know right now about how you plan to defend your thesis. The more information you can give me about how you plan on writing your paper, the more likely it will be that I can give you some constructive feedback that will help you write your paper (and, of course, the less you give me, the less likely that will...
be). Don’t censor yourself here, holding back ideas that are only, as we say, “half-baked.” Every good idea begins as a half-baked idea. And if you share them with me, I will be able to both point out ideas which look promising and ideas which don’t look promising (actually, that negative assessment can be even more important at this stage of the process as there is no value in wasting time trying to work with a strategy for the paper that probably will not work).

3) LITERATURE AND ITS USE:

A) David Chalmers, “Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness” in *Explaining Consciousness.*
   I will draw on Chalmers’ essay to present his ideas.

   I will draw on Holmes’ article to explain my thesis. My paper will principally be an examination and defense of Holmes’ criticisms of Chalmers’ arguments.

(Note: There are a number of things to notice here. 1) Notice that I am using philosophical literature that we have not read for the course. That is a very basic requirement of this assignment. 2) Notice that I am explaining how I am planning on using the literature I have found. I need to see that in this proposal. 3) Notice that I have given a complete bibliographical citation for the literature we have not already read in the course. I need to see that in order to assess whether the literature is appropriate for this assignment (see syllabus for more on this point). 3) Notice that I am only working with a single article beyond what we have already read for the class. This paper only needs to be five full pages in length and it would be difficult to work in a substantial way with more than one or possibly two articles or chapters from a book in a paper of this length. *Depth is better than breadth* when it comes to this assignment. I would much rather see a paper which works in a close, analytical way on a small part of a question rather than do a superficial job skimming the surface of a number of different points that, though they may all be important, cannot be adequately addressed in a paper of this length.

4) (I am giving this point its own paragraph to emphasize its importance) Notice how I am conceiving of my paper. It is really just going to be “an examination and defense of Holmes’ criticisms of Chalmers’ arguments.” What I’m imagining here is that my initial thoughts about Chalmers’ arguments was that I was not convinced by them. Though I was not quite sure why, I found them suspect. I went into the literature looking for work that might help me to clarify and develop these initial misgivings I had with the arguments and found Chalmers’ arguments explaining why he thought they didn’t work. My paper is little more than a report on what I found in the literature that convinced me that my initial misgivings were justified and, of course, why I find them convincing. In other words, you do not have to have your own articulate, critical insights into what we have been reading to do a very good job on this assignment. You can learn from the literature about how to think critically about what we’ve read and write a paper that basically just reports what you have learned. Your paper *can* be more than this. You may, for instance, already have some fairly
articulate critical insights regarding what we have read and use the literature to help you develop those insights; not merely reporting on what you’ve found in the literature but developing your own position in critical dialogue with the literature (and, by the way, “critical dialogue” can imply either agreement or disagreement, in the end, with the literature you’re using as long as you are critically assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments you’re working with). It is the latter sort of paper that I would expect from someone majoring in philosophy with a good deal of work in philosophy already under her/his belt. But you do not have to be a major with a good deal of philosophy already under your belt to do well (even very well!) on this assignment. If this is your first class in philosophy, you may find it helpful to think of this assignment in the way I have imagined it here in this sample proposal: as a report on what you’ve learned in the literature about the strengths and weaknesses of some position taken in one of the texts we have read.)