

Dissertation Proposal Guidelines

Bob Andersen & Anna Korteweg

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All students in the Sociology PhD program are required to write a dissertation proposal that must be approved by their committee by the end of their third year in the program. It is the gateway to achieving PhD candidacy status. You should not start your dissertation until you have had a proposal approved by your dissertation committee. You should plan on taking about three months of concerted effort to write the proposal. Depending on how developed your ideas are when you start writing it, you might need to take more time. Throughout the process, you should consult regularly with your supervisor and other committee members.

Structure of a Proposal

The dissertation proposal is a roadmap for your proposed PhD research. A good proposal will clearly outline what you plan to do and why it is important. In short, it should clearly state how you hope to contribute to knowledge, even if you don't know yet exactly what you will contribute. In addition, the proposal should provide a clear outline of the steps you will take to complete your project. The proposal, then, is a starting point, not an end in and of itself. Although your supervisor and other committee members may have their own expectations for the proposal—and hence you should consult with them on the issue—generally this roadmap will have the following five components:

1. A statement of the research problem or research question. Often the research question concerns a general issue or concern relating to existing literature and/or an issue in the real world. The research problem or question is operationalized (concretized into research steps) in the methodology section. You should also state clearly whether you plan to write a “traditional” thesis or a “three paper” thesis. If you choose the latter, be clear about how the papers will tie together. Usually this involves having them fall under a common theme but you should consult with your supervisor about how to go about this. (Note that the three-paper thesis must be bookended by introductory and concluding chapters. The introductory chapter should outline the scope of the project. It can be based on the dissertation proposal. The concluding chapter should summarize the results of the research and point the way forward to research that your work suggests is now needed.)
2. Context or information about the case or social process that you will study that helps situate your research question. This can be a discussion of existing theoretical and/or empirical analyses related to your research problem. It might also contain “factual” or historical context. In short, you should clearly describe prior research on the social problem or social processes that you will study so that the reader understands the importance of your research question.

3. The literature which you will directly engage with or the literature that you will directly confront in your research. There are different ways of addressing the literature. You can aim to falsify already existing findings but you can also aim to extend existing theories or do the kind of research that will generate new knowledge altogether. The literature covered under 3 can be a subset of that covered under 2. [the reason to separate 2 and 3 is that there is often a large literature within which the research is situated but only a subset of that literature can be directly addressed in the dissertation research itself].
4. Data and Methods. Your proposal will need a clear statement of the data you will gather or use, the methods you will employ to gather those data (if relevant), and the kind of data analysis you will conduct.
5. Timeline. Your proposal should include a timeline for the various steps of your research (data gathering, analyzing, reading and analyzing secondary literature, writing memos and chapter drafts)
6. Length – the recommended maximum length for the proposal is 40 pages, double-spaced, excluding bibliography and any appendices. Again, however, this is a guideline only—your supervisory committee may determine that more is needed after reading drafts of the proposal.

The Proposal Defense

The final version of the proposal needs to be orally defended at a meeting with your dissertation committee. The structure of this meeting is up to your committee. However, commonly you will be asked to give a brief presentation of your proposal and then leave the room to give the committee a chance to vote and discuss necessary changes, if any, before the proposal can be accepted. Upon re-entering the room, you will discuss the Committee's feedback, often taking the time to indicate the first steps now that you have achieved candidacy. It is usually helpful to receive feedback on drafts of your proposal from individual committee members before having the meeting to defend the final proposal. When the Committee approves the proposal, its members must sign the Dissertation Prospectus Record and hand it in, with a copy of the proposal, to the Graduate Office. The form can be found at <http://www.sociology.utoronto.ca/graduate/gradforms.htm>. After successfully defending the proposal, you will officially advance to candidacy.