

Dissertation Proposal Guidelines

Students in the PhD program should write and defend a dissertation proposal in the third year of the program. A dissertation proposal is a prerequisite for carrying out your dissertation research. You should construct the proposal in consultation with your supervisor and committee members. Students defend their proposal in a meeting that includes the supervisor and two other committee members. After defending the proposal, you have achieved candidacy. You can now happily attach ABD (all but dissertation) to the signature line of your email.¹

Time Investment + Length of Document

There is no hard and fast rule for how long it should take to write the dissertation proposal. It can be the most difficult part of the program because you are often searching for a “doable” and interesting project that you are passionate about. A clever research design for a study is generative of a strong study, so spending time on design is important. Generally, students will take a few months to write their proposal although it can take longer if the student works on it slowly while meeting other program benchmarks (e.g., while working on an article for submission to a journal or studying for a second comprehensive exam). Likewise, there are no strict guidelines for the length of a dissertation proposal. However, many proposals are about 30-40 double-spaced pages and normally do not exceed 50 pages. It is the proposal, after all, not the dissertation itself.

Key Components

Think of your dissertation proposal as a roadmap for your PhD research. As with any good map, your proposal needs clear landmarks to orient the reader. You have some flexibility when it comes to how you organize your proposal, but most proposals contain the following sections:

ABSTRACT

- 200 or so words with 1) a succinct statement of the sociological problem or issue, 2) a sentence on the extension of or challenge to the literature that you are making with the study, 3) the methods/sample and 4) potentially the preliminary findings of the study or studies.

INTRODUCTION

- **Your topic:** What is this a case of? Include a **working title** for your dissertation.
- **Your research question(s).** This is an important starting point, even if the question is modified later as you collect and interpret your data.
- **Potential contribution to knowledge.** Ask yourself: How will my dissertation contribute to the field? Which sociological communities, sub-fields and debates am I in conversation with?

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Essential literature.** Briefly tell the reader what the field knows about your topic. Identify a research gap and communicate how you fit into this academic conversation.
- Remember, the dissertation proposal cannot contain *all* the literature you think is important for your topic. You only need to include enough material to contextualize your research question and proposed contribution.

METHODS / DATA

- **Methods of data collection.** Ask yourself: how will I carry out the research? Why is this the right data for my research question? Carefully describe the sample and measures.

¹ Technically speaking, you are ABD after you have completed all of your coursework, taken your comprehensive exams and defended your dissertation proposal.

- **A timeline** for completing the research. Ask yourself: is this plan realistic? Is it overly (or underly) ambitious? Many dissertation proposals start out with a plan that is too ambitious and then get scaled back.

CONCLUDING MATERIAL

- **Summary.** Briefly summarize your proposed research for the reader.
- Mention any potential **limitations** of your study or **ethical considerations** that you are contemplating.

REFERENCES

- This is a good opportunity to commit to a consistent reference style and start keeping all your important citations in one place.
- Consider investing time in reference software (e.g., Zotero, Mendeley) to keep your references up to date.

Traditional Dissertation or Three-Paper Model?²

Writing the proposal is a good opportunity to decide whether your dissertation lends itself more to a traditional dissertation (structured more like a book), or a three-paper model (written as three academic articles). Make a tentative decision, and include your rationale in the dissertation proposal, explaining why you think this is the best approach. If you are planning a three-paper dissertation, you might wish to outline a plan for each paper that includes the specific research question, contextual literature, and target journal(s).

The Proposal Defense

When you and your supervisor are satisfied with the proposal document, you will schedule a meeting with the full supervisory committee. Ideally, the committee members have been consulted before the proposal defense. You want your committee to be aware of your proposed research plan so there are no surprises. The proposal defense may be scheduled online or in person.

What is the point of a proposal defense? Simply put, you will discuss your research, and defend your dissertation plan to the committee. The format of this defense can vary. Sometimes the meeting is quite formal and sometimes it is relatively informal. Talk with your supervisor about their preferences and practices.

The defense typically begins with a short (10-15 minute) presentation describing the research. You may use PowerPoint slides to accompany your presentation, but it is not required. After your presentation, the committee discusses the research plan, conveying their excitement about the research and articulating any concerns they may have. The discussion can be structured as a formal question-and-answer session or as a more fluid dialogue. Either way, the conversation should spark ideas that will help make the upcoming research more valid, robust, and impactful. After the discussion, you may be asked to leave the room while the committee votes on whether the proposal can be approved in its current form. After approving the proposal, the committee must complete and sign the [PhD Thesis Approval Form](#) which you will submit to the graduate office. Once the form is received, your doctoral recommendation will be submitted to the School of Graduate Studies. The final step in the process is to celebrate that fact that you have achieved candidacy!

² To read more about dissertation formats, including the three-paper model see this Department of Sociology guideline [document](#) saved on SharePoint.