

Dissertation Proposal Guidelines

Summer 2025

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 contribution, 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 the minor comp exam). Likewise, there are no strict guidelines for the length of a dissertation proposal. Many proposals are 35-50 double-spaced pages; they normally do not exceed 75 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:

TITLE

- Make this meaningful to the actual study you will conduct. Make it clear and compelling.

ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

- **Your topic and problem:** what is the social problem you will address (i.e., why should people care?) and what is the sociological problem (i.e., why should sociologists in your field care?). What is it a case of?
- **Your research question(s).** This is an important starting point, even if the questions are 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.** Tell the reader what the field knows about your topic. Identify a research gap and communicate how you fit into this academic conversation. Explain and argue how specifically you will extend, challenge or clarify one aspect of the literature.

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

- 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.
- This is a judicious, crafted “critical review” – revealing a gap and potential contribution.

METHODS / DATA

- **Methods / 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, measures and analytic plan. For quantitative projects, include preliminary descriptives of the focal variables - IVs, DVs, CVs; plus potentially table shells with titles, laying out the likely variables included in models. For qualitative projects, include a draft interview guide and/or other materials.

CONCLUDING MATERIAL

- **Summary.** Briefly summarize your proposed research for the reader. Be clear about the potential contribution to sociological knowledge in challenging, extending or clarifying a research puzzle.
- Mention any potential **limitations** of your study or **ethical considerations** that you are contemplating.
- Provide a **Timeline** for completing the research, including up to 3 months from when the dissertation is nearly complete until ideal defense date, given the need for including an external evaluator and other timelines required for the Final Oral Defense (FOE). 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 may get scaled back.

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, outline a plan for each paper that includes the specific research question(s), contextual literature, methods, 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. Normally, the committee members have been consulted before the proposal defense and are aware of your proposed research plan so there are no surprises. The proposal defense may be scheduled online or in person, with the latter preferred.

What is the point of a proposal defense? Simply put, you will discuss your research and defend your

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

dissertation plan and its contribution to the committee. The format of this defense can vary but it is somewhat formal. 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. Note that the written proposal document serves one purpose, your oral presentation another, and the slides a third purpose – which is to enhance your oral presentation. Thus slides should be succinct (not wordy) and clear. After your presentation, the committee discusses the research plan, conveying their excitement about the research and articulating concerns and suggestions. 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. The supervisor should write out a memo regarding decisions that the group has agreed upon, outlining expectations for the ensuing work.

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 (SGS). The final step in the process is to celebrate the fact that you have achieved candidacy!