

Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Guidelines

Writing a thesis proposal is an important and valuable precursor to preparing, researching and writing your doctoral dissertation. Although the nature, style and content of your dissertation proposal will vary depending on the kind of dissertation you plan on writing, the following are intended to serve as general guidelines.

Overall, your proposal should be 15-20 pages in length (excluding your bibliography), with lines double-spaced. The content of the proposal should be similar to that required in a SSHRC standard research grant application, in that your proposal should provide a clear statement of the topic of your work and your central research questions, summarize the key theoretical and empirical literature on your topic, and provide a clear statement of what you will do to address your research questions. The following sections are typical.

1. Introduction (1-2 pages): A statement of what is being studied and why it is important both within your field and to people working outside of your particular field.
2. Literature Review (7-10 pages): Your full dissertation will contain a lengthy discussion of the literature relevant to your project. Here, you want to provide a summary of the theoretical and empirical literature most relevant to your study, and the literature that shapes your key theoretical and research questions. This review will generally be thematic, identifying particular aspects of your project that have been studied and/or particular ways in which your topic has been approached by others.
3. Study Objectives (1 page or so): Provide a statement of your study objectives. Clearly state your research questions and/or hypotheses. Identify what these questions and/or hypotheses contribute to the existing literature on your topic.
4. Methodology (2-5 pages): Clarify how you intend to tackle your central questions. Will your research be quantitative, qualitative, theoretical, historical...? Where will you find your empirical evidence, and how will you access / collect it? Will you be collecting your own data? Are you using previously established questions and scales? Have you designed your own questionnaire or interview schedule? Will you require ethics approval? Overall, this section should clearly describe the phenomenon or population you will study, the data sources you will use, your study design, data collection and sampling techniques, and your data analysis strategies. This section should also outline your time frame for completion. If you anticipate difficulties or challenges with your proposed methodology, explain those issues as well as ways in which you anticipate addressing them. If your dissertation is theoretical in nature, discuss the bodies of work with which you will engage, particular perspectives you will bring to bear on those bodies of work, and the types of case studies you may analyze.
5. Anticipated Outcomes (1-2 pages): Discuss the outcomes or anticipated impacts of your research on the broader fields within which you are working. Do you anticipate supporting or revising existing theories on your topic? Providing a new methodological approach that represents an improvement over, or a complement to, existing ones? Testing existing explanations in new contexts? Developing theoretical approaches to social phenomena? In each case, you should show that you have an idea of what your project will contribute to sociological understanding as well as to your subfield.

Overall, a well-written proposal links all sections and provides a complete story of your dissertation project. That is, your central questions should be clearly lined with, and informed by, the literature you review, and your study methodology should link back clearly to your central questions and objectives. It should be clear – not only to specialists in your field but also to sociologists working in other areas of the discipline and to non-sociologists – what it is that you plan to do, why it is

important, what its potential impact on our understanding of society might be, and how these aspects are integrated.

In preparing your dissertation proposal, you might find the following questions important to consider.

1. What is your key problem, question, or object of investigation?
2. Why does this problem or question matter? Why should others care about it?
3. What are the potential implications of your research for the discipline, your field, subfield, and the literature in your sub-field?
4. What theories shed light on your issue? Do different theories make different predictions about your phenomenon?
5. Is there an approach (or several) you find provides a more convincing explanation? Why?
6. What is your own argument or prediction about the social phenomenon you are studying?
7. What empirical evidence is available on your phenomenon?
8. What methodology will you use? What are the strengths and limits of this methodology for the problem under investigation?
9. Is there an existing secondary data set, or questionnaire related to your issue? Should you collect your own data? Where will you find it, and how will you collect it? Is your population hard to get access to?
10. How can you operationalize central, complex concepts? What has been done in the past?
11. What are the theoretical impacts of your proposed dissertation project?

The following two sections (Dissertation Proposal Milestone and Dissertation Format) are excerpts from the *Graduate Handbook*.

Dissertation Proposal Milestone – The purpose of the dissertation proposal milestone is for the candidate to demonstrate the requisite theoretical and methodological background as well as the necessary writing skills to proceed to concentrated thesis work. The dissertation proposal provides an opportunity for the student to interact with their thesis supervisor and supervisory committee member in a focused way. The submission of the proposal represents a commitment by the student to pursue the thesis upon completion of the thesis proposal. Typically the proposal would be completed and approved in the summer (at the end of year 2) or the fall (beginning of year 3), following the completion of year 2 comprehensive exams.

PhD students are required to write a thesis proposal under the supervision of the faculty member selected to be the thesis supervisor. The dissertation proposal requires:

- 1) The selection of a supervisory committee member. The expectation is that the supervisory committee member will serve as a "reader," providing advice and feedback beginning at the proposal stage and throughout the writing process, and will read the thesis in its entirety before preliminary submission. A supervisory committee member must be a member of SGPS with at least non-core limited membership status (see the graduate program assistant for further details).
- 2) Approval of the proposal by both the supervisor and the supervisory committee member.
- 3) An informal oral presentation of the approved proposal to which faculty and students are invited to attend.
- 4) Completion of the [Dissertation Proposal Report](#).

Points to consider:

- Please consult the *Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Guidelines* (above) which provide details such as what should be included and questions to consider in the preparation of your proposal. A proposal typically provides key background literature, methods/methodology, and expected contributions. Further, the candidate must clearly describe the plan of study - what will be done, how, and when.
- Format - The content and structure of the proposal should be developed in consultation with the supervisor and supervisory committee member before writing. Clearly identify one of the two SGPS approved formats i) monograph or ii) integrated-article. If the dissertation will be integrated-article format, the student needs to clearly identify each of the manuscripts along with the individual problems, questions, and methods involved with each. See Dissertation Format, below, for further details.
- Ethics Approval - Students planning to conduct research involving human participants (e.g., survey, participant observation, interviews) need to obtain Ethics approval from the University's [Non-medical Research Ethics Board](#). This is not a simple process and, since from start to finish the Ethics process could take up to 3 months, the student and supervisor need to plan accordingly.
- In order for completion of the proposal milestone to be recorded, the signed *Dissertation Proposal Report* must be submitted.

Dissertation Format—Students may submit their dissertation in either monograph or integrated-article format. Listed below are components required in the main body of the thesis. Students should consult Section 8.3 of the [School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies' \(SGPS\) Thesis Regulation Guide](#) for a complete list of components and formatting details. See the Thesis Information section of the *Graduate Handbook* for further details regarding SGPS regulations and procedures.

Following SGPS guidelines, it is expected that a thesis following an **integrated article** format will include the following components in the body of the thesis:

An introductory chapter that introduces and establishes the relevance of the broader dissertation topic that is addressed by the separate articles; A literature review chapter that sets the broader theoretical, conceptual, and methodological context for the separate articles to follow; A minimum of three articles; A concluding chapter that relates the separate articles to each other and integrates and discusses the findings within the context of the broader field of study; A separate bibliography should be included at the end of each chapter and article.

Further, following the SGPS guidelines, it is expected that a thesis following a **monograph** format will usually include the following components in the body of the thesis:

An introductory chapter that introduces and establishes the relevance of the broader dissertation topic; A literature review chapter that sets the broader theoretical, conceptual, and methodological context for the dissertation; A methodology chapter that describes the analyses conducted; One or more results chapters; A concluding chapter that discusses the findings within the context of the broader field of study; A bibliography.