Writing Thesis and Dissertation Proposals

The Graduate Writing Center of the Center for Excellence in Writing

Overview: This workshop will introduce basic principles of writing proposals across a range of disciplines. It will present practical strategies, and it will include examples of successful proposals.

Goals

1. To introduce strategies for bridging the gap between coursework/beginning research and thesis writing.
2. To help you understand the rhetorical situation of the thesis proposal and common elements of such proposals.
3. To introduce practical rhetorical and grammatical principles of writing effective proposals.
4. To provide you with tips for drafting and revising individual sections of the proposal.

About this Workshop and the Graduate Writing Center:

Please note that these workshops are designed to address general writing principles. As a result, you may not find information in this packet or during the workshop that is directly relevant to your field or your current study. The best way to view these workshops is as opportunities to be exposed to general skills that should transfer across disciplines. That means attending these workshops is not a substitute for reading extensively in your field or for asking questions of advisors or peers.

The Graduate Writing Center, located in 111-L Kern Building, provides free, one-on-one consultations for graduate students working on any kind of writing project—from seminar papers and presentations to articles and dissertations. Scheduling an appointment with the Graduate Writing Center is an excellent way to follow up on the practical information you receive during the workshops. To learn more about the Graduate Writing Center, visit the Center's website at http://www.psu.edu/dept/cew/grad/gwc.htm. You may also schedule appointments directly, at https://secure.gradsch.psu.edu/wccal/studentview.cfm. Please try to schedule an appointment as far in advance of due dates as possible. To cancel an appointment, call 814.865.8021.

Writing Thesis/Dissertation Proposals

Your thesis/dissertation proposal provides an overview of your proposed plan of work, including the general scope of your project, your basic research questions, research methodology, and the overall significance of your study. In short, your proposal explains **what** you want to study, **how** you will study this topic, **why** this topic needs to be studied, and (generally) **when** you intend to do this work. (Occasionally, you may also need to explain **where** your study will take place.)

Purpose:

Dissertation/Thesis proposals are designed to:

- Justify and plan (or contract for) a research project.
- Show how your project contributes to existing research.
- Demonstrate to your advisor and committee that you understand how to conduct discipline-specific research within an acceptable time-frame.

Audience:

Most proposals are written specifically for your academic advisor and committee.

Proposal Writing and Anxiety

General Advice**:**

- Establish a writing schedule, preferably writing at the same time and place each day.
- Begin by free-writing. Remember that no one but you has to see the initial draft.
- Keep a small notebook with you throughout the day to write down relevant thoughts.
- Say parts of your writing into a recording device and then play it back to yourself.
- Compose different parts of the proposal in different computer files or on different index cards to help with arranging and rearranging.
- Start with more "clear cut" sections first, rather than with the Introduction, since it may be the most difficult part to write.

Proposal-Specific Advice**:**

- Understand that the proposal will be a negotiated document, so be prepared to draft, redraft, and resubmit it.
- Think of the proposal as an introduction to your thesis—not a chapter, not an extensive literature review, not an opportunity to rehearse the major conflicts in your field. You are "bridging the gap" between existing work and your work.
- Remember that the proposal is not a contract that determines what your thesis will demonstrate. You will likely modify and refine your scope, argument, and methods.
- Remember that your proposal is not meant to limit your ideas, but to help you think in practical terms about how you intend to research and write your dissertation.
- Ask colleagues to form a writing group that you can use to exchange ideas, drafts, and experiences. As lonely as it may seem sometimes, writing is a social activity.

Because proposal requirements vary broadly by department, program, and advisor, generalizing them is difficult. The best advice is the simplest: consult with your advisor, ask to see past successful proposals, and talk to your colleagues. Using other proposals to help you generate ideas in not plagiarizing!

PARTS OF A PROPOSAL

Despite their wide differences, proposals across programs generally include at least some form of the following sections (though you will want to check with your academic advisor about the specific sections s/he requires): Title, Abstract, Introduction/Background, Problem Statement, Purpose/Aims/Rationale, Review of Literature, Methodology, Significance/Implications, Overview of Chapters, Plan of Work, Bibliography.

Sometimes these sections may be combined—in some fields, the problem statement, aims, and review of literature are all part of the introduction. The most common elements are the introduction/problem statement, review of literature, and methodology (which in some fields roughly correspond to the first three chapters of the dissertation).

Title

At this early stage, you need only provide a working title. You can decide on the exact wording for your title when you are nearer to completing your dissertation. Nevertheless, even at the start, aim to create a title that conveys the idea of your investigation. Normally, a title beginning "A study in . . ." is too vague; decide whether you want to compare, collate, assess, etc. Also, don't worry if you compose a long title. You are preparing to write an academic document, not to devise a snappy headline for a tabloid newspaper.

A good title should:

- Orient your readers to the topic you will research.
- Indicate the type of study you will conduct.

Examples:
What do the following examples tell you about the topic and type of research conducted?

- Role of the Hydrologic Cycle in Vegetation Response to Climate Change: An Analysis Using VEMAP Phase 2 Model Experiments
- Geographic Representations of the Planet Mars, 1867-1907

Abstract

Not all fields require abstracts, so check with your advisor to see if you are required to include one. The abstract should:

- Provide a brief (100-350 word) overview of the proposal that gives a reader a basic understanding of your proposal and encourages her or him to read more.
- Summarize Introduction, Statement of the Problem, Background of the Study, Research Questions or Hypotheses, and Methods and Procedures.
- (In some cases, the abstract may need to be very brief—no more than 50 words—in which case, it will be more descriptive than complete.)

Informative abstract:

> The Black-Bellied Plover (Pluvialis squatarola) is a shorebird species threatened with becoming endangered because of the loss of habitat through twentieth-century urbanization. As a step toward preventing this species from becoming endangered, this report identifies the Black-Bellied Plover habitat in Louisiana. To identify the habitat, I examined information about Black-Bellied Plover

sightings in Louisiana over the last 50 years and the landuse categories derived from satellite imagery of the sighting locations. These examinations indicate that the Black-Bellied Plover habitat in Louisiana is generally pasture and shrubland. To protect this species, the Louisiana Department of Parks and Wildlife or the private sector should conserve and monitor this habitat, especially in the areas where the most frequent sightings have occurred on Grand Isle and around Caillou Bay.

Descriptive abstract:

The Black-Bellied Plover (Pluvialis squatarola) is a shorebird species threatened with becoming endangered because of the loss of habitat through twentieth-century urbanization. This report identifies the Black-Bellied Plover habitat in Louisiana based on previous sightings over the last 50 years and on landuse categories derived from satellite imagery of some of these sighting locations. The report also recommends conservation techniques to protect this species.

Introduction/Background

The introduction helps put your project in conversation with other projects on similar topics. Generally, the introduction provides necessary background information to your study and provides readers with some sense of your overall research interest. A good introduction should:

- Establish the general territory (real world or research) in which the research is placed.
- Describe the broad foundations of your study, including some references to existing literature and/or empirically observable situations. In other words, the introduction needs to provide sufficient background for readers to understand where your study is coming from.
- Indicate the general scope of your project, but do not go into so much detail that later sections (purpose/literature review) become irrelevant.
- Provide an overview of the sections that will appear in your proposal (optional).
- Engage the readers.

Example: How does this introduction to an environmental geography proposal introduce the topic?

Although they did not know of the germs the animals might carry, residents of US cities in the 1860s and 70s cited the flies, roaches, and rats who swarmed the tenements in arguing for community sanitary programs. In the 1950s vermin provided justification for housing and health agencies to pursue urban renewal, and also gave tenant activists a striking symbol of officials' neglect of their neighborhoods. Today, though we know that vermin produce indoor allergens, and we have pesticides designed to keep vermin at bay, the fact that both may be hazardous confuses parents, health officials, and other advocates who seek to protect health. As long as people have lived in cities, pest animals have joined us in our homes and buildings, affected our health, and propelled our policies on the urban environment. The social geography of pests, however, reflects the social position and physical surroundings of our neighborhoods.

The researcher's objective is to use the ecological history and social geography of pest animals, which have been blamed for several kinds of disease exposures throughout the past two centuries, to investigate how health and environmental conditions are connected with poverty in cities. (http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/bcs/grs/Cronon-SampleProposal.htm)

Statement of the Problem

This section may be incorporated in your introduction or your purpose section, or it may stand independently (it depends on the field). Some proposals start with the statement of the problem, rather than a more general introduction. Regardless of placement, at some point you need to clearly identify the problem or knowledge gap that your project is responding to. This section should:

- Answer the question: "What is the gap that needs to be filled?" and/or "What is the problem that needs to be solved?"
- State the problem clearly early in a paragraph.
- Limit the variables you address in stating your problem or question.

You may want to consider framing your problem "statement" as a question, since you are really seeking to answer a question (or a set of questions) in your study.

Examples: How do these excerpts introduce a specific problem or gap?

> 1. Despite the growing interest in nineteenth-century geographical representation, no geographer has yet seriously examined the remarkable discourses that emerged during the latter half of the century to represent the geographies of worlds beyond Earth. Popular histories of geography (e.g. Sheehan 1996; Morton 2002) indicate that astronomers collected extensive geographic data about the nearby planets, usually recording their findings in detailed maps that were strikingly similar in appearance to many of the well-studied imperial maps produced during the same time period. Although much of this astronomical-geographical knowledge compiled during the late nineteenth century has since been revised or discarded on the basis of twentieth-century remote sensing images, I contend that colonial era discourses had widespread scientific and cultural significance at the time they were created. (https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/lane.pdf)
>
> 2. Reports on the state of freshwater reserves warn that severe local shortages are imminent, and predict that violent conflicts will emerge in water-scarce regions (Ohlson 1995, Elhance 1999). Water scarcity has been shown to cause civil conflict, particularly when accompanied by high population density, poverty, and income inequality (Homer-Dixon 1994, 1996; Hauge and Ellingsen, 1998). Urban migrant communities, where ethnic, religious, and class differences can exacerbate tensions, and community-wide patterns of adaptation to environmental scarcities are not well-formed, may be particularly vulnerable to water conflicts (Moench 2002). To better understand how conflicts develop in water-scarce regions, research is needed on the social and economic factors that mediate cooperation and conflict (Ronnfeldt 1997). I propose to do an in-depth study of Villa Israel, a barrio of Cochabamba, Brazil, where conflict over water is an established part of life. (http://lance.qualquant.net/ang5091/proposals/wutich_nsf.pdf)
>
> 3. Surface light fields and surface reflectance fields are image-based representations of lighting which are parameterized over geometry. Constructing these representations is a time-consuming and tedious process. The data sizes are quite large, often requiring multiple gigabytes to represent complex reflectance qualities. The result can only be viewed after a length post-process is complete, so it can be difficult to determine when the light field is sufficiently sampled. Often, uncertainty about the sampling density leads users to capture many more images than necessary in order to guarantee adequate coverage. . . . The goal of this work is a "casual capture" system which allows the user to interactively capture and view surface light fields and surface reflectance fields. (http://www.cs.unc.edu/~cssa/guides/proposals/coombe.pdf)
>
> 4. Historians searching for the causes of the Reformation have long assigned central importance to the role of the printing press. . . . [R]ecent scholarship has produced a number of important studies examining the role of printed media in the spread of the Reformation message. Much of this work

> tends to focus on the production and reception of Reformation texts and images, with little attention paid to the means by which such texts were distributed and circulated. Such studies are often premised on the assumption that texts and ideas enjoyed a relatively free circulation and that patterns of book production and distribution therefore serve as essentially transparent measures of interest and demand. . . . However, virtually nowhere in sixteenth-century Europe were ideas likely to flow unregulated through some critical discursive field. . . . I propose to examine the censorship of religious texts and images within the imperial city of Nuremberg, from [1513 until 1555].
> (http://www.virginia.edu/history/graduate/papers/dispro_example.html)

Purpose/Aims/Rationale/Research Questions

Most proposals include a clear statement of the research objectives, including a description of the questions the research seeks to answer or the hypotheses the research advances. This may be included as part of the introduction, or it may be a separate section. Spend significant time brainstorming before and while you draft this section. Once you begin your dissertation research, you may find that your aims change in emphasis or in number. What is essential for you at this point, though, is to specify for your readers—and for yourself—the precise focus of your research and to identify key concepts you will be studying.

A clear statement of purpose will:

- Explain the goals and research objectives of the study (what do you hope to find?).
- Show the original contributions of your study by explaining how your research questions or approach are different from previous research (what will you add to the field of knowledge?).
- Provide a more detailed account of the points summarized in the introduction.
- Include a rationale for the study (why should we study this?).
- Be clear about what your study will **not** address (this is especially important if you are applying for competitive funding; narrowly focused studies are more likely to win funding).

In addition, this section may:

- Describe the research questions and/or hypotheses of the study.
- Include a subsection defining important terms, especially if they will be new to some readers or if you will use them in an unfamiliar way.
- State limitations of the research.
- Provide a rationale for the particular subjects of the study.

Examples:
How do these examples introduce the goals or objectives of the research?

> 1. My objectives are twofold. First, I intend to examine the effects of historic shifts in climate on the interactions of the carbon and water cycles as simulated by the constituent models of VEMAP Phase 2. . . . Second, I will investigate how alterations to future climate, as simulated through the end of the 21st century, are predicted to impact those same cycles and interactions. The linkages between the carbon and water cycles at the regional scale have only recently been the subjects of research; hence, much work remains to improve our understanding of the feedbacks between coupled processes. . . . Questions I plan to investigate include: How does the water balance of a region, including surface runoff, change as a result of climate alterations . . . ?
> (https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/w_gordon.pdf)

2. The guiding research question is: Under what conditions do Latinos in Queens, NY, switch their ethnic identification? This involves the following specific objectives:
1) **To document the incidence of multiple ethnic identities among research participants**. This involves collecting life histories that focus on the ethnic background of informants and their experience with ethnicity.
2) **To determine the contexts under which people invoke their ethnic identity**. This involves collecting data on characteristics of the community and social networks of communities. It will also involve prolonged *shadowing* observations of the participants (with their consent) in their day-to-day activities. [etc.] http://lance.qualquant.net/ang5091/proposals/Negron_NSF.pdf

Review of Literature

The literature review is a **critical** look at the existing research that is significant to the work that you are carrying out. Obviously, at this point you are not likely to have read everything related to your research questions, but you should still be able to identify the key texts with which you will be in conversation as you write your dissertation. Literature reviews often include both the theoretical approaches to your topic and research (empirical or analytical) on your topic.

Writing the literature review allows you to understand:

- *How* other scholars have written about your topic (in addition to *what* they have written).
- The range of theories scholars use to analyze their primary materials or data
- How other scholars connect their specific research topics to larger issues, questions, or practices within the field.
- The best methodologies and research techniques for your particular topic.

The literature review has four major functions or rhetorical goals that you should keep in mind as you write:

- It situates the current study within a wider disciplinary conversation.
- It illustrates the uniqueness, importance of and need for your particular project by explaining how your research questions and approach are different from those of other scholars.
- It justifies methodological choices.
- It demonstrates your familiarity with the topic and appropriate approaches to studying it.

Effective literature reviews should:

- Flesh out the Introduction's brief description of the background of your study.
- Critically assess important research trends or areas of interest relevant to your study.
- Identify potential gaps in knowledge.
- Establish a need for current and/or future research projects.

Tips on drafting your Literature Review:

- Categorize the literature into recognizable topic clusters and begin each with a sub-heading. Look for trends and themes and then synthesize related information. You want to
    1) stake out the various positions that are relevant to your project,
    2) build on conclusions that lead to your project, or
    3) demonstrate the places where the literature is lacking, whether due to a methodology you think is incomplete or to assumptions you think are flawed.
- Avoid "Smith says X, Jones says Y" literature reviews. You should be tying the literature you review to specific facets of your problem, not to review for the sake of reviewing.
- Avoid including all the studies on the subject or the vast array of scholarship that brought you to the subject. As tempting as it might be to throw in everything you know, the literature review is not the place for such demonstration. Stick to those pieces of the literature directly relevant to your narrowed subject (question or statement of a problem).
- Avoid polemics, praise, and blame. You should fight the temptation to strongly express your opinions about about the previous literature. Your task is to justify your project given the known scholarship, so polemics, praise, and blame are unnecessary and possibly distracting.

Key Point: You are entering a scholarly conversation already in progress. The literature review shows that you've been listening in and that you have something valuable to say. After assessing the literature in your field, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- Why should we study (further) this research topic/problem?
- What contributions will my study make to the existing literature?

Examples: How do these examples provide an overview of existing research?

> 1. Other studies also support the conclusion that traditional teaching methods hinder learning calculus. Selden, Selden, and Mason, conclude that isolated, trivial problems, the norm in many classrooms, inhibit students from acquiring the ability to generalize calculus problem-solving skills (Selden, Selden, and Mason 1994). Similar results are reported by Norman and Prichard (1994). They demonstrate that many learners can not interpret the structure of a problem beyond surface-level symbols. They show that novices have inaccurate intuitions about problems which lead them to attempt incorrect solution strategies (Norman and Prichard 1994). Because they cannot see beyond high-level features, they can not develop correct intuitions. On the other hand, successful problem solvers categorize math problems based upon underlying structural similarities and fundamental principles (Silver 1979), (Shoenfeld and Herrman 1982). These categories are often grouped based upon solution modes, which the experts use to generate a forward working strategy (Owen and Sweller 1989). https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/kaczmarczy.pdf

> 2. Increasingly, the research community is turning to coupled land-surface-atmosphere-ocean models with dynamic modules to achieve the realism necessary for climate studies. Most of the studies to date have incorporated equilibrium vegetation models into climate change simulations (e.g., Neilson and Marks 1994, VEMAP Members 1995 . . . ; but see Foley et al. 1998 for an example of climate simulations with a DGVM). It is recognized that the next stage is to include dynamic representations of the terrestrial biosphere. In this context, VEMAP Phase 2 model experiments will provide a unique opportunity to assess the effects of climate change on the hydrologic cycle and the water balance of regions on a continental scale, and how vegetation dynamics mediate those responses. https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/w_gordon.pdf

Methodology

This section is essential to most good research proposals. How you study a problem is often as important as the results you collect. This section includes a description of the general means through which the goals of the study will be achieved: methods, materials, procedures, tasks, etc.

An effective methodology section should:

- Introduce the overall methodological approach for each problem or question. Is your study qualitative or quantitative? Are you going to take a special approach, such as action research, or use case studies?
- Indicate how the approach fits the overall research design. Your methods should have a clear connection with your research questions and/or hypotheses. In other words, make sure that your methods will actually answer your questions—Don Thackrey notes that the most common reason for the rejection of professional proposals is that "the proposed tests, or methods, or scientific procedures are unsuited to the stated objective."
- Describe the specific methods of data collection you are going to use—e.g. surveys, interviews, questionnaires, observation, archival or traditional library research.
- Explain how you intend to analyze and interpret your results. Will you use statistical analysis? Will you use specific theoretical perspectives to help you analyze a text or explain observed behaviors?
- If necessary, provide background and rationale for methodologies that are unfamiliar for your readers. (Typically, the social sciences and humanities require more explanation/rationale of methods than the hard sciences).
    - If applicable, you may also need to provide a rationale for subject selection (particularly if you have not already provided one). For instance, if you propose to conduct interviews and use questionnaires, how do you intend to select the sample population? If you are analyzing literary texts, which texts have you chosen, and why?
- Address potential limitations. Are there any practical limitations that could affect your data collection? How will you attempt to control for potential confounding variables and errors?

Tips on drafting your methodology section:

- Break down your methodology into easily digestible subsections.
    - In the physical sciences, these sections may include subjects, design, apparatus, instrumentation, process, analysis, etc.
    - In the social sciences, these sections may include selection of participants, interview process, profiles, interpretive and analytic framework, methods of qualitative analysis, etc.
    - In the humanities, these sections may include scholarly research, archival research, theoretical orientation, etc.
- Remember that your methods section may also require supporting literature.
- Anticipate and pre-empt the audience's methodological concerns.
    - If the audience might have a problem with a facet of the methodology, admit this difficulty and justify your approach.

- If your methodology may lead to problems you can anticipate (including timeframe problems), state this openly and show why pursuing the methodology outweighs the risk of these problems cropping up.

Key Point: If you have demonstrated that you have considered even the downside of your methods, their advantages will seem more carefully developed.

Examples:
(NB: Most of these excerpts are from the *introduction* to the methods section; they do not comprise the complete methods description). How do these excerpts introduce the methods used to collect and/or analyze data?

> The research plan will proceed in two phases. During the first phase, I will select a 60-household purposive sample, create and test interview protocols, choose key informants, and train a research assistant. The first phase will lay the groundwork for the second, so that I will be prepared to create a baseline assessment of exchange and social interaction before the dry season begins in May. During the second phase, I will conduct in-depth interviews with key informants and four ethnographic interviews with each household in the sample. At the end of the second phase, I will conduct a series of experimental economic games to determine the norms of trust and reciprocity in the community. . . . The research design has several strengths. First, ethnographic study will yield data with high internal validity about how responses to water scarcity evolve over the wet-to-dry cycle (Kirk and Miller 1986). Second . . . (After providing a rationale for the research design, the author goes on to describe in detail the site selection and methods of data collection and analysis).
> (http://lance.qualquant.net/ang5091/proposals/wutich_nsf.pdf)

> My research draws on a three-tiered methodological approach: close textual analysis of primary source material; historical contextualization of both primary documents and broader socio-cultural framework through archival research and secondary histories; and interpretation of primary texts through theoretical frameworks, including spatial theories and gender studies. (Goes on to describe specific theoretical frameworks).

> This project is theoretically informed by several related literatures that form a compelling interdisciplinary intersection: studies of colonialism, the history of cartography, and science studies. The proposed project will draw from recent inquiries in these literatures, contributing materially or theoretically to each. (Goes on to describe these theoretical frameworks).
> (https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/lane.pdf)

Compare this example with the first example on p. 6 (purpose). How do these methods relate to the stated objectives?

> I am proposing two major analyses: 1) a comparison of simulated to observed streamflow and soil moisture for the historical period as a means of validating the hydrology of the VEMAP models, and 2) an examination of how changes in the water balance affect species' distributions over the entire simulation period, and vice versa. . . . VEMAP Phase 2 model runs will cover two periods: (1) the baseline or historical period from 1895-1993, and (2) a period of altered climate inputs from 1994 through the end of the twenty-first century as derived from three climate model experiments: i) The Canadian Centre for Climate Modeling and Analysis . . . The nearly 100-year baseline period will allow for the examination of multi-decadal variations that may be of similar magnitude to the effects of climate change. (Goes on to describe sources for historical data, and how the interaction between water balance and species' distribution will be measured).
> (https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/samples/w_gordon.pdf)

Significance/ Implications

Some proposals require a separate section stating the significance of the study. A clear statement of significance may:

- Discuss the methodological, substantive, and/or theoretical contribution you anticipate making to existing knowledge in your (sub)field.
- Plainly state the practical and/or theoretical importance of the problem and/or objectives of your study, given current knowledge and practices.
- Explain the usefulness or benefits of the study, if possible (and especially for funding agencies), to both the outside world and the research community.

Example:

> My research on identity and development is innovative because it brings together analysis of national discourses about Indians with a study of the practices and choices of the individual Indians whose identities are at issue. I believe this research can be helpful to the nation, development agencies, and indigenous organizations as Bolivia works out what a multicultural identity will mean for its people. I am particularly committed to sharing the results of my analysis with the Guaraní people with whom I work, in the hopes that my work will not just be an extraction of truths, but will give them information with which they can better control their lives and resources.
> http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop/examples/PosteroFulb.pdf

Overview of Chapters

Some proposals also include a brief description of relevant chapters. Check with your advisor to see if this is required for your proposal.

Timeline/Plan of Work

Many proposals also include a schedule with anticipated completion dates for specific parts of the dissertation. This timeline helps your committee determine if your project is realistic given available methods and institutional requirements (such as deadlines for submission, etc.). Setting a schedule can also help you manage your time more effectively by setting specific goals for yourself.

Some suggestions to keep in mind while drafting a timeline:

- Consult your advisor as you develop your plan of work.
- Be aware of important dates that the Penn State Graduate Thesis Office has set for submitting and defending dissertations. Once you have identified a specific time for submitting your dissertation, work backwards and estimate how long each stage will take. Penn State's "Thesis Information" page can be a useful resource for this task: http://www.gradsch.psu.edu/current/thesis.html
- Do not be overly ambitious; most stages seem to take longer than originally planned.
- Remember that this is a proposed timeline. What is perhaps most important is that you demonstrate your awareness of the various elements of the study (IRB approval, travel; design, testing, and length of experiments; negotiation of entry into the study site; purchase of necessary equipment; drafting; redrafting; etc.).

Bibliographic References and Appendices

Your proposal should include a working bibliography of key texts that inform your study and methodology. You will want to include all sources cited in your proposal, and you may also want to include references that will be cited in the dissertation itself.

Your appendices may include Experiment Diagrams, Permissions for Human Subject Testing, etc. Both bibliographies and required Appendices tend to be discipline specific: make sure you know what the requirements are for end matter in your discipline.

More Proposal "Nuts and Bolts"

A. Length

Most dissertation proposals are roughly 20 pages. Conciseness is usually at a premium. The tight focus you have developed on your research problem should, in turn, focus the amount of time and space you spend reviewing relevant literature and discussing methods. Some advisors may require a more in-depth proposal, from 30-50 pages in length. Alternately, in some fields the proposal is the first three chapters of a dissertation (introduction, methodology, review of literature).

B. Style Considerations

Tone

Tone refers to the writer's attitude toward his or her writing, usually expressed most clearly in vocabulary choices and "hedging" considerations.

- Try to strike a consistently confident tone.
- Avoid an apologetic or arrogant tone.

Coherence

Coherence reflects the extent to which sentences and paragraphs "flow" together. It allows your readers to follow your writing. Often, when readers say something "logically fits," they mean that it is coherent. Writers best achieve coherence by

- Moving from **"old"** (familiar) information to **"new"** information.
- Put the most important information at the end of the sentence (stress position).
- Keep the subject and verb together.
- Starting sentences with **short, easily understood phrases**.
- Using **"stock" transitional phrases** ("however," "therefore," "in addition," "on the other hand") that signal to readers a shift in topic or emphasis. (For more tips on transitions, see Purdue's Online Writing Lab: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/574/01/).
- Using **pronouns** to refer back to previously introduced information (e.g. this+noun) and/or the use of **recycling**, or the repetition of key words or phrases.

Example: When rocks erode, they break down into sediment—smaller pieces of rock and minerals. These sediments may eventually travel in water to new sites such as the sea or river beds. The water deposits the sediments in layers that become buried and compacted. In time, the sediment particles

are cemented together to form new rocks, known as sedimentary rocks. The layers of sediment in these rocks are often visible without microscopes. (Lay et al., 2000)

C. Voice

Voice refers to your "presence" as a grammatical subject in your sentences. Be conscious of the difference between "active" and "passive" voice.

> **Active:** I will conduct the bulk of the research during the six-month fieldwork period.
>
> **Passive:** The bulk of the research will be conducted during fieldwork.

English teachers are fond of telling writers to avoid the passive voice. However, there are two rhetorically strategic reasons for using the passive voice construction:

1. Your field may prefer its use, especially in describing research design and experimental activities.
2. You need to preserve coherence from sentence to sentence.

Example: Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. A Black Hole *is created by* the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways. (Williams, *Writing With Style*).

D. Visual Aids

Incorporate charts, graphs, diagrams, illustrations, etc., wherever possible, permissible, or practical.

Entering the Academic Conversation

You may think that a proposal is a fairly straightforward account of the dissertation project you will conduct. Indeed, research papers are often designed to create this impression so that they can appear more convincing to their readers. However, such impressions are largely misleading. As you write your proposal, you need to establish that your research questions are sufficiently interesting to pursue. You need to demonstrate that you are familiar with the relevant literature so your readers understand that your research questions have not already been answered. As you write your thesis proposal, then, you need to be concerned with positioning, with showing that your study is relevant and significant and has some new contribution to make.

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.
>
> —Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*

A1. The Introduction: Creating a Research Space / Defining Your Contribution

The following outline details the moves that many writers make in the introductions to their proposals. These moves allow them to signal to their readers the precise contribution that their dissertation will make to the disciplinary conversation.

Move 1: Establishing a Research Territory

- Show that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional).
- Introduce and review items of previous research in the area (obligatory).

Move 2: Creating a Niche

- Indicate a gap in the previous research, or extend previous knowledge in some way (obligatory).

Move 3: Occupying the Niche

- Outline purposes or state the nature of the present research (obligatory).
- List research questions or hypotheses (probable in some fields, but rare in others).
- Announce principal findings (probable in some fields).
- State the value of the present research (probable in some fields).
- Indicate the structure of the research paper (probable in some fields).

Sentence-Level Strategies for Introductions

Move #1: Claiming Centrality

First, you can claim centrality by stressing the growing amount of literature devoted to your topic. Here are some "skeletal" examples of strong opening statements. Notice how many of them use the present perfect tense of the verb:

> Recently, there has been growing interest in . . .
> The possibility of . . . has generated wide interest in . . .
> The development of . . . is a classic problem in . . .
> The development of . . . has led to the hope that . . .
> The . . . has become a favorite topic for analysis . . .
> Knowledge of . . . has a great importance for . . .
> The study of . . . has become an important aspect of . . .
> A central issue in . . . is . . .
> (The) . . . has been extensively studied in recent years.
> Many investigators have recently turned to . . .
> The relationship between . . . and . . . has been investigated by many researchers.
> Many recent studies have focused on . . .

Move #2: Negative Openings

The most common way to indicate a gap in the current research is to use a *quasi-negative subject*. Presumably, writers often choose negative subjects because they signal immediately to the reader that Move #1 has come to an end. Note the following uses of *little*, *few*, and *no/none of*.

> However, little information . . .

little attention . . .
little data . . .
little research . . .
However, few studies . . .
few investigations . . .
few researchers . . .
No studies/data/calculations . . .
None of these studies/findings/calculations . . .

Of course, not all research papers express Move #2 by indicating an obvious gap. You may prefer to avoid the quasi-negative comment altogether, in which case a useful alternative might be the *contrastive statement*.

The research has tended to focus on . . ., rather than on . . .
These studies have emphasized . . ., as opposed to . . .
Although considerable researcher has been devoted to . . ., rather less attention has been paid to . . .

Finally, writers in your discipline might explicitly raise a question, a hypothesis, or a need in their introductions. Here are some skeletal examples.

However, it remains unclear whether . . .
It would thus be of interest to learn how . . .
If these results could be confirmed, they would provide strong evidence for . . .
The findings suggest that this approach might be less effective when . . .
It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to . . .

Move #3: Tense and Purpose Statements

Move #3 is typically signaled by some reference to the present text, such as the uses of *this*, *the present*, *reported*, and *here*. If the conventions of the field or journal allow it, it is also common for authors to switch from the impersonal to the personal by using *we* or, more rarely, *we*.

Many visitors to the Graduate Writing Center ask whether they should use *was* or *is* in purpose statements. The answer to the question depends on how you refer to your work. You have two choices.

1. Referring to the type of *text*—paper, article, thesis, report, research note, etc.

2. Referring to the type of *investigation*—experiment, investigation, study, survey, etc.

If you choose to refer to the type of text, you must use the present tense. If you choose to refer to type of investigation, you can use either *was* or *is*, although there is an increasing tendency to choose the present, perhaps because it makes the research seem relevant, fresh, and new.

Links and Resources

WWW Links

Burke, C. G. *The Doctoral Dissertation Proposal*. University of Southern California, School of Policy Planning and Development. http://kerlins.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch/burke.pdf
The (UC) Berkeley Proposal Workshop: http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop/
Frank Pajares' Proposal Elements Page (Education): http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/proposal.html
Heath, A. W. *The Proposal in Qualitative Research*: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-1/heath.html
Penn State Office for Research Protections: http://www.research.psu.edu/orp/
Thackrey, D. *Proposal Writer's Guide*: http://www.research.umich.edu/proposals/PWG/pwgcontents.html
University of Connecticut Proposal Format Guide: http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/dpg/writdiss.html
University of Minnesota Grant Writing Tools: http://www.gen.umn.edu/grants/tools.html
Campbell, L. M. (Questions for assessing methods): http://www.nova.edu/~ron/campbell.html

For links to a wide variety of stylistic and grammar issues, see Purdue University's *Online Writing Lab*: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

Print Resources

Aaron, J. E (2001). *The Little, Brown compact handbook*. 4th ed. New York: Longman.
Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. C., & Williams, J. M. (1995). *The craft of research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Cresswell, J. W. (2000) *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
Glatthonr, Allan A. (1998). *Writing the winning dissertation*: *A step-by-step guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
Hacker, D. (2003). *A writer's reference*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
Lanham, R. (2000). *Revising prose*. 4th ed. New York: Longman.
Lay, M. M., Wahlstrom, B. J., Rude, C. D., Selfe, C. L, & Selzer, J. (2000). *Technical communication*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., & Silverman, S. J. (2000). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, SAGE.
Penrose, A. M., & Katz, S. B. (1998). *Writing in the sciences: Exploring conventions of scientific discourse*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
Punch, K. F. (2000). *Developing effective research proposals*. London: SAGE.
Sims, B. R. (2003). *Technical communication for readers and writers*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Murray, T. R. (2003). *Blending qualitative and quantitative research methods in theses and dissertations*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

Some Sample Proposals

Sample proposals at UT Austin, in a range of disciplines: https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/sample_diss.html
Sample proposals from UC Berkeley: http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop/examples/
Sample anthropology proposals: http://lance.qualquant.net/ang5091/proposals.htm
Computer science proposals, UNC: http://www.cs.unc.edu/~cssa/guides/proposals/index.html
NSF Social and Behavioral Science proposals: http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/bcs/grs/propsamples.jsp
Proposal Example (Collaborative Learning): http://www.indiana.edu/~educr795/prop1.html