

Dissertation Proposal Workshop Session 1

Open by explaining the logic of having a dissertation Proposal Workshop, this year a 'dry run'. Reference to the University of Southern California Proposal Workshop site.

1. Start by asking everyone for the name, year level and their topic. Also any specific anxiety or concern that they have about doing the proposal.

–why do we experience anxieties doing the proposal?

–possibly a result of the perennial problem that academics face - starting projects and finishing them

–committees will help enormously on both (other deadlines also)

1a. Committee Members - how many, who, out of program and out of university

2. The Proposal - what is it, what does it do as part of your degree?

–allows you to meet a program requirement

–ABD - can always come back and finish

–gives you direction as you proceed with the dissertation

–it is a useful tool (ultimately that's all it is)

–poses the questions for the dissertation

–the process of preparing it is enormously useful and important

3. The Proposal is not:

–the dissertation

–the introductory chapter or (the more common mistake) the theory chapter of the dissertation

–the process of writing the proposal is important, but there's a danger of investing too much in it, insofar as some students seem to confuse it with the dissertation itself. This doesn't mean it's not important and is not to be taken seriously, but it's very important not to get confused about what it isn't and what it isn't expected to accomplish

4. Components of the Proposal - this is currently on page 18 of the program calendar

i) A Title - should state briefly what your topic is. Later you will want to make sure your title touches on the relevant keywords, so that people can find your dissertation in citation and literature searches; that's less important at this stage, and instead point is to have a title that is clear and precise.

ii) Why This Topic Merits Study this and the next two points are focusing on the *Research Question*

–asking why the topic merits study presupposes that you think it merits study, and if you don't, stop now and step back (if it doesn't interest you now, you will not complete this

dissertation)

–why does it merit study: what drew you to the topic, what about it matters to you
 –this is the first of many ‘so what?’ questions - not a dismissive so what, but one that asks you to think about the significance of the topic and question you are posing

–when you pose your research question/topic, it should be evocative there’s no formulaic response to how to make something evocative, but you are basically trying to show that either your topic or the way you are cutting into it results in a way of thinking about (understanding/knowing) the issues you are studying in ways that are not obvious

–no single way to form a topic or question that is evocative, but some guidelines:

–timeliness- evocative questions or topics can be distilled from very contemporary social or theoretical concerns ie. Global warming, international criminal court, nationalism, anti-globalization activism, etc. Timeliness likely peaks the interest of your committee members and readers because their relevance is obvious

–frame it as a paradox - a theoretical or empirical paradox (empirical paradox: why is it indigenous organizations in Bolivia markedly declined while the number and quantity of funding sources increased? Why has violent conflicts over forest resources increased while the people involved in those conflicts are less dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods)

–take it a distintintive approach are you approaching an old problem in a new way?

iii) This is related to next point in the program handbook - what is original about the way you are approaching the topic?

–this is where you insert not your theory chapter or general review of all the existing treatments on this topic, but where you do cover some of the most relevant literatures that engage with your topic and you show how what you are doing differs from that other work

–is it theoretically distinctive?

–do you see a paradox or gap that hasn’t been noticed by other researchers?

–is your research addressing a gap or question that has been noted by others that has not yet been addressed?

–are you applying a general theoretical observation or position to a case that has not been explored? Is the case you are exploring unusual in some way? Or, is it simply that the theoretical insights you are applying have not been applied to the particular case you’ve decided to look at?

–is your case a test of a larger set of arguments?

iv) Hypotheses - a hypothesis technically means a suggested explanation. If this more positivist orientated language disturbs you (and/or doesn't fit with your own position), think of it simply as setting out your assumptions or your tentative arguments at this point

–it's also the second place you address the 'so what' question. Scientists usually set out hypotheses in if/then statements - not on the order of description, but of prediction. We tend to use that language less than do the natural scientists, but you can also think of this as returning you to the 'so what' - if there is a high presence of military bases in country X, then prostitution in the area rises. But so what? Why does it matter? Keep returning your reader to why the topic is important

v) Research Methods and vi) Sources

–how do you plan on conducting this research? How will you explore the question(s) that you have posed?

–this is important because in addition to an interesting, evocative and original research question, you need a do-able question and topic and thinking through how you will do the research helps you to determine whether it is do-able

–what information do you need and how will you get it? Can you get it?

–do-ability factors:

–length of time it will take to understand/get answers to your research questions

--availability of information

–research ethics

–cost

–language(s)

–you are pushed to answer 'how' questions here, but you still need to think through other questions, including the 'why'

– ie. Think of the questions associated with doing interviews: you need to describe with whom, how many interviewees, will they talk to you, what are the ethics involved), but you also need to ask why you are conducting interviews, what kind of information do you expect interviewees to provide? (Example of proposal that sought 'mainstream' accounts of HIV/AIDS)

–archival research - which ones? Where? What does it tell you

vii) Problems - you are asked to describe any anticipated problems in your method and your sources - will costs, availability or willingness of interviewees

(if you're doing interviews) get in the way? And if you think they might, what's your back up plan?

viii) Structure and Timeline

–this is enormously important - when you clarify the structure, you will have also conquered the 'enormity' of the project by putting it together into do-able chapters, each chapter contributes to the overall argument

–you do this when you write papers now, just apply to a larger scale

–you're asking of each chapter the 'so what' question again - what is the significance of this chapter in the context of the entire dissertation? What does it contribute to your argument?

5. Final Important Points

–style: clarity is better than theoretical or other obtuseness; confidence without arrogance, humble without being apologetic

–the process of preparing the proposal is important to give you a guide, to assist your committee and you as you proceed with the dissertation, but once it is done, remember it is only a guide, it's not a contract and you need to be able to be flexible

–the choices you are making here and throughout the rest of the dissertation writing process will come up at your oral where you will be asked to think through the reasons you did the dissertation in the way that you have - there's an infinite number of ways to cut into any topic, you are making choices about why you made the choices you did, the proposal is part of the process of sorting through those choices