

WRITING A PROPOSAL

FOR AN EMPIRICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE DISSERTATION

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January 2001

The process

1. Proposal writing may not be as daunting as it sometimes seems. The process of designing and implementing research is rarely as linear or orderly as published books suggest. A proposal is really only a snapshot of one's questions and plans taken a particular moment during a continuous stream of learning. The practicing scholar often adjusts his or her research question, key concepts, and decisions regarding which evidence to study before and after drafting a final proposal--especially so if the project employs qualitative methods. Later research often sparks ideas we can use to make the project better. Your readers will have had this experience. Promises sprinkled with a teaspoon of realistic humility go down well. Remember--it's only a *proposal*.
2. A good proposal does take time and multiple drafts, however. To win a national competition, begin six to twelve months prior to the deadline. Expect to cycle several times through previous scholarship, candidate research questions, empirical probes, and possible methods, improving as you go.
3. Ask your advisers to describe your likely readers and the criteria they will probably use in evaluating proposals. What questions will interest them these days, and what has been overdone? How much will they know about my special topic? What biases might they have? Your goal is to persuade imperfect humans to say "yes."

Selecting a topic.

1. Build on your strengths, relative to other scholars.
2. Many readers react positively to puzzles, anomalies, or contrasts that seem counter-intuitive or were surprises to an influential theory or expert observers.
3. Many social scientists are especially attracted to studies that identify theoretical weaknesses or controversies and promise to advance theory development in some way. While some readers will be receptive to a project aiming at solving a practical problem, others will be less enthusiastic. One solution is to contribute to some branch of theory that would be useful to your practitioner if it were valid.
4. Finding something that no one has studied at all is not necessarily a sound route to a project with significant payoff. Many readers will ask "so what? Proposing to plow

ground that has already been turned many times may also invite especially skeptical scrutiny. Consider carefully before choosing a new topic that everyone else in the country seems to be tackling this year.

5. Consider the disadvantages of studying only recent events, especially of a process that is still evolving, still less problems that are looming but have not occurred yet, however intriguing they may seem. Getting information may be difficult. The benefits of distance will be denied you. Events occurring a week after your defense can prove you wrong. Set a cutoff date that has some substantive basis and limit your research question to a period prior to it. Aim to write something that will be worth reading five years from now.
6. Consider designing the project to help you get your first job. Your dissertation will be the main “calling card” that identifies where you fit intellectually. What will be in demand in that career two years from now?
7. Too many accepted dissertations never lead to any publication, which makes us wonder how much they were worth. Plan for publication from the outset, and consider designing a set of three related journal articles as an alternative to a book. Ask your adviser which would be more valuable for the career you seek.

Building blocks. The structure and order of these common components may vary across successful proposals.

1. Summary of the specific research question and main expected contribution to scholarship (less than 100 words). This may be the most critical component. Make it as fresh, penetrating, and memorable as possible. Normally the toughest challenge is to raise a broad question that will interest a range of readers and yet to address it through a project focused narrowly enough to be feasible. Any scholar who is not a specialist on your narrow topic should be able to understand most of your proposal and especially this summary readily, at least on a superficial level.
2. What is already known about my specific topic and what important problems need solving today? Many readers will ask, “why do we need another study on this topic?” Some section of the proposal should demonstrate succinctly your command of the closest published scholarship and the originality of your proposed contribution. Do not include a mere description of literature; instead defend an original critical *evaluation* of present knowledge. The relevant literature is not limited to broad perspectives on your discipline. Concentrate on finding the specialized studies that come closest to answering your particular question (both may evolve as you go). Some students underestimate how much work and time are needed to master the professional conversation on a topic--the assumptions underlying it, the technical distinctions, what has been found empirically, the inconsistencies and the gaps. A well-focused research question rarely emerges from casual thinking alone. The final proposal should be dominated by your own points; do not absorb much of the reader’s time telling him things he or she already knows.

3. The central research questions or the provisional thesis to be supported and the general research design. Specify how your project will address the intellectual or practical problems identified in section 2. Do you aim to describe, to explain, to interpret, to predict, or some combination? Will you use qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or a combination? To what population will your generalizations, if any, aim to apply? There are many ways to make original contributions to knowledge. If you have no provisional hypotheses or theses yet, give a set of well-focused research questions.
4. Methods of analysis and why they are appropriate, in more detail. Indicate which of your methods are standard and which innovative. Especially critical is the question “what evidence or inference would suffice to demonstrate that your thesis or interpretation is wrong or inferior to another?” Use terms such as “theory” and “test” only if they truly apply to your project. Otherwise promise what you honestly expect to produce even if that feels more modest. Merely honorific use of scientific language will put off the sophisticated reader. In some proposals this material might be in section 3 or 5.
5. Evidence collection. Be as specific as you can about how you plan to spend your time--which evidence you will collect and where. Many proposals lose in competitions because they do not satisfy readers on these operational issues. Which cases have you selected provisionally and why have you excluded others? Many past students have selected certain cases intuitively before working deeply enough into steps 2 and 3, and consequently have suffered painful delays trying to make something out of their evidence, once collected. Will you observe directly or indirectly--via archives, interviews after the fact, and the like? If you plan fieldwork overseas, where have you arranged an institutional affiliation? How certain are you that that archive has information useful to your project? More than one type of evidence (quantitative, qualitative) is better than only one. Consider dividing this work into phases such that findings in early phases can help fine-tune what you do later.
6. Feasibility. Say roughly when you plan to complete the project and what you have done to make its completion feasible by that time. Consider including a calendar with intermediate deadlines. Consider identifying a fallback arrangement if the most likely plan proves to be out of reach. Many early drafts look naive because the author has not yet focused the project sufficiently (i.e., worked long enough on the proposal) to make completion feasible in less than a decade. This question is common, but it can also be answered in another section.
7. Significance. Why is it worth knowing what we will learn from your project? The broader its possible implications, the more people will care. In any case, promise at some point that choosing your project will probably yield some specified payoff, though with that touch of humility. Its significance could appear near the beginning.

8. Some readers look for a bibliography that shows that the proponent is adequately prepared and up to date on the special topic. Write to leading scholars who can identify any unpublished papers or funded projects that are not yet completed. Including a bibliography might allow you to cut the proposal's overall length while still conveying your preparation.

Some recommended reading

King, Gary, R. Keohane, and S. Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton.

Maxwell, Joseph. 1996. *Qualitative Research Design*. Sage. Consider performing the exercises designed especially to help new scholars through the most uncertain, early phase of refining a research question and its conceptual context in an original way.

Przeworski, Adam, and Frank Salomon. 1998. *On the Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions to Applicants to Social Science Research Council Competitions*. New York: SSRC.