

## Updated Guidelines Summer 2005

### Dissertation Proposal

The dissertation proposal will be defended by the doctoral candidate before their full dissertation committee. All committee members must agree that the proposal is ready for defense before the defense can be scheduled. Proposal defenses may be performed using any appropriate and relevant technology, depending on the location of committee members, and the student. The student is permitted to defend their proposal by being present at SHSS in person, or via telephone or video conferencing. For the final dissertation defense, students are expected to be present at SHSS.

*Length:* The dissertation proposal will be 20-25 pages

*Sections:* Section order may vary, and individual students will make these decisions in consultation with their full dissertation committee. The following is a brief synopsis of what is expected in each section of the dissertation proposal:

#### (1) Abstract:

A succinct summary of the proposed study usually no longer than 5% of the total length of the narrative (e.g, if proposal is 5000 words – then abstract will not exceed 250 words). This section should highlight topic; major theories/concepts to be explored; proposed research questions/hypotheses, if qualitative study – tradition/genre; methods – sample, instruments, procedures; proposed data analysis methods; expected contribution to field (theoretical, praxis, methodology)

#### (2) Introduction:

Justification section (~ 2 pages). The first section of your prospectus concerns a justification for a program of research. It also offers the context or background to the study. The topic can concern a domain of behavior, a theory, or an important concept/phenomenon to be researched. The objective of this section is to offer a clear rationale for why the topic merits exploration over time in a sustained and systematic manner. Good reasons include social needs, cultural needs, introduction of a concept that is valuable for research, advancement of the field (That something has been understudied is not by itself a good reason.) Make certain to define relevant terms as necessary.

Goals: (~1-2 pages). The second section of your introduction should outline several goals that you will accomplish in your research. You should underscore why these goals are important as well. Begin by stating, “The first goal of this research is. ...”and so on. There can be a number of goals. There will generally be from 3 to 6 goals. Be very specific in outlining what your goals are and how they differ from goals underscored in past research.

### **(3) Literature Review:**

Next, you should present a review of literature and provide arguments for the exploration of research questions and/or hypotheses. The review will be state-of-the-art (that is, completely up-to-date at the time of proposal submission) and focus on the research that you wish to propose. Think of this review as a funnel, in which you begin by broadly discussing the topic, becoming more and more specific and focused as you narrow to your idea.

Accordingly, this portion of the paper is not meant to be a review of individual papers. Rather, your review should synthesize what has been done to provide insight into the topic. While you synthesize past research think about building an argument for your own research. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of past research while presenting an argument for your research choices. The review of literature should reflect your critical examination (stated explicitly in your paper) of past research.

Hypotheses, research questions, and/or thematic purposes for your paper should be explicitly pointed out in your paper. For example, hypotheses should be numbered systematically (H1, H2, H3, and RQ1, RQ2 and so on) and they should be placed in appropriate sections of the literature after you have made a justification for them. If hypothesis or research questions are comparable they may be included in sets such as H1a: H1b or Q1a, Q1b. Make sure that you build a good argument in the literature review for your questions, hypotheses, or thematic purposes before you present them in this section. Provide a couple paragraphs above each hypothesis and/or research question to justify it.

Alternatively, you can conclude your review of the literature with your research questions/hypotheses. You would then begin this section with a sentence like the following: “Based on the above, the questions that will drive this study are...” After EACH question/hypothesis, you must present the rationale for choosing the question to study.

### **(4) Methodology:**

Next you need to present a description and critical examination of a type(s) of method(s) that have traditionally been used to investigate the topic you are proposing to research. Here you should not only discuss what types of methodologies have been used to examine the domain of behavior (or other) in related research, but also critique the strengths and weaknesses of methodologies that have previously been employed. The idea is to make a strong case for your methodology. A solid methodology comes from learning about the types of methodologies that have been employed by researchers in previous work related to your topic. It is important that you not only describe the methodology, but cite specific studies that have applied the methodology. For example, if you are

performing a phenomenological interview you should cite studies that have used this methodology and describe them. You need to be very specific in this section.

Include all of the following relevant sections:

*Sample* – what kind of sampling procedure, why chosen, who is in the sample, important selection criteria (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, life experiences, location, etc.)

*Instruments (data collection methods)* – e.g. surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observations etc. Include information about the reliability/validity if it is known. It is also recommended to include a few sample questions in order to give the reader a sense of the instrument to be used. Explain why you have chosen these instruments – why are they relevant for your study?

*Proposed Process/Procedures* – Give as detailed a description as possible concerning how the research will proceed. If this is a quantitative study, you will also want to include your Research Design (e.g. if this is an experiment, what kind; if this is a survey/correlation study – what is the design? Pre/post etc.)

*Proposed data analysis methods* – How do you propose to analyze your data? Be as specific as you can at this early date to lay out your proposed ideas for analyzing your raw data. For example, if this is a quantitative study, will you be using analysis of variance, factor analysis, etc. If this is a qualitative study, will you be doing a content and thematic analysis etc. It is also suggested, for qualitative research proposals to provide a short example of how material might be analyzed.

Use the jargon that is specific to your methodology; however be very clear and define the terms you use.

Be very specific in discussing these sections by including a rationale for the choices you made. For example, when a person states s/he will involve participants in the study...the immediate question is why? Based on past research and theory, you should explain why you made the methodological choices you have. Everything must be justified ...otherwise it is an opinion, which you will not be able to defend during a dissertation defense or **in a** scholarly conference. The most important question that you need to address throughout the entire research project is “why.” Specifically, why did you make the choices you did? What are the sample, instruments, ideas or data analysis and how do you support the choices you have made. Different criteria are involved with different forms of research, so you should address these in your proposal.

**For example the criteria good scholarship in qualitative research includes:**

Confirmability, through the use of pilot tests, reflexive journals and collecting recorded data

Trustworthiness: A form of qualitative research validity, whereby research can be verified by participants in the study, other similar research...other examples apply

Dependability, through the overlap of techniques and a use of an auditor

Member-checking, in the form of an amendment phase for the participants

Credibility, in the form of people from diverse backgrounds who are knowledgeable, and researcher's knowledge regarding the site through prolonged engagement in the field.

There are a number of standards used to evaluate qualitative research. Look at some of the following to learn your options: Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Josselson & Lieblich, 2004; Kleinman, 1991; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 1993; Spradley, 1979.

**Criteria for good research in quantitative research** (in addition to reliability and validity) include:

*Explanation:* Can explain why a social phenomenon occurs

*Predictability:* Can predict social behaviors in the future (however, please bear in mind that social science is very poor at this, as a rule)

*Control:* Controls for extraneous and intervening variables/artifacts

*Generalizability:* From the random sample we can generalize to the larger population

*Falsifiability:* Ability to check whether findings can be falsified.

*Replicability:* Methodology and data operations are transparent and can be replicated and performed by other researchers (a test for reliability).

*Validity:* Accuracy, testing for what you want actually mean to test (there are many kinds of validities – please choose the ones relevant to your study)

*Reliability:* Consistency in the findings & survey responses (there are many strategies for evaluating reliability; please choose the ones relevant to your study)

*Heuristic:* Research is easy to understand and can be replicated

*Value neutral:* Researcher does not contaminate the findings, the findings are external to the researcher and need to be objectively uncovered and analyzed

**There are criteria for good research in critical research; good research is:**

*Pragmatic:* Practical & relevant to current social concerns

*In-Depth:* Detail into a topic so that social injustices can be uncovered

*Culturally appropriate:* Describing cultural concepts accurately according to participant (emic) point of views

*Creates understanding:* Critical research does not seek to predict, but rather to promote an understanding about a topic concerning a group of people

*Clarify values:* Reveal what values are held and what has caused these views to be held.

*Connection with history:* Reveals how history constructs reality, history explains the current social situation, & cannot understand without history

*Stimulates agreement:* People begin to understand a social issue better

*Aims to change society:* Promotes change, recognition, and empowerment

*Improves status quo:* Betterment of lives and standards for particular populations

*Note:* It is important to take these criteria in consideration and discuss them as you are designing your research. For example, when you select an instrument (for quantitative research) in your methodology section it is important to report the reliability and validity of it in past research.

## **(5) Results or Analysis:**

Here you will present a thorough description of the types of analysis you plan to perform in your research. Whether they are qualitative or quantitative analysis, you should supply the reader with a detailed description of the types of analyses you will perform. You should organize this section of your paper around each research question and/ or hypothesis. That is each hypothesis or research question should be followed up with a detailed description of the analysis you plan to perform. Here you should discuss the ethical issues involved with your research as well.

Alternatively, include this in the above methodological section.

## **(6) Ethics and reflexivity section:**

If this is a qualitative or quantitative study, and you are planning on carrying out a study on human subjects (i.e. you do not plan on solely focusing on documents, written texts, etc.), explain how will you carry out an ethical study – e.g. how will you assure that no harm will come to your participants as a result of your study; are there potential benefits – if so, what are they; will the participants receive some kind of payment for their participation (if yes, explain what and why this is necessary and how this will not lead to coercion to participate); place of

participants in study; their roles in the research etc. If this is a qualitative study, then discuss where you are in this research – discuss your biases, prejudices, perspectives on life that may impact your work. Discuss how you plan to address these as you carry out your research. This section, like the above, is very specific to your proposed study.

**(7) Expected contributions of the proposed research:**

Present an argument about what you expect to find after you collect your data and why. Discuss the importance of the research and the expected contributions of the research. For the purpose of the proposal this section should be relatively short since you will not have collected your data; however, in your dissertation project this may very well be one of the longer sections. You would present a logical summary of why you found what you found as it relates to past research and according to the links you made in your review of literature. Here you can also include a section that addresses the expected limitations and strengths of your research.

**(8) References** - Use APA or Chicago style. Be uniform in your choice throughout the text and throughout the reference list.

**(9) Appendices**

In addition to your references, you should include as appendices related materials as appropriate. Examples include your survey instrument (quantitative study) and sample interview questions (qualitative study).

Students should refer to the Dissertation Guidelines for the format used in writing their dissertation