

UW Madison Sociology - FemSem
Dissertation Proposal Workshop with Myra Marx Ferree
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See website <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/gender/Resources/index.htm> for sample proposals and additional notes.

Overview

A proposal is your best guess of what you expect to find when you go into the field. You are showing that **you are capable of thinking through a limited, focused, doable project.**

Will the specifics change? Likely. Your committee wants to see **focus, clarity, do-ability** and to be able to say, “We can see that if you do this, you will get something valuable.” “We can see the core of something really good. Go out and see what develops.” Your proposal is NOT the culmination of your graduate career. It is your (often first) small step to show that you are an independent, contributing scholar.

You have to know enough about your data, issue, and literature to have a plausible idea of what you will study. A broad research question needs to be turned into something more limited in order to do it in the quite limited time frame a dissertation should take.

You should be proposing **an open and answerable question. Don't write it as if you know what the answer is already.** If you already know the answer, what's the point? Don't pre-determine your answer. Rather, **“I know that there's an important question here, and this is the piece I can address in a useful way.”** Whether the answer is more or less, this way or that way, in this context but not this, should be explored. You shouldn't know what the answer is, but do show:

- How you'll go about getting an answer
- That your questions matter
- That you can get at the question you ask with this particular data

Remember that you are proposing *to* somebody – your committee! Or your potential funder(s). Think about the audience and tweak appropriately.

Proposal Structure and Purpose

1. Lit review (at beginning) and significance (at end) sections:

- establish this is an important problem to research
- Should make up **half of the total proposal**
- Lit review: sets up the bigger problem into which your limited work fits, it does NOT “review” any literature in general terms.
- Significance: sets up where your work fits into the bigger problem
 - Why is this an important contribution to this issues/set of problems/need to know

- How will my work will tell me enough to get back at the research question productively – is there a good match (NOT a final answer)

2. Methods:

- **Goal: present a plausible and feasible way to answer your question(s)**
- Show that you are going to be able to do what you say you're going to do.
 - **Show you can do it in time!** Many dissertations start out as research agendas for a dozen years and need to be whittled back to what you can do NOW (save the rest for postdoc or other related articles)
 - **Show that the data exists**
 - I.e. these variables exist for these measures
 - Sufficient sample size; and if I am going to restrict the sample size, my n is still sufficient for not just my favored hypothesis but others
 - Variables, access, data, documents all exist where I say they do
 - There is an appropriate amount of variation for me to explore/test the alternatives to my hypotheses
 -
 - Think through possible contingencies...what can you control in terms of access, models, etc
- This section is about **half of the proposal!**

Examples:

1. Hae Yoon's proposal and dissertation (see website)

- General question: How is citizenship negotiated at the margins for migrant women?
- This doesn't change though the way the answer is imagined did as did the methodological design
 - State relations and visa status matters but is not as important as work, family, other relations
 - Intended to do 3 sites, but did 2 once she realized that rather than three separate populations, she found that two of them mostly overlapped as a single group.

2. Liz Holzer's proposal and dissertation (see website and file)

- Social movement took off when she arrived, how it was happening changed her study

Question & Answer

Q: How much do you have to stick to what you proposed and at what point do you have to write a new proposal?

A: For most committees, most of the time (~95% here), the idea is that you write a proposal that will be a valid dissertation regardless of how your results come out. In rare cases, if a lot of time has passed or massive changes have occurred, the committee might want a revision.

Q: What if you happen to have done a lot of research before the proposal, such that you have very strong ideas about what you might find and only need to do a small additional piece, such as fleshing out ideas through archival research?

A: Then focus on *why is the fleshing out important? Why is it worth doing? What is the open issue that, if I go to the archives, I will be able to say something about?* I.e. frame the question in terms of what has already been done (even your own research). The significance is framed as: *the archives may suggest X, which means Y, or archives may enable us to adjudicate between X and Y.*

[**Note on archival research:** For archival proposals, one of the best ways to frame the proposal is to show that you know appropriate materials are in that archive instead of another, that you have access, that you will or won't need another archive. Specifically cite how you know this and how you'll gain access. Why the archive matters more than published primary sources. See [pre-dissertation archival research funding from UW-Madison.](#)]

Q: Should we put your previous research into the literature review?

A: Don't cite yourself unless you have already published. However, the whole structure of the so-called lit review should (indeed, must) be based on your previous research. And if you have facts about the case (number of articles for a content analysis, rise of the prison population for a study of release conditions, etc) use it knowledgably. The argument is built on the fact that you already know something about it. You should never sound naïve, nor assert facts in general terms that exist in specific (e.g. don't say "there are many new organizations that focus on women's rights" if you can get a count of them)

Q: For committees, can we be more fluid about how precise we are about access to a research site?

A: It depends on your committee. Many committees want to know where you are going to go, how you're going to fund your research, and other factors that show that you can do what you set out to do. Mention pre-dissertation work. Include a **fallback plan (if you don't get the funding you applied for, if your alternative hypothesis begins early on to be more plausible than your main one).**

Q: Can you offer any advice on limited focus and answerable question?

A: Think about how to develop enough material for a project that is no larger than a 3-article project (not counting lit/methods chapters). NO more than 4 articles.

- How separate or different should the questions be?
 - What are the aspects of one focused question that can be broken into different elements?
 - 3 small, related articles
 - Bad example: 3 articles that are essentially 3 different dissertations.
- How do you pick the small piece?

- Is it compellingly interesting to you? Does it need to be done now (before going on to other aspects of the question you could do later on)? Is it feasible to do with the kind of resources you have?
- Publishing before you do your dissertation proposal is an EXTREMELY helpful way to understand the scope of “3 articles” that could be the standard for how you focus your dissertation.

Q: When we are establishing the validity of a question, should we be looking at popular interest (i.e. news sources) or research?

A: It should be building on theoretically meaningful sociological literature. “In sociology, at the moment, there is concern about understanding some bigger question” (i.e. citizenship, migration, social movements). Your theoretical handle is your so-called literature review. You do not need to show that you have a handle on “all” the literature; rather, engage with the literature that BEST points to the things you want to address. What is important for this one little project? The lit review should take on a funnel shape: E.g. Citizenship, law and social change, etc. -> in particular, in this context, in this time period > in particular with this data, I can contribute X to how to understand Y about the citizenshipprocess.

Q: How long should a proposal be?

A: External proposals are generally 15-single spaced including all references (some are only 15 pages DOUBLE SPACED!)

Internal (dissertation proposal) should be the same, but committees won't make you jump through hoops if you don't edit it down this drastically.

Q: Should references be only the works cited?

A: Yes, always. And cite selectively (given that lists of references count in your page length). Think of the lit as “raisins in the dough” – tasty bits scattered through it, overpowering and undermining the structural integrity of the loaf/proposal if overdone.

Q: How should we orient toward a literature? For example, if there are 5 theories that could explain your questions, can you arbitrate or winnow?

A: You can winnow, but with reason. It's very rare that one study is able to arbitrate between many. However, you might find two different traditions offer specific *and different* ways of thinking about the issue. You could say, “There are a number of theoretical traditions that all point to answers of this kind and a number that point to another kind. Mine is a good question to explore under what conditions and to what degree these camps work.”

Q: Should you be laying out your theoretical framework?

A: Depends on what you mean. You should be making clear where your contribution lies and to whom you are talking.

Q: Are there major differences between funding and dissertation proposals?

A: No. Think of the dissertation proposal *as* a research proposal. They are the “easy first proposals.”

Q: What types of relationships should we negotiate with our major advisors in terms of how to develop the proposal – and eventually the diss itself?

A: Many different areas to negotiate and forms of relationships:

- Only reading/reviewing at the end
- Reading drafts/chapters throughout
- Asking questions as you go along
- Standard apprenticeship models -- research fits into a piece a broader research program (i.e. ITP, CDE) allows more significant collaboration
- Apprentice-like relationship possible even outside quantitative areas where it is more standard if you have a bigger project that concerns/interests you both

Also, with your major advisor, you can submit an **NSF grant as a regular grant** with you as a research assistant. This gives you a stipend. You must write a competitive proposal, that clearly specifies what you and your advisor are each doing and what each will contribute.

Q: What is the role of non-major advisor committee members in proposal development and approval?

A: At UW, this tends to be collaborative, with the entire committee providing substantive input. Most major advisors want to see your draft first and provide feedback, and some committee members will also be this engaged. It is also fine to draw on expertise from outside your committee. This department enjoys a fairly open advising structure.

Q: What are common reasons they dissertation proposals don't pass?

A: Many! These include:

1. Not clear what the research question is
2. Question is not answerable (usually way too big, not too small)
3. Answerable but not open enough
 - It looks like you have already decided the answer. If you're wrong, it's unclear what you're going to say. (I.e. you expect a big difference in entertainment migrants and factory work migrants... What if there isn't?)
 - *Must phrase it in the form of a question* (as they say in Jeopardy)
4. Not enough methods – too short, not justified, not clear
 - Again this should be HALF the proposal
 - Practicality: how you are going to get the access, who are you going to interview, where are you going to live, what makes you think you can do this.
 - E.g. situate yourself. Don't assume we know how you'll secure access.
 - Anticipate and talk with your advisor about what makes it feasible or not feasible

Q: How do we frame research questions, given the range from broad to specific?

A: The question is tied to HOW you propose something. See any of the posted examples. You can't come to the conclusion that the proposer would ever find *nothing*, though each offers some well-thought through hypotheses. A good proposal makes it clear that dissertation will find something interesting. Do note that every method has its tradeoffs. "No question is worth asking if the answer to "why is that interesting" is "it is interesting" Interesting *how? To whom? For what?*