

How to Write and Defend Your Dissertation Proposal¹

Graduate Programme in Communication Studies

Guidelines for the Dissertation Proposal (aka “The Second Project”)

When: We recommend that you aim to begin working on your dissertation proposal immediately after you have finished all coursework and passed your comprehensive exam. Ideally, this would be your 4th term of residence.

What you need to start:

- An advisor. Usually, this will be the same person with whom you did your comps. However, if you find that there is someone whose expertise or working style suits your project better, this is the time to switch.
- A good sense of your project. Dissertations are usually quite different from the proposals that authorized them, but the hardest thing for many students is to narrow down their area of focus. Start early and narrow often.

What the proposal looks like:

The dissertation proposal is approximately 40-45 typewritten, double-spaced pages (exclusive of notes and bibliography). It should have

- a) An Introduction which clearly states the problem and its significance. What research questions do you intend to answer in your dissertation? Do you have a preliminary hypothesis or set of arguments?
- b) A Discussion or Literature Review which situates the research problem in the context of current debates and research. What are the key unsolved questions in your field and how do you plan to speak to them?
- c) An Approach section that sets out the sources, methods, and procedures for the scholarship. What do you need to know in order to write the dissertation? How will you find out?
- d) A tentative Outline of Chapters which breaks the project down into manageable sections. Keep in mind that you can't get too much done in a single dissertation chapter—it is not much bigger than a big seminar paper.
- e) A preliminary Bibliography, including all materials reviewed in the Discussion/Literature Review section.
- f) All written material must be presented in accordance with the stylistic regulations of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and must include appropriate documentation, footnotes and bibliography. See sections D,1-7 (8 does not apply to proposals) at <http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/programs/thesis/guidelines/preparation/>.

¹ Also known as the “dissertation prospectus” and formerly known as the “second project.”

g) Projects associated with confidential research or that use human subjects may only be submitted in accordance with the regulations of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. See <http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/ethics/>.

Step 1: Have a conversation with your advisor where you discuss the intended thesis. He or she will have a lot of good ideas. Take the advice and go write.

Step 2: As necessary, avail yourself of relevant resources. Have a look at friends' dissertation proposals or ask your advisor to recommend one. Better yet, take a look at dissertations in the department to get a sense of the range of topics, styles, quality, and level of breadth and detail in a dissertation.

Step 3: Write the proposal. Revise the proposal.

Step 4: Once the proposal is written and your advisor is satisfied with it, you and your advisor will decide on a committee to evaluate the proposal. Your advisor will chair the committee, which will have two additional faculty members appointed to it. (This committee is officially approved by the Graduate Programme Director, but you don't need to worry about that.) Once you agree on the committee members, your advisor will approach them. Once they accept, you can give your proposal to Maureen, who will send copies to them.. Or you may deliver them yourself.

Step 5: Within four weeks of distributing your proposal to your committee, there will be an oral defence where you defend it. Normally, you begin with a short prepared statement about the project, and then your committee asks questions and make suggestions.

Step 6: The proposal shall be graded as Pass with distinction, Pass, or Unsatisfactory. In the event of an unsatisfactory evaluation, further work may be agreed upon in consultation with the committee.

A Hypothetical Timeline for the Dissertation Proposal

Your first year: Make up and discard dissertation topics at will.

3rd Term of residence: Take your comps. Keep an eye out for areas where you can make an important contribution.

January of 2nd year: meet with your advisor, put together a game plan, look at some dissertations, discuss potential committee members.

February-March (and April, if necessary): Read, read, write, write. Meanwhile, your advisor approaches your committee.

April or May: Submit and defend your proposal. You pass! Celebration occurs. Sated, motivated and rested, within a week or two, you begin work on your dissertation. Start with the part that excites you the most.