

NYU DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH—TIPS FOR THE DRAFTING OF THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

THESE GUIDELINES ARE MEANT TO COMPLEMENT THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS ON COMPLETING THE DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND PREPARING THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL, AND THEY SHOULD BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH THAT DOCUMENT.

General points regarding the structure and character of the proposal:

- The Proposal as a whole should be written in clear, precise prose that is relatively free of specialized jargon and thus intelligible to an educated general readership.
- The first main part of the Proposal, comprising the general summary of the project, should state the thesis of the Dissertation as explicitly as possible, so that the reader is left with no uncertainty as to the topic and aims of the research. While it is perfectly acceptable—and in some instances most effective—for the thesis statement to be preceded by one or two paragraphs explaining the critical context amid which the project emerges, it is in many cases best to indicate the thesis in the very first sentences of the Proposal, with the contextual elaboration following this. In any event, the general summary should also provide a skeletal account of how the primary materials examined in the Dissertation will be shown to support the central thesis.
- The second main part of the Proposal comprises a relatively detailed description of the dissertation's organization, which might include a chapter by chapter in the completed Dissertation. Each of the chapter descriptions should identify the primary materials to be considered in the chapter, cite the aspects of these materials that will be most salient within the treatment, indicate the claims that will be made based on these salient aspects and the argumentative method by which the claims will be substantiated, and describe how these local claims contribute to the support of the Dissertation's principal thesis.
- Your working bibliography should include both works you have consulted to formulate your Proposal and ones you expect to consult and/or address as you write, because of their relevancy to your Dissertation topic.

Bear in mind that the Proposal is a *working document*, meaning both that it should effectively *function* on the Dissertation writer's behalf (in fellowship competitions, on the academic job market, and in the drafting of the Dissertation itself), and that it is always *in progress*—subject to revision as the project changes during the writing of the Dissertation. Thus, be sure to:

- Conceive the writing of the Proposal as a finite process that is meant to jump-start the drafting of the Dissertation itself, rather than as the once-and-for-all production of a perfect document. Set a clear schedule for researching and drafting the Proposal if necessary, and stick to it.
- Approach the Dissertation project aware that what they discover in their primary materials may differ from what they expected to find there. If this occurs, it is best to be guided by these discoveries and to adapt the project accordingly, rather than to let the original Proposal rigidly prescribe the subsequent course of the investigation.

- Revise the Proposal as necessary during the writing of the Dissertation, so that it reflects any changes made to the project along the lines indicated in the preceding point (and thereby increasingly approximates the status of an extended *abstract* rather than a *proposal per se*). Alternately,
- Do not hesitate to refer to the Proposal for guidance during the writing of the Dissertation, if that latter process should ever become stalled. A fairly clear and reasonably up-to-date Proposal can often serve as an effective “recipe” for how to proceed in the drafting of the Dissertation if (as sometimes happens) students lose sight of their objectives while they are in the midst of the project.

Additional random tips for identifying a topic, preparing the Proposal, and drafting the Dissertation—adopt and adapt as seems warranted:

- Explore for a dissertation topic by reading widely, in more or less “survey” fashion, so as to get a lay of the intellectual land in your area of interest. More directed “deep” reading can be pursued later in the process.
- Strive to identify a topic that is manageable within the constraints of the dissertation-writing context—i.e., one that can be successfully addressed within a two- to three-year period. The dissertation should not be encyclopedic in scope or conceived as presenting everything you know about your field of specialization. Remember, too, that it is simply the first major work in a career that is likely to be fairly long, and so should be reasonable in extent even while it is intellectually ambitious.
- As you proceed in the dissertation writing, don’t get so lost in the general or so obsessed by the particular that your progress is impeded (referring back to your Proposal for guidance can help you to avoid this pitfall). It is especially inadvisable to hazard grand generalizations about the period or other area of inquiry on which you are focusing.
- Strike a balance in your dissertation between inductive and deductive modes of argumentation, and between the persuasive effects achieved through rhetorical strategies and those derived from substantive research. Try to attain a level of self-consciousness about how these paired modes work in relation to one another in your own critical method.
- Remember that the type of writing represented in the dissertation project will remain relevant—if only as a touchstone—throughout the rest of your career, so it will be to your benefit to achieve a meta-practical awareness of how it generally works for you.
- Enjoy!