

## Dissertation Proposals

### The Pre-Proposal Stage

- The dissertation proposal process is long and iterative – for many people it is at least a year from the moment when you first start to think about a topic idea until the defense of a dissertation proposal
- There are some things that you should do/think about during that year that will help to get you to the proposal writing stage
  - Talk regularly with your advisor and other potential committee members about your ideas.
  - Use your research papers and your exam readings to help you uncover ideas for the dissertation; review and state of the field essays can be especially helpful since they often suggest new approaches or understudied issues.
  - Think about authors whose style/methodological approach you might like to use as a model for your work.
  - Read the prefaces, acknowledgements, footnotes, and bibliographies of books in your field; this can get you thinking about archives you might want to work in and people with whom you want to talk. Take notes on these things; visit the websites of the relevant archives.
  - Start a dissertation diary – this is a word file with entries by date in which you keep track of notes, ideas, and conversations you've had with your committee, classmates, people you've met at conferences, etc. It is best to spend 10 minutes a day on it; but even if you can't find time to write daily try to schedule it in a few times a week. This document will be very helpful when you actually start drafting your proposal.
  - Find out your advisor's expectations for the contents of the dissertation proposal – formats can vary even within a department.
- Other macro things to think about at this pre-proposal phase:
  - Your level of interest in the topic – if you are not intrigued by it at this phase, find another topic
  - How your topic will look as you head to the job market – share your ideas with scholars in your field in your department to make sure that your study won't be the 10<sup>th</sup> one on that subject in the past 5 years
  - The feasibility of the project for you --- It is important that you do some self-assessment and design a project that works for your work style, constraints, and preferences. Your advisor and committee members have done tons of projects, but you can't count on them to assess whether your project is a doable exercise for you. Not only is it tough for senior scholars to remember what the dissertation experience was like, but they may not know (nor do they need to) the various constraints (family, health, financial) and personal preferences you may have (e.g. not living in X country or Y place, spending more time at a few archives rather than

having documents scattered here and there in a multitude of different cities). Try to figure out at the pre-proposal stage what will be entailed in executing the project you are planning to propose (e.g. does the project necessitate going to 5 archives in one city or 15 archives in five countries, does it require oral interviews, what is the balance of published primary versus manuscript materials for your project, what languages does the project require, is this a needle in a haystack type project that will force you to work against the organizational structure of the archive). Take some time to assess whether you are prepared to do what the project demands. If not, redesign the project to fit your needs or find a new project that does.

- Committee composition – put together a committee in which each member can make a unique contribution either in terms of topic area expertise or because of particular skill sets (e.g. ability to help you conceptualize ideas or willingness to read your written work carefully, etc.)

## **The Proposal**

- Dissertation proposal writing, like dissertation writing itself is messy, tentative, and iterative. Allow yourself sufficient time to put the proposal together.
- Don't tie yourself in knots trying to write the perfect document; dissertation proposals are by definition imperfect documents because they demand that you lay out an argument when you have a best conducted only a small fraction of the research. Do not let yourself get bogged down.
- Remember that it is perfectly normal for your dissertation to change a bit once you get into the archives.
- That said a dissertation proposal is a contract between you and your Committee/Graduate School. By signing off on your proposal your committee agrees to the significance of the question you asking and to the work that you are proposing to do. This is an important protection for you since your committee cannot later deny you your degree by deciding that the question was insignificant or the work (assuming it was carried out as proposed) was insufficient.
- A well-written proposal can also be the basis for grant proposals

## **Typical sections of a dissertation proposal in history:**

- Introduction which provides basic context/background
- Literature review/historiography
- Dissertation Question/Argument
- Significance of the project
- Methodology/Approach (this section can take various forms – declaring yourself a certain type of historian (social, cultural, intellectual, political), noting a style you are emulating e.g. Foucauldian analysis, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of

- habitus, or offering particular themes and how they might translate into chapter topics)
- Research Agenda/Plan (include information about archives you will visit and documents you wish to see)
  - Chapter breakdown
  - Time-table with specific completion dates for research and writing of each chapter
  - Bibliography

### **Writing the Proposal:**

- Since dissertation proposals tend to be divided into sections, don't feel obligated when you first sit down to write the proposal to start at the beginning and go section by section; try writing up the individual sections as you feel ready; once you have a series of sections written, you can then pull the document together
- Read carefully through your dissertation diary and pull out relevant ideas and copy and paste them into each section; focus special attention on phrases in your diary that point to the big question your dissertation asks, the dissertation's argument, the major historiographic intervention, etc.
- Try any of the following exercises to clarify your thoughts
  - The elevator pitch – Imagine you are in an elevator and have only a minute before the doors open to explain your project to everyone in the elevator. This exercise will force you to identify the most salient points about your dissertation and its argument
  - Subject, Angle, Take – Every history dissertation (and book) has a general subject it addresses, an angle through which the subject is approached, and a take (the author's argument). Identifying these elements will allow you to write the various sections of your proposal
  - Fill in the blank – On a separate piece of paper, do a series of exercises that require you to finish a sentence.
    - My dissertation argues that....
    - My dissertation poses the key question of....
    - My dissertation innovates by....

### **Proposal Defense**

- Find out in advance what form the proposal defense takes at your institution.
- Take advantage of the defense experience to get feedback from all the members of your committee; this will likely be one of the few times in your dissertation process that you will have all of your committee members assembled in one room and focused on your work.