

GUIDELINES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING DISSERTATION PROPOSALS

The dissertation proposal should specifically include the following parts:

1. general statement of purpose and specific aims of study;
2. significance of the research problem and potential application of findings;
3. the state of relevant knowledge and theory and a review of significant literature pertaining to the proposed study, its hypotheses or questions, and its implications for social work and science;
4. the questions to be answered or hypotheses to be tested;
5. a description of the plan of research including major concepts, variables, assumptions, sources and nature of data, techniques for data collection, and a plan for analysis of the data. The student must present evidence of competence in the research methods required by the proposal; and
6. a discussion of human subject considerations.

Some Suggestions for Writing a Dissertation Proposal:

The proposal should persuade committee members that the proposal is: conceptually sound, has methodological rigor, is substantive and rich in its content, and meaningful for social work theory and/or practice. It should be clearly and cogently argued, not draw on jargon, and be understandable by people from different disciplines.

The following section outlines ideas for structuring the various parts of the proposal:

1) Introduction. The purpose of the introduction is to present the main research question(s) or hypothesis(es) and develop the scholarly context through a review of relevant literature. The introduction should convince the reader(s) that the proposed questions or hypotheses are significant and would make a meaningful and new contribution to the field. It should not include an exhaustive, “textbook-style” review of the area, but rather a framework for developing a cogent, persuasive argument. In other words, this section provides a sharply focused summary of the areas of research that inform this particular study and the questions it will address. The introduction will include the major hypotheses or questions to be addressed. It may conclude with a brief paragraph outlining how the proposed questions and/or hypotheses will be addressed.

2) Method. The method section should convince the reader that conclusions that may be drawn from the study will be valid. The student should specify the specific methodology that will be used to interpret the data in terms of the central problems. The plan of research should include an argument as to why this methodology (and analyses) is the best way to address the problems. This section could contain the following subsections:

- a) Design. Identify the specific research design to be used, including its strengths and limitations.
- b) Participants. Describe the relevant characteristics of the people who will be participating in your study. These typically include ethnicity, gender, age, education, as well as other characteristics relevant to your study, (e.g., mental health status, income level.)



- c) Procedures. Describe exactly what you propose to do in enough detail that committee members can assess the adequacy of your methods for addressing your question.
- d) Human Subjects. When human subjects are involved, all proposals must abide by the School and University guidelines on the use of human subjects in research. The website for UIUC Institutional Review Board, which handles human subjects requests and issues, is: <http://irb.illinois.edu/>. Procedures to be followed in this respect should be elaborated in the proposal.

3) Analysis. Describe the analytic procedures you will employ to interpret the data used. Other relevant topics, depending on the discussion topic and the methods used, would be data management and reduction.

4) Discussion/Conclusion. This section should include a summary discussion of the possible significance of your findings to social work policy and/or practice, and its relevance to possible future research (that is, describe how the proposed study fits into a larger research program). The section might also consider and explore alternate interpretations/explanations, as well as limitations to the study. It will also underscore what will be learned as a result of the study that is not known now.

5) References. Use APA Style (See most recent available version of APA publication manual).

The following readings may be useful in preparing your proposal:

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association: Fifth Edition (2001). American Psychological Association.

Shadish, W., Cook, T., & Campbell, D. (2002). Experimental and quasiexperimental designs for generalized causal inference. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Przeworski, A. & Salomon, F. (1995). The Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Social Science Research Council. Retrieved November 19, 2003, from <http://www.ssrc.org/cgi-bin/htsearch?workds=The+Art+of+Writing+Proposals>.