

How to develop a Project Proposal

THO 9295/9695 Doctoral Seminar (October 21, 2011)

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→ Courses)

Where to start?

Start with the goal of your work:

The successful defence of a completed thesis!

What does it take to complete a thesis successfully?

According to the [University of Ottawa's Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#):

A doctoral thesis must constitute a significant contribution to knowledge, embody the results of original investigation and analysis on the part of the student and be of such quality as to merit publication.

(underlining added)

Steps in the production of the thesis

1. Identification of a research director
2. Identification of an area of doctoral research
3. Refinement of the research area (Directed Readings, Comprehensive Exam, readings, discussion)
4. Presentation of the Project Proposal
5. Research and Drafting of thesis sections
6. Presentation of the Thesis
7. Evaluation by jury members of the thesis
8. Oral Defence of the thesis
9. Publication of the thesis

Timing of the Project Proposal

- Le projet de thèse (THO 9695) s'élabore normalement au cours des deux premières années de résidence de l'étudiante (coïncidant normalement avec la période de participation au séminaire doctoral) et est complété après la réussite de l'examen de synthèse.

Objective of the Project Proposal

- Permettre à l'étudiante de préciser et de délimiter son champ de recherche, la méthode employée et les ressources utilisées en préparation pour la rédaction de la thèse.

What does this mean?

- Helps ensure that the completed thesis will
 - Be an original contribution to a field of study,
 - Have a clearly identified (and identifiable) method for investigation of that field,
 - Be of publishable quality, and
 - Be do-able in the **recommended** time-period (2-3 years) and that it will take no longer than the **required** time period (maximum 4 years).

Who is the audience for your Project Proposal?

- Your director and committee members
- Two other audiences:
 - specialists in your field (usually represented by other faculty members in your Concentration or research area)
 - astute readers (other scholars in Theology, represented by members of the other Concentrations of the Faculty of Theology)

The elements of the Project Proposal

Manuel / Handbook, Doctorat en théologie / Doctorate in Theology, 2011-
2012, Section 6

The component parts of the Proposal

1. Title
2. Statement of the Problem
3. State of the Question
4. Research Hypothesis
5. Methodology
6. Table of Contents
7. Bibliography

2. Statement of the Problem

- According to the PhD Manual
 - “Décrire brièvement, en quelques phrases, ce dont on veut traiter.”
 - “In the thesis project, candidates:
 - identify the question which initiated their research and set out the objectives of the project;
 - indicate which difficulties might occur during the course of the research as well as the specific scope of the project.”

Statement of the Problem: Another perspective

- *A Statement of the Problem* allows you to “introduce the reader to the recognised general subject area and how your topic is related. Briefly point out why it is a significant topic and what contribution your work will make.”

[University of New South Wales Learning Centre](#) (my emphasis added)

What does that mean?

- Think of this section as
 - A first indication of the general parameters within which you will work (what to expect; what not to expect)
 - An opportunity to set before your reader why you personally are proposing to undertake your project
 - An opportunity to elicit your readers' interest and "good-will" towards your project.

Statement of the problem: Strategy

- Lead your reader gently into the area in which you are interested:
 - What is the topic you wish to work on? (A brief introduction to the topic)
 - Why are you working on this? This question can be broken down into smaller questions:
 - what brought you to this topic?
 - why is there a need for study on this topic?
 - what is at stake?
 - what leads me to want to spend 4-6 years doing this?
 - what is the larger social or church-related relevance of this topic?

A note of caution on the personal nature of your thesis project

- Theses in the “Humanities” tend to be much more personal than ones in the Natural Sciences and somewhat more personal than ones in the Social Sciences
- This can be a good thing and a bad thing:
 - It is a good thing when it means that there is a passion for the subject that will sustain you.
 - It is a bad thing when a reader suspects that your thesis will simply be an advocacy statement.
- The thesis must in the end be an academically and scientifically defensible original contribution to a field of knowledge.

A concluding thought on the *Statement of the Problem*

- By the end of this section, your reader should have a clear idea of
 - what your topic is within the larger and more general research field of scholars,
 - why you have chosen it,
 - what some of the limits are on what you will do,
 - what are some possible, initial implications that might come of your work.
- The next section (State of the Question) will ask: what has already been done by others on and around this topic?

3. State of the Question

- According to the PhD Manual:
 - “À partir de la littérature appropriée, décrire l'état de la question dans lequel s'inscrit le projet de thèse.”

What does that mean?

- What has already been done on and around this specific topic within the general research area?
- Having suggested the importance of the topic in the Statement of the Problem, the goal here is to carve out a space in which something else can be done on it.

Significance of the State of the Question

- This is very important for the following reasons:
 - Your work must be original: you cannot do what someone else has already done (ORIGINALITY)
 - But, your work must also be a contribution to the existing field of studies (CONTRIBUTION)
- The job of your director, committee, and the Faculty is to ensure that your thesis is both: original and a contribution.

State of the Question for two audiences

- The SQ shows that you have a clear grasp of the major lines of conversation in the field:
 - a specialist should be able to agree;
 - an astute reader will find your presentation compelling
- For the specialist:
 - Your methodology and hypothesis will suggest how your thesis will be an original contribution to the body of existing research and the questions that are asked in the field.
 - The SQ shows where it will fit and the original contribution it will make.
- For the astute reader:
 - The SQ should be such that a reader has a clear idea of
 - what has been done on this topic?
 - where do gaps/holes/incomplete or inadequate work exist presently?
 - why is there a need for your particular thesis on this topic?

A concluding thought on the *State of the Question*

- The State of the Question should answer your readers' question with which s/he was left after the Statement of the Problem: given the importance of this topic, what has already been done on it and around it?
- At the end of the section on the State of the Question, your reader should be prepared to be delighted by the original question that you will now propose to research and the place that your research work will occupy in the field (next section: Research Hypothesis).

4. Hypothesis

- According to the PhD Manual:
 - “Expliquer quelle hypothèse ou quelle façon nouvelle d`aborder la question permettront de poursuivre une recherche originale.”
 - This challenge is to “formulate an original hypothesis”

Significance of the Hypothesis

This is the distilled essence of your thesis.

This the axis of your project.

Everything hinges on your hypothesis.

Thesis = Hypothesis

- A thesis is a hypothesis or conjecture about a topic or a way of approaching a topic.
- A PhD dissertation is a lengthy, formal document that argues in defense of a particular thesis. (So many people use the term ``thesis" to refer to the document that a current dictionary now includes it as the third meaning of ``thesis").

From [Prof. Douglas E. Comer \(Purdue University\)](#)

Hypothesis: What it must be

- Clearly and easily identifiable
- Arguable
- Theological

Let's look at what these mean.

Hypothesis: Clearly and easily identifiable

- The hypothesis should be clearly identifiable -
- probably 'in 25 words or less'. (Though it is the focal point of your project, it is probably the shortest element of the project.)
- It should consist of something that suggests:
 - I propose that.....
 - I intend to prove/establish/argue/predict that ...
 - While the question ____ has been asked previously by means of ____, I will be asking the question by means of ____.

Hypothesis: Arguable

- Imagine formulating your hypothesis rhetorically (agonistically):
 - Your “opponent” is sitting across the table from you and arguing with you asserting the contrary to what you want to show ...
 - Why do you think that that is so?
 - Wouldn't it be better to propose that....?
 - How can you propose that when everyone knows that...?
 - Didn't so-and-so propose that the opposite was true?

Hypothesis: Theological

- You must keep in mind that your thesis is being written and for a Faculty of Theology, and that the degree that you will be awarded will be in Theology.
- You will need to identify ways in which the place that your research will occupy in the field will be clearly and decisively an original contribution to Theology and that the method that you choose to use will be self-reflectively theological and appropriate to that contribution.

A concluding thought on the “Research Hypothesis”

- After reading the Research Hypothesis (following the Statement of the Problem and the State of the Question), your audience(s) should have a clear idea of the original contribution that you plan to make within the general field and in light of previous work that has been done on this specific topic.
- In the next section (Methodology), they will want to know how you are going to prove this thesis.

5. Methodology

- According to the PhD Manual:
 - “Présenter la méthode qui permettront de vérifier l’hypothèse et de mener les recherches.”
 - In this section, PhD candidates seek to
 - “explain the methodology that will be used to verify their hypothesis”
 - “specify which method(s) they intend to use to attain the objectives of the research”
 - “detail which resources are at their disposal for the completion of this project”

Methodology: significance

The method is the key to a successful thesis , which is your goal, since it allows you to convince your reader(s) concerning your hypothesis.

It is, however, also the most difficult part of the project.

Role of the Methodology section

- In the *Statement of the Problem* you indicated
 - the field within which you believe pertinent data lie, and
 - what data you think are broadly pertinent to an important question you wish to study
- In the *State of the Question* you indicated
 - what others have made of this data thus far
- In the *Research Hypothesis* you indicated
 - the thesis (claim) that you believe can be supported by the data
- Now, in the *Methodology*, you identify
 - how and why you will identify those appropriate data, and
 - how and why you will approach those data in a specific way in order to demonstrate your thesis

Method: Two different meanings

1. How will you identify the appropriate data?
2. How will you analyze the data to be explored/used in the thesis?

Method 1: How will you identify the data?

- What will you need to do to get at the data?
 - **Not:** How will you interpret YOUR data? (That is the next question.)
 - **The first question is:** How will you gather (assemble, identify) the data (often the same data that others have gathered) so as later to interpret it (for which you will need the Method part 2)?
 - In other words: You will need to let your reader know what your data are and why.

Method 1: How will you identify your data?

- You must be familiar enough with the methods used in your discipline to assess which methods allow you to identify pertinent data for your thesis.
 - Peers in the field must agree that you have a knowledge of the methods that are available to you in your field.
- You will have to choose the method that is most appropriate for getting at the data that you have identified.
 - Peers in the field must agree that you have chosen a valid method.

Method 2: Understanding the data that you have gathered

- Having used method as a filter whereby you will look at a finite sub-set of data from among an infinite amount of data that exist in your field of interest, you must now use the same method – or one that is able to complement the first – in order to examine the meaning of those data that you are looking at.
 - This requires an absolute clarity about the method that you are using.
 - This requires an explanation of why this method (rather than another) works best.
 - This requires a sophisticated ability to use the method.

A concluding thought on “Methodology”

- Your audience(s) may not like your hypothesis (for a variety of reasons), but your audience(s) should be able to agree that, if the methodology you have chosen to evaluate it is sound, your results will need to be considered seriously.

A sample test

- Look at the thesis abstract that I will show you and ask the following questions:
 - What would you imagine to be the author's Statement of the Problem?
 - What will the author have to provide as a State of the Question
 - Is the hypothesis clear?
 - Is the method that the author will use to prove the claim (hypothesis) clear?

Tait, David Alexander. "From confidence to confusion in moral teaching: Episcopalians, pluralism and gender 1892-1997" (PhD thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1999)

Churches in the United States seek to provide moral guidance for their members, but in the late twentieth century some denominations found it hard to offer clear moral teaching and to enforce policies in the area of sexuality. This study of the Episcopal Church between 1892 and 1997 sought to determine why the church's teaching on certain aspects of sexual morality became incoherent. Previous studies examined Pastoral Letters from the House of Bishops, resolutions from the triennial General Convention, and statements by the Anglican Communion's Lambeth Conference. This investigation found that the Episcopal Church also provided moral teaching in its canon law, in the Church's Teaching series published in the 1950s and replaced in the 1970s, and in the Book of Common Prayer. As Episcopalians grappled with contraception, remarriage after divorce, the ordination of women, and the moral status of same-sex relationships, the church's moral teaching became conflicted and confused. Underlying the debates over specific issues was a struggle to define the nature and mission of the Episcopal Church. Before the 1960s, prominent Episcopalians understood sexuality in terms of a vision that linked marriage, family, church and nation: an indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman, each with clearly defined roles, was the basis of the family, and the family was the foundation of both church and society. After 1960, Episcopalians greatly modified their views on marriage, family and ordination, but did not integrate marriage, family and sexuality into a new vision of the Christian life. ... The Episcopal Church could not make up its mind about sexuality, not only because the issues were so complex, but because the church was deeply confused about its identity and its proper role in a radically pluralistic society.

6. Table of Contents

- According to the PhD Manual:
 - “Même si un plan détaillé du projet de thèse n`est pas nécessaire à ce stade-ci du travail, une table des matières provisoire aidera à mieux cerner les orientations de la recherche.”

TOC: Provisional

- The proposed TABLE OF CONTENTS is provisional.
- Should provide guidance to the overall flow of the thesis.

TOC: Divisions

- Two different ways to view the TOC at this point:
 - Chapters
 - Division of the material by proposed chapters.
 - Parts
 - It may be more helpful to think in terms of parts, than of chapters.
 - For example:
 - Part 1: History of interpretation
 - Part 2: Method used to study the material, and why
 - Part 3: Analysis of the text in question using the method

TOC: Annotations

- You may wish to annotate your TOC by identifying how a chapter or a part will address the elements of your thesis and why.

- For example:

Chapter 2: Interpretations of Machiavelli's political theory.

In this chapter I will identify the main lines of interpretation to date concerning the history of ethical reflection on and appropriation of Machiavelli's political theory.

7. Bibliography

- According to the PhD Manual
 - “Présenter une bibliographie organisée, concise, limitée au sujet et qui démontre une bonne connaissance de la matière. On présente normalement une bibliographie de base, qui à ce stade-ci, n’a pas encore besoin d’être complète.”

Bibliography: What must it include?

- What is required is a representative, not an exhaustive, bibliography.
- It must include any works to which reference is made in the text of the Proposal.

Bibliography: What should it do?

- The bibliography of the Proposal should provide
 - specialists in the field with a clear indication that you know the pertinent literature
 - astute readers with a guide to the literature related to what you have said in the body of the Project Proposal

Bibliography: Suggestions

- Two forms of presentation:
 - Alphabetical bibliography of all pertinent works,
or
 - Subject bibliography
- You should ensure that you have followed the University's accepted style manuals.
- You should make it of reasonable length.

1. Title

- According to the PhD Manual:
 - “Il est de l’intérêt de l’étudiante de choisir un titre qui illustre bien la recherche qu’elle compte entreprendre. Le titre proposé doit être concis et précis, donnant, avec un minimum de mots, une idée exacte du sujet.”

Title: My suggestions

- The title should contain ONLY the essential words that indicate what you intend to show / do.
- Think in terms of Internet / database search engines:
 - what three terms are crucial for someone to find your thesis?
 - If someone is looking for material in your area, will your thesis “come up” in *Dissertations and Theses*?
- Avoid “marketing” phrases for the title of your thesis.
 - A catchy title is only valuable if your thesis is published, and usually your publisher will do this for you.
- Remember: your topic, not your title, is all that is registered with the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies of the University of Ottawa

Exercise

- How would you modify the following title in light of the author's abstract: **From confidence to confusion in moral teaching: Episcopalians, pluralism and gender, 1892-1997?**
 - Identify three Boolean search characters (or phrases)
 - E.g., "The American Episcopal Church", "Sexuality", "1892-1997"
 - Amplify those characters with action words
 - "An analysis of and explanation for significant shifts in the American Episcopal Church's official moral teaching regarding sexuality 1892-1997"

Additional Comments and Conclusions

- Your topic must be focused and fairly narrow and the proposal should then be clear and compelling.
- Make sure that you have discussed with your Director and your Committee what your Project Proposal can and should look like.
- The Proposal should be error-free. (This helps reassure the Faculty that your thesis will be!)

Follow-up

- Allen, G.R. (1976) *The graduate student's guide to theses and dissertations: A practical manual for writing and research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Booth, W. C.; G. C. Colomb and J. M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (2d. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Cryer, P. (1996) *The research student's guide to success*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Davis, G.B. & Parker, C.A. (1979) *Writing the doctoral dissertation: A systematic approach*. Woodbury, NY, Barrons Educational Series.
- Laws, K. (1995) *Preparing a Thesis or Dissertation Proposal*. University of Sydney (Australia).
- Phillips, E.M. & Pugh D.S. (1987) *How to get a Ph. D.: A handbook for students and their supervisors*. 2nd Ed. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Karathwohl, D.R. (1988) *How to prepare a research proposal. Guidelines for funding and dissertations in the social and behavioural sciences*. 3rd Ed. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Follow-up

- You may find valuable the discussions at
 - ThesisBlog.com
 - DissertationBlog.com
- But do not even think about buying your Project Proposal from them or from MastersThesisWriting.com

Or you will end up here



THE GATES OF HELL