

Developing a Sociology MA Thesis Proposal

Guidelines 2009

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BACKGROUND

MA students in the Sociology Programme suggested to the Postgraduate Committee in 2008 that it would be useful to have a set of guidelines relating to thesis proposal writing. The guidelines below have been developed from previous guidelines and experience of both supervising and being supervised.

Comment and suggestions from MA Candidates and supervisors is appreciated in the updating of this document.

THE PROCESS OF PROPOSAL WRITING

The proposal is your statement of your research question, your rationale for your research, the theoretical and empirical background you are bringing to bear, and your methodology for the research. If you are a full-time student, you have two months to write your proposal. If you are a part-time student, you have four months for this task. There are proposals prepared by previous students available for viewing in the Sociology and Anthropology office; ask Margaret Hawke for the folder.

The MA proposal registration form is available on the student administration section under 'Arts' on the UC website.¹ The proposal is signed off by the Head of School (in practice, it will be read by the programme's postgraduate coordinator, who then advises the HoS). When the proposal is signed off by the HoS, the thesis student shifts from provisional to full registration. A supervision agreement with your supervisors is part of the form you submit with your proposal, and will involve you discussing with them your mutual expectations for supervision.

Your proposal will develop through several drafts, with guidance from your supervisors. Most people start with a short introduction or statement (2-3 pages), which outlines the topic, your focus, and the proposed methodology. This is then developed and elaborated through discussion with supervisors, and through further reading. The final document varies widely in length and format, but the average is about 3,000-5,000 words.

The form for submitting your proposal can be found under the 'Arts' heading on this url: <http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/acad/masters/progress.shtml>

¹ <http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/acad/masters/progress.shtml>

In addition to writing your thesis proposal, you may also need to prepare your application² to the UC Human Ethics Committee. If you are doing a health and disability topic, you may have to prepare an ethics application for the Canterbury Health and Disability Ethics Committee, which is a longer and more involved process. Your supervisors will guide you through the ethics process. It is quite common for the Human Ethics Committee to come back with questions, and you may be required to make changes to your project as a result of ethics committee recommendations.

WHAT SHOULD THE PROPOSAL INCLUDE?

The structure for the MA thesis proposal is broad and different proposals vary in format and organisation. This is because of differences in the nature of the research question/s and the theoretical and research orientations of students or supervisors. However, there are certain elements that are present, in some form, in most proposals.

These include:

Title and a brief discussion of how the thesis topic

A general discussion of the topic is found in the introduction to the proposal, including your rationale for choosing this topic. This section frames the research question (which is to come later), and discusses its relevance, the social context for the thesis research, and its significance. This is a place for you to establish the themes which will run through the rest of your proposal.

The research question/s

It is important that the proposal include the research question/s. It is important that research questions are clearly stated in proposal, and may be part of the introduction to the proposal, the beginning of the methodology section, or in a separate section.

A proposal includes discussion of the research questions, such as how they were arrived at and why they are important. In this section, you outline a specific research question (or questions) or area of enquiry ***which can be answered in the course of a one year research project***. Sometimes, one or two key research questions are elaborated with several sub-questions. If so, the sub-questions should not be additional questions, but questions that you will answer in the process of answering your main question. Research questions often change while you are doing the research, but the value of articulating them early is that you will give your research focus and direction.

² http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/humanethics/documents/HE_application_form1.pdf

Background to the project/ Literature Review

These two areas are often produced together, within one section. However, they are sometimes split into two sections. Sometimes the background to the proposal is included in the introduction. In some cases, the literature review will not have its own section, but will be split over several sections. However, a review of the literature and the background to the project are always included in a thesis proposal.

Background to the project can include:

- ❖ Historical background/ development of the issue, organization or problem being studied.
- ❖ Legislative and policy environment.
- ❖ Intellectual autobiography: The personal background or involvement of the researcher in regards to the topic.
- ❖ Social context for the topic
- ❖ Theoretical background or previous research (this shades into the literature review...)

The literature review can incorporate at least four types of literature:

- ❖ Conceptual or theoretical sources that provide a framework for approaching the problem.
- ❖ Empirical research relevant to the topic (which may include discussion of theory relevant to this research)
- ❖ Policy documents or related technical documents.
- ❖ Methodological literature. This can include sources on research strategies and rationales for those strategies, published work on methodological issues which arose in other research, or empirical studies relevant for the thesis research. (This part of the literature review is usually located in the methodology section of the proposal.)

The idea of the literature review is not to incorporate everything you have ever read on the topic (and related areas). It is not quantity that is important, but quality. Both the literature review and the background section set up your research project. The idea is to elaborate the basis for your research questions, to highlight the assumptions you are bringing to the research and the reasons for them, to point out what research has already been done on the topic so you can show how your project fits into the wider scheme of the field. By the time a reader finishes the literature review and background sections, they should understand why you are approaching the topic the way that you are, what the relevant background is to your specific questions, and what assumptions/ theoretical concepts you are bringing to bear.

Methodology

The methodology section is crucially important. It should explain how you are going to answer your research questions. The nature of the methodology section varies quite a lot, depending on the methodology chosen. Sometimes, for example, supervisors will suggest that there is a separate section for methodology/ epistemology, and for discussion of specific research strategies

(methods). A quantitative project will require detailed discussion of sampling, issues of reliability and validity, data collection methods, analysis, and so forth. Qualitative projects may give more attention to epistemological assumptions or ethics. Regardless of the nature of the project, there should be quite a lot of detail in this section.

Ethics are a crucially important part of the methodology section. Some people integrate their ethical discussion throughout the methodology section, and some people discuss it in a separate sub-section of its own.

The methodology/methods section often includes:

- ❖ Epistemological/methodological approach/es (e.g. social constructionism, feminist postmodernism, actor network approach, symbolic interactionism)
- ❖ Identification of information relevant to the thesis research questions
- ❖ How the research will be done – for example:
 - How relevant primary documents will be acquired and analysed.
 - How permission or assistance will be acquired from gatekeepers to the research.
 - How participants will be found and recruited.
 - How sampling will take place
 - What will actually happen during data collection? (e.g. Where will focus groups be held and how will they be structured? What will the interviews focus on? What type of questions will be included in the survey?)
 - Ethical issues - what plans do you have with respect to informed consent, confidentiality, safety of the participants, return of transcripts, and storage/privacy of the data etc.
 - Plans relating to coding and analysis of research material.
- ❖ Limitations and potential problems that are foreseen
- ❖ Who will have access to research results and how will you make them available?
- ❖ A timeline for completion of the project
- ❖ Budget and required resources
- ❖ Provisional outline of thesis chapters – this will be very speculative at this stage and does not commit you to writing under these headings.

References

Your proposal will need a list of references you have used in the proposal. You do not have to provide a comprehensive bibliography. The reference list usually ranges from 12-40 items, of all types including websites, newspaper articles and other theses. A really helpful website for this is: <http://www.citewrite.qut.edu.au/cite/apa/index.jsp>

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18.2.09