CUNY Graduate Center  
Ph.D. Program in Anthropology  

ANTH 82303  PROPOSAL WRITING  
Spring 2012  

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Fridays 2-4 pm, room 6114  
Office hours by appointment  

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The purpose of this course is to guide PhD students in Anthropology in preparing their dissertation research proposals. As such, the course provides a framework within which students are expected to take the initiative to accomplish their goals. Our aim will be to travel collectively through the key stages of effective proposal writing process in a seminar/workshop format. Topics addressed include defining researchable questions, designing an effective fieldwork plan, IRB protocols, research proposal evaluation criteria, peer-review processes, and other theoretical and methodological topics that are relevant to the task of proposal writing. (Please note that some knowledge of the techniques of collecting, coding, analyzing and interpreting evidence is presupposed.)

The seminar is organized as an intensive workshop. Participants are asked to embrace ground rules designed to enhance the capacity of the group as a whole to become proficient at proposal writing: all participants must be open to constructive criticism and to the possibility of rethinking parts of their research projects; and everyone must also take a rigorous yet supportive and non-competitive approach to the review of other people’s proposals.

Two aspects are absolutely crucial:

a) Unflagging commitment on your part to the task of writing, re-writing / thinking, re-thinking until the raw materials of your ideas have taken the form of a well-crafted proposal. In short, like any form of craftsmanship this is an endeavor this will be laborious, occasionally repetitive and frustrating, but ultimately rewarding.

b) Willingness to take interest in and engage seriously with the ideas of your peers, in a thoughtful, detailed, and non-judgmental manner. This is easier said than done because you will not necessarily be familiar with or, initially, even sympathetic to the research interests of your peers. You will have to find a way to overcome this because peer evaluation and discussion are integral to the intended outcome of this course.

¹ Professor Vinay Gidwani, Jeff Maskowsky, and Ruthie Gilmore developed sections of this course & kindly agreed to let us use their syllabi. I am grateful for their generous collegiality.
Since proposal writing can be a lonely and sometimes tedious or even alienating exercise, we will find a way to mix things up in class. Once the class enrollment stabilizes, I will set up triads of students whose task will be to serve as your reviewers and sounding board over the course of the semester.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Upon successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the proposal writing and review process, including the techniques for identifying and approaching potential funders and for surviving the application process;
- Demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the different parts of a compelling research proposal, including the problem statement, the research plan, the theoretical background, and the anthropological contribution; and
- Produce a polished research proposal for submission to funders.

REQUIREMENTS

1) Proposal Writing Exercise. After the first six weeks, you must complete a proposal writing exercise, the content of which becomes the first draft of your grant application.

2) Peer Review. You will subject your work to the scrutiny of others, and you will in turn review the work of others. In the final presentation a committee of peers and faculty will also evaluate your proposal narrative draft.

3) Proposals. The goal of the workshop is for you to produce a grant application by the semester’s end. Building on the draft you produced for the proposal writing exercise, you are expected to make incremental revisions until it is ready for submission to major funders. Each student will decide on the format of their proposal. I suggest that you contact NSF, NIH, Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Ford Foundation and/or the staff of the GC research office for help with selecting an appropriate proposal format early in the semester, so that you are ready to submit your proposal at the conclusion of the class.

   A key to the success of the project is the formulation of an interesting, clear, feasible research problem. It is critical that you identify, within the first two weeks of the semester, a topic that you are passionate about. Following the identification of the problem you will be expected to research it thoroughly using library sources, to situate it in the existing literature, and to develop and defend an argument of your own. Remember that this decision is one that you will live with for the next three to four years, from writing the dissertation to publishing your findings as articles and possibly a book. It is important that you select something that you care about and are curious to know the answer to as this undertaking requires so much time, emotion and hard work.

Class Format
Class-time will be used to discuss all written reports produced by members of the class. The purpose of these discussions is to provide critical but constructive feedback to colleagues.

**Recommended Texts**

You should purchase these texts as handy references that will serve you well, now and in the future. I will assign readings from these texts and they will implicitly or explicitly inform our class discussions. Reading is critical for success in this course. Books can be ordered through internet sites.


(for anthropologists and those undertaking an ethnography)

**Schedule of Activity and Deadlines**

Please note that written assignments are to be distributed electronically to your research partners and professor 24 hours prior to the class meeting****

Jan. 27

**Introduction and Review of the Class Syllabus**


IN CLASS EXERCISE: Write your research question on the board. As a group we will discuss your question, how you chose it, what theoretical framework you are working with, and whether you have thought about what kind of evidence you will need to answer your question.

Feb. 3

**The Structure of Inquiry: Paradigms, Epistemologies, and Research Design**

WRITE: Fictionalize your research imagination! Write a 1-page short story loosely based on your research problem. [The purpose of this exercise is to develop the art of storytelling. Ultimately, a good dissertation tells a compelling story. I want you think how you can creatively convey to readers the wider significance of your conceptual approach and research question.] / [To be circulated electronically to everyone in the seminar.]

Feb. 10

Theoretical Approaches and Grounded Theory


WRITE: a 1-page statement that outlines your theoretical framing of your research problem. If you are using a grounded theory be sure to explain how you will develop concepts and a framework from this exploratory research design. [To be circulated electronically to your paired research partners and the instructor for comments].

Feb. 17

Literature Review


WRITE: A 2-page introduction to the literature review with a 1-page bibliography. [To be circulated to your paired partner and the instructor for comments.]

Feb. 24

The Research Problem and the Research Question/Hypothesis/Model Redux


WRITE: A statement of your research topic and two sentences defining the research problem. Think about: *What’s the element of surprise in your problem?* Then write a 1-page re-statement of the research problem, with working hypotheses and/or questions. [To be circulated to your proposal partners and the instructor for comments.]

**Mar. 2**

**The Research Plan: Setting, Methods and Analysis**


WRITE: A 1-page statement of the research question / thesis with working hypotheses and/or questions + a 1-page preliminary statement of the methods that will allow you to generate the data necessary to interrogate / test /explore these questions and hypotheses. Conclude this assignment with a 1-page preliminary plan of how you intend to analyze your data once collected. [To be circulated to your proposal partners and the instructor for comments.]

**Mar. 9**

**Significance of the Project and First Draft Class Review (with Review Forms)**


WRITE: A 5-6 page draft research proposal with the following components: a) research problem and questions/hypotheses, b) critical [abbreviated, revised] literature review including theoretical framework/approach, c) research methods and design, d) analysis, and e) timeline for tasks. [To be circulated to everyone in the class electronically for comments.]
IN CLASS EXERCISE: Friendly defense of your research thesis and questions/ working hypotheses [come to class prepared to state with clarity, succinctness, and persuasion the element of surprise and the theoretical / empirical significance of your research question – you will be limited to 5 minutes of presentation time. Class members will use review forms to evaluate your question and the significance of the project.]

Mar. 16 (Guest lecture by Claire Panetta)

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD PROCEDURES AND RESEARCH ETHICS


Mar. 23 (if possible change to a morning time—Guest Lecture by Victoria Malkin)

WENNER GREN FOUNDATION FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Mar. 30 (Guest Lecture by Jeff Maskovsky)

PROFESSIONALISM AND OTHER CONCERNS

April 20

The second time around—reworking the research proposal for the final presentation and submission format

The Research Problem


WRITE: A two-page problem statement that introduces your research topic and describes your research goal. Remember that it is not enough to say that this research has not been done before. You must not only introduce a research problem. You must also make clear why it is important. Please include in your statement a list of specific questions and/or hypotheses that can be answered by the research you are proposing. [To be circulated to your proposal partners and the instructor for comments.]
April 27

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

READ: An exemplary article (or articles) in your sub-field and/or an Introduction to an exemplary book in your sub-field [as a way of thinking how a research problem is theoretically framed and justified].

WRITE: In three pages, describe the theoretical framework and approach to your project. Your theory section must demonstrate disciplinary mastery, theoretical coherency, and a nuanced understanding of critical theoretical debates. Ultimately, it must point to shortcomings in existing research, and it must explain how the project will fill the gap. But the theory section should be neither a straightforward literature review nor a vicious critique. Instead, it must show how the project builds upon prior work, and how it advances disciplinary knowledge.

WRITE: A 3-5 page critical review of the literature, with an extended bibliography. [To be circulated to your proposal partners and the instructor for comments.]

May 4

The Research Plan

READ: Another exemplary article (or articles) in your sub-field and/or an Introduction to an exemplary book in your sub-field [as a way of thinking how a research plan is organized and executed].

WRITE: A three- to five-page research plan that explains the steps you will take in the field and/or archive. Convince us that you will be able to collect the kinds of evidence you will need to answer the questions you are asking. Keep in mind that your discussion of methods should be presented more as an argument than as a list of things that you will do. It must make clear your rationale for choosing particular research methods, instruments, and data-collecting techniques, and should also include a clear description of the sites, populations and practices that will be the main objects of your study. You should also include a data analysis plan. Tell us what you will do with the evidence you collect. Be sure to include IRB information and how you will protect your informants/subjects.

May 11

Final Proposal Review (with Review Forms)

IN CLASS: Final Presentations with invited Review Board

WRITE: A 10-12 page draft research proposal with the following components: a) research question and its significance, b) critical [unabbreviated] literature review and theoretical framework, c) research design with methods and analysis, d) feasibility of study and anticipated problems, e)
timeline for tasks, and f) extended bibliography [note: bibliography is exempt from the 10-12 page limit]. [To be circulated to your proposal partners and the instructor for comments]. Note that you will need to edit down your previous assignments to keep it short enough to meet the guidelines of most funders.

Final draft is due electronically at 5pm New York time on May 18 to my box at the GC on the same day.