Format for Preparing a Dissertation Proposal

The following guidelines are offered to students who are preparing their dissertation proposal and their second examination on it. Passing the second exam admits students to candidacy, meaning they move to Level III and proceed to work directly on their dissertation. These are guidelines intended to apply for the entire program, and thus you will want to tailor your proposal to the advice and ongoing commentary of your Sponsor, should there be some subfield differences. These subfield differences do matter, such as between political theory and international relations, but not as much as you might think. The main principles apply for everyone. More important is the intellectual relationship that you establish with your primary advisor, whom we call the Sponsor. You will also work closely with—and get approval from—a second advisor, whom we call Reader. The other members of the committee, whether three or five, can come in at any time; it is up to you as the student to seek their advice and use it appropriately.

A three-member committee is one that is comprised of three members of the graduate faculty (see the departmental website for that list); if you wish members of your committee to include people who are not members of the graduate faculty (either have not yet been elected within the CUNY system or are at universities outside CUNY), then you must have five members. Of the three, two must be from political science (usually from within your subfield) and one must be outside that subfield (and can be outside the political science department); of the five, three must be from the political science graduate faculty at CUNY.

Procedurally, you are eligible for the second examination once your Sponsor and your Reader agree that your proposal is ready for defense, and each of them writes the Executive Officer an email to that effect. In principle, you should have these approvals one month before you have scheduled the second exam, which then gives the other member(s) of your committee two weeks to read your proposal, then send you comments, and two weeks for you to prepare to answer those comments in the second exam itself.
The other thing you need to do procedurally, and this is probably best done in that month-long interval while you are waiting for final comments, is to apply to the International Review Board for approval for you research. Full information is on the following website: http://www2.cuny.edu/research/research-compliance/human-research-protection-program-hrpp/. The initial form, which is attached as Appendix A below, must be submitted by everyone, even those who are doing no research that involves humans. If your research involves humans who are only in official positions, the application is an “expedited” one because officials are legally obliged to answer your questions as part of their office; for all other topics/research, however minimal, you cannot proceed with your dissertation research without first obtaining IRB approval. This is federal legislation. The Program has an official IRB advisor. Currently, Professor Julie George has agreed to advise our students about this procedure and holds weekly office hours. Note that you apply to the Human Research Protection office at the CUNY institution where your Sponsor is primarily based.

The following guidelines provide information on format (e.g., the cover page); length – the proposal can be no more than twenty pages of text (double-spaced, 12-point font, one inch margins), although this 20-page limit does not need to include the table of contents and the bibliography; sections (obligatory) of the proposal; and recommended content of each section. The proposed page numbers for each section are approximate guides, not rules. Avoid quotations; you do not have space for them and you benefit more by having to use your own words. No footnotes are allowed.

1. Cover Page

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
GRADUATE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY CENTER
Ph.D. Program in Political Science

Student's Name: (include e-mail address)

Dissertation Title:

Sponsor: Professor (include e-mail address)

Reader (s): Professor (include e-mail address)

Abstract of Proposal [1-3 paragraphs, limited to cover page; this should be single-spaced]:

2 | Page
2. Introduction: (1-2 pages)

The introduction should accomplish three things, which best populate each of three paragraphs:

Paragraph 1. The puzzle: what is the empirical or theoretical puzzle that generates the question of this dissertation? In empirical topics, this would usually mean some empirical evidence that contradicts the expectations of the literature on that topic that leads you to your question, but there are many ways that a puzzle can emerge. The key goal of the first paragraph is to provide the “hook” – why should your audience, both your advisors and a wider reading public, think there is a topic (especially a research question, but not only) that they should find of interest?

Paragraph 2: state very clearly what the research/theoretical question of the dissertation is (one sentence); in the second sentence, state what your proposed answer is (you will elaborate this later in the Statement of the Argument section, so just one clear sentence here); and in the third, you may find information or discussion that supplements these two sentences. This will depend on the topic. The clearer, more straightforward this paragraph is about what you want to investigate and what you propose at this point (remember, please, this is a proposal, not the dissertation itself), the better.

Paragraph 3: identify the potential significance of your research/topic. Of course, you have not done the dissertation, so these are informed guesses, but it is important to situate your research into the context of the literature to which you are contributing. There are two kinds of significance: (1) to the particular literature of political science that forms your background and puzzle, and (2) to any possible public/policy (“real world”) issues to which you hope to contribute. The first is essential, but given our commitments at CUNY, it is often the case that the second is also important to you, and you should identify it. There may be more than one item in each of these two, especially in (1).

3. Theoretical Framework and Substantive Focus (3-8 pages)

This section identifies the theoretical literature and its debates (theories, authors, research findings) in which you are situating your study and that informs it. You may wish to provide a paragraph or two on substantive background, if you think it necessary to your committee, but normally, this would wait until the dissertation (most commonly chapter two). You should begin with a paragraph identifying the categories of literatures that you will discuss in this section, to give a guide to your reader, and then proceed accordingly. This is good to force you to think in terms of categories of literatures that you are using, too, not just individual authors. DO NOT just list individual authors; you want to identify categories of arguments and theories in the literature. If appropriate, this section will begin with the primary theoretical debate that has provoked your dissertation topic, but there may not be such a debate for some, so do not worry. The point is to situate your topic (and eventually your argument and research design) in the existing literature that is directly related to your question and informs its conceptualization.
While this section might be, at least implicitly, critical of the existing literature, that’s not necessary at all. The key is to state what we already know about your topic. This means a lot of summarizing – one statement might represent 20 to 100 authors! Use the Chicago Manual Style (name of author and date of publication, in parentheses, referring to your bibliography at the end) for each summary (it may be one sentence, or several) of what the literature has said about your topic. Be sure to confine this discussion to that which is totally related to your question and argument. You will, of course, identify gaps, but be careful not to engage in your own debate with this literature. That will come in the next section.

4. Statement of the Argument (1-3 pages)

State your research question in the first sentence (repeat what you have said in the introduction), and then follow it with your proposed answer (that you will research or analyze in the dissertation). This can be a formal, positivist hypothesis (or several hypotheses), or an interpretive answer. The method of your dissertation and research will determine the appropriate format. What matters is that it be clear. It is often the case that stating hypotheses as if they will be tested in positivist ways is a very good strategy, so that your readers can get a very clear sense, even if, in the next, Research Design section, your method will not be positivist.

It is often best, therefore, to refer back to what the literature says you should expect in regard to your question, and then say, while the literature expects X, I expect Y. Thinking in positivist terms, this is where you identify very clearly the independent (causal) variable, the dependent (outcome) variable, and the causal mechanism you expect between the two. Some equivalent in less positivist terms is fine as long as the section tells us what it is you want to explain and/or understand.

You must, in this section, give conceptual definitions of the key terms of your question and proposed answer. Also, you need to give the reasoning for your proposed hypotheses or arguments. One paragraph is sufficient. If you have more than one hypotheses/arguments, follow each with a paragraph giving the reasoning that informs it.

If this is an empirical dissertation, you must frame your hypotheses/arguments in testable ways. They must be falsifiable. This task of testing, disconfirming, belongs to the next, Research Design, section, but it cannot be done if you have not very clearly stated your argument, hypothesis/es in language that is testable. Whatever your research method, it is useful to state here also one or more competing arguments to yours.
5. Research Design (6-8 pages)

It is important to know that this is probably the most difficult section, so allow time to develop this section. You will also soon see why the previous section must be very clear about what you intend to test, investigate, or interpret so that you can, indeed, say how you will do it.

What do you need to know to answer your research question/to test your proposed answer (hypothesis/ses)? How will you research/investigate your question and argument? This section requires, but not necessarily in this order, (1) operational definitions of the key concepts of your topic/argument; (2) What information or evidence do you need to assess or measure each element of your research question/topic (each of the variables – causal, intervening, and outcome)? (3) If you are doing case studies rather than a large-N study, explain your case selection criteria (whether they are countries, individuals, policy issues, literary texts, or whatever your unit of analysis is), and (4) What are the main sources of information you expect to use in your research (e.g., existing databases, libraries, or categories of people you would interview)?

On the last (4th) aspect, the second exam committee needs to know that the information you need actually exists and that you know how to find it; they also need to know that this is a practical, realistic design – that you have a good idea about where to find the information you need and the project can be done in reasonable time. Your committee may suggest new ideas about research design during the second examination, but these suggestions would be on the basis of what you have already written.

Remember that your argument must be disprovable – that the toughest test should be against your own argument, to try to disconfirm it; if it survives this test, it will be much stronger and more persuasive. This applies whatever the method, whether quantitative, qualitative, or interpretative. Consider even specifying what kind of information or competing arguments would go against your proposed answer/interpretation.

Many students have the idea that this section is about what “methods” (methodology) they will use. That is wrong. You want to say what information you need for your hypothesis/argument and how you will get it. If the method by which you get it is, for example, regression analysis or process tracing, you can say that in the course of discussing what you will do, but starting with a statement about such methods independently of what it is that the method aims to learn is senseless.
6. Tentative Chapter Outline

The chapter outline indicates to the committee how you expect to organize your findings and especially your writing. Chapter organization, of course, will evolve as the project advances. Nevertheless, even a preliminary outline is useful to your committee because it indicates how you conceive the task of linking together the components of the project into a coherent argument. It is very important, also, to write a paragraph for each chapter in the outline of what you expect the contents/argument to be. This is hard to do; this will change; but it is very important to give your committee an understanding of the reasoning behind your table of contents so that they can be helpful in thinking about your conceptualization.

7. Preliminary Bibliography

The bibliography should be single-spaced and follow Chicago Manual Style.
APPENDIX:

A. Dissertation Proposal Human Subjects Research Clearance Form

The Graduate Center requires all Ph.D., Au.D., D.M.A., DPT, DPH, and D.S.W. students to complete and submit the Dissertation Proposal Human Subjects Research Clearance Form to the GC HRPP Coordinator upon advancement to Level 3, immediately following successful completion or defense of the dissertation proposal or qualifying examination(s), or equivalent. Students must submit this form with their dissertation proposal and methodology, and, if applicable, documentation of IRB review and approval, to the GC HRPP Coordinator after their dissertation topic and methodology are approved by their dissertation committee and before the start of any research procedures.

For all inquiries regarding this requirement, please contact the GC HRPP Coordinator, Marianna Azar, at 212-817-7525 or MAzar@gc.cuny.edu.

Student's Name: ___________________________________________________________

Student ID Number: _______________________________________________________

Program of Study: _________________________________________________________

Student's CUNY Email Address: ____________________________________________

Student's Telephone Number & Mailing Address: _______________________________

Dissertation Supervisor: ____________________________________________________

Project Title: _____________________________________________________________
Please check one of the following:

_____ YES, this dissertation will involve research or clinical investigation and the proposed research or clinical investigator involves human subjects.
*** Attach copy of the IRB approval letter.

_____ NO, this dissertation will not involve research or clinical investigation involving human subjects.
***When researchers are not certain whether their activities constitute human subject research, they should submit a Human Subject Research Determination form in IDEATE to their College’s HRPP Office. The HRPP Coordinator will issue a determination of whether the proposed activities constitute human subject research. If the HRPP Coordinator determines that the research does NOT constitute human subject research, the researcher should retain this documentation in their research files and attach a copy of this determination to this form.

For further guidance, please visit the CUNY HRPP Policies and Procedures page: http://www.cuny.edu/research/compliance/human-subjects-research-1/hrpp-policies-procedures.html

_________________________ Date

_________________________ Date

***Please return this form, along with a copy of your approved dissertation proposal and methodology, and, if applicable, documentation of IRB approval or formal NHSR (not human subjects research) determination letter to Marianna Azar at the address specified on page 1 of this form.

GC HRPP Approval: _______________________________ Date: __________
B. Some procedural advice from Professor Woodward:

1. Although it is really, really difficult to do, I recommend writing the three paragraphs of the Introduction and not go further until you feel comfortable with them. They set up the entire dissertation proposal, and once you have identified the puzzle, the research question, and the proposed answer, you will have done all the thinking necessary to do the rest of the proposal. You may need many drafts before you are satisfied; that’s normal.

2. I am very concerned that people focus on the literature (theoretical framework section) too soon; it is easy to read for a lifetime and not get a proposal. You will, of course, need to know what argument(s) in the literature generate your own question or you want to disprove, but you will discover most of the truly relevant literature only after you know what it is you want to ask and argue. And this is a proposal, after all, not the dissertation; you will read much more once you are actually doing your research. So, please work first on the introduction, for the reasons I mention above, then move to the Statement of the Argument section. You will have begun a list of categories of literature relevant to your topic, but wait to write the Theoretical Framework section until after the Statement of the Argument section is done so that you can be as targeted as you need to be and don’t spin your wheels. There will be an interaction, of course, between your thinking for those two sections, but it will be much easier, I predict, if you work in the order I propose. While the Research Design section cannot be written until your Statement of the Argument section is done, you may also find that if you are having some difficulty with stating what your argument is, it can be useful to think about the kind of information and empirical research you want to do (and then write the RD itself once you have finished the SofA).