

# Social Research Dissertation Autumn Workshop

Dr Chao-Yo Cheng

Today's workshop is for



MRes Politics



MRes/MSc Social Research

# Plan for today

- ▶ Why dissertation (and what is it)?
- ▶ An overview of the dissertation process
- ▶ Getting started: Dissertation proposal form
  - Personal information
  - Title and subject area
  - "Scholarly" literature
  - Data and methods
  - Choosing (naming) your potential supervisor
- ▶ Concluding remarks and Q&A

# Why dissertation? And what is it?

- ▶ An **independent, original** research project, guided by your supervisor(s)
- ▶ Resembles a **peer-reviewed journal article** (12,000-15,000 words, excluding appendix)
- ▶ A **rite of passage**
  - from a student to a scholar
  - from consuming to producing knowledge
  - from an empirical "technician" to a well-informed social "researcher"

# Dissertation process: An overview

- ▶ Term 1: Prepare your **dissertation proposal form**; talk to the program director and/or your potential supervisor (if there is one)
- ▶ Terms 2 and 3
  - January: Submit your proposal form by **12 January 2025**
  - February to early March: Supervisor allocation
  - March to June/early July: Research and supervision in progress; complete ethics and risk assessment (if necessary)
  - July-August: Supervision ends (typically); complete your dissertation
  - September: Submit your dissertation by **15 September 2025** (tentative)
- ▶ After September 2025: Extension and deferral (TBA)

# Dissertation activities and events

- ▶ **Term 1** (Autumn) Workshop by Dr Chao-Yo Cheng
- ▶ **Term 2** (Spring) Workshop by Drs Laura Richards-Gray and Barry Maydom
  - Literature review
  - Time management
  - Ethics and risk assessment
- ▶ **Term 3** (Summer) Social Research Dissertation Fairs, as part of **Masterclass**
- ▶ Additional activities: Dissertation bootcamps (check with the Study Skills Team and UoL)

## DISSERTATION PROPOSAL FORM

Please upload this form to the Moodle site for your dissertation, which you can find at [moodle.bbk.ac.uk](https://moodle.bbk.ac.uk).

**Name:**

**E-mail address:**

**MSc or MRes programme:**

**Full-time or part-time?**

**Title of proposed dissertation**

**Description of subject area**

**What scholarly literature will you be examining?**

**What primary research material might you use?**

**Have you identified or spoken with a potential supervisor? If so, who?**

You can find the dissertation proposal form on Moodle.

# Dissertation proposal form



# Dissertation proposal form

- ▶ The proposal form is **NOT marked**; no written comments will be provided (but you can/should come to my office hours to talk about it)
- ▶ The proposal form **helps us find you a supervisor** that best suits your research project
- ▶ The proposal form **shows your tentative ideas** for the dissertation
- ▶ The proposal form should be **short, succinct** and yet **sufficiently coherent and informative** (2-2.5 pages max)
- ▶ Submit your proposal form by **12 January 2025** on Moodle

# Proposal form: Basic personal information

- ▶ Name
- ▶ Email address
- ▶ MSc/MRes programme
- ▶ Full-time or part-time

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**The information you provide needs to be consistent with what we see on MyBirkbeck**

# Proposal form: Title and subject area

- ▶ Title of proposed dissertation: Short v long? Creative v informative?

# Proposal form: Title and subject area

- ▶ Title of proposed dissertation: Short v long? Creative v informative?
- ▶ Description of subject area: A brief statement to introduce your research (like a paper's abstract)
  - What are the **research questions**?
  - What is the **focus of previous research literature**?
  - What is the **context and/or background**? What is the **scope condition**?
  - What is **distinctive about your theory position or intellectual approach**?
  - What are **the tentative methods and data sources**?
  - **[Not yet]** What are your benchmark findings? What "new facts" have you found? Or what key substantive conclusions do you draw? The value-added or originality of your work within this field?

*Developmental puzzles* First, you might, for example, pose a developmental puzzle – **how and why did  $x$  or  $y$  develop?** The  $x$  or  $y$  might be anything, ontologically speaking, for example, racist attitudes, cultural imperialism, the American system of government, a mental illness, and so on.

*Mechanical puzzles* Alternatively, your puzzle might be about how something works or is constituted. **How does  $x$  or  $y$  work? Why does it work in this way?** Again,  $x$  or  $y$  might be anything – intimate personal relationships, a legal system, a penal institution, the human psyche, and so on.

*Comparative puzzles* **Your puzzle might be about what we can learn from comparing  $x$  and  $y$ , and how we can explain differences and similarities between them.** This could involve comparing legal or social institutions internationally, different cultural objects or artefacts, or groups of people with different sets of experiences, for example.

*Causal/predictive puzzles* You might be interested in causality, and pose a puzzle about **what influence  $x$  has on  $y$ , or what causes  $x$  or  $y$ ?** You might extend that into a predictive puzzle - what is the likely outcome of  $x$  or  $y$ , where  $x$  or  $y$  might be a social intervention or programme for example.

Mason, J. 2002. *Qualitative researching* (2nd). London: Sage, p.18.



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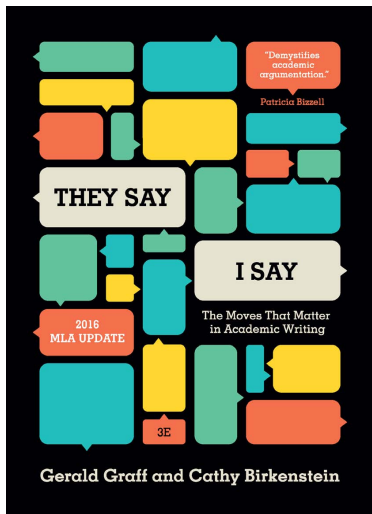
## Proposal form: “Scholarly literature”

- ▶ List the relevant "scholarly" literature(s); arrange the literature(s) by topic/keyword if you'd like

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- ▶ List the relevant "scholarly" literature(s); arrange the literature(s) by topic/keyword if you'd like
- ▶ Identify the gap, such as
  - Theoretical/empirical tensions or contradictions
  - Different or alternative theoretical perspectives
  - Different methodological approach (e.g., build on more inductive work to propose some hypothesis-testing deductive approach)
  - Extension to new context (e.g., different region, time period)
  - Untested conventional wisdom left untested or understudied (e.g., critical element not engaged with, need to consider other conditions)
- ▶ Use literature to think through your RQs and supervisor preferences





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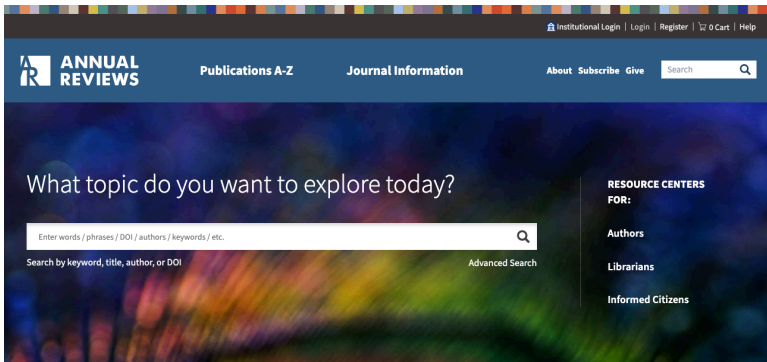
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<https://www.annualreviews.org/>

# Proposal form: “Primary research material”

- ▶ A suggestive research design where you
  - describe the type(s) of evidence which will be collected and analyzed
  - show that the proposed evidence can feasibly be collected given the time constraint
  - outline potential method(s) that will be used to analyze the evidence
- ▶ It is okay to be tentative (we know things will change), but aim to build a coherent alignment between question, theory, and empirics; you can use your observations to *evaluate* or *challenge* a theory
- ▶ The key task is to provide original analysis, which can be based on existing data

# ON THE ART OF WRITING PROPOSALS

Some Candid Suggestions  
for Applicants to  
Social Science Research Council  
Competitions

*Adam Przeworski*  
*Department of Political Science*  
*University of Chicago*  
and  
*Frank Salomon*  
*Department of Anthropology*  
*University of Wisconsin*



Social Science Research Council  
One Pierrepont Plaza, 15th Floor  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
212.377.2700 | [www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org)

<https://www.ssrc.org/publications/the-art-of-writing-proposals/>

# Proposal form: Potential supervisor

Supervisor allocation is a **collaborative** process between the Program Director and you; in the dissertation form:

# Proposal form: Potential supervisor

Supervisor allocation is a **collaborative** process between the Program Director and you; in the dissertation form:

- ▶ Nominate one or more (permanent) academic staff members from
  - School of Social Sciences
  - Other subject areas, such as applied linguistics, criminology, and law in other Schools
- ▶ Show some knowledge of the work by your potential supervisor and provide explanations in the proposal form
- ▶ Start informal conversations with me and/or your potential supervisors

# What supervisors do (and do not do)

- ▶ Min **three** meetings (each about one hour) before summer break
  - It is your responsibility to arrange meetings and keep in good contact with your supervisors
  - **Supervisors can:** Offer guidance and support (but not necessarily direction); advise you on approach, scope, questions to be asked, and the outline structure and research design and methods
  - **Supervisors may not:** Comment on full drafts and meet you during the summer break

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  - **Supervisors may not:** Comment on full drafts and meet you during the summer break
- ▶ Read through the following documents for more information
  - "Guidelines for MRes and MSc Social Research Dissertations"
  - "Policy on Supervised Dissertations for Taught Students"



# STAFF IN THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

## ACADEMIC STAFF

- [William Ackah](#), Senior Lecture in Black and Community Geographies
- [Margarita Aragon](#), Lecture in Sociology
- [Lisa Baraitser](#), Professor of Psychosocial Theory
- [Bina Bhardwa](#), Research Fellow, ICPR
- [Jasmine Bhatia](#), Lecturer
- [Alanna Bodo](#), Lecturer in Environmental Geography
- [Becky Briant](#), Reader in Quaternary Science
- [Sue Brooks](#), Professor of Coastal Geoscience
- [Ali Burak Güven](#), Senior Lecturer



<https://www.bbk.ac.uk/school/social-sciences/our-staff>



# Where Research Begins

CHOOSING A  
RESEARCH PROJECT  
THAT MATTERS TO YOU  
(AND THE WORLD)

Thomas S. Mullaney  
& Christopher Rea

## Where Research Begins

Choosing a Research Project That Matters to You (and the World)

Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea

Plenty of books tell you how to do research. This book helps you figure out WHAT to research in the first place, and why it matters.

The hardest part of research isn't answering a question. It's knowing what to do *before* you know what your question is. *Where Research Begins* tackles the two challenges every researcher faces with every new project: How do I find a compelling problem to investigate—one that truly matters to me, deeply and personally? How do I then design my research project so that the results will matter to anyone else?

This book will help you start your new research project the right way for you with a series of simple yet ingenious exercises. Written in a conversational style and packed with real-world examples, this easy-to-follow workbook offers an engaging guide to finding research inspiration within yourself, and in the broader world of ideas.





Announcements



Book 1:1 Meetings with Chao-Yo



College Assessment Offence Policy



College Mitigating Circumstances Policy



College Dissertation Supervision Policy

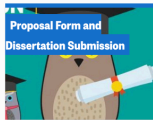


MRes Politics and Social Research Dissertation Guidelines



Slides: MRes Politics and Social Research Induction

Overall progress % 0



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# Course of action (until we meet again in Summer 2025)

- ▶ Revise workshop slides and recommended readings on Moodle
- ▶ Start thinking about your dissertation (if you haven't) and talk to me and/or potential supervisor
- ▶ Work on the proposal form and submit it by 12 January 2025

MRes Politics



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MRes/MSc Social Research



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