A Guide to Completing a Thesis or Project Proposal

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2007

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Guide Available at www.uvic.ca/spp

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Acknowledgements

Early versions of this guide were developed in workshops at graduate conferences of the Faculty of Human and Social Development, University of Victoria. Thanks to the students, faculty, and graduate advisors who encouraged me to write this guide, and made comments on drafts.

A particular thanks to Corrine Lowen, Laura Dowhy, Catherine van Mossel, Catherine Sparks, and Doug Hillian who gave permission to use examples from their research proposals and ethics application for teaching purposes, including the development of this document.

I appreciate the conceptual contributions of Pamela Moss regarding the inevitable tensions associated with writing a proposal.

Summary

A proposal is a serious statement of intent to look into a question or phenomenon and a plan about how to conduct the search. There are seven components to the work of coming to that final revision of a written proposal for a graduate thesis or project, although specific expectations vary by discipline, committee, and funding body. The seven components are: (1) general and specific focus; (2) review of literature, experience & concepts; (3) methodology and sources; (4) ethics; (5) timetable and ways of making decisions; (6) references, appendices and table of contents; and (7) formal approval.

There are six relationships that need attention to help prepare, and eventually implement a clear, feasible research proposal including relationships: (1) with oneself, (2) with a supervisory committee, (3) with representatives of organizations and their institutional expectations, (4) with selected friends, family, advisors, and supporters, (5) with "others" and finally, (6) with participants in pilot research activities.

The seven components of the proposal and the six sets of relationships are presented in a linear manner. In reality one often proceeds in a more circuitous way, engaging in various components and relationships simultaneously.

The Purpose of a Proposal

The purpose of the proposal is to provide a serious statement of intent to look into a phenomenon and a plan about how to conduct the search. Students engage in research under the supervision of faculty and with the guidance of others. Thus, the proposal is a statement of intent and a plan that needs to be accepted, useful, and feasible for all parties. The proposal is a careful, thoughtful and feasible plan towards a goal. It demonstrates an ability to undertake a study about a question that emerges from an analysis of what is known and not known in the literature and experience.

One could think about a research proposal as a distant cousin to a proposal of marriage or partnership: it indicates a willingness to engage in a significant undertaking that has consequences for both parties. Or, one could think of the proposal as a star to guide a voyage of discovery. It is to be used to chart a course and avoid undesired detours. In both instances, there may be starts, restarts, drafts, and revisions, until a "final revision" is accepted as an important step in beginning a journey.

Although at least two and usually more people accept a particular proposal as "a final revision", the ideas and processes in a proposal will continue to be revised. Thus, a proposal cannot and should not attempt to specify exactly everything that will be done or what is expected. A graduate thesis or project proposal is not a recipe to create a particular product or an advertising campaign to convince others of the worthiness of an idea. A proposal does not establish a set of sleuthing techniques to solve a puzzle. The intent of the proposal is to construct a feasible plan for you to explore, understand, or test a concern about which you are curious and do not know the answer.

The comprehensiveness and length of proposals, however, vary by discipline, by degree, by funding body, and by committee. Michael Prince (2005) distinguishes three types: First there is **_the sketch type _** of proposal that speaks to the topic, goals and questions and overview of research design. Next, there is the **_blueprint type_** of proposal from 25-35 papers that has literature review and discussions of theory and methods, personal stance and ethical considerations, as well as research question, method, time table and bibliography. Third, there is the **_foundations type_** of proposal that can be quite long, from 50 to 75 pages and includes solid drafts of theoretical and methodological chapters of the thesis. This type of proposal is more likely used for doctoral proposals, but may also be used in masters' proposals in various disciplines.

There are other types of proposals. For instance, disciplines, such as law and history, prefer a short outline of 10 to 20 pages presenting a thesis statement and procedures for analysis, to which is attached a substantial list of references and

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sources to be consulted. Some committees decide that a clearly articulated 15-20 page proposal that specifies intent and design, to which a draft submission to the Human Research Ethics Board is attached, may suffice as a proposal. Academic funding bodies, such as Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, will not accept proposals that exceed their web-based limits on size, often fewer than six single spaced pages, plus references and limited pages of attachments.   The funding types of proposals must be very clear conceptually and methodologically. They are usually the product of many drafts, discussions, and very, very careful editing.

Whether compact or substantial, a proposal is intended to convince an audience made up of yourself and others, such as a funding body or a thesis committee, that you have the disciplined curiosity and capacity to conduct a piece of research. A strong proposal is coherent and clear, with a methodology and specific research activities that are directly related to your analysis of interest, relevant scholarship and experience. It also includes arrangements for check-points so that changes can be made when necessary that assist the researcher to stay on course given the realities of life, the excitement of unexpected discoveries, the inevitable mishaps and problems, and the requirements for quality scholarship.

Pre-Proposal Steps

Dithering and having fun, combined with disciplined reading and discussion are part of the early stages. The point of these activities is for the student to explore their interests and develop a direction. It helps to read the proposals of others. Some find it wise to start writing down their ideas, worries, interests, and possible plans in systematic ways in logs, emails, or letters.   Talk to faculty and others who have similar interests or may contribute to the work of completing a thesis.

Choosing a thesis supervisor, or two co-supervisors, is part of starting, as is thinking about who could be on the thesis committee and advisory groups where relevant. Masters thesis committees must have three, and doctoral committees, four members, who are approved by graduate departments or faculties in your university.   An additional member may include an adjunct professor or member of community relevant to your proposal.

 It helps to figure out how you, a supervisor and committee members could work together for at least one and usually more years. Think about why you are asking someone—what do they bring to your work and life, and what would interest them in you and your project. It helps to take a course with a faculty member you are interested in working with, reading their work, doing pilot work

with someone, and talking about communication, decision-making, giving feedback and negotiating. It is important that the supervisor can work with the members that the student wishes to include in a committee. It is recommended a student consult with a potential supervisor about committee membership.

Graduate students are encouraged and expected to write at least two or three drafts of a proposal. The **first draft** is usually less than five pages and serves as a way for students to introduce themselves and their research intent to prospective committee members. The next and **longer drafts** are the basis for discussions and feedback from a supervisor and others. The last draft, that I call **the final revision**, is read carefully by committee members who give verbal and sometimes written feedback. In some disciplines and faculties there is a formal committee meeting to discuss the proposal and recommend clarifications or revisions. The supervisor is responsible to ensure that the student and everyone on the committee signify clearly that they "agree" to the proposal, and they clarify processes by which modifications will be made. It is not an unusual practice for the proposal to be "signed off" in some official way, with a short written record of that agreement placed in the student's file.

The Seven Components of a Written Proposal

1. The General and Specific Focus.

A writer of a proposal needs to be able to clearly fill in the blanks of the following sentence, also presented below in Table 1(adapted from Creswell, 1994:59). The purpose of the study is to_____ (*fill in blank with a central concept or two)* about_____ (*fill in blank with the unit of analysis, whether people, groups, time periods)* using a_____ (*fill in blank the method of inquiry).* Here is an example of how one master's student in Studies in Policy and Practice filled in the blanks.

> The purpose of the thesis is <u>to document</u> the <u>decisions and tensions</u> of one <u>committee of representatives from not-for profit agencies</u> as they engage in the development of a cooperative, using a <u>case study</u> and participant observation, documents, and interviews with key informants within <u>a community action research approach to inquiry</u>. (Dowhy, 2004)

Table 1: Four key aspects in the statement of focus.

The Blanks to fill in	How to fill in the blanks
The purpose of the study is to_____	Fill in blank with a verb such as test, understand, develop…
The_____	Fill in blank with one or two central concepts
About_____	Fill in blank with the unit of analysis, whether people, groups, time periods, spatial units
Using a_____	Fill in blank with the method of inquiry

Attention to all components of a proposal is necessary, however, before one can satisfactorily and convincingly complete the following sentence and say it out loud in informal conversation. But, completing this sentence is necessary to finish a proposal. The sentence, with its blanks filled in, can be used in the proposal abstract, in the first few pages of the proposal, in informal conversation, in the consent forms, and in submissions for approval to organizations and to the Human Research Ethics Board.

To reach the specific focus, describe the nature of your general concern and reason for interest in a specific topic. Introductions or prefaces to proposals can include a description of a client or a coalition approaching you with a problem such as the imminent change in the law affecting applicants for welfare. Or there is your own pressing interest in the absence of any information about fathers parenting children. Or, the specific focus can emerge from a curiosity of how citizens go about debating health policies in public arenas**.** Key to a proposal is the transformation of a general line of inquiry into a specific focus. A specific focus could become a hypothesis that tests the relationship between two concepts or the focus could be a clear question about one particular concept that you do not know the answer to.

The questions of what, why, who, how, and when help to clarify what is the specific line of (Strega 2005). "**What"** is the specific question you want to have answers to by the time the thesis or project is finished. By asking "**Why,"** you are challenging yourself to clarify why you want to ask that particular question, and why does the literature point to the need to ask this question. "**Who"** is a question about data sources—who are the persons who have written documents or who are the people to interview or organizations or places that you will observe. "**How"** is asking about the specific processes you use to collect and analyze the data. The last question to answer is "**when":** when are you going to carry out your work.

Most early drafts of proposals include several questions. Not all valuable and interesting questions can be the central focus of an inquiry. They may, however, become interview questions or frameworks for observations and analysis of documents, or questions you keep thinking about and come back to answer in another study. It helps to ask oneself: if I had to choose between several central questions, which one do I really want to know something about, and what is the proposal not about. **When stuck, ask yourself what are you <u>not</u> going to look at.**

2. Review of Relevant Literature, Experience and Concepts.

I argue there are three aspects to a review of what is known and not known: the research literature; personal and professional experience; and conceptual scholarship. Not every proposal includes a written summary of each of these, but all need to be clarified in your mind as they directly affect what questions you ask and how you propose to answer them.

In the literature review, a proposal writer examines **relevant** scholarly and professional publications, both theoretical and empirical, that directly supports or challenges the proposed specific focus (Webster & Watson, 2002). Literature may also be included that bears upon your focus, and sets it in context. Reading the literature helps you differentiate what is known from what is not known. Writing about the literature in the proposal builds the argument of why your specific focus needs to be studied.

Most researchers and scholars have experiences and personal reasons for studying what they do. It may be seen as a problematic, a puzzle, or a desire for a particular change in one's personal, community, professional life or theoretical work. It is not necessary to explicate in a proposal all the reasons for doing a study, but it is essential to clarify **to oneself** the assumptions and desires that drive a study. When reviewing experiences and assumptions, it is helpful to honestly clarify if one already feels they have the answer to the question or

mystery and is using the proposed study to "prove it". Proving what one knows or desires can stifle the curiosity to examine what one doesn't know.

Not all, but many proposals include a presentation of concepts or the conceptual framework. Sometimes this section is brief, presenting specific definitions of the unit of analysis, such as the age of the persons in the sample or boundary around a case study. In hypothesis-testing proposal, the variables to be tested are clearly defined, with a rationale for the chosen definitions. In historical, legal, or hypothesis generating proposals, the debates on several, but not more than two or three key concepts are reviewed. For example, a student in Studies in Policy and Practice debated the various ways scholars theorize key concepts such as "public consultation" in the conceptual framework of a thesis proposal on how citizens in British Columbia oppose the framing of "for profit" health care in presentations made to a government committee (van Mossel, 2005).

3. The Methodology.

How you approach the following three sections in methodology depends on how you understand methodology and how to use it, and the characteristics of the specific approach selected.

One: There is a section on **design and matters related to epistemology.** You will argue why you picked a design and how that choice helps answer your specific research focus. You will think about the implications your choice has to assumptions about how knowledge is produced, how you collect data, and interpret information. Both you and your committee need to be convinced that the design or methodological approach selected is better or most suitable (and feasible) compared to other approaches that are less relevant or appropriate to the study focus.

Two: There is a section on **data collection methods**, including sampling procedures, particular methods of collecting what type of data, from whom, how and why, and specific instruments or procedures to collect information. In historical and documentary research, a careful list of sources is expected and why some are included while others rejected. In quantitative research, it is expected the sample size and recruitment will be justified on particular standards. In observational naturalist inquiry, you need to describe the decisions taken to select what will be observed, when, where, and how.

Three: This section is on **analysis**. What will you do with the data? How will you go about organizing, inspecting, transforming, comparing, and interpreting? Draft if you can tables and charts that present possible relationships between several variables or categories, or a history of a policy or event. What statistical

tests are appropriate, and which ones are not? What analytical processes are relevant to making sense of the information and help to account for patterns? What are the possible points of comparison or juxtaposition of paradoxes that will explicate what is going on in the data?

4. The Ethics.

There are two aspects to ethics: first, there is the work of clarifying your research values and second, the ongoing task of creating ethical research relationships with persons. Some persons, including myself, argue that how you go about establishing the value and significance of the research is itself an ethical process. Thus, you ask yourself: what do I consider to be valuable, good research? What are the criteria of rigor appropriate to my design? Examples of different criteria of valuable research include: validity and reliability; thick, rich description; activation of allies and catalytic validity; population or theoretical generalizability; statistical significance; and relevance to policy or practice.

There are ethical issues in your decision about what research questions and activities are important: to whom are they important and relevant, and why? The reasons for doing a piece of research, and for doing it with integrity, are important ethical issues. In some methodologies, there are conventions about what results may be stated as significant and what margins of error or mistakes are accepted. For example, if a particular statistical test is appropriate to a certain sample size and type of variable, then a researcher argues a pattern is found in the data beyond what is expected by chance alone. A hypothesis is accepted or rejected with some level of confidence regarding the relationship between two variables. Even then, however, there are ethical decisions that go beyond technical or scientific matters, in order to make claims about value and significance of results.

Then there is the ethics of doing research with the persons and groups in a study. These are not just relationships with "human subjects" as per guidelines and protocols of particular institutions, including protocols for indigenous communities. There are also the ethics of relationships with oneself, members on the supervisory committee, and others as described later in this document.

For example, a student in the Dispute Resolution graduate program completed a thesis on how women in a rural Melanesian island work with the land, and how they understand their relationships to their land. The purpose of her thesis proposal was to explore how the use of, and knowledge of communal land contributes to the struggles against the World Bank's drive to break down communal land, and register parcels of land to individuals. This student spoke the local language, sought sponsorship of a respected, non-government cultural organization, and paid a "community representative and guide" to

accompany her through all parts of the study. The student did not start collecting information until after she and her guide prepared a meal and a village gathering to discuss the proposed research and request community support for her as a person, and for the research. Also, the student used an oral approach to discuss and obtain consent for individual interviews, with consent witnessed in ways familiar to traditions of the villages. The student wrote up a script of the oral consent approval processes for the supervisory committee and the University of Victoria Ethics Board. In addition, the ethics of working in the village meant reciprocity: there was an exchange of labour and food before and during the period of collecting information for the thesis, including for example, organizing the start of a popular education campaign with youth about land registration and World Bank initiatives (Sparks, 2005).

5. Timetable and Ways of Making Decisions.

This component of the proposal specifies who is doing what, when, and where. What are the costs in money and time? What check-points will there be for evaluating how the research is progressing, what are the problems, and what changes are required? Think about time and ways of making decisions, especially a process to check mid-way.

The timetable part of the proposal may be short. Sometimes it isn't written up clearly, especially as it is difficult to know how much time is needed or what decisions are required in the future.   Estimates, however, are a good idea. Sometimes writing up a budget about costs for preparing surveys, transcription costs, honorariums for participants, and the time needed for observations are helpful to the committee to clarify feasibility of sampling.

Some students start at the end when making up their timetable. They think about when they must or want to graduate and work backwards. Sometimes they use internal program deadlines for oral defense of the UVic deadlines for "Request for Oral Defense" form that must be signed by committee members before a thesis is sent out for external review. Others start at the beginning, and estimate how long it will take to complete various tasks associated with completing a thesis or project. A good proposal includes at least some estimates and deadlines, with an appreciation that flexibility is required to attend to realities of family, health, work, funding, and other obligations.

Besides a timetable of approximate deadlines, there is attention to ways of working together and decision-making. How will the committee communicate, and how often they meet. Normally, **I encourage building three committee meetings** into the timeline for a master's thesis: the first meeting to approve the proposal; a second meeting after most of the data are collected and preliminary analysis so that decisions can be made for final analysis or changes

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in direction; and the third committee meeting to discuss a nearly complete draft of the entire thesis is completed. Sometimes more meetings are required, especially for a doctoral thesis, or fewer when supervisors work in a tradition of approving everything first, and work goes to committee only after it is satisfactory to the supervisor. The ways committees work and who makes decisions and how, is related to the six sets of relationships discussed in the next section.

In a research project with a community group, a government "client", or a partner, it is necessary to clarify what are the responsibilities, contributions, and expectations of each participant. In a project using a community based design, differentiate clearly the decisions that the community is responsible for, such as the community products from a project, and those the thesis committee is responsible for, such as methodology and conceptual writing. Both may share responsibility for interpretation from their own perspective; both may contribute to dissemination to different audiences. When an indigenous protocol for conducting research is used, there will be discussions about who owns what information, and what happens if there are disagreements about interpretation.

In all thesis and research projects, there can be serious disagreements or unexpected problems. There may also be pleasant surprises, such as finding an unexpected source of excellent data. It is necessary to think about what processes can be used to resolve concerns, respond to opportunities, and revise methodological decisions. It is particularly important to agree about these processes while preparing a proposal. The responsibility for anticipating changes and implementing responses should not rest primarily with the student, although ultimately they are most affected if they do not identify and solve concerns. Sometimes problems cannot be resolved by the student or committee. There are people, dispute resolution processes, and appeal mechanisms available to assist students and their committees, within the student's home faculty as well as Faculty of Graduate Studies.

6. References, Appendices, and Table of Contents.

A working bibliography is essential to write a satisfactory proposal. It is the foundation for the completed project or thesis. Some disciplines expect thorough and complete lists of references and sources that will be consulted.

Appendices may include: drafts of submissions to ethics; a guide to interviews; a specific questionnaire; draft tables indicating how data may be analyzed, and letters of support. Some proposals have few appendices, as the students and their committees decide to spend their time clarifying particular details when an ethics review is actually submitted, or drafting the table of contents after data analysis has begun.

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Another useful appendix is a proposed table of contents for the completed project or thesis. In some disciplines and for some committees, a table of contents is required. Certainly a draft outline of the chapters and sections or focus of these chapters is helpful, but not always possible or desirable.

7. Final Institutional Approval.

As mentioned before, there are usually several drafts required to craft the "final revision" of a proposal. There may be a formal presentation or "defense" of the proposal to the full committee, followed by questions and requests for verbal clarification and written changes. At some point, the committee members indicate approval, through email or by signing a form. For other committees, a provisional decision is made to accept a 15 to 25 page proposal, pending clarification. Rather than requesting a total revision and re-submission of a proposal, memos of clarification are used to signal student's responses to particular matters. Upon receipt of a clarifying memo that responds satisfactorily to issues raised, the supervisory committee indicates the proposal is approved.

Whatever approach is used, there needs to be a clear signal of formal or institutional approval. **Approval means: the proposal is satisfactory; the student and committee have agreed to it; and that the student and committee will work together towards its implementation.** If there are significant changes in focus or design once the research has begun, it is the student's responsibility to inform the supervisor, and the supervisor's responsibility to ensure other committee members are aware of, and approve of these changes. Hence, the importance of building relationships of knowledge and trust, so that all parties to a proposal support its implementation, and are willing to negotiate the small and larger changes required to complete the thesis or project.

The Six Relationships Associated with Completing a Proposal

There are various ways to start a research voyage. What may be most baffling and hidden, however, is the actual work of preparing oneself and those with whom one has responsibilities and obligations while on the voyage. Each of the following six relationships is necessary to prepare a proposal. To implement a proposal and complete a project or thesis, further work is needed on these six sets of relationships. Thus, the following comments are relevant to the preparation of a proposal, and to all the stages of completing and defending a thesis.

One: Relationship with oneself.

This is a relationship that you have the most control over, and that will give you the most sustenance and power. Begin, and regularly return to your relationship with yourself. What is it you think is important? What is your intent and what values are important to you as you engage in research? Honesty, kindness and acceptance are important to this relationship. These attributes help you see that of the many important questions you may want to pursue, it is possible to pursue only one specific focus in the proposal. Early drafts of proposals include several large questions that will take several thesis or lifetimes to answer. To move from the general to the specific focus through drafts of the proposal, ask what you really want to know and what you really are able to work on. An honest look at values and intent can help compare what it is you wish to learn with particular questions. Pick what is most possible, feasible, amusing or useful according to your own values of what is important, leaving other questions for later studies or other people. Or, you can pick a focus that is most insistent. You may not know why, but you are convinced a question presses you. If you cannot live with yourself if you ignore the question, maybe that is what you focus on. Or pick the question that will be the most rewarding or fun to answer.

Take time to revisit this relationship with yourself. Recognize you have power to do the proposal, the project or thesis. Without you, it will not happen. When you are clear on what you want to do and why, it gives confidence. It is also freeing to honestly state privately, if not publicly, what is important about the project. What is it that you are prepared and able to give to it?

Two: Relationships with a supervisory committee.

At a masters' level there must be three members on the committee, four at a doctoral level. There could, however, be another member, such as an extra faculty or key community member interested in your work. If a thesis, the members must be members of graduate faculty at your university. If a project, one or more of the members must be members of the community, or a "client organization" for whom the report is prepared. Usually one person serves as supervisor; sometimes there are co-supervisors.

Finding committee members who are available, willing to contribute, and keen to work with you and each other on preparing a proposal and then a thesis or project is interesting and tricky. Some people find it helpful to systematically interview students and faculty about experiences, interests, ways of working, and availability. Some students are clear on who they wish to work with and why, and focus on developing those relationships. General and specific conversations are helpful. There is no obligation on a student or on a faculty to

agree to be part of a committee until the time is right and an invitation is offered and responded to.

Most faculty and students find it helpful to prepare a 2 to 3 page draft of their general focus, why they are interested in their topic, how they wish to do their research, and the feasibility of the topic. In contrast to the formal written full proposal, this sketch includes why you are considering inviting someone to be a committee member. What is it that you hope they can offer? Or, why are you interested in developing a research relationship with them? It may not be possible to know or state publicly the reasons for choosing relationships with particular committee members; but it is a good idea to ponder the reasons for selection.

Committees and supervisors vary in how they work. The supervisor is central to ensuring relationships are engaged in appropriately and to moving the proposal to the final approval stage. Some committees meet only once during the proposal stage: to discuss the proposal and ensure steps are clear about what is needed for institutional approval so the student can begin research. Some committees work more as a group, meeting several times as they wish to work more actively in the development of the proposal, or to resolve difficulties.

After the proposal is defended, some committees or members thereof remain quite active, while others contribute infrequently. All, however, must independently approve a proposal and then a thesis or project as ready for oral defense—and sign an institutional form indicating their decision. Therefore, at the proposal stage discuss time, as well as challenges of distance, and individual communication preferences. Explore the specifics of building relationships and preparing the proposal through the use of electronic, phone, and other mechanisms. At issue is the development of sufficient knowledge, clarity, and trust in yourself and committee members so the proposal moves to approval efficiently and **the proposal is a helpful document that can be implemented.** It makes sense to be as clear as possible early on, and to check mid-way, how available and willing committee members are to engage in individual conversations and problem solving. Some students expect far more contact than is possible for committee members; others want far less than may be needed to approve a proposal.

When one is thinking of committee relationships and the work required to develop a proposal and complete a thesis, I wish to repeat a point made earlier about the number and type of committee meetings. There is an early meeting to examine and approve the proposal and draft ethics submissions. Mid-way, a meeting is organized during the data collection or early analysis to check progress and make changes if necessary to methodology. Late in the process there is a third meeting to review a good final draft of thesis or project and to

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indicate clearly what steps must be taken to sign the relevant forms indicating a thesis or project is ready for external review and oral examination. Finally, there is the oral defense. In some disciplines, however such as law, there is no oral defense of a masters' thesis as the external provides a written assessment. If there is the defense, it is organized by the supervisor, student, and representatives of the graduate program. Whether four meetings are held, or more, or fewer, depends on the practice of the supervisor, the interests of the committee, and the traditions of a graduate program. The student is responsible to set up these meetings in consultation with the supervisor.

It is wise practice for the student to take careful notes of ideas, possibilities, disagreements, and decisions that emerge from committee meetings. For those I supervise, I encourage regular writing of reflections and reflexive notes in logs or emails to oneself that attend to preparation for meetings, and ideas prompted by discussions. Some students find taping meetings, with permission, with their supervisor (and committee) to be useful, especially during conceptual and theoretical discussions. It is a good idea to circulate a record of decisions after committee meetings to serve as reminders of what was said and signposts for future directions. Also, at times it is necessary to seek clarification in writing if there are serious disputes.

Three: Relationships with representatives of institutions

Students and committee members need to build relationships with university representatives, such as staff of the Human Ethics Review Board, Graduate Advisors, and Graduate Secretaries in order to learn what the institutional expectations are, when they change, and how to meet them. It helps to know who those responsible for your thesis and project are, what their job is, and how they can assist you in completing a proposal. It is also important to learn what they cannot do and what helps or hinders them do their work, including courtesy and appreciation. Official expectations regarding thesis proposals vary by program, and whether a student is completing a thesis or project, at a masters or doctoral level. Check them out. Check again just before you face a decision, as expectations change. These official procedures and guidelines are often posted on graduate or research websites of the university. But, remember there may be variations among individual supervisory committees that affect a particular student in moving proposal to formal approval. Are you expected to present and "defend" in front of the full committee? Is there a "sign off" step, whereby committee members sign a form indicating their approval of the proposal?

One common university expectation, however, is that students who intend to

collect new data from human subjects must submit an ethics application to the University's Human Research Ethics Review Board.   It is becoming an expectation that even if a thesis or project is a naturalistic inquiry, or draws upon public documents or an evaluation of a program as part of 'normal' activities, there is a short submission.   The supervisor must sign the ethics application, and cannot sign it unless the committee has agreed to the proposal. See the university websites under graduate studies and research for specific procedures, application forms, guidelines and timelines. Sample consent forms may be posted and available from faculty members.

Four: Relationships with friends, family, advisors, and supporters.

A reader may glimpse the significance of these relationships by reading the acknowledgments in completed thesis or projects. Rarely are these relationships conceptualized as work requiring negotiation during the proposal development. But why not, as these relationships are essential to you during and after the proposal.   What focus is selected and what is considered feasible may be directly, or unconsciously related to obligations and interests one has with family, colleagues, or friends. There may be expectations, mutually negotiated or not, about what time is taken to work on the thesis or projectl.

A graduate thesis or project is different than a course paper. It is not like a very long, big course paper.   That is one lesson masters' students' talk about needing to learn. A proposal, and a thesis or project, are qualitatively different. It is a rare student who can complete a proposal or thesis in a few long weekends. Recognize the time and energy it takes, whether weeks, months, and years. This time and energy has implications for one's relationships.   It is work to negotiate family and friend relationships that respect their needs and yours while completing a proposal. Negotiations are significantly affected by gender expectations, familial obligations, and financial entitlements.

Some, but not all, students decide to involve a few close family members, friends, advisors, or what one student calls "thesis angels" to accompany them in the journey of discovery, or in a particular stage of the proposal or research. These people are picked for their interest in the proposal and explicit desire to "stand beside" the person and assist them in completing the study. At times there are formal thesis seminars or informal groups of students who read each other's draft proposals or solve problems. It is important to recognize that these relationships are voluntary and premised on unconditional regard for the student as a person doing a task. But the student is not obligated to take the advice of these persons, nor be accountable to them for proposal decisions.

In certain methodologies, research approaches, and ethical approaches to research, such as those in indigenous communities or community action

research (Reitsma-Street, 2002), there may be "advisors" or a "community research committee" explicitly selected by the student and possibly by the community under study to accompany the student on the journey through the proposal and study. These people agree to know what is going on and negotiate what is helpful and relevant. There may also be funders of the research, and obligations to them need to be clarified, especially what is not negotiable that may affect a proposal. It is best to explicate and revisit from time to time the interest, capacity and responsibility of advisors or funders. A social work student put together an advisory committee of parents whose sons had completed their probation terms and who wanted to see more help for parents in youth courts. That same advisory committee later implemented some education workshops based on results of the thesis (Hillian, 2000).

It is also important to clarify what is the thesis committee responsible for in comparison to responsibilities of informal or formal advisors, and funders, if any. With a community advisory committee, for instance, is there a requirement or desire to ensure opportunities to share data? Jointly interpret? Interpret and write up different aspects of a study for different audiences? Exchange services or accept the gift of time? Is an additional report required by funders? Some graduate programs, such as Nursing, Public Administration, Social Work, and Business, have extensive experience negotiating with clients–as members of the supervisory committee. The relationships, however, that I am speaking of in this section are those "outside" the university supervisory committee, but part of what the student decides is necessary for their research.

Five: Relationships with "others".

I call attention to relationships with others, whether colleagues, friends, or faculty, who may give solicited or unsolicited advice about a proposal. There are also the others who provide welcome or unwelcome distractions. "Others" may include those you chose to consult with about a specific matter. The "others" may include the vague 'other', such as the other student who is perceived as moving more quickly than you, the faculty who appears to have a 'better' methodology, or the other graduate programs that appear to give students more money or support for graduate research. The 'Other' could be illusive, like a 'superego' that hounds a student with unrealistic expectations about what should be done, or a 'guiding spirit' that is supportive.

The point is not to ignore or dismiss what these others may say, as sometimes the information or advice can be helpful and relevant. But, these others do not know you or your proposal. They are not responsible for the implications of their advice. Hence, it is important to be clear and efficient in shifting through what these others say, and how much time you spend on these relationships. Do they add to your work on the proposal? Do you lose or gain energy, time, and focus

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by listening, and responding to the 'others.'

Six: Relationship with pilot research activities.

 I end this document on the 13 aspects of work required to complete a proposal by arguing it is helpful to think about building a relationship between oneself and the actual research work through pilot or preliminary research activities. Pilot work deals with various aspects of a proposal, and can prompt lively discussions and useful activities. Engaging in pilot or preliminary activities helps students get out of their heads and computers and build personal confidence in the chosen research question and one's identity as a researcher. Good research depends on pilot work to ensure a proposal is feasible and closely related to the intent.   Pilot activities can include:

- speaking out loud the specific focus;
- trying out recruitment procedures,;
- asking a friend to read a draft consent form;
- selecting several sample documents and preparing summaries of them;
- taking an hour to do an interview with a colleague using draft questions;
- transcribing pilot interview results;
- spending a half day observing and taking notes of a possible site of inquiry;
- preparing physical and electronic places for holding the information;
- experimenting with possible analytic procedures including draft categories, themes, tables, semiotic squares etc.

Piloting is practicing what must be done to answer your research question. It provides both focus and momentum: when bored, eager, or stuck, try collecting some information closely related to your proposal. What do you learn? What more will you need to do, or what must be done differently?   What discard? Why not try some other procedure?   Engaging with yourself and pilot activities helps to sort through efficiently what is far too general in a proposal and what is not feasible. Conversely, pilot work promotes curiosity and confidence in what you know is the purpose and value of a proposed project or thesis.

Concluding Comments

Are there inevitable tensions associated with completing a proposal? It is helpful to think about those problems or issues that can be solved or minimized, and those that will not disappear but surface regularly, requiring attention.

One obvious inevitable tension is time: students want to finish, and yet it takes time to do what they need to do.

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Another insolvable and profitable tension is the negotiation between process and product: between the enjoyment of doing the research imaginatively, and getting it done.

An interesting aspect of this tension is examining what doors are closed when you choose a focus for a thesis or project. Ask yourself: what do you not want to let go and why? One cannot answer more than one or two valuable questions in a thesis or study, no matter how hard one works or how clever the design. Writing a proposal about something means one has to close the door on something else. We may be reluctant to let go of some favored question or important mystery. It is common to find two or three questions jostling for attention in a first draft of a proposal. In early stages, pursuing several questions creates interesting possibilities and energy. But, at some point, one must say: **"What is this proposal NOT about?"** What are the questions you cannot, or will not answer? What doors must one close—for now.

I end this guide with a short commentary on a more invisible tension: the pursuit of excellence in academy, a pursuit that can become a search for unattainable perfection, threatening what is good and healthy. Academe pursues and rewards excellence, and pays less attention to that which is not "the best". The current and common, but not only way of pursuing excellent ideas and persons, is through grading, promotions, awards, and funding. These evaluative processes arrange people and ideas into a hierarchy, with the top few deemed as excellent, or worthy of an A. Others may be good, but not worthy of funding, publishing, giving awards etc.   This hierarchal way of establishing worthiness in academe is internally absorbed by students by the time they get to graduate school. For years they have been graded, and they now grade others and evaluate ideas into "the best", knowing their livelihood, funding, success, and potential jobs depend on these types of assessments.

On one hand this pursuit of excellence can challenge people to "do their best", and to test ideas for rigor and worthiness. On the other hand, this approach to excellence pushes people to evaluate ideas and the worth of persons continuously—in ways that may produce arrogance and anxiety. These types of emotions cost energy and may prompt excessive, sharp critical comments about what is wrong with an idea or paper, and downgrade helpful comments about what makes sense or could strength the argument. Arrogance and its sister anxiety can lead to chilly climates, endless emails, not asking for help, withholding first drafts, obsessing to get better writing, procrastination, or hurried attempts to finish and get out. Or, students just disappear and do not finish. This tension around academic excellence is most problematic when funding is restrictive or organizational policies institutionalize very limited outlets or recognition for the variety of academic work. The institutional press to evaluating excellence, through public assessments of worthiness and restrictive

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incentives, may have another unintended consequence: the potential to devalue innovative methods, avoid risky research questions, and ignore promising research that does not fit the current mold of what is worthy or excellent.

It can be otherwise. There are many activities in academe that resist hierarchal assessments of people and escape being graded, especially at the graduate level. The joy of academe is found in learning, through reading and arguing, writing and discussing, and above all in positive relationships, nurture of curiosity and solid scholarship. These joys are essential to completing thesis and project proposals that pose interesting and useful research questions.

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