

Frost Centre Dissertation/Thesis/Major Research Paper (MRP) Proposal Guidelines

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This set of guidelines is intended as a basic outline to help masters and doctoral students get started on their dissertation/thesis/MRP proposals. Students should also consult with their dissertation/thesis/MRP supervisors for advice to supplement or modify these guidelines. Proposals are initially prepared as one of the requirements for the core seminar for your program and are usually due late in the second term. Ph.D. students are required to present an extended and revised version of their proposal to their dissertation committee for approval after their comprehensives and before they commence PhD research.

Proposals are necessarily, as their name implies, suggestive rather than definitive. Still, they serve a significant purpose. They ensure that students think through their projects carefully and they give academic advisors an opportunity to identify and identify potential problems. The proposal, then, serves a significant function in guarding against misguided research initiatives. A proposal should define the question to be explored, contextualize it, and explain how it will be studied.

Proposals should contain the following elements:

1. Research Question
2. Literature Review
3. Methodology
4. Structure
5. Timeline and preliminary budget
6. Bibliography

Note: Shorter page lengths are specified in a range from an MA research paper proposal; longer lengths are expected of a PhD dissertation proposal.

1. Research Question(s) (Length 3-5 pages)

- a) Introduce the subject you will study and explain **why it is important/worthy of study**.
- b) **Identify** the specific problem or question(s) that will be **the focus** of your study
- c) **Situate** the particular issue within its broader context to show how your study will advance knowledge in the field
- d) Specify the scope of the work, i.e. **its limits**, what you are and are not going to investigate, provisos, caveats, etc.

2. Literature Review (Length 6-12 pages)

A literature review is a succinct description of the scholarly writing related to your subject. It helps to set the intellectual framework for your dissertation/thesis/MRP, demonstrating both where existing material is lacking, and crucially, how you propose to build on what has already been written in your research and writing. You may not have read carefully everything of relevance by this point in your research, but you

should have an idea of what the relevant works are and how they relate to your subject.

The review should cover existing literature on this subject matter (or on closely-related issues); discuss the literature thematically and/or chronologically (as relevant), highlighting the central ideas/concepts/relevance to your proposed research and the theoretical works/ideas that are pertinent to your research question. Discuss what theoretical questions/positions will inform your research process and how your research may inform existing theory.

Don't:

- Simply list works
- Describe all facets of all the individual works in the field

Do:

- Characterize the existing scholarship in the field.
- Discuss particular features of the literature or of particular works that bear directly on your subject
- Organize your discuss by relevant themes/debates/issues

In this part of the proposal you are setting the groundwork for a critical section of your dissertation/thesis/MRP. The literature review in your actual dissertation/thesis/MRP will be an expanded critical commentary on the secondary works, engaging with those that are most important to your topic and discussing how they are useful and insightful (or not) relative to you proposed work.

3. Methodology (Length 1-5 pages)

This is the 'how to' section of your proposal. It specifies:

1. Your working premises
2. Your proposed research methods indicating how you will go about collecting the information that you will need to answer your research question(s).

A) Working Premises: Be specific about any assumptions that you will use to guide your research. Stating them clearly from the start establishes a benchmark for reference as you structure your arguments and research materials iteratively as the project progresses.

B) Research Methods: Discuss where and how will you collect the information that you need to answer your research question(s). Tell your reader why you feel these methods will work best in your project. Identify the scope of your methodology. For example how many people will you interview? how do you plan on identifying them? will you conduct focus groups? If you are planning on working in archives, identify which ones, and if you know which materials will you be examining. Identify any potential problems you think you might encounter in actually doing your research.

N.B.: Research Involving Human Subjects: If your project involves work with human subjects (interviews, for instance) it must be reviewed and accepted by the Trent's Research Ethics Board as part of the dissertation/thesis/MRP approval process. Since this process can take a while it should be started as early as possible. Research

involving human subjects must not proceed until you have this approval.

4. Structure (Length 2-5 pages)

You should include a preliminary chapter outline that delineates, in general terms, what material will appear in each chapter and how the different chapters relate to one another. The organization of your dissertation/thesis/MRP will vary with each research topic; however there are some common patterns that reflect the purposes of different parts of a dissertation/thesis/MRP. These basic parts and their functions are as follows:

The *Introduction* presents your research questions, explains and justifies the scope and limits of your inquiry, situates it in its broader social and scholarly context, introduces your argument, describes your methodology, comments on your sources, and previews the structure of the paper. The aim is to give the reader the orientation and context necessary to understand the material to follow.

In some cases a *literature review* is included in the introduction, and the introduction constitutes an entire chapter of the dissertation/thesis/MRP. In other cases the dissertation/thesis/MRP begins with a short introduction followed by a first chapter consisting of the literature review. In yet other models, relevant theoretical and contextual information is introduced as relevant in various chapters of the dissertation/thesis/MRP.

The *chapters that follow* should have logical coherence, building on one another, expanding and unfolding your argument. Chapters should be broken down on criteria most relevant to the research project. Two common structures are thematic or chronological, but these are by no means the only two that could be used. The decision is usually made on the basis of the question being addressed, the nature of the research, materials, and individual preference. The chapter structure chosen should be one that strengthens the arguments and discussion of the dissertation/thesis/MRP. This structure may also change dramatically once the research is actually completed.

Your *concluding chapter* generally summarizes your major points, and importantly, offers a unified picture of your research problem. Refresh the reader's memory about the purpose of the study, touching on all the key elements presented in the introduction. Restate your dissertation/thesis/MRP clearly and simply, then review quickly how the evidence you have presented supports it. You may want to distinguish between firm and tentative conclusions. Explain how your conclusions differ from, add to, or challenge the work of others, i.e. how your work constitutes an original contribution to knowledge. Suggest how your work could also lead to new, fresh lines of inquiry.

5. Schedule for Completion and budget (Length 3-5 pages)

Include a proposed timetable that indicates dates when you will be working on different stages of researching and writing. Time is an important factor. You are committing yourself to do the best job possible in the time available, not to an open-ended, unlimited pursuit. It is important to think through the costs of doing your proposed research. So an itemized list of the expenses that will be incurred to do the work is important. There is no point in planning an research project with a prohibitive budget!

6. Bibliography/References (Length 5-10 pages)

List the primary and secondary sources of evidence you intend to use for your research. You can list separately both those sources you have cited and secondly a list of material that you feel will be relevant to your research.

The style used for references/footnotes will vary across disciplinary practices, but should be consistent throughout the proposal.

Dissertation/thesis/MRP proposals will be assessed in relation to all these elements as well as on the usual criteria of academic evaluation: research, analysis, originality, critical thinking, prose style, clear organization, and presentation.