



Carleton
UNIVERSITY

Ethics and Public Affairs

The Dissertation Proposal: Guidelines for Students and Supervisors

As adopted by the Program Committee 2020 01 27

After the theory and area examination processes are completed you will begin work on your dissertation. **The first step in this process is the preparation, submission, and defence of a dissertation proposal.** The importance of the proposal is that it indicates that the groundwork for the research questions you have identified has been done. It demonstrates that you have identified and thought through the essential components of your project; it shows clearly how your project has the potential to make an original contribution to your area of study; it demonstrates that you have the requisite background and methodological training to carry it out effectively; and it shows that you have a well-developed plan for carrying out the project.

Your dissertation proposal should be no less than 20 and no more than 30 pages long (or between 7,500 and a maximum of 10,000 words) *not including your bibliography or reference list.* The content of the proposal should be similar to that required in a SSHRC standard research grant application, in that your proposal should provide a clear statement of the topic of your work and your central research questions, summarize the key theoretical and empirical literature on your topic, and provide a clear statement of what you will do to address your research questions. The following sections are typical to a dissertation proposal, although (apart from section 1) may be presented in a different order.

Note on supervisory committees. Each EPAF doctoral dissertation is supervised by a three-person committee. This includes two co-supervisors, of whom one has special expertise in social science or public policy aspects of the project and the other has special expertise in relevant ethics or political philosophy. It also includes a third member, with special expertise in either of these two areas.

Note on theories and methodologies. A thesis in Ethics and Public Affairs can combine any relevant social science methodologies within a critical analysis of public justifications, including relevant normative arguments, that pertain to the public policy issue that is the subject of the thesis. ***Keep in mind that your final goal is to find whether there are any solutions to a given policy problem that have the strongest support of value-based and evidence-based argument.*** Social science methodologies should be chosen according to how useful you think they will be for achieving that goal. (Some EPAF theses will not follow any particular social science methodology, relying instead on secondary research on relevant social science findings.)

In the EPAF program we have called this critical analysis of public justification ‘public reason analysis’ in order to link it with theoretical debates on ‘public reason’ – which we understand as debates on why some attempts at justifying public policy are better/worse than others. Earlier in the program you have spent a lot of time and effort understanding those debates. Now, in the research phase of your program, your thesis should be sensitive to those debates, but only insofar as they are relevant. You are not required to review or rehearse those debates except on particular issues that may be especially relevant to your project.

1. Research Question: In this section, you should motivate and justify your research project. Begin with a statement of what you want to research: what do you want to know and what hangs on the answering of your research question(s)? Provide some background on the issues and explain - as if perhaps to others in a related but different field of study - why these questions matter, and why it matters that they be addressed from your disciplinary or methodological perspective.

2. Theoretical Concepts: Here you will identify the key concepts you will utilize to conduct your analysis. What theoretical ideas are pertinent to your research question, which debates will you draw from, and to which theoretical discussions will your conclusions speak. What theoretical models or explanations frame your policy issue in the way you want to consider it? Which normative values or theories are most relevant and useful, from your point of view?

3. Methodological Approaches: In this section you will explain the research and analytical methods you intend to use to answer the research questions you’ve identified. Are there any approaches to public reason or public justification that you consider relevant and useful to your project? Are there other methodologies (of social science or policy analysis) that you will employ, and how will all of these work together? You may also choose to address and engage here with any possible challenges to these methodological approaches.

4. Relevant Literature: Here you need to situate your research question in the relevant literature. This involves a discussion of how the answer(s) that you come up with will contribute to or build on existing literature or respond to the puzzles left as yet unexplained or unexplored. There is no need to identify and read everything that has already been written on the topic, but you should have a strong familiarity with the literature directly relevant to your research question, both theoretical and practical in nature. This section requires you to be conscious of your place within your field(s) of study.

5. Implications and Originality: To conclude your proposal you should make clear how using the concepts, literature, and methodologies that you have identified will produce an original proposition. How will your research contribute to theoretical debates, how might it resolve social issues, how will it inform or enable decision-making in a public or institutional context?

6. Table of Contents and Research Timeline: Upon concluding your proposal, include an addendum in which you identify your chapter headings and major subheadings, so as to demonstrate a coherent overall structure. Then provide an account of how long you anticipate it will take you to complete each section.

7. Bibliography: Your proposal must include a preliminary bibliography in an agreed-upon style, i.e., APA, MNL, Chicago, etc. Consult with your dissertation advisor/committee on this. You will inevitably expand the bibliography as you prepare the final version of the dissertation.

The Proposal Defence

Once your three-person committee has determined that your proposal is ready for the oral defence, a date will be scheduled for you all to meet. At this meeting, you will have the opportunity to introduce and summarize your proposal, and the committee will have the opportunity to ask you questions about your proposal to determine if you are prepared to move forward towards researching and writing the dissertation. Normally your introductory remarks should be confined to 10 minutes; then the third member and co-supervisors in turn will have 15 minutes each for one-to-one discussion with you; finally, after follow-up discussion in which everyone may take part, you will be asked to leave while the committee deliberates.

The committee members will make one of the following decisions:

1. Accept the proposal as is;
2. Accept the proposal with minor revisions (in which case one of the co-supervisors will be designated to check them);
3. Accept the proposal with major revisions (in which case you will be expected to significantly rework the proposal and bring it back to the full committee for approval, but you will not have to do another proposal defence);
4. Find the proposal unsatisfactory (in which case you will have to redo both the proposal and the proposal defence; you will be given one chance to rewrite and redefend the proposal).

A final version of your dissertation proposal must be submitted to the Program Director after the successful completion of the defence and any required revisions.

Detailed guidelines concerning the technical preparation of the dissertation (margins, paper quality, fonts etc.) can be found at the following site. The same considerations apply to the preparation of your proposal. <http://www5.carleton.ca/fgpa/thesis-requirements/formatting/>