

LAWS 6096– Thesis Proposal in Legal Studies Guidelines

Each doctoral candidate must successfully complete and defend a thesis proposal. The proposal is written after all other course requirements are completed and should be completed within a single semester of concentrated work. Normally, the proposal will be presented for defense by the end of the second year of full-time doctoral study. The proposal is defended at an oral examination conducted by the supervisory committee. Evaluation is on the basis of pass/fail. The proposal must be successfully defended before you can register in the Ph.D. thesis (LAWS 6909).

This guideline is to assist you in the preparation of your thesis proposals. You should work with your thesis supervisor in the preparation of your proposal.

Thesis Proposal Guidelines

Your proposal will have a working title and should be no less than 20 and no more than 40 pages. Formats and order will vary, but your proposal should include the following elements:

1. Clear statement of research question/research focus;
2. Justification/working thesis. Why is this research focus necessary/relevant. In some cases this section might include a preliminary answer to your research question.
3. Literature Review: Locate your project within the relevant literature, summarizing the main debates and analytical directions in the field. Your discussion should identify the gaps in the literature your research will speak to, and the contributions your project will make. This section should include not only a discussion of which bodies of scholarship you identify as relevant and why, but also a discussion of which literatures you are not considering and why.
4. Key theoretical concepts: Identify and define the key theoretical concepts through which you will be conceptualizing your analysis in abstract terms, anticipating how these concepts are contested. The theoretical framework will answer the question: “What language will I use to analyze the phenomenon at the heart of my project?” The theoretical concepts help the project exceed the limits of its specific object.
5. Methodological Approaches: Which research and analytical methods do you intend to use to answer the research questions you identify? What led you to these methods and what are some of strengths and limits of your choice of methods?

6. Research Design: Closely connected to your discussion of methodology, the section will explain the:

- time frame for the research;
- different stages in the process;
- need for/completion of ethics approval (if relevant, attach copies of your draft ethics application documents);
- sources of information for your thesis and any issues around access;
- basic layout of thesis chapters: what will be discussed, roughly, in each chapter; how do the chapters build on one another;

6. Bibliography: Include a bibliography of relevant writing in the area.

Evaluation

Your thesis proposal does not have to be a rigid template for what follows afterwards. Research questions may be altered or refined as the research process advances.

In examining the thesis proposal, your committee will consider:

- has a viable and original dissertation topic been identified?
- has the central research question or problematic been clearly identified? Has its significance been justified?
- does the proposal identify a theoretical field through which the research will be framed and analyzed?
- does the proposal evidence a competent understanding and appreciation of the topic under consideration and the relevant scholarly literature?
- will the method/s chosen allow the candidate to address the central research questions/problematic?
- Is the research plan (in terms of timing, access to material, logical flow) doable within a Phd thesis?
- Will this project make an original contribution to the field?

The proposal and defense will be evaluated on a pass/fail basis.