How to write a Dissertation Prospectus/Proposal

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A few rules

Feel free to turn off video

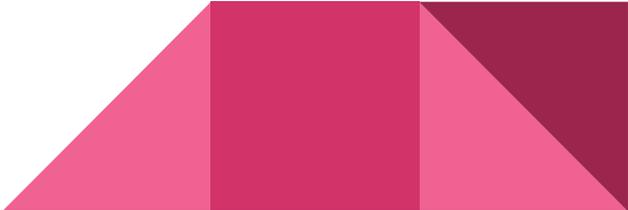Keep your mic off when not speaking

Use the chat for questions

"Raise hand" if you want to unmute

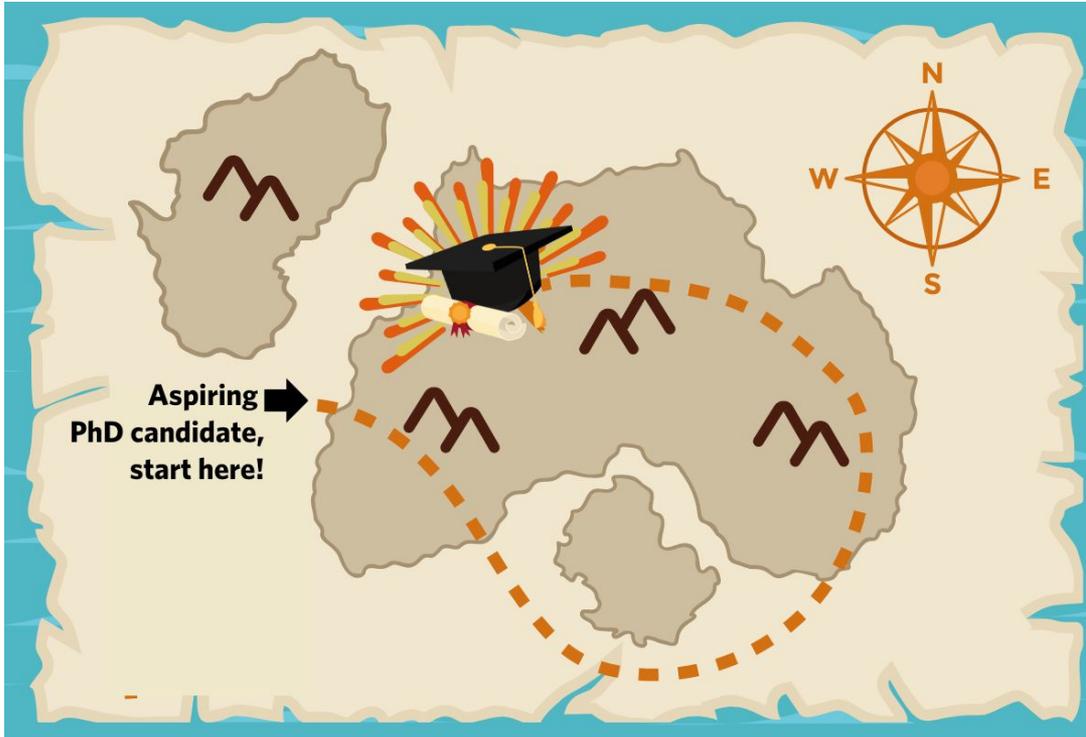* We will be recording the session for accessibility purposes*
* Slides will be distributed following the session*

Goals of the workshop

- **Understand why we need dissertation prospectuses/research proposals**

- **Understand the prospectus writing & submission process**

- **How to write to maximize your impact**

- **Assess the quality of your prospectus**

A Roadmap for your PhD Research Project

Aspiring PhD candidate, start here!

The Dissertation Proposal is the first formal document that you will submit to your dissertation committee that highlights your research question and how you plan to answer it.

Why do we need dissertation/research proposals?

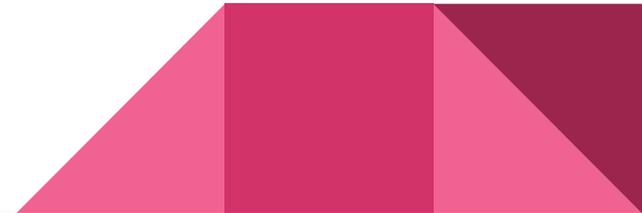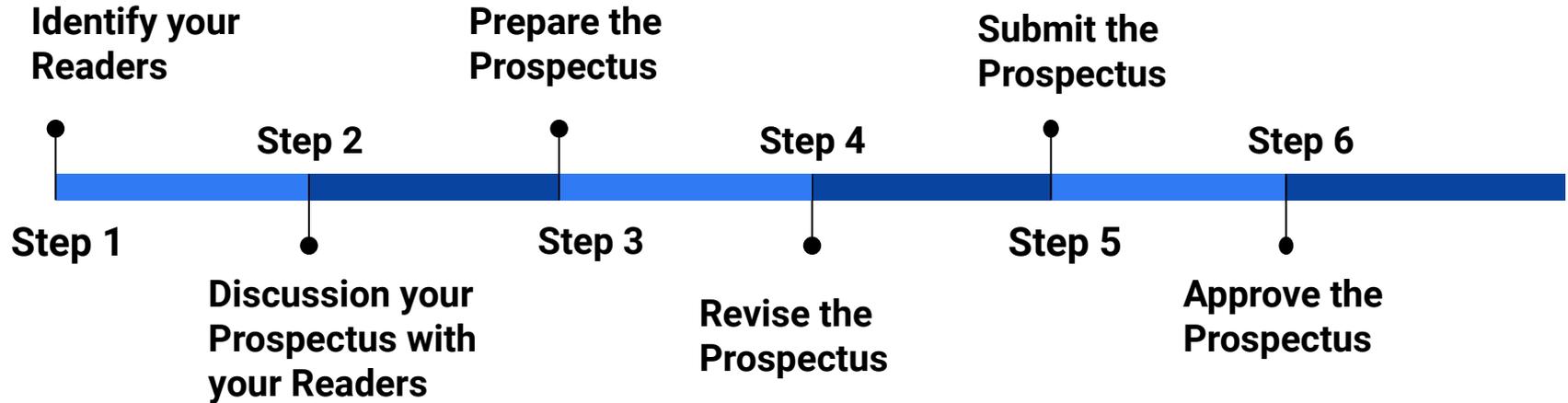

Please add any ideas in the chat!

Why do we need dissertation proposals?

- **It ensures you have a plan for your research, since you need to describe:**

    - Why you conduct your research (literature review → research question)

    - What you need to do to answer your research question

    - How you will collect evidence to answer your research question

    - The "What for" of your research project (impact)

- **Good news: you will not do this alone!**

    - PhD Dissertation Committee

    - Chat with them at each step of the reflection & writing process

Process to get your dissertation proposals accepted

Identify your
Readers

Step 2

Prepare the
Prospectus

Step 4

Submit the
Prospectus

Step 6

Step 1

Step 3

Step 5

Discussion your
Prospectus with
your Readers

Revise the
Prospectus

Approve the
Prospectus

Steps 1 & 2: Your Readers

How many readers do you need?

- Typically 2 or 3
  - Usually one is your advisor
- Are you required to only have readers in your department?
  - Can you have outside readers across departments and/or outside of BU?

What's your project?

- Are you starting "from scratch"?
- Are you developing something your have already researched on?
  - Your advisor's project or the lab's project
  - An existing MA thesis or seminar paper?

How well do you work together?

- What is your working style? Their working style?
- What kind of mentorship do you want for the next few years?

Steps 3 & 4: Prepare and Revise

Do some *pre*-prep work

- General requirements vary
  - Mech E: 10 page prospectus + 350 word abstract;
  - GRS: 20 pages

- Reach out!
  - Ask older students (those in your lab, same advisor, similar topics) if they might share resources

- Find models!

Confirm the writing process with your readers

- Do they want a whole draft? Or parts?

- Set deadlines together
  - Or, check your grad handbook, and ask other students

- Be realistic and practice
  - Use this as an opportunity to practice hitting deadlines for your dissertation

Revisions

- Expect a few rounds of revisions!
  - Use this as practice for the dissertation.

- Start identifying recurring feedback

- Practice asking for high and low-order feedback

- Create accountability-deadlines, writing groups

Steps 5 & 6: Submit and Approve!

Make a Checklist

- Larger graduate program deadlines

- Department deadlines

- Deadlines with readers

- General requirements- double check

- Note that you can make this checklist beforehand!

Identify all approvals needed

- All approval forms required by your graduate school

- Confirm IRB approvals if necessary

- Approve date for oral defense

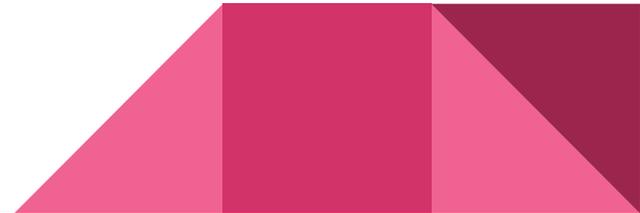 - If you don't know what the oral defense will entail, talk to your readers and older students!

Checklists for the prospectus

Content of Dissertation Proposals

Content of Dissertation Proposals

Please write in the chat:

If you were a member of a dissertation committee, what would you like to see in a research proposal?

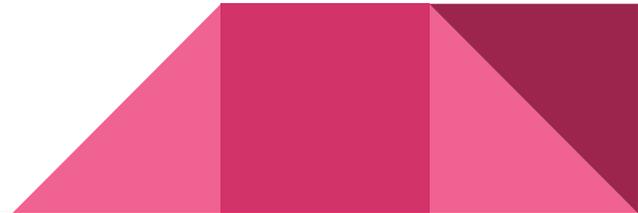# General Outlines of the Dissertation Prospectus

What is your Research Question?

Why is it important?

How are you planning to explore this question?

Can you achieve your goals in the time you have?

Where are you conducting research?

The order may change, some parts may be more detailed than others, but *all* dissertation prospectuses have these components

General Outlines of the Dissertation Prospectus

STEM/Social Sciences

- Statement of the problem
- Background
- Current status and significance of proposed project
- Approaches/methods to reach resolution
- Preliminary Results
- Anticipated timeline
- Tables and Figures

Humanities

- Statement of thesis/purpose
- Existing Literature/Literature Review (identify the "gap")
- Your approach/method for the project
- Brief outline and summary of chapters
- Preliminary work and expected work that needs to be done
- Images, list of archival documents, list of primary and/or secondary sources

Content of Dissertation Proposals - Writing Order

The discovery process of your readers

Title

Abstract

Intro/Conclusion

Main text

The order in which you must write your proposal

Content - Title

A good title is:

- **short** (try to aim for 15-20 words max),
- **simple** - avoid very technical terms or jargon,
- concisely and precisely indicates the **nature** and the **direction** of your project.

To create a good title, ask yourself the questions below:

➔ What is my project about? Who/What do I plan to study?

➔ How am I planning to answer my research question?

List keywords in the answers to the questions above

Create a Sentence with the keywords → shorten it!

Content - Context/Significance

After conducting and writing a literature review, it is time to lay the foundation of your research project:

- Explain the intellectual, scientific, theoretical, etc. context of your research,
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the literature (focus on a specific set of papers, critically analyze them and confront opinions and methodologies),
- Anchor your study in the context presented.

Organize your findings and your thoughts:

- Reference Management Software
- Mindmap your thoughts with Lucidchart

Content - Problem/Purpose Statement

Characteristics of a research topic:

- **Interesting**
- **Doable**
- **Significant**
- **Ethical**

Points that must be included in a purpose statement:

- Context of the research
- Problem/Purpose statement
- Explain why it matters
- Explain how you will address the problem (briefly)
- Explain the impact of your research

Content - Methodology

Think about and include:

- **Type of data** needed to answer your research question - quantitative *vs* qualitative

- **Type of sample** that you will work on (archival documents, human subjects, other organisms, books, etc.) - selection criteria, length of the study, sample collection...

- **Tools needed to conduct your research** - questionnaires, examinations, instruments...

- **Protocols or procedures** - experiments, field work, systematic review...

- **Data Analysis** - from data curation to data visualization (+ references in support)

- **Risk management** - anticipate difficulties, potential limitations, etc. How are you planning on overcoming these challenges?

Content - Bibliography & Appendices

- **Bibliography**
  - Make sure to check how many references are expected by your graduate program

- **Appendices**
  - Tests, questionnaires, or other instruments you may need to conduct your research,
  - Protocols you plan on using or optimizing,
  - Any other page required by your graduate program.

How to maximize your impact!

Please write in the chat:

What do you think make the following proposal excerpts impactful?

How to maximize your impact!

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study will be qualitative with a generic qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is consistent with understanding how students approach the work of creating a successful dissertation problem statement, which is the focus of this dissertation. Keeping the focus on how students make sense of their dissertation research should be consistent with Perry's (1970) epistemological expectations at this point in their development (Gardner, 2009).

Example Source: https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/ld.php?content_id=45725055

How to maximize your impact!

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Data for the study will include interviews with a representative group of doctoral graduates who have successfully defended their dissertations and whose work was highly ranked by faculty. In addition, the design may include, as a possible source for triangulation, interviews with doctoral faculty who have helped students to succeed.
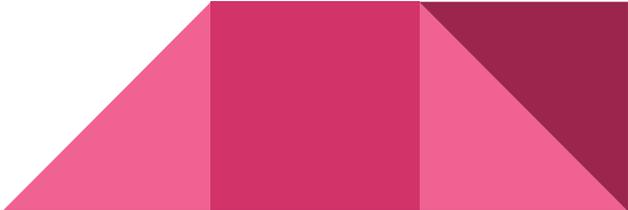
Example Source: https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/ld.php?content_id=45725055

How to maximize your impact!

Introduction: Problem Statement and Why

My dissertation will discuss serial river photographs, groups of images that, when viewed together one after another, show the length of the river methodically. **I argue** that these photographic series are settler colonial images, both a product of and complicit in violence towards people and landscapes. These photographs symbolically control waterscapes and foreshadow the industrial conquest of water central to settlement of the western United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. **The images are deeply enmeshed in nineteenth-century water politics and Euro-American expansionist discourses** and erase alternate uses and histories of the land, especially those of indigenous people. They act as **sites of interaction** between rivers and photography, two individual but intertwined instruments of expansion and settler colonialism. Control of the land and water, as visualized in and foreshadowed by these images, connects directly to the **climate crises that pervade news headlines today**. Euro-American ecological sensibilities conveyed in nineteenth-century landscape photography exacerbate drought, wildfires, and flooding.

Sample from current PhD candidate at BU (Humanities)

Key Takeaways

- Prospectuses are a **roadmap** for your research project(s)

- Prospectus proposals can also **provide *practice* for:**

  - Future research and grant proposals

  - Mentorship communication

- Prospectuses **differ** by department and schools, always check guidelines!

- At the same time… the content of prospectuses is the **same *across disciplines***

  - What, why, how, when, where

- Create a **checklist(s)** when you write your prospectus!

  - Checklist for deadlines

  - Checklist for important qualities and components

Assess the quality of your prospectus

1. **Complete** - does your prospectus follow all the required elements?

2. **Meaningful** - has a meaningful gap been identified?

3. **Justified** - is the problem significant for your field?

4. **Grounded** - is the problem identified backed up by the literature?

5. **Original** - does this project have the potential to make an original contribution?

6. **Impact** - does this project have the potential to have an impact (scholarship, social impact)?

7. **Feasible** - can a systematic approach be used to answer the question w/i a few years?

8. **Aligned** - do the various aspects of the prospectus align with each other?

9. **Objective** - is the topic approached in an objective way?

More resources

- PhD Progression badge - [Dissertation Prospectus/Proposal](#)

- [BU PhD requirements/guidelines across all Graduate schools](#)

- [Checklists for the prospectus](#) (ERC)

- [Breaking it down: Writing a Doctoral Dissertation Prospectus](#), YouTube video

- [7 tips to write a Research Proposal](#), YouTube video

- [How to write a dissertation prospectus, with outline and examples](#), Beyond PhD Coaching

Upcoming workshops

July

- July 20: Elevator pitch, with Linda Plano (in-person, 3-5 pm, RKC101)
- July 27: Brown Bag Lunch with EAL students (in-person, 12:30-2 pm, RKC101)

August

- August 4: PhD Office Hour (5-6 pm)
- *Stay put for more ERC/PDPA workshops (Dissertation Writing Institute)*

Learn more about these events and register here!

Thank you very much!

Any questions?