

**SO YOU HAVE TO WRITE A DISSERTATION PROPOSAL?
SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO KEEP FROM BEING OVERWHELMED AND MOVE
STEADILY TOWARDS YOUR GOAL.**

**By Elizabeth Ferry
Department of Anthropology, Brandeis University
Fall 2008**

*“If you use your mind, take a step at a time, you can do anything that you want to do.”
Steve, “Blue’s Clues”*

Once you have passed your qualifying exams, the time has come for you to complete the last few steps before commencing your fieldwork. These include the language exam, IRB approval (for those of you working with human subjects), grant proposals and dissertation proposal. The hardest of these, perhaps, is the dissertation proposal, and it will take the most time. (Grant proposals are also very difficult and time-consuming, but writing the dissertation proposal will help you considerably with them).

The dissertation proposal is a relatively new requirement in the department, and we think it is a marked improvement on the previous system. However, it is not an easy task. In this memo, I give you some of my thoughts on ways to make it less scary and more manageable. Also, I asked students who already completed the requirement to tell me what they wished they had been told beforehand, and have included some of their comments in this document.

Of course, since everyone’s project, mind and life circumstances differ, not all of these suggestions will work for all of you. I have tried to write something that is sufficiently general to apply to many of you, but that still has practical, specific suggestions.

What is a dissertation proposal and what is it good for?

The graduate student handbook has this to say about the dissertation proposal:

After completing all required course work and passing the general examination the student prepares a dissertation proposal of 40-70 pages, consisting of (a) a detailed presentation of the dissertation research questions or problems, (b) a substantial literature review of the chosen topic and fieldwork area, and (c) a discussion of the proposed research methodologies. In the proposal the student is expected to formulate explicitly how the review of significant issues in the scholarly literature leads to and provides a theoretical motivation for the dissertation research agenda.

This is a good, but very general, description. Let me try to give some more details on what a dissertation proposal is and what it is supposed to do. The dissertation proposal is intended to take you from the qualifying exam stage, in which you demonstrated your control over particular areas of theoretical and anthropological literature, to a coherent and detailed statement of your own proposed project and its relevance to the field. It is thus, for many of you, your first extensive experience of bringing together your own ethnographic or archaeological example (with some of your own data, if you have already done preliminary research) and anthropological theory. Bringing these two levels

together is the best, but also the hardest, part of anthropology. Your task in this proposal is to make a first attempt at this.

As the grad handbook says, the proposal can be roughly divided into three sections: Project statement and Research Questions; Literature Review (both theoretical and area); and Methodology. In particular, a successful dissertation proposal will discuss the following:

1. **What are the basic research questions that I wish to examine?**
2. **What is the ethnographic/archaeological situation or case that I have chosen to examine these questions?**
3. **Why is this an appropriate situation or case for these questions?**
4. **What have other anthropologists (and others) written about this case and the surrounding research area?**
5. **What have other anthropologists (and others) written about these research questions?**
6. **How will my research add to, differ from, or change these previous studies?**

7. **What data (specifically) will I need to examine these questions?**
8. **How will I gather these data? (specifically)**
9. **What tools, skill, permissions, etc. do I need to gather these data and how have I or will I obtain these (language training, IRB approval, local affiliations, access issues, etc.)?**

In most cases, answers to questions 1-3 would be included in the Project Statement and Research Questions section, 4-6 in the Literature Review section, and 7-9 in the Methodology section.

Now, obviously, you are writing a proposal for what you **plan to do** in the future, not a discussion of what you have **already** done. Nobody expects you to know everything yet, and every dissertation project undergoes substantial changes in the field. (In fact, if it didn't, it wouldn't be anthropology and we wouldn't need to (get to) do fieldwork!) Don't worry about that. Just write as clearly as possible about what you want to find out and how you hope to do so.

How do I start?

Armed with a general idea of what kind of document you are trying to write and what a successful example might look like, you are now ready to prepare the ground to begin. As the epigram to this document suggests, large mental challenges are made up of many small mental challenges, and if you break down what you need to do into smaller steps, you will be less intimidated and more likely to make steady progress.

Here's what one student had to say about beginning the process:

Even though we might feel that we are writing the proposal for the first time, in reality I believe that by the time we get to this stage, we have most likely written different versions or sections of it in class assignments, presentations, the comprehensive exams, fieldnotes, small grant proposals like the Sachar, and so forth. Using these different papers was enormously helpful for me.

Another student writes:

If I could do it over, I would keep going after the comps, [consulting] the literature in the comps to [help] write the literature review section of the proposal. With that part done, I think it would have been easier to move on to other sections of the proposal.

You might begin by looking back over what you have already done, in seminar papers, grant proposals and perhaps most importantly, for your exams. This will not only remind you of places you can mine for portions of the document, but also of the fact that you already know much if not most of what you need to know to write the dissertation proposal.

Remember, however, that you will no doubt need to revise these earlier writings substantially to mold them to your current purposes. They are a jumping off point, rather than a finished product.

You may wish to create a file or several files, either materially (hard copies of former papers, annotated bibliographies, exams, etc.) or virtually (on the computer). You may wish to put these all in one place called "Dissertation Proposal" or in several places called "Research Statement;" "Lit Review;" "Methodology." Use whatever categories and titles you find most useful and/or inspiring.

Once you have completed this task, you are ready to start on the first section. Probably this should be the Research Statement and Questions, since these are the heart of your project and are intended to guide the literature review and the methodology. However, if you feel you will be more able to begin the Research Statement if you have already written the Lit Review, you could start there too (as long as you already have a clear idea in your mind of your basic research questions). I don't recommend starting with the Methodology section (though you could do it second if you wanted to).

Several students mentioned, and I agree, that it is helpful to set yourself a time deadline to complete a draft of this first section (whichever one you choose to begin with). It should not be too long, though of course it depends on what else is going on in your life (see **How do I manage my time?** below). Something between two weeks and one month is probably good. You can let your advisor know that you plan (hope) to send him or her the draft at this time. If you are part of an established group to whom you can show the draft, perhaps you can set up a meeting a week or two after the deadline to discuss the draft. This will force you to write and will provide you with some immediate practical

feedback. If you are not part of an established group, **you should form one**, either with others at the same stage or other students in the department.

Of course, you may always ask other faculty members on your committee (or not on your committee) to read the draft, but you should bear in mind both that they may not have time to get back to you before you need to move on, and that feedback from your peers can often be as or more helpful than from faculty.

[Note: If you are commenting on someone's dissertation proposal, you should remember that specific, constructive criticism is always more helpful (and kind) than general, negative criticism. Comments should be aimed at the level of development of the draft, so that a first draft should receive a different kind of comment than a final draft. Reading others' work will allow you to get a feel for different modes of commenting, and will also help you improve your own writing.]

At the same time, you should always feel very welcome approaching any member of the department, whether or not they are on your committee. For instance, as you are working, you may encounter a series of questions or themes related to the work of a particular scholar or body of literature, and wish to consult a faculty whom you know has some expertise. In those cases, it helps faculty know how to contribute if you come with specific questions or topics. "What do you think about the difference between Gramsci and Foucault with respect to the concept of agency?" works better than "My advisor told me to come talk to you and here I am" or even "I need to think more about agency, can you help me?"

Once you have received feedback, you will need to decide whether you want to revise the section you have already drafted or move on and come back to it later. The answer to this depends on your personality, work habits, your schedule and other commitments, and the kinds of comments you received. Ideally, you will be able to move on and draft all three sections and then revise all three later. However, if there are serious issues of conceptualization, etc., or if you are a perfectionist, you may need to do another round of revisions before moving on. However, you should **not** try to make each section absolutely perfect before you move to the next section, as this can lead to delays and discouragement.

Writing each section of the proposal should basically follow this process, where you write one or more drafts and elicit feedback from both your advisor and a writing group of some sort. If possible, there should be at least some overlap in your readers throughout the process (that is, at least some of the same people should read all the different sections of the proposal). Also, watch out for burnout on both sides. If your readers read the same section too many times, they will lose perspective, and their comments will not be as effective (the law of diminishing returns). On the other hand, if you give the drafts to too many different readers, you may become overwhelmed and be unable to process the comments you get, especially if they are quite varied. With practice, you will get a feel for a proper balance of number of readers and number of drafts per reader.

Of course, once you have drafted each section, you will need to revise the entire thing at least once and probably a number of times. At this point, it may help you to look back at questions 1-9 I listed on page 2. Not only should you have answered all 9 questions, but the answers should flow into each other. For instance, the answer to question 3 (why is this case a good one for my chosen research questions?) should lead to the answer to question 6 (how will my research add to other work on these questions?) and questions 7-8 (what data do I need and how will I get it, in specific terms)? (I don't mean that one section has to come right after another, but that the ideas should go together conceptually.) You should be checking this as you go along. If they don't fit together, you may need to revise either your case, your research questions, or your lit review section. This is something that should become clear to you in the process of writing, revising and discussing your drafts.

A note from one of your peers on how to manage transitions:

Starting a new section was a somewhat tedious process and to reduce my boredom and general inertia I would do less demanding things like laying out the table of contents, revising titles and subtitles for the various sections, organizing margins, font size, and such stuff. I know this sounds silly but I kept telling myself that I am still putting in time towards my proposal. Another strategy that worked for me is that when I felt weary I would work on the section that I was most confident of so that that was one other thing taken care of even if it wasn't the most important section. For instance, when beginning the methodology section, I first started writing the stuff on language training which is what I knew most about. Once that was done, I told myself that I had already finished one-third of the methodology so now what remained was significantly less work.

How do I manage my time? Or, am I going to be defending this thing from a nursing home? And, you do realize I have to eat and pay rent during this time, too, right?

There have not yet been enough cases for us to determine an average length of time for writing a dissertation proposal. However, I would say that four to seven months from exams to dissertation proposal defense is ideal, depending on what else you need to do during that time. You will likely need to do something else, such as working as a course assistant or research assistant. In addition, you may also wish to be studying for your language exam if you haven't already passed it. Indeed, I think a moderate schedule of other activities may help give structure to your time and keep you from feeling isolated, overwhelmed, or depressed.

Some people have also taught UWS courses during this period, but I would not recommend it. Being a course assistant or teaching fellow, especially in a course where there is not too much grading, is one thing, but as many of you know, teaching your own course can be both time- and energy-consuming, and it does not combine well with writing. Of course, it may be unavoidable. But don't kid yourself, it will add to the amount of time you need to finish the proposal.

Here's a general strategy for managing your time. Let's say you defend your exams in September. You still have one TF commitment left (or you have arranged to work as a course assistant for pay) and you also need to brush up on your Spanish to pass a language exam. If you decide that you would like to try to defend your dissertation proposal in March (and your committee agrees with this general deadline), you can sketch out a schedule that looks something like this:

September 1: Finish exams – hooray!

September 10: Wake up! 'Nuff celebrating! Get back to work!

October 10: draft of first section

November 10: draft of second section

December 15: end of TF/CA commitments

January 1: draft of third section; [allotting time for holidays, etc.]

January 21:: revise entire proposal; submit full draft to committee;

February 8: get comments back from committee

March 1: final defense version for department

March 15: DEFENSE

April 15: Spanish exam

As far as managing your time on a smaller scale, much of this depends on your mental makeup, your schedule, and so on. If you keep thinking in terms of breaking down larger tasks into manageable chunks, that will help you manage your time and keep from getting discouraged.

Here are some suggestions from your peers on how to manage your time:

I would organize my time so that I had to finish say two pages before my favorite TV show or else I would feel really guilty and would not be able to enjoy it! Another such incentive I created for myself was a 10-day holiday with my husband one-and-a-half months into my proposal writing (the February break). This might sound crazy given that I was in the middle of a semester and surely had no time to spare. But, knowing that I really wanted to enjoy this holiday and would not be able to unless I finished another section or two before leaving was a really strong incentive for me. Moreover, my husband would keep reminding me that we had X number of days left before leaving and I had to finish such and such section by then. Although this got me really annoyed and irritated with him, in the end it worked. I had written out another section and a half before we left. Basically what I am suggesting is that a reward system and a few breaks now and then is a good idea. For instance, after we returned from our holiday, I found myself with no excuse but to get back to work. I had had my fun and now that I was relaxed I could resume my work with fresh energy.

What worked best for me is when I look at the calendar and figure out how much time I have to work on [the dissertation proposal] and then allocated hours. I made a point of writing at least 5 days/week and, lo and behold, I actually got work done.

Final Thoughts:

I hope that these thoughts and suggestions help some of you manage this rather stressful, but ultimately, we hope, rewarding exercise. I have two final points to emphasize. The first is simply to underscore what has been the main point of this memo, as summarized by Steve from Blue's Clues (far superior to his successor Joe): Break down the task into manageable steps and you will be far more likely to succeed. The second is also simple, and I hope, inspiring: the dissertation proposal is an extension of the qualifying exams. Where the qualifying established you as an expert in various fields of anthropological literature, the dissertation proposal establishes you as an expert in your particular project and its significance. You should feel free to enjoy and explore that sense of expertise.

Good Luck!
Elizabeth Ferry