

# Guidelines for Thesis Proposal

*With thanks to Robin Ridington.*

## Abstract

A thesis proposal indicates that you are ready to work at a professional level, as you will be writing many proposals, abstracts and summaries throughout your career. Similar to a grant application or paper proposal, it should be clearly written and focused on a problem that you can easily identify. Your abstract should be written in a single paragraph that summarizes your topic of interest. If you cannot explain what you propose to do, reevaluate, revise or change your proposal abstract.

## Proposal

A proposal should only be drafted after consulting a guide such as *Proposals That Work* (2nd ed.) 1987, by L.F. Locke, W.W. Spirduso and S.J. Silverman (Sage Publications), or *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* 1994 by J.W. Creswell, Sage Publications.

**The proposal itself should include information on the following categories:**

**1. Statement of Problem:** This should be short and to the point. It indicates that you have gone beyond having a general area of interest (gender – kinship – ethnohistory – sociolinguistics – archaeology) to a focused question or problem. You cannot know the answer to your question before you start articulating it.

**2. Relevance to Existing Literature:** Although a thesis must be an original contribution to knowledge, it must make that contribution within an established field of anthropological inquiry. What is the history of your problem? What information is already available? What information will add to it? How will your perspective contribute to an overall understanding of the problem?

Avoid jargon, buzzwords and name-dropping. For example, the following statement would not be acceptable: “The thesis will be situated in a Derridian deconstruction of the Marxist episteme.” Explain and define your terms. If you are unable to do so, try a different thinking approach or consider a different topic. Focus on building upon the existing literature.

**3. Availability of Material for Study:** Clearly state what sources of information are available to you. Give examples if possible. What kinds of information will you be collecting? Indicate that you have the skills required and have considered ethical issues and potential problems which may be specific to the proposed research.

**4. Collecting and Analyzing Information:** Stating “I plan to use archival (or ethnographic or such) sources” in your thesis proposal is not suffice. You must indicate what kinds of information you will gather, how you will organize it and how it will be analyzed. Does the project require a language, linguistic transcription skills, quantitative ability, experience with database programs? Indicate that you have the required training. Does your argument depend on counting things or will it work to cite telling examples to demonstrate your points?

Also be aware of spelling, grammar and punctuation. For example, data are plural and that when you mean methods, don't say “methodology” in order to sound fancy.

**5. Timetable:** Indicate when you plan to carry out the various phases of your work. Plan for periods of research, writing, revision, and defense. Indicate sources of funding, permissions and

access to information, completion of UBC Ethics Committee review, travel plans and visas, and personal time budget.

Chapter Outline: Even though you will not have collected your information at the stage of writing a proposal, you should have thought about the containers into which you will ultimately package it. What categories of information will you be collecting and how will you present them?

## **Conclusion**

A thesis proposal should demonstrate your ability to think about a problem and identify sources of information relevant to it. You may be tempted to use every theory or perspective you have encountered in your courses and seminars. Avoid this temptation. Be selective. It is a skill to be able to identify relevant literature from irrelevant literature you have previously encountered.

Lastly, do keep in close touch with your Supervisory Committee. Show them drafts of your proposal and use their advice to your advantage.