

Guidelines for Writing a Thesis Proposal

Important Note: There is no one formula for a thesis proposal, given the range of disciplines and organizational sequences for processing it. The advice here is meant to raise your awareness of some of the underlying functions and issues around the submission of your proposal.

Process (how to do it)

- Look closely at departmental specifications (about timing, scope, length, readers, etc.)
- Ask other graduate students in your department about their experiences; look at past proposals
- Try out your ideas as widely as possible, especially with your supervisor and committee members. Make the most of chances to take part in informal discussions, drafts, preliminary meetings, presentations at colloquia, etc.
- Don't procrastinate; delays will just isolate you.

Function (what it's for)

- Show why your research idea is interesting within the field (by discussing what others have done and not done).
- Show that you can carry it out (by sketching your methodology).
- Limit your promises: exclude things you won't get to (texts, topics, methods) as well as outlining those you will use.
- Remember that your proposal is a document to be filed, not a promise to be fulfilled in every detail.

Rhetoric (how it gets passed)

- Start with *why* your idea is worth doing (contribution to the field), then fill in *how* (technicalities about the topic and method).
- Give enough detail to establish feasibility, but not so much as to bore the reader.
- Show your ability to deal with possible problems or changes in focus.
- Show confidence and eagerness (use *I* or *we* and active verbs, concise style, positive phrasing).

Generally, thesis proposals include four elements: your argument, some type of literature review, your methodology, and a timeline. However, as stated earlier, different disciplines and topics will require adaptations (for instance, your field may require more of a theoretical orientation than a methodology section, or an undergraduate thesis may not require a timeline). Be sure to check with the people who know.