

Guidelines for writing qualitative dissertation proposals

Although many of the books about writing a dissertation present a standard format for dissertation proposals, students using qualitative methods will generally find these formats unsuitable. This is especially the case for those working within the interpretive tradition. Qualitative research, being largely inductive, often changes dramatically while underway. Any stipulation that a project must fulfill specific terms runs contrary to the goals of qualitative inquiry. Here, I offer guidelines to students doing qualitative research using an interpretive theoretical paradigm. You should check with your committee members to find out what they will require in a proposal. Committee members who expect you to follow the format for a National Science Foundation grant proposal will not approve of my guidelines.

You might think of a dissertation proposal as framing the study for your committee. A roadmap is another way to think of it. The committee members need to understand what you are doing, how you will do it, and why it matters. Although a hypothetic-deductive format will not work for interpretive research, all proposals nevertheless answer similar questions:

- What are you studying?
- How are you studying it?
- What kind of data do you anticipate collecting?
- How will you analyze it?
- How will the research contribute to sociological knowledge?

For students conducting largely inductive, qualitative research, the proposal and defense must be flexible. Develop your proposal in collaboration with your advisor and committee. Although it constitutes a working dissertation outline, it must not be considered a contract, in strict terms. While the student should demonstrate competency and expertise in the research area, the qualitative defense cannot be an event in which he or she "defends" a concrete proposal. More accurately, it is an opportunity for the student and the committee to brainstorm together. It should be considered a valuable resource for the student. The committee can help anticipate pitfalls, wrestle with issues of accessibility of settings, and suggest additional points of investigation. The outcome of the defense should be a more comprehensive, yet still tentative, research plan. Because the appropriate methods will unfold in the research setting, the prospectus cannot possibly state the research design and data analysis plan in advance; it can, however, establish the initial steps that a student intends to take to investigate areas of interest that appear at the outset.

The proposal helps your committee understand where your project is going. In general, it should have these basic components:

- Working title: give this considerable thought because it should serve as a guide to the project. Keep notes of potential titles as they occur to you.
- Synopsis of the study: provides an overview of the research topic, including where it fits within particular theoretical and conceptual discourses and discusses the potential significance of the research. Specify what questions interest you about the topic. Frame the topic in a way that makes it congruent with qualitative methods.
- Literature review: The amount of literature you review here will vary. Ask your advisor and committee members what they expect. I want most students I supervise

to identify what scholars know and do not know about the topic and indicate how their research participates in a broader conversation. I do not expect an extensive review, which is better suited to the specialty comp exam.

- Methods: discusses how you are doing the research. Depending on method, this might include tentative interview questions or discussion of membership roles and gaining entrée in a setting. Discuss any HRC or ethical issues, actual or anticipated.
- Tentative chapter outline: gives an idea of how you see the dissertation as a whole. Some students find it helpful to include a timeline here. Many begin the proposal with the outline. This order is not set in stone.

How long should it be? Qualitative proposals seldom run over 20 pages.

Tips for writing

- Think of the writing of the proposal as an iterative process, rather than a linear one. It probably will not work to sit down, type “Synopsis,” and hope to proceed straight to the chapter outline from there. I suggest beginning by writing “I am interested in...” and filling in the blank several times. Then sketch out your methods. Then work on the chapter outline and go back to the questions about what interests you. Refine them into researchable questions. Go back to the methods. And so on.
- Plan to write multiple drafts of the proposal.
- Write every day. Do not let your work get “cold.”
- Use first-person and active voice. Write “I intend to study how women veterinarians understand the feminization of the profession,” rather than “The proposed research will be an investigation of how women veterinarians...”
- Proofread and edit continuously.