Proposing, Writing and Defending a Thesis

“I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again.”
Oscar Wilde (advice on how NOT to write a thesis)
In this presentation

• Choosing a topic and a supervisor
• What should be in a proposal
  – Common mistakes
    - methodology, methodology, methodology, methodology
- The Writing Process
- Defending Your Thesis
- Important dates, ethics approval and funding opportunities
4 components to research design

1. Research question (should be able to summarize in one, main question)
2. Theory (consider I.R., political or other theories)
3. Data (systematically collected elements of information – qualitative or quantitative. It must be valid, reliable and replicable)
4. Use of Data (use data to generate inferences that are “unbiased” i.e. correct on average)

Avoid the trapping of simply retelling a lot of facts in a simple, chronological order – this is not a thesis.
Your Proposal AND Defence Committee

1. Your advisor (You may have co-advisors)
2. Internal Examiner – an academic from Political Studies
3. Your External Examiner – an academic from a different U of Manitoba department. In some cases, they can be from U. of Winnipeg or an official (esp. for MPA)

• Note: one member of the committee must have a *primary* appointment within the Department of Political Studies.
Proposal Process

• Once the advisor deems the proposal acceptable, it will be distributed to the other members of the Thesis Advisory Committee for review. Normally, this review takes 3 weeks. Members of the Committee can grant acceptance, conditional acceptance (which may or may not require the proposal to be resubmitted for review) or reject the proposal. The advisor will advise the student of the outcome.
The Proposal

The good news is that much of this is also going to be your Chapter 1:

All proposals must centre on a question. “Why” questions, if possible, are far superior to “how” questions.

- Please note that thesis proposals can only be successfully written after doing a considerable amount of research for your thesis. This will not be wasted and part of the proposal can often end up being parts of your thesis.
- Plan for 2,000 to 2,500 words or 8-10 pages.
What the Proposal Must Address

1. Contextualization for your question which points to its importance: why should anyone care about it?
2. The question your thesis attempts to answer (it should emerge naturally, as it were, from your contextualization)
3. The existing literature which attempts to answer it, or comes closest to answering it and the gap it leaves, which your thesis is designed to fill (wholly or in part)
4. The hypothesis: what you expect to find and why.
5. Methodology – this is key!!
6. The primary sources: these may include data, news stories, documents, etc.
7. Chapter outline with brief descriptions of the content of each chapter, preferably the argument of each chapter
8. Bibliography
Proposals

• At least a page for each question with a summary of the literature and your methodology being longer

• If your Grandma can’t read your proposal and cannot summarize your thesis in one question, you need to rethink

• Don’t underestimate definitions – they can be your saving grace or your undoing. (eg. what do you mean by “effectiveness”, what exactly is a “sanction”?)
The key is the question you ask

- Is it, in fact, a question?
- “Why”? is better than “how”?
- Is it testable?
- Is there data associated with it?
- Are there theories associated with it?
- Will it further knowledge/research?

- Can you measure something? It doesn’t need to be quantitative, but you need to compare/contrast ideas, theories, approaches or data
Methodology

• Are you proving/disproving a theory?
• Are you conducting a case study? (the more you have, the more conclusions you can infer, the fewer you have, the more in-depth)
• What are your PRIMARY sources?
• Do you have independent variables?
• What is your dependent variable?
• Have you predetermined your outcome?
• We don’t want summaries of stuff happening. We want arguments about why or when something happens.
Methodologies to avoid

• If your dependent variable doesn’t change with a change in your independent variables, you have a problem
• Causation is very, very difficult to prove
• NO primary data or inventing data bases (the latter more appropriate for a PhD thesis)
• The meaning of life – break down your research question into sub questions
• If you can’t provide a “so what?” to the reason you are conducting your thesis
Human Ethics

• If you interview people, you must complete an ethics review
  – Complete a protocol submission form
The Writing Process

• Once your proposal is approved, data gathering can begin

• Typically
  – **Chapter 1** – intro of why this topic, your research question(s), your methodology, expected outcome (your proposal minus the lit review)
  – Chapter 2 – literature review – what have others said about this topic
  – Chapters 3 – 5,6 – substantive chapters and argument (perhaps each chapter is a case study or time in history?)
  – **Chapter 6 or 7** – your conclusions. What was your initial question, what are your findings, did you answer the question, why or why not? Implications of this research and future research and next steps if you were to continue analysing this topic
  – Annexes but only if they are used in the thesis! Do not create maps and tables for the sake of adding them.

  **Bibliography**

  **Bolded chapters are what examiners focus on especially!**

• Need to write a little every day, set deadlines, communicate with your advisor, peer review
Online Referencing Help


• Zotero... the advantage of zotero over refworks is that you can take it with you wherever you go... it is not licensed to the university. It is free.
Final Drafts of your Thesis

• Your committee members will need several weeks to review your thesis (your supervisor will have seen many iterations)
• Your thesis will not be passed on to the committee UNTIL the supervisor gives it the green light
• The cleaner, more polished final draft that you have will limit corrections after the defence
The Oral Defence

• 10 mins – a summary of your research question, why it is an important one, how you tackled it and conclusions. You can use powerpoint, but simple, oral presentations are often better.

• 2 rounds of questioning beginning with external, internal, advisor then repeat

• Questions from the public audience

• Final remarks by you

• You leave the room, the committee debates. You are invited in to hear the results
Defence Results

- Accepted
- Conditional Acceptance
  - Resubmit (perhaps a chapter needs a rework?)
  - Advisor approval (small, grammatical or formatting issues)
- Not Accepted
Funding

• SSHRC – Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
  – Duff Roblin Political Studies Fellowship (U of M)
  – See U of M [http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/funding/585.html](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/funding/585.html)
  – Travel grants, see [http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/awards/3006.html](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/awards/3006.html)
Resources

U of Manitoba Resources

Consider Taking a Methodology Class

scott.sinclair@gov.mb.ca email if interested

POLS 3950 Research Methods in the Study of Politics Cr.Hrs.3 (Formerly 019.395)

An introduction to the major quantitative and qualitative research strategies employed in the study of politics. The topics addressed include interviewing, content analysis, comparative studies, survey design, sampling, research ethics and basic statistical analysis. Students may not hold credit for both POLS 3950 (019.395) and the former
Final Words of Wisdom

• Your mantra should be “get it done” NOT “make it perfect”
• Read aloud – you’ll catch more mistakes
• Peer review each other’s work