RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Your research proposal should comprise two main components: 1) describe a specific, interesting, and feasible research problem; and explain how, specifically, you are going to address/solve that problem. Good proposals closely link both components and justify both why the research proposed is interesting/important and why the research is necessary to solve the problem. The core of a proposal is the research problem. The entire proposal should focus on that problem.

Potential hazards: Too many proposals simply describe an interesting research subject or issue, but fail to outline a specific problem and a means of addressing that problem. Conversely some proposals simply describe the analysis to be undertaken, without explaining why that analysis should be undertaken, what problem it will address.

A proposal should have various parts, often in separate sections, as outlines below. Not all proposals need to follow this outline exactly; some will combine parts, others will make more divisions. Some proposals will follow an order different from that outlined here.

Introduction: Like any paper, a proposal should begin with an introduction that gives the reader an idea of what the paper is about. As a general rule, by the end of page one the reader should know, generally, what the research problem is and how it will be addressed. And why it is important.

Theoretical Perspectives: Many proposals should include a discussion of the theoretical perspective that will be taken. In some cases this discussion can be incorporated into the introduction or literature review.

Review of the Literature: All proposals must include a review of the relevant literature regarding the geographic area, general perspectives on the research problem, history of research on your particular problem, etc. This review can be divided into sections or subsections as appropriate. It is essential that the review of the literature be tied directly to the research proposal. For example "Smith outlines several issues that are relevant to this research" *or* "Previous research in the area has contributed important insights, but the issue of blah blah blah has remained unaddressed. My research will focus directly on this neglected issue." An ideal review of the literature builds towards and defines the research problem by outlining relevant issues and showing what knowledge is needed.

Potential hazards: Too many proposals simply review literature that relates generally to the research problem under the faulty assumption that the relevance of such a review will be obvious. Do not assume. EXPLICITLY tie the literature review into your research problem.

The Research Problem: This is the heart of the proposal. Describe, explicitly and in detail, the problem you will address and how you will address it. What will your research actually involve? In some cases, the definition of the research problem should involve the development of explicit hypotheses and test implications. Even if you choose not to set out specific hypotheses, you must still set up specific expectations regarding how you

will consider and analyze your data or material. What might you find and how would you interpret your findings?

Potential hazards: If your research problem is not well defined, you can easily waste lots of time writing about and pursuing an unrealistic problem. Work through your hypotheses/expectations carefully. Can you really collect the data/information necessary to address them? Do the implications really follow?

Database: Describe the data or information you will use to address your problem. Included here should be a specific discussion of how you will collect those data, the availability, relevance, completeness, and representativeness of the data.

Methodology/Analytical Procedures: Discuss the methods, analytical techniques, etc. you will use to interpret your data and address your research problem. If you have already developed specific procedures, coding forms, etc. you may wish to describe these briefly in the text and include the forms in appendices at the end.

Conclusions: Wrap it all up. Usually, this is the place to discuss the significance of your research, how it will contribute to the discipline.

References Cited: List the references you have cited in the proposal. You may also wish to compile a list of additional literature you plan to consider as part of your research. Keep the lists separate, and label them appropriately. Use the procedures/format established for your discipline.

Research Schedule: In many cases, it is useful to include an appendix that sets out your schedule/agenda. What will you do and when will you do it?

General Considerations

- A Master's thesis proposal should usually be 15-25 double spaced pages long.
- As you are writing and then reviewing your draft, focus on the basic issue, your research problem. For every sentence, paragraph, section, consider its relevance to the overall problem and consider why you are including it at a given point. It is not enough to think that what you are saying is generally relevant to your problem, you must consider how what you are saying fits into the structure of your argument and proposal development. It is often a good idea to discuss, explicitly, the flow of your proposal ("Having described the history of research in the area and several gaps in that history, I will now discuss methods that may be used to fill those gaps.") Sometimes all this explicit discussion of what you are doing becomes tedious, but it helps you stay focused and organized. Try putting it in, at least in early drafts; you can always take it out later.
- For many proposals, especially thesis proposals, first person is perfectly acceptable, and it is often desirable for clarity. Some major competitive proposals (e.g., NSF) cannot be in first person, however.