

Professor Marsha Weisiger's Guidelines for Writing Thesis Proposals

Your thesis proposal should be written in a clear, direct manner and should follow the basic outline below. Its purpose is to guide you in thinking about the development of the thesis, to compel you to do the preliminary work necessary to organizing your research and writing project, and to help your committee understand your project and offer guidance. Your argument and approach will likely change as you research, analyze, and narrate your story. But the proposal helps you start on a firm foundation.

OUTLINE

- I. Overview of thesis
 - a. The “big idea” for the thesis (that is, the general subject and its significance)
 - b. Working thesis statement (the specific argument you think you will make). This should be no more than one paragraph long. Be clear and concise, and make the claim you intend to prove.
 - c. Topics/themes/subjects that will be covered
 - d. What shape you think your argument will take, including a list of chapters
 - e. What theories you will draw on to analyze your data, if applicable (these might be drawn from ecology, anthropology, literary criticism, ethnic studies, sociology, economics, etc.)
 - f. Why you chose your topic
- II. Brief historiography of the topic
 - a. Discussion of the historical literature on this subject to date, with a brief statement of each historian’s argument. Please include citations to the literature you review.
 - b. What will your thesis add to the dialogue—what will be your unique contribution?
 - c. Why should we care (what’s the big deal)?
- III. Research plan

- a. Primary sources
 1. What/where/extent of collections (i.e. general content of boxes, number of linear feet)
 2. How each will inform your thesis, as far as you know now
- b. Major secondary sources (beyond the historiography above) – This should be an annotated list, giving the argument of each book and explaining how it will inform your thesis. (You can get this information from book reviews. Get book review citations from the American History and Life database, then look up the reviews in hard copy or (if available) on line.)
- c. Research and writing schedule – try to be realistic. Rarely do students actually stick to this schedule, but it will help structure your project. Please remember that you must give me two weeks to read each draft of each chapter (and count on two or three drafts). Once I've approved your thesis as ready to defend, you must give the committee at least two weeks (10 business days) before defending.