

## Guidance for SOCY Students Writing the Dissertation Proposal

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*Note that these recommendations are not intended to replace your advisor's guidance, but rather to provide general guidelines that may be useful. Check with your advisor to see if they have other suggestions or different ways of proceeding.*

Your dissertation project is meant to demonstrate your ability to design, conduct, and write original sociological research. The proposal document is a “road map” for the committee that engages with relevant literatures and lays out the study design in sufficient detail for the committee to understand the project and be able to help you improve it during the defense. Keeping this goal in mind can help you write a strong proposal document. See your cohort's Graduate Handbook for more information, at <https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/students/graduate-students/resources>.

### General guidance:

1. Most students identify a specific dissertation topic early by the end of the process of preparing for their specialty comprehensive exam, so it can be useful to tentatively plan to be writing your dissertation proposal during the semester or summer after you complete your exam. The dissertation proposal should be defended by the end of your fifth year in the program.
2. It is a good idea to approach several faculty members with your dissertation idea to get their feedback and learn about the expertise they could provide in helping you with your project. Choosing a dissertation topic is an important decision, and getting faculty members' feedback can also help you decide whether to include them on your committee.
3. Choose your dissertation committee, which may or may not be the same as your specialty comp committee. You may choose to include committee members because of their expertise in the topic or method, or because you have worked with them in other capacities (e.g., teaching) and would like to include them as letter writers when applying for jobs. You may want to designate three primary and two secondary committee members, who will differ in the level of feedback they provide. Three members must be tenured or tenure-track SOCY faculty in our department, one “outside” member must be in a different department at CU-Boulder or elsewhere, and one member is typically from within the department but can also be from outside. It is possible to add a sixth member if you choose.
4. If your dissertation project will involve fieldwork, you should plan ahead for when this fieldwork will happen. Many fieldwork grants such as Fulbright and SSRC have application deadlines in the fall, and funds are not released until the following spring.
5. Using other students' dissertation proposal as templates (ask your advisor for suggestions of good models), begin outlining your proposal. It usually contains the same sections as the “front end” of a manuscript up to and including the methods section. Each section is longer than in a journal article manuscript, though. Your introduction lays out the topic, why it is important, what the gaps are in the literature, and how your work contributes to the literature. The background or theory sections engage with relevant literatures and build theoretical arguments. The methods section is particularly important and needs to be detailed enough for your committee to fully grasp your proposed project and the pros and cons of our plan. The methods

section justifies why your methodological approach is the right one, provides detail on your data source(s), and lays out your data collection procedures and/or plans for analysis and any preliminary results. The document usually ends with a proposed timeline and an outline of chapters. Having initial findings is not required but may be useful in the defense. After reading your document, the committee should have a very clear idea of what you plan to do and why.

6. The topic, framing, and approach need to be your own ideas, and the dissertation should be your own work. The faculty define this as independently generating research questions, theorizing and/or bringing literature to bear on the questions, analyzing data, and writing the dissertation; it is permissible to collaborate in data preparation and to eventually coauthor the dissertation when submitting it for publication. The advisor should help the student clarify her/his thoughts but make sure the dissertation represents the student's own thinking and skills. A suggestion for the early stages of the project is for the advisor to ask the student to bring a one-page memo detailing the topic/framing/approach that the advisor or committee members can then talk through with the student. Advisors and others can help the student understand how to conduct and interpret analyses more generally but should not analyze their specific data or write the dissertation.
7. Depending on the scope of your project, the length of your proposal document may vary. But proposal documents are rarely shorter than 30 to 35 double-spaced pages and tend not be longer than 50 pages.
8. Early in the process, talk to your primary advisor about a timeline and about their expectations for review of drafts. Your advisor (but not other committee members) will typically want to read and edit at least one draft of the proposal and give you the "green light" to distribute it to the committee for the defense. You should plan to send your finalized proposal to the committee at least two weeks prior to the defense.
9. Preferably a couple of months in advance, talk to your advisor about setting a defense date. If your advisor approves, schedule a defense slot with your committee for sometime during the academic year. Finding a 90-minute slot when the whole committee is available can be difficult, so set up a scheduling poll (you can use a site such as [whenisgood.net](http://whenisgood.net) or [doodle.com](http://doodle.com)) that provides quite a few potential options. Once you have decided on a slot, notify the committee and reserve a room.
10. Submit Dissertation Proposal Defense Report paperwork at least 2 weeks before an oral defense. For the paperwork, see: <https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/students/graduate-students/forms-deadlines>
11. It is possible that your committee may ask you to delay the defense in order to make changes to the proposal document in advance of the defense. These revisions may be more or less extensive. Be sure to take the feedback seriously.
12. The defense consists of your short presentation of your project, followed by an hour or more spent workshopping the project, defending your choices in your research plan, and improving it. It is not usually an oral exam in the sense of the committee members testing your knowledge. Instead, everyone engages deeply with the project. Approach this workshopping session with an open mind. The defense may or may not result in substantial changes to your research plan. Prepare yourself to receive suggestions for major changes, rather than reacting defensively about receiving that kind of feedback.

13. You will be asked to step out of the room at the beginning of the defense as your advisor and committee members discuss procedural matters. You will also leave the room at the end, as the committee decides the outcome of the defense. You will learn that outcome immediately.
14. Bring your Dissertation Proposal Defense Report to your defense (see above paperwork link).
15. You may be asked to make written revisions to your proposal that reflect changes that were agreed on in the defense.
16. It is common for the final dissertation to reflect major changes that were not in the proposal document. Often, during data collection or analysis, students will find they need to adjust their methods or analysis. If you find that you need to make substantial changes to your project, after checking with your advisor, email your committee and ask them to reply if they do not agree with the proposed change. Do not forget to resubmit your project to the IRB if your changes are substantial enough to warrant an amendment. All dissertation projects involving human subjects need IRB approval.