

MA Program in Critical Sociology 2014-15
Brock University
Guidelines for MA Thesis and Major Research Paper Proposals¹

During the second term of your program, you will prepare a proposal for your thesis or major research paper (MRP). A thesis proposal is a compact document (10 pages) that includes a working title. It also identifies and locates the significance of the question framing the research, and sets out the investigative procedures to be followed. In developing a proposal, you need to communicate your sense of the field (i.e., what is already known and claimed about your topic or problematic) and specify a clear research question that makes a contribution to that field. Moreover, you need to be explicit about the logic of inquiry and the strategies proposed to support your claims. A MRP proposal is a more concise document (5 pages). It too identifies an organizing research question and your plans to investigate and answer that question.

Thesis Proposal Format

Formats may vary, but all proposals contain the following elements:

1. **Research question:** This question is key to your proposal and research. It should appear on the first page of the proposal. Think of your research question as a puzzle or problem to be solved, or literally a question to be answered.
2. **Locating your research question in the existing literature:** Locate your proposed research question and larger thesis objectives/goals in terms of the relevant theoretical approaches and substantive research in the field that relates to your question. What are the **assumptions** and **claims** made by scholars about that field, and the extent to which you concur or differ? You do not need to write a lengthy review of the literature in the field. Rather, be sure to identify how your project is situated in relation to the current thinking in and approaches to your topic. You need to be conscious of your place in the literature...where and how you are making a significant contribution to your field of knowledge.
3. **Outline your contributions:** Discuss the contributions your proposed thesis will make to your field of inquiry, i.e. its significance and claims to originality.
4. **Specify your working argument:** Your working argument is a tentative, speculative answer to your research question. Focus on articulating the underlying logic of your argument. Setting out a working argument will help guide your investigation, and keep you focused on your contribution to the literature.
5. **Define key concepts:** What are the key concepts used in formulating your research question and working argument? How do you define them? These questions are more than a simple matter of setting out strict definitions. Your discussion of key concepts should reflect on scholarly debates about these concepts and their theoretical ambiguities, as well as the ways in which those concepts can be developed.

¹ Thanks to the Institute of Political Economy at Carleton University for giving us permission to revise their proposal guidelines as a basis of our own.

6. **Identify your research methodology, methods and sources of data:** Highlight the way your research question and working argument establishes the importance of certain kinds of evidence and ways of gathering that evidence. Identify and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the methodological approach your research question requires. Be reflexive about your position as ‘researcher’ in the investigative process. Consider issues of access to data sources, and the quality/quantity of information required. Show how these sources, using your methodology, will produce evidence that addresses your research question and working argument.
7. **Outline the research process and your data analysis strategy:** How will you work with the primary and secondary data relevant to your research? How does the data analysis strategy you propose speak to your research question and fit with the overall theoretical orientation of your research? Discuss any considerations, including any special circumstances, required for ethics approval.
8. Provide a **timeline** for your research.
9. Provide a **rough outline** of thesis chapters.
10. Include a **sample reference list** of relevant literature in your field of inquiry.

The **final version** of your thesis proposal is due to your Supervisor on the Friday of the winter term’s Reading Week (mid-February). The oral presentation of the proposal to your supervisory committee will follow shortly afterward.

MRP Proposal Format

Formats may vary, but all proposals contain the following elements:

1. **Topic and research question:** What is the general topic of the MRP, and what do you propose as the specific research question? This question will guide your interrogation of the literature in your topic field.
2. **Locate your research question in the existing literature:** Locate your proposed research question and larger MRP objectives/goals in terms of the relevant theoretical approaches and substantive research in the field that relates to your question. You do not need to write a lengthy review of the literature in the field. Rather, be sure to identify how your project is situated in relation to the current thinking in and approaches to your topic.
3. Briefly state the **contribution** you hope to make with the work of your MRP, in relation to the literature on your topic.

4. **Identify your research sources:** Identify the range and types of material that you intend to read and interrogate, and provide a justification for the choices you make. MRPs do not usually incorporate primary research due to page length restrictions.²
5. Provide a **timeline** for your work.
6. Include a **sample reference list** of relevant literature in your field of inquiry.

The **final version** of your MRP proposal is due to your Supervisor in early June. The oral presentation of the proposal to your supervisory committee will follow shortly afterward.

² If you plan to do some limited form of primary research, then you also need to include in your proposal discussions of why you intend to collect primary data, and what methodology, methods and data analysis strategy you will employ. Also be sure to note if you will need to obtain ethics clearance.