

**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**  
**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**  
**DISSERTATION PROPOSAL GUIDELINES**

Although many aspects of the dissertation may change as research progresses, the dissertation proposal provides the candidate with a sound starting point. It provides an opportunity for members of the Department to help sharpen the student's approach, suggest useful resources, and help minimize the chance of research duplication. It also enables the candidate to describe the dissertation project and obtain feedback from political scientists, both specialists and non-specialists, in his or her field, which can prove useful in clarifying the project and applying for research funding. The Department's approval of the proposal signifies a commitment to the scope and orientation of the dissertation before the candidate undertakes the major research effort.

The body of the proposal should be no longer than 12 double-spaced, typed pages in length. This is a firm ceiling; proposals that exceed this length will not be accepted by the Graduate Coordinator and circulated for review to members of the committee. In addition, the proposal should include an abstract of no more than 500 words, references, a chapter outline, and a brief bibliography.

The proposal shall set forth (not necessarily in this order):

- The political problem the student wishes to address.
- The questions the student plans to examine and/or hypotheses to be tested or presented.
- The reasons political scientists should be interested in the topic and in the potential findings of the dissertation, as well as the significance of the research for larger theoretical and political concerns in political science.
- The research strategy and methodology to be employed. The Department encourages each student to develop a research strategy and deploy research methods that the student and sponsors believe are most appropriate to answering the questions raised in the proposal. The Department encourages students to employ a diversity of methods.
- The principal sources available.
- The qualifications or limitations that may attend the results and a projected timetable for completing the dissertation.
- References, table of contents, and bibliography. This material may be in addition to the 12 pages maximum of text.

The student shall draft a clearly written proposal in conjunction with two members of the Department who agree to serve as co-sponsors (a third sponsor from within or outside the Department may be added in particular cases). A cover sheet bearing the signatures of the two sponsors must accompany the submitted proposal. Cover sheets are available from the Graduate Program Coordinator.

Three weeks before a student plans to defend his or her proposal, the student shall submit to the Graduate Program Coordinator electronic copies of the proposal together with the dissertation proposal cover sheet (which will include a title and abstract of no more than 500 words as well as

the approving signatures of both sponsors). A final deadline for submission will be set for each semester.

The DGS will assign to each proposal two readers drawn from faculty members outside of the student's major field and will designate one of these readers as the chair of the examining committee for that proposal. When submitting the proposal, students should include suggestions (designating order of preference) for qualified outside readers. There is no guarantee that these readers will be assigned, however.

Students will be required to defend their dissertation proposals orally in a meeting with the two assigned readers and one or both of the two dissertation sponsors. After the oral defense, the chair of the examining committee will write an assessment of the proposal and will assign the proposal a grade of pass or fail. The assessment will be sent to the DGS, the student, and the student's dissertation sponsors. A student who fails must submit a proposal for reconsideration within four months of the failure. In order to proceed to the dissertation, students must have an approved proposal.

## **Helpful Materials**

The following material is available from the Graduate Program Coordinator:

- Dissertation Proposal Approval Form. (You must attach this completed form to the front of all copies of the proposal to be submitted to the Review Committee.)
- "Thinking About Research Projects," 1998. A set of questions created by Professor Charles Tilly to help you clarify your research project.
- "Outlining Research Proposals," 1994. A useful reference piece written by Professor Douglas Chalmers.
- Sample copies of earlier dissertation proposals. It is useful to review several proposals to appreciate the range of possible approaches that have been employed in the past.