THREE PARTS OF A SENIOR THESIS PROPOSAL

John Odell, February 2003

Thesis research goes beyond what we normally do to write a term paper. There we are learning about a subject for the first time. We read books and articles by other people and make an argument based on these readings. This is research limited to secondary sources. A thesis aims to say something that has not been said before, and the project will take you into primary research of some sort. Now you will look with your own eyes at evidence like that which your book and article authors were viewing. Analyzing primary evidence yourself is one way to assure that your thesis makes a new contribution. To write a proposal is to design a larger research project. It is also a way to ask your mentors a question: do you recommend that I actually spend a lot of my time doing this research? When I have done it, will I have a good thesis? It is your advisers’ duty to help you settle on a project that is feasible and will pay off, warning you away from pitfalls if possible. But the shallower the proposal, the less useful the forecast one will get.

A. What is your research question—a sentence ending in a question mark, for which your project will supply answers? It can be quite simple in the end, but refining a good research question usually takes work. Typically when we don’t know much, our early question is too broad. Then we learn more and find we must narrow it or shift to a different angle, to have a question we can answer conclusively in the time available. Some well-focused questions zero in on a specific contrast like “why did civil war A end so much sooner, with so much less loss of life, than civil war B? Are there any lessons for the international community?” Ask professors to suggest a narrow-enough question that would yield something new. You do not have to identify a provisional answer (a thesis) already at the proposal stage, but this would be a plus, as long as the final result is not biased.

B. What will be new about your thesis? What is wrong with the publications we already have on your specific question? Ask for the 3 or 4 best books or articles already published on the narrow question, and describe them briefly in your proposal, as part of showing how your study will be different. Often it is easy to find contrasting examples, like the civil wars, which no one else has compared in the same way. This is one good way to generate an original contribution even on a subject about which much has been written in general. At the same time, the existing literature can clue you to candidate answers to check out in your new case studies or statistical studies.

C. What research operations, exactly, do you propose to undertake to find answers? Commit yourself to some recognized method for collecting and analyzing evidence—statistical? qualitative? If qualitative, a single-case study or comparative case studies? (Ask for help on methods too.) Spell out the types of evidence you intend to collect and analyze: data collected by others on the incidence of war? local press accounts of an event, read directly or as translated by World News Connection? Before
committing your time to sources, sample them to see whether they really will do the trick. It is also highly productive at the proposal stage to break your main research question into more specific questions that will tell you what to look for when you start reading the press, etc. For example, how many parties were fighting the civil war? were they from different ethnic groups or not? did any of them have support from outside the country? did any other party try to mediate between the warring parties? Advisers who work on subjects like yours can help identify sources and specific questions.

Finishing a good proposal is not a simple linear process, sparked by a mysterious flash of insight that reveals a well-formed question, then designing new research on it. In reality we go around the circle several times--starting with vague ideas, reading some previous publications, talking to advisers, narrowing the question, tracking down different specific studies on the narrowed question, choosing a method, sampling some primary sources, back to revising the question or the methods, etc. Expect to put yours through two or three drafts before having it refined enough. Five to ten double-spaced pages will normally be enough.

And even when finished it will be only a proposal. Don’t try to sound like you feel completely certain what these research steps will yield. We all have some uncertainty at this stage, and expect to learn more and make mid-course corrections. But the more work invested in the proposal, the less the frustration and time wasted later.

For additional guidance, consult Doing a Literature Review, by Chris Hart, especially Appendix 1, and Writing Arguments, by John D. Ramage et al., especially the chapter on proposal arguments.