

## International Relations Honors Theses Proposals<sup>1</sup>

2008

Your thesis proposal explains your project to your advisors and to the world. You will use it to persuade your proposal defense committee that the project should go forward, as well as to elicit comments and suggestions on your project from them. You may also wish to show it to others whose advice you consider valuable. Beyond graduation, project proposals of comparable scope—if not exactly the same format—may be useful in persuading funders or supervisors to support your work..

The proposal should frame the question(s) your thesis will answer and explain how you propose to answer them. It also should persuade readers that your questions are important, and that your plan of action is practical.

A proposal should answer five questions:

1. What question or questions do you address? If you can, distill your project down to specific questions rather than more amorphous “topics.” Your main question will undoubtedly generate a number of subsidiary questions that must be answered in order to resolve the main question. List these, and explain how they will contribute to resolving the main question.<sup>2</sup>

2. Why does this question arise? (From what scholarly debates or real-world events?) Why does it matter? Say a few words about the origins and significance of your project. Your thesis need **not** be framed around a current hot debate in the I.R. literature; it also should not address questions that are trivial or that have been considered settled—unless you intend to unsettle them! It is sufficient that your question be important to you and more ambitious than you could hope to resolve in an ordinary undergraduate course. Nor is it necessary that your thesis ultimately succeed in fully resolving the question; making some progress on a very difficult issue is an honorable enterprise.

3. What previous literature has been written on the question? Describe the “state of the art” on the subject.

If a substantial literature has already appeared on the subject you address, you should explain and distinguish majority and minority views, and sketch the manner in which important relevant controversies have evolved. You are not expected to master all possible relevant material in all media and all languages, but you must satisfy yourself, your supervisor, and your committee that you have mastered the literature on your question sufficiently that you can write a thesis that will not simply go over old ground.

Do not simply report the views of a number of authors, one after another. Rather, **you** must impose order on the literature and explain the issues yourself. Provide citations to relevant literature where appropriate. You may quote other

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<sup>1</sup>. Adapted from Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 115-116.

<sup>2</sup>. Alternatively, this task could be done as part of section 5, below. The choice will depend on the nature of the main question and you and your supervisor’s understandings of what your project requires.

scholars directly for illustrative purposes, but not as a substitute for your own coherent explanation.<sup>3</sup>

4. What working hypotheses will you explore? You can't be sure of our answer until you complete your research, but readers want to know what hunches you plan to investigate.

5. How will you reach your answers? Say a few words about the methodology you are choosing, why you are choosing it, and how you will implement it. If you are doing case studies, identify your cases and explain the justification for their selection. If you are analyzing large-*n* data bases, identify and describe them. If you are doing interviews or other field research, briefly explain how you plan to go about it. If you are doing survey research, briefly describe your survey sources. If you are doing archival research, explain which archives and sources you will use. If you are using other records, e.g. press accounts, make this clear. If your approach is largely deductive, explain this. If there are methods that readers might expect you to use given the nature of your project, but for some reason you do not intend to use, you might note this and briefly explain your decisions.

You should answer these questions in roughly ten typed double-spaced pages.<sup>4</sup> Document your proposal as you would a research paper.<sup>5</sup> It may also be appropriate to append a preliminary bibliography of 1 to 2 pages listing some of the sources that you plan to consult. If you think that some of the sources are likely to be obscure to your readers, you may want to annotate some or all of the bibliography entries.

To learn more about how to write a proposal, ask a friend who has written a reputedly good proposal and look at what they did. Some people also write introductory sections of research papers in formats that resemble the above advice fairly closely. Pay close heed to proposals that were well received by others.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. Note: Questions 2 and 3 overlap and can sometimes be answered together in a single statement.

<sup>4</sup>. There is a maximum limit of fifteen pages.

<sup>5</sup>. You may use either "scientific format," where literature citations are placed in the text and footnotes are used only for additional discussion of points that would interrupt the flow of the main text, or "standard format" in which footnotes are used for either or both purposes. Note that scientific format requires a bibliography while standard format does not. Probably the best single guide is Joseph Gibaldi and Phyllis Franklin, *MLA Style Manual*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003)—or the latest edition if a newer version becomes available. Scientific format is described in chapters 5-6 (or you may simply follow the style of the *American Political Science Review*); standard format is described in Appendix B (or you may follow *International Security* style). The other chapters of this book are also very valuable. Also consult the International Relations Department policy on plagiarism.

<sup>6</sup>. Since AY 2005-2006 is the first in which the Department requires formal proposals, it may be harder to find good models among your fellow students. Consult your supervisor for assistance.