

NMSU Department of Sociology

Master's Thesis Proposal Structure Guidelines

(revised 1/13)

The structure for the thesis proposal may vary in format and organization, depending on the student's research questions, hypotheses, theoretical/research orientations, and overall intent. Some thesis chairs have additional, specific requirements for what is included in a thesis proposal document. A binder of successfully defended thesis proposals can be found in the Sociology Department.

The department expects that the following elements be present in all proposals. It is customary to utilize section headings throughout the actual thesis proposal (with the exception of the title page). The following elements have page lengths as guidelines only. Please consult with your thesis chair regarding expectations.

Title Page (1 page)

The title page should have an appropriate title for the master's thesis that reflects the specific nature of the proposed study. It should also have the student's contact information, as well as the names of the committee members.

Introduction (2 pages)

The overall goal of a thesis proposal is to describe a specific, interesting, and feasible research problem, and then explain how the research problem will be addressed through the student's efforts. In the introduction, the general topic is presented and its sociological relevance noted. Introduce the specific scope of the research, and address the overall research question, actual research questions, and/or hypotheses. Also note what data will be used to address the research questions/hypotheses. Conceptual definitions of key terms could be presented in this section. The introduction sometimes includes a discussion of the theoretical perspective(s) that will be taken (if it will not be addressed in the literature review). Briefly introduce the research methods and provide a sort of map of the thesis proposal...what will come first, second, third, etc.

Literature Review (5-7 pages)

This section should be a well-organized overview of the research most closely related to the thesis. This may include dominant debates, theoretical approaches, a history of previous research on the problem/issue, and methodological research designs used by others. If the theoretical perspective(s) that will be taken in the thesis are not discussed in the introduction, include them in this section. Address the existing sociological research on the proposed topic or question, noting how the thesis will contribute to the literature. This section should demonstrate the student's familiarity with what research has already been done in the area and it should be constructed in a way that draws on sociological language and context. Literature reviews are often divided into sections or subsections based on the thesis research questions and/or hypotheses, or relevant themes/debates in the literature. Make sure to explicitly tie the literature to the research problem the thesis intends to address.

The Research Problem / Research Questions / Hypotheses (1-2 pages)

This section may be included in some capacity throughout the literature review, or may stand on its own in presenting in detail the overall research problem, followed by the study's research questions, hypotheses, and/or study's purpose/aim/rationale. This section may also include the main argument of the proposed thesis. It is important to have research questions/hypotheses that are framed sociologically and can be addressed in the course of a one-year research project.

Methodology (5-7 pages)

Although this section may vary depending on overall research design, it is probably the most important component of the thesis proposal. The goal is to specify the proposed methodological approach for addressing **how** the study will address the research questions and/or hypotheses. Using future tense, explain in detail (step by step) the research process from inception to finish. How will the data be gathered? Who is the sample, and how will it be obtained? How will access to the sample be gained? How will research sites be chosen? What incentives will be used, and how will consent be obtained? Use appropriate terminology to describe the sampling process. How many surveys will be administered or interviews conducted? What kinds of questions will be asked during the interview or on the survey? How will the interviews be recorded and transcribed? How will the data be coded? What kind of statistical program will be used analyze the data? Be very specific, thorough, and detailed in the description of the methodology. Make sure to also include the limitations of the proposed study. All research has some sort of limitations; it is better to acknowledge them and explain why the study is still important to complete. Also, include any ethical concerns. How will voluntary participation be ensured? How will informed consent be obtained and how will the confidentiality and safety of the research subjects be ensured? How will the data be stored? When will IRB be obtained? Acknowledge the budget (if applicable) and required resources in this section. Also, it may be appropriate in the section (depending on the research) to acknowledge one's positionality; especially when employing feminist methodologies.

Timeline (1-page)

Provide a reasonable timeline with key deadlines for data collection, analysis, and completion of writing the thesis. This may also be provided as a figure, table, or chart. Consider the departmental and university deadlines for thesis filing, defense, and completion, as well as graduation deadlines from the Graduate School. Be realistic about the timeline!

Preliminary Results/Discussion or Expected Findings (1-3 pages)

This section may be relevant if there is a pilot study associated with the thesis, or preliminary data has already been collected. Use this section to present the preliminary data/results, and discuss how the thesis will build up, extend, rectify, or engage the preliminary results.

Conclusion (1-2 pages)

Briefly recap the thesis proposal (the research problem, research questions/hypotheses, proposed methodology) and reference the research's sociological and general significance. Articulate again the proposed argument of the thesis, if applicable, and address any expectations with the data. Acknowledge expected findings and how the thesis will contribute to sociology as a discipline.

Works Cited (2-4 pages)

List all sources that are cited throughout the thesis proposal. Follow the guidelines of the American Sociological Association in formatting the works cited. The reference list for the thesis proposal usually ranges from 25-50 sources.

Appendix (1+ pages)

Include all research tools, such as surveys, interview guides, consent forms, coding categories, and other details about data sources. Include any additional tables, graphs, or charts referred to in the proposal. In some cases, the timeline for the thesis research is included in the appendix and referred to in the body of the proposal.

General Considerations in Writing the Thesis Proposal

Proposals should be typed with an appropriate font, double-spaced, and use 1" margins. In writing every sentence and paragraph, consider both its relevance to the overall research problem as well as what purpose it serves in the proposal. Make sure each section is clearly written, uses future tense, and successfully serves its purpose. Also, consider how what is written fits into the overall proposal's argument and development. Provide roadmaps throughout each section, as well as write transitions between sections. First person language is perfectly acceptable, especially in the methods section.