

## Writing a Senior Thesis Proposal

It's natural to think that when you are writing your senior thesis proposal, what you are writing will be the first 1000 words or so of your thesis.

**HOWEVER:** by this stage in your studies, you will probably be aware that the introduction to a long piece of work will often NOT be the first thing you write. (if you're not aware of this, talk to your adviser about some of the reasons why it's true: you'll probably find this helpful not just for you senior thesis but for some of your other courses as well)

With that in mind, how *should* you approach your senior thesis proposal? This document should help you to address that question. We'll start by looking at the purpose of a senior thesis proposal; we'll then talk about what a good proposal should contain (and why). You'll almost certainly find that if you follow this advice, your proposal will produce some material which you can usefully incorporate into your thesis, even if it is not the first 1000 words.

I've gone into quite a lot of detail about each of these things here. For those who find it tedious there's an executive summary at the end, which gives a quick list of the requirements and explains how the proposal is supposed to help you write a good thesis.

### The Purpose of a Proposal

The point of a proposal is to tell your committee what you are planning to write about, convince them that what you are doing is worth writing about, and show that you are in a position to make a good job of it. Let's address each of these in turn:

#### **i) Telling your committee what you are planning to work on**

Most people start off with some idea of what area they want to write about by the time they write their proposal. In many cases you will have discussed this with your supervisor before asking them to supervise your thesis or when discussing who you want to have on your committee. If you have not (or even if you have) you should certainly talk to them about it before writing your proposal. When you do so, it is quite likely that they will ask you *why* you want to work on it. This will be an important conversation – and may well contribute something important to your proposal – we'll come on to this; but if for some reason you don't or can't have a conversation of this sort, you should spend some time thinking about what you would say.

a) Proposing a specific (and manageable) topic for your thesis is a minimum requirement for your proposal. It is probably a good idea to talk to your supervisor in some detail to check that you both agree that the topic is manageable.

However, a good proposal will typically do more than this.

b) It is often easier to organise your work if you have a specific research question in mind. For example, having a particular question in mind will help you when you are trying to figure out which of the things that have been written on your topic will be worth reading (and also which bits of the things you are reading are going to be important).

So, if at all possible, you should try to formulate a specific question which you are going to be aiming

to answer in your thesis. Again, you'll probably find it helpful to discuss the formulation of your question with your supervisor before starting to write.

Lots of people find the process of formulating a question a bit difficult. If you are one of them, don't worry. You may also find that the exact formulation of your question changes as you find out more about the topic you are writing on. This is perfectly normal, and not something to worry about. The thing to bear in mind is that by the time you finish writing your thesis (in May), you will need not only to address a specific question but also give and argue for an answer to that question. Having some idea of what your question will be by the time you write your proposal will make it easier to reach this goal.

c) As we've already seen, a completed thesis will need to ask a fairly specific question, and propose an answer to it. In other words, your thesis (the 8-10,000 word document) will need to have a thesis (a concisely stated answer to a definite question.) You may already have some idea of what your thesis is going to be. If so you might want to include this in your proposal. (As with your question, you may change your mind later on, as you do more reading and thinking. This is perfectly normal and nobody will complain if this happens) But you may not yet be sure what view you want to argue for: this is fine too.

HOWEVER: Even if you aren't yet sure what your thesis is going to be, it's a good idea to have some idea as to what the answers to your research question might be. (One reason why this is a good idea is that it gives you a good idea of whether your question is a good one.) So it's often a good idea for your thesis to suggest one or two possible answers to your research question, and explain what might lead someone to answer them.

## **ii) Convincing the committee that the thesis is worth writing.**

You'll find it easier to get useful feedback from your committee and supervisor if they think your project is worthwhile. You'll also find it easier to motivate yourself if you think it is worthwhile. You will probably (we hope) be quite enthusiastic about your project at the beginning of the year; but experience suggests that as time goes on, it's possible to get bogged down. If you've spent some time thinking and talking about why the project is worthwhile you'll have something useful to refer back to when things get difficult.

This is also something which should go into your proposal. It has two sides, which we could call the 'academic' and 'personal' sides. (We could call them the 'objective' and 'subjective' sides, but I think it's helpful to use these words as little as possible in academic writing: ask your supervisor why.)

The personal side: Why do you in particular find this an important or worthwhile topic? Why is it worth spending a year thinking and writing about? (If you don't find it worthwhile, why should your supervisor be interested in what you have to say about it? And why should anyone turn up to hear your presentation at the end of the Spring semester?) How does it relate to other things you are interested in?

The academic side: To write a good thesis it's helpful to pick a topic which is of interest to you. But a good piece of academic writing – which is what you are trying to produce – should also be one which is of interest to your audience. Who is your audience? Philosophers. What are they interested in? Well, by the time you're a 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate, you should have some idea of what kinds of issues philosophers in general are interested in. So, it's a good idea to explain how the issue you're addressing relates to other philosophical issues. (For example – what difference might the answer to your research question make to how we think about other philosophical questions?)

### **iii) Convincing your committee that you are able to write a senior thesis on this topic**

The only way of being 100% convincing about this is to actually write the thesis. But of course, we don't expect you to produce the whole thesis as part of your proposal :-).

What we are looking for is evidence that you are well-prepared to write the thesis: in other words, that you have already spent some time reading and thinking about it, looking for relevant philosophical material to read about it and so on. (We don't expect you to have done this all on your own, of course: if you've met with your supervisor, he or she will probably have given you some help with this.)

If you've succeeded in doing the things listed under i) and ii) above you will already have gone some way towards showing that you've been thinking about the question. But a good proposal should also show that you're ready to move on to the next stage of your thesis, the literature survey.

The best way to do this is to show that you have a) already identified some philosophical literature which is relevant to your topic/question, and b) that you've started reading some of it and thinking about how its relevant to your question.

#### a) identifying relevant literature

Different supervisors will have different views about what's appropriate here. But a good guide would be the following: you should prepare a short reading list of about 8-10 items which you think will be relevant to your thesis and which you aim to read over the course of the year. (You may end up not reading all of these, and you may end up reading things which are not on your list: this doesn't matter – the list is a guide, and it will form the basis of your works cited list.) You should ask your supervisor for advice about how to identify relevant material, and your supervisor may identify one or two key readings that they think are particularly important for your topic. But the task of identifying relevant readings is your job, and you shouldn't expect your supervisor to do it for you.

Your list of readings should come at the end of the thesis proposal. It should be formatted following the thesis style sheet.

#### What counts as philosophical literature (for the purposes of this exercise):

Articles in academic journals – typically, but not always in philosophy, or anthologies; chapters of books published by academic presses; whole books published by academic presses – but not more than one or two;

You may want to use encyclopedias (like the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) or online resources (like the PhilPapers website) to help you compile your reading list, but you should not include more than one encyclopedia article in your list.

#### b) Showing that you've started reading and thinking

If at all possible, by the time you submit your proposal you should have read and talked to your supervisor about one or even two of the key pieces of literature that are relevant to your question.

In your thesis proposal, it will probably be helpful to try to say something about at least one piece of literature you have read, and how it relates to the question you are addressing. If you've done everything else that the proposal requires there may not be much space for this: that doesn't matter too much. If you haven't had time to do this, you should at least explain what you are going to work on next, and why.

## **Executive Summary**

The document above covers a lot of ground. Here's a brief summary

### **What are you trying to do in your proposal?**

- i) Identify a topic, and where possible a specific research question and a range of possible answers to that question.
- ii) Explain why that topic is worth studying and writing about
- iii) Show that you are in a position to start addressing this question by a) identifying a range of relevant philosophical literature and b) demonstrating some knowledge of the content of that literature and its relevance to the topic you are addressing.

### **What should your proposal contain?**

- i) A brief statement of the topic of your thesis, and where possible, a specific research question with a range of possible answers (or perhaps just one answer)
- ii) Together with an explanation of the significance of the topic, both in personal terms and in relation to an academic literature
- iii) A summary of one or two relevant pieces of reading and an explanation of how they relate to the research question/topic
- iv) A list of 8-10 pieces of academic literature relevant to your topic, in proper bibliographic format, containing not more than one encyclopedia article, and not more than one book-length item.

### **How will this help you?**

A good proposal will help you to organize your work effectively; maximize the value of conversations with your supervisor and committee members; and provide something to refer back to as your work progresses.

It is likely that you will be able to incorporate at least some of what you write in your proposal into the introduction and literature survey parts of your thesis. In particular, your explanation of why your topic is worth studying will probably be incorporated into the introduction; your first steps in explaining some of the reading will become part of your literature survey; and the reading list will be the basis for the bibliography. But you should bear in mind that *this is not the main purpose of the thesis proposal.*