

The Research Proposal in Thirteen Parts Revised¹

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Abstract

A proposal is a serious statement of intent to look into a question or phenomenon and a plan about how to conduct the search. Although expectations vary by discipline, committee, and funding body, there are seven common aspects to completing a written proposal for a graduate thesis or project. These include:

1. General and specific focus
2. Review of literature, experience & concepts
3. Methodology and Sources
4. Ethics
5. Timetable and Ways of Working
6. References, Appendices and Table of Contents
7. Formal Approval

To help prepare, and eventually implement a clear, feasible research proposal, there are six relationships that need attention including: (1) relationship with oneself, (2) with a supervisory committee, (3) with representatives of institutions and the institutional expectations, (4) with selected friends, family, advisors, and supporters, (5) with “others” and finally, (6) with participants in pilot or trial research activities.

The seven aspects of the proposal and the six sets of relationships are presented in a linear, clear fashion. In reality, however, they are entangled in tensions inherent to academe and scholarship. Some of these tensions are discussed at the end of the paper.

The Purpose of a Proposal

The purpose of the proposal is to provide a serious statement of intent to look into a phenomenon and a plan about how to conduct the search. Students engage in research under the supervision of faculty and with the guidance of others. Thus, the proposal is a statement of intent and a plan that needs to be

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accepted, useful, and feasible for all parties. The proposal is a careful, thoughtful and feasible plan towards a goal. It demonstrates an ability to undertake a study about a question that emerges from an analysis of what is known and not known in the literature and experience.

One could think about a research proposal as similar to a proposal to live with a friend or life partner: it indicates a willingness to engage in a significant undertaking that has consequences for both parties. Or, one could think of the proposal as a clear star to guide a voyage of discovery. It is to be used to chart a course and avoid undesired detours.

But a proposal cannot and should not attempt to specify exactly everything that will be done or what is expected. A graduate thesis or project proposal is not a recipe to create a particular product nor an advertising campaign to convince others of the worthiness of an idea. A proposal does not establish a set of sleuthing techniques to solve a puzzle. The intent of the proposal is to construct a feasible plan for you to explore, understand, or test a concern about which you are curious and do not know the answer.

The comprehensiveness and length of proposals, however, vary by discipline, by degree, by funding body, and by committee. Michael Prince distinguishes three types²: First there is *the sketch type of proposal* that speaks to the topic, goals and questions and overview of research design. Next, there is the *blueprint type* of proposal from 25-35 papers that has literature review and discussions of theory and methods, personal stance and ethical considerations, as well as research question, method, time table and bibliography. Third, there is the *foundations type* of proposal that can be quite long, from 50 to 75 pages and includes solid drafts of theoretical and methodological chapters of the thesis. This type of proposal is more likely used for doctoral proposals, but is also used in masters' proposal education and psychology.

There are other types of proposals. For instance, disciplines, such as law and history, prefer a short outline of fewer than 10 pages of the thesis statement and direction to which is attached a substantial list of references and sources to be consulted. Some committees decide that a clearly articulated 15 page proposal that specifies intent and design, to which a complete submission to the Human Research Ethics Board is attached, may suffice as a proposal. Academic funding bodies, such as Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, will not accept proposals that exceed their web-based limits on size, usually less than six single spaced pages, plus references and limited pages of attachments. These types of proposals must be very clear conceptually and methodologically, and usually the product of many drafts, discussions, and very, very carefully editing.

Whatever the form of the proposal, a good proposal for a research project, a funding body, or a thesis promotes disciplined curiosity and convinces readers that the research is both worth doing and feasible. An excellent proposal also includes arrangements for check-points so that changes can be made when necessary that assist the researcher to stay on course given the realities of life, the excitement of unexpected discoveries, the inevitable mishaps and problems, and the requirements for quality scholarship.

Pre-Proposal Steps

Dithering and having fun, combined with disciplined reading and discussion are part of the early stages. The point of these exercises is for the student to explore their interests and develop a direction. It helps to read the proposals of others, and some find it wise to start writing down their ideas, worries,

² See M. Prince "Thesis Proposals: A Declaration of Honest Intentions" Presentation to the 2nd Annual HSD Graduate Conference, University of Victoria, October 2004, Retrieved from SPP website February 3, 2005.

interests, and possible plans. Talk to faculty and others who have similar interests or may contribute particular parts to the work of completing a thesis.

Choosing a thesis supervisor, or two co-supervisors, is part of starting, as is thinking about who could be on the thesis committee—who must be on the Graduate Council of the University of Victoria, and advisory groups where relevant. Explore how to work together, by working together and discussion. It is important that the supervisor supports or does not disapprove of particular faculty that the student wishes to include in a committee.

Graduate students are encouraged and expected to write at least two or three drafts of a proposal, with the first draft to be less than five pages, and useful to introduce themselves and their research intent to prospective committee members. The second longer draft is usually the basis for discussions with a supervisor and others the student elects to work closely with. The final version is the one that provides the student and committee members a clear direction for their work together. This version is read carefully by committee members, followed in some disciplines and faculties by a formal committee meeting to discuss the proposal and recommend clarifications or revisions. The supervisor is responsible to ensure that the student and everyone on the committee “agrees” to the proposal, and processes by which modifications will be made. It is not an unusual practice for the proposal to be “signed off” in some official way, with a record of that agreement to be on the student’s file.

The Seven Aspects of a Written Proposal

1. The General and Specific Focus.

A writer of a proposal needs to be able to clearly fill in the blanks of the following sentence, also presented below in Table 1.³ The purpose of the study is to _____ (fill in blank with a central concept or two) about _____ (fill in blank with the unit of analysis, whether people, groups, time periods) using a _____ (fill in blank the method of inquiry). Here is an example of how one masters student in Studies in Policy and Practice filled in the blanks.

The purpose of the thesis is to document the decisions and tensions of one committee of representatives from not-for profit agencies as they engage in the development of a cooperative, using a case study and participant observation, documents, and interviews with key informants within a community action research approach to inquiry.

Attention to all sections of a proposal is necessary, however, before one can satisfactorily and convincingly complete the following sentence and say it out loud in informal conversation. But, completing this sentence is necessary to finish a proposal. The sentence, with its blanks filled in, can be used in the proposal abstract, in the first few pages of the proposal, in informal conversation, in the consent forms, and in submissions for approval to organizations and to the Human Research Ethics Board. \

Table 1: Four key aspects of in the statement of the study's focus.

Aspects in the Study's Focus	How to fill in the blanks
The purpose of the study is to _____	Fill in blank with a verb such as test, understand, develop...
The _____	Fill in blank with a one or two central concepts
About _____	Fill in blank with the unit of analysis, whether people, groups, time periods, spatial units
Using a _____	Fill in blank with the method of inquiry

To reach the specific focus, it helps to describe the nature of the general concern and reason for interest in a specific topic. Introductions or prefaces to proposals can include a description of a client or a coalition approaching you with a problem such as the imminent change in the law affecting applicants for welfare. Or there is your own pressing interest in the absence of any information about fathers parenting children. Or, the specific focus can emerge from a curiosity of how citizens go about debating health policies in public arenas. Key to a proposal is the transformation of a general line of inquiry into a specific focus, whether a hypothesis testing a directional relationship between two concepts or a clear

³ Adapted from p. 59 of John W. Creswell *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* Sage, 1994.

question about one particular concept that you do not know the answer to. Often early drafts of proposals begin with several questions, and it takes work and several more written drafts to clarify what is the specific line of inquiry. Not all valuable and interesting questions can be the central focus of an inquiry. They may, however, become interview questions or frameworks for observations and analysis of documents. It helps to ask oneself: if I had to choose between several central questions, which one do I really want to know something about.

2. Review of Relevant Literature, Experience and Concepts

In the literature review, a proposal writer examines scholarly and professional publications, both theoretical and empirical, that directly supports or challenges the proposed specific focus. Literature may also be included that bears upon your focus, and sets it in context. Reading the literature helps you differentiate what is known from what is not known. Writing about the literature in the proposal builds the argument of why your specific focus needs to be studied.

Most researchers and scholars have experiences and personal reasons for studying what they do. It may be seen as a problematic, a puzzle, or a desire for a particular change in one's personal, community, professional life or theoretical work. It is not necessary to explicate in a proposal all the reasons for doing a study, but it is essential to clarify **to oneself** the assumptions and desires that drive a study. When reviewing experience and assumptions, it is helpful to honestly clarify if one already feels they have the answer to the question or mystery and is using the proposed study to "prove it". Proving what one knows or desires can stifle the curiosity to examine what one doesn't know.

Another task in a review of what is known and not know is sometimes called the conceptual framework. This includes the specific definitions of the unit of analysis, such as the age of the persons in the sample or boundary around a case study. In a quantitative hypothesis-testing proposal, the variables to be tested are clearly defined. In or hypothesis generating proposals the debates on several, but not more than three or four key concepts are reviewed. For example, a student in Studies in Policy and Practice debated the various ways scholars theorize key concepts such as "for profit" and "public consultation" in the conceptual framework of a thesis proposal on how citizens in British Columbia oppose the framing of "for profit" health care in presentations made to the government committee on the *Patients First: Renewal and Reform of British Columbia's Health Care System*.

3. The Methodology.

This is often a large section of the proposal. Many books and articles are written about it. How one approaches the following three parts to the methodology depends on how one understands methodology and how to use it, and the characteristics of the specific approach selected. (i) It includes a section on design and matters related to epistemology. Key here is an argument why you picked a design and how that design helps answer your specific research focus. Both you and your committee need to be convinced that the design or methodological approach selected is better or most suitable (and feasible) compared to others that are less relevant or appropriate to the study focus. (ii) There is a section on data collection methods, including sampling procedures, particular methods of collecting what type of data, from whom, how and why, and specific instruments or procedures to collect information. In historical and documentary research, for instance, a careful list of sources is expected and why some are included while others rejected. In quantitative research, it is expected the sample size and recruitment will be justified on particular standards. In observational naturalist inquiry, the decisions taken to select what will be observed, when, where, and how need description. (iii) The third section is on analysis. What will you do with the data? How will you go about organizing, inspecting, transforming, comparing, and interpreting? Draft possible tables and charts that present possible relationships between several variables or categories. What statistical tests are appropriate, and which ones are not? What analytical processes

are relevant to making sense of the information and help to account for patterns? What are the possible points of comparison or juxtaposition of paradoxes that will explicate what is going on in the data?

4. The Ethics.

There are two aspects to ethics: establishing research values and developing ethical research relationships with persons. How you go about establishing the value and significance of the research is I argue an ethical process. Explore and argue for criteria of research quality that you choose to value and that are appropriate to the design selected for the proposal's specific focus such as rigor and relevance; validity and reliability; thick, rich description; activation of allies and catalytic validity; population or theoretical generalizability; statistical significance; and relevance to policy or practice.

In some methodologies, there are conventions about what results may be stated as significant and what margins of error or mistakes are accepted. For example, if a particular statistical test is appropriate to a certain sample size and type of variable, then a researcher argues a pattern is found in the data beyond what is expected by chance alone. A hypothesis is accepted or rejected with some level of confidence regarding the relationship between two variables. Even then, however, there are ethical decisions that go beyond technical or scientific ones in each approach to making claims about value and significance. It is helpful to think clearly about what the ethics involved in for instance deciding how important it is to select research questions and activities that relevance to whom, and why. The reason for doing a piece of research, and for doing it with integrity, is important ethical decisions.

Then there is the development of ethical relationships with the persons in a study. These are not just relationships with "human subjects" as per guidelines and protocols of particular institutions⁴, but also those with oneself and members on the supervisory committee and support groups as described more in the last part of this paper on the six relationships. For instance, a student in graduate program of Dispute Resolution is studying how women in rural Papua New Guinea work on and understand their land. The purpose of the proposal is to explore how the use and knowledge of communal land contributes to the struggles against the World Bank's drive to register land to individuals. This student knows the local language, seeks sponsorship of a respected, non-government cultural organization, and pays a "community representative and guide" to accompany her through all parts of the study. The student did not start collecting information until after she and her guide organized a meal and a village gathering to discuss the proposed research and request community support for her as a person, and for the research. Also, the student used an oral approach to discussing and obtaining consent for individual interviews, with consent witnessed using traditions of the village. The student wrote up a script of the oral consent approval processes for the supervisory committee and the University of Victoria ethics committee. In addition, the ethics of working in the village meant reciprocity: an exchange of labour and food before and during the period of collecting information, as well as conducting a popular education campaign with youth about land registration and World Bank initiatives.

5. Timetable and Ways of Making Decisions

This is the section that specifies who is doing what, when, and where. What are the costs in money and time. What check-points will there be for evaluating how the research is progressing, what are the problems, and what changes are required.

⁴ See University of Victoria Office of Vice Present Research ethics procedures, Tri Council Guidelines, forms of submission to the Human Research Ethics Committee, and other protocols to a particular community, institution, or group relevant to the study.

This section of the proposal may be short. Sometimes it isn't written up clearly, especially as it is difficult to know how much time is needed or what decisions are required in the future. Estimates, however, are a good idea. Thinking about time and ways of making decisions, especially a process to check mid-way cannot be ignored. Sometimes writing up a budget about costs for preparing surveys, transcription costs, honorariums for participants, and the time needed for observations are helpful to the committee to clarify feasibility of sampling.

Some students start at the end when making up their timetable, when they must or want to graduate and work backwards, using UVic deadlines for "Request for Oral Defense" as a key point to calculate when work must be completed by. Others start at the beginning, with when they want a proposal approved and ethics submitted. Most make rough estimates that need some flexibility built in depending on family, work, funding, and research realities.

This other focus in this section of the proposal attends to ways of working together and decision-making. How will the committee communicate, and how often they meet. I recommend at least one committee meetings for a master's thesis: one, to approve the proposal, a second meeting after most of the data are collected and preliminary analysis if directions need to change, and the third committee meeting to discuss a nearly complete draft of the entire thesis is completed. But, sometimes more meetings are required, or fewer, especially when supervisors work in a tradition of approving everything first, and only then does a proposal or thesis go out to the committee. The ways committees work and who makes decisions and how is related to the six sets of relationships discussed in the next section.

In a research project with a community group, a government "client", or a partner, it is necessary to clarify what are the responsibilities, contributions, and expectations of each participant. In a project using a community based design, what are the decisions that the community is responsible for, such as the community products from a project, and which ones the thesis committee responsible for such as methodology and conceptual writing. Both may share responsibility for interpretation from their own perspective and both may contribute to dissemination to different audiences. When an indigenous protocol for conducting research is used, there will be discussions about who owns what information and what happens if there are disagreements about interpretation.

In all thesis and research projects, there can be serious disagreements or unexpected problems. There may also be pleasant surprises, such as finding an unexpected source of excellent data. It is necessary to think about what processes can be used to resolve concerns, respond to opportunities, and revise methodological decisions. It is particularly important to agree about these processes while preparing a proposal, as students have power, but institutionally they hold less power than their committee members. The responsibility for anticipating changes and implementing responses should not rest primarily with the student, although ultimately they are most affected if they do not identify and solve concerns. Sometimes problems cannot be resolved by the student or committee, and there are people and dispute resolutions and appeal mechanisms available to assist students and their committees, within the student's faculty, such as the Director, Associate Dean or Dean, and also within the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

6. References, Appendices, and Table of Contents

A working bibliography is essential to write a satisfactory proposal. It is the foundation for the completed project or thesis. Some disciplines expect very thorough and complete lists of references and sources that will be consulted. This list of what will be read and examined is essential to the proposal.

Appendices may include: drafts of submissions to ethics; a guide to interviews; a specific

questionnaire or instrument; draft tables indicating how data may be analyzed, and letters of support of a proposal. Some proposals have few appendices, as the students and their committees decide to spend their time clarifying particular details when an ethics review is actually submitted, or drafting the table of contents after data analysis has begun.

Another useful appendix is a proposed table of content for the completed project or thesis. In some disciplines and for some committees, a table of contents is required. Certainly a draft outline of the chapters and sections or focus of these chapters is helpful, but not always possible or desirable.

7. Final Institutional Approval.

There are usually 2 or 3 drafts written of a proposal. The supervisor and sometimes other committee member's comment on the drafts, and revisions are made by the student. Then a complete written proposal goes to all members of the committee. For some programs and committees the proposal is 30 to 40 pages. Doctoral, but even masters' thesis proposals can include draft chapters of the literature review and methodology prepared as if they will be used in the final thesis. For others, the proposal is shorter and not prepared as draft chapters: the proposal is still formal and substantial, 25 to 30 pages long, plus title page, an abstract, table of contents, references and appendices.

There may be a formal presentation or "defense" of the proposal to the full committee, followed by questions and requests for verbal clarification and written changes. At some point, the committee members indicate approval, through email or by signing a form. For other committees, a provisional decision is made to accept a 15 to 25 page proposal, pending clarification. But rather than expecting a revised and re-submission of a proposal, memos of clarification are used to signal student's response to particular matters. Upon receipt of a clarifying memo that responds satisfactorily to issues raised, the supervisory committee indicates the proposal is approved.

Whatever approach is used, there needs to be a clear signal of formal or institutional approval. Approval means the proposal is satisfactory; that faculty, student, and possible other committee members have agreed to it; and that the student and supervisory committee members will work together towards its implementation. If there are significant changes in focus or design once the research has begun, it is the student's responsibility to inform the supervisor, and the supervisor's responsibility to ensure other committee members are aware of, and approve of these changes. Hence, the importance of building relationships of knowledge and trust, so that all parties to a proposal support its implementation, and are willing to negotiate the small and larger changes required to complete the thesis or project.

The Six Relationships Associated with Developing a Proposal and Finishing a Thesis

Where to start? There is no one best place. There are many ways to prepare oneself to go on a voyage of learning and exploring mysteries and practical problems. What is most baffling and hidden, however, is the actual work of preparing oneself and those with whom one has responsibility to while on the voyage. Each of the following six relationships is all necessary to prepare a proposal. To implement a proposal and complete a project or thesis, further work is needed on each of the six sets of relationships. Thus, the following comments are not only relevant to the preparation of a proposal, but to all the stages of completing and defending a thesis.

1. Relationship with oneself.

This is a relationship that you have the most control over, and that will give you the most sustenance and power. Begin, end, and return to your relationship with yourself. What is it you think is

important? What is your intent and what values are important to you as you engage in research? Honesty and kindness are important to this relationship. They help you see that of the many important questions you may want to pursue, it is possible to pursue only one specific focus in the proposal. Early drafts of proposals include several large questions that will take several thesis or lifetimes to answer. To move from the general to the specific focus through drafts of the proposal, ask what you really want to know and what you really are able to work on. An honest look at values and intent can help explore what it is you wish to learn with a particular question compared to another. A kindly relationship with yourself gives you room to pick what is most possible, feasible, amusing or useful according to your own values of what is important, leaving other questions for later studies or other people. Or, you can pick a focus that is most insistent. You may not know why, but you are convinced a question presses you. If you cannot live with yourself if you ignore the question, maybe that is what you use focus on. Or pick the question that will be the most rewarding or fun to answer.

Take time to revisit this relationship with yourself. Recognize you have power to do the proposal, the project or thesis. Without you, it will not happen. When you are clear on what you want to do and why, it gives confidence. It is also freeing to honestly state privately, if not publicly, what is important about the project. What is it that you are prepared and able to give to it?

2. Relationship with a supervisory committee.

At a masters' level there are three members on the committee, four at a doctoral level. If a thesis, the members must be members of Graduate Council at the University of Victoria. If a project, one or more of the members must be members of the community, or a "client organization" for whom the report is prepared. Usually one person serves as supervisor; sometimes there are co-supervisors. Finding committee members who are available, willing to contribute, and keen to work with you and each other on preparing a proposal and then a thesis or project is interesting and tricky. Some people find it helpful to systematically interview students and faculty about experiences, interests, ways of working, and availability. Some students are clear on who they wish to work with and why, and focus on developing those relationships. General and specific conversations are helpful. There is no obligation on a student or on a faculty to "agree" to be part of a committee until the time is right and an invitation is offered and responded to. Most faculty and students find it helpful to prepare a 2 to 3 page draft of their general focus, why they are interested in their topic, how they wish to do their research, and if feasible. In contrast to the formal written full proposal, this early draft includes why you are considering inviting someone to be a committee member. What is it that you hope they can offer? Or, why are you interested in developing a research relationship with them? It isn't possible to know, articulate or state publicly all the reasons for choosing relationships with particular committee members; but it is a good idea to ponder the reasons for selection.

Committees and supervisors vary in how they work. The supervisor is fundamental to ensuring relationships are engaged in appropriately and proposal writing moves to the final approval stage. Some committees work more as a group, meeting several times. Some committees meet only once during the proposal stage: to discuss the proposal and ensure steps are clear about what is needed for institutional approval so the student can begin research. Some meet several times as they wish to work more actively in the development of the proposal, or to resolve difficulties.

After the proposal is defended, in those committees that meet infrequently, the supervisor remains active while the other members act as final readers and occasional consultants. But all must independently approve a proposal and a thesis or project as "ready for oral defense." Check out restrictions on everyone's time, challenges of distance, and individual communication preferences. Explore building relationships and preparing the proposal through the use of electronic, phone, and other mechanisms. At issue is development of sufficient knowledge, clarity, and trust in yourself and committee members so the

proposal moves to approval efficiently and it is a helpful document that can be implemented. It makes sense to be as clear as possible early on, and to check mid-way, how available and willing committee members are to be engaged in individual conversations and problem solving. Some students expect far more contact than is possible for committee members; others want far less than may be needed to approve a proposal.

If one is thinking of the committee relationships required to develop a proposal and to complete a thesis, I have found it helpful to think of several committee meetings. (1) An early meeting to examine and approve the proposal and draft ethics submissions; (2) a meeting mid way during the data collection or early analysis to check progress and make changes if necessary to methodology; and (3) another meeting to review a good final draft of thesis or project and to indicate clearly what steps must be taken to “approve the thesis for oral examination”. Then there is the defense itself, organized by the supervisor, student, and representatives of the graduate program. Whether four meetings are held, or more or fewer, depends on the practice of the supervisor, the interests of the committee, and the traditions of a graduate program. The student is the person who has the responsibility to set up these meetings in consultation with the supervisor.

It is wise practice for the student to take careful notes of committee meetings, of ideas, possibilities, disagreements, and decisions. For those I supervise, I encourage regular writing of reflections and reflexive notes in logs or emails to oneself that attend to preparation for meetings, and ideas prompted by discussions. Some students find taping meetings, with permission, with their supervisor (and committee) to be useful, especially during conceptual and theoretical discussions, so they can review them later. It is very wise to circulate a record of decisions after committee meetings to serve as reminders, signposts. Also, at times it is necessary to seek clarification in writing among the committee members if there are serious disputes.

3. Relationship with representatives of institutions and their official expectations.

Throughout the process of learning what the expectations are and how to meet them, students and committee members need to build relationships with university representatives, such as the Human Ethics Facilitator, Graduate Advisors, and Graduate Secretaries. It helps to know who they are, what their job is, and how they can assist you in completing a proposal. It is also important to learn what they cannot do and what helps or hinders them do their work. Official expectations regarding proposals and practices vary by graduate program in HSD, and whether a student is completing a thesis or project, at a masters or doctoral level. Check them out. There are also significant variations by individual supervisory committees that affect a particular student in moving proposal to formal approval. Are you expected to present and “defend” in front of the full committee? Is there a “sign off” step, whereby committee members sign a form indicating their approval of the proposal?

One fundamental university expectation, however, is that students who intend to collect new data from human subjects must submit an application for ethic review, with the exception of research that is naturalistic inquiry, document review, or as part of ‘normal’ activities. The supervisor must sign that ethics application, but cannot sign it unless the committee has agreed to the proposal. See the university websites under graduate studies and research for specific procedures, application forms, guidelines and timelines. Sample consent forms may be posted and available from faculty members.

4. Relationship with friends, family, advisors, and supports.

A reader may glimpse these relationships by reading the acknowledgments in completed thesis or projects. Rarely are these relationships conceptualized as work requiring negotiation during the proposal development. But they are important to you and life during and after the proposal. What focus is selected

and what is considered feasible may be directly, or unconsciously related to obligations and interests one has in family and friends. There may be expectations, mutually negotiated or not, about what time is taken to work on the proposal.

A graduate thesis or project is different than a course paper. It is not like a very long, big course paper. That is one lesson masters' students' talk about needing to learn. A proposal, and a thesis or project, are qualitatively different. It is a rare student who can complete a proposal or thesis in a few long nights or weekends. Recognize the time and energy it takes, whether weeks, months, and years. There are implications for one's relationships. But it isn't easy to negotiate family and friend relationships that respect their needs, and help you complete a proposal and do the research. Negotiations are significantly affected by gender expectations, familial obligations, and financial entitlements.

Some, but not all, students decide to seek the engagement of a few close family members, friends, advisors, or what one student calls "thesis angels" to accompany them in the journey of discovery, or at a particular stage of the proposal or research. These people are picked for their interest in the proposal and explicit desire to "stand beside" the person and assist them in completing the study. There are thesis groups of students who read each other's draft proposals, or solve problems. It is important to recognize that these relationships are voluntary and premised on unconditional regard for the student as a person doing a task. But the student is not obligated to take the advice of these persons, nor be accountable to them for proposal decisions.

In some methodologies, research approaches, and ethical approaches to research, such as those in indigenous communities or community action research, there are "advisors" or a "community research committee" explicitly selected by the student and possibly by the community under study to accompany the student on the journey through the proposal and study. These people agree to know what is going on and negotiate what is helpful and relevant to whom. It is best to explicate and revisit from time to time their interest, capacity and responsibility as did a social work student working on a thesis that put together an advisory committee of parents whose sons had completed their probation terms and who wanted to see more help for parents in youth courts. (That same advisory committee later implemented some education workshops based on results of the thesis). What is the thesis committee responsible for in comparison to the community committee? Is there a requirement or desire to ensure opportunities to share data? Jointly interpret? Interpret and write up different aspects of a study for different audiences? Some of the programs in HSD, such as Public Administration, have more experience working through formal negotiations with clients—as members of the supervisory committee. The relationships, however, that I am speaking of here are "outside" the supervisory committee, but part of what the student decides is necessary for their research.

5. Relationship with "others".

I call attention to relationships with others, whether colleagues, friends, or faculty, who may give solicited or unsolicited advice about a proposal. There are also the others who provide welcome or unwelcome distractions. "Others" may include those you chose to consult with about a specific matter. The "others" may include the vague 'other', such as the other student who is perceived as moving more quickly than you, the faculty who appears to have a 'better' methodology, or the other graduate programs that appear to give students more money or support for graduate research. The 'Other' could be illusive, like a 'superego' that hounds a student with large or unclear expectations about what should be done. The point is not to ignore or dismiss what these others may say, as sometimes the information or advice can be helpful and relevant. But, these others do not know you or your proposal. They are not responsible for the implications of their advice as are members of your supervisory committee or support group. Hence, it is important to be clear and efficient in shifting through what these others say, and how much time you spend on these relationships. Do they add to your work on the proposal? Students can lose

energy, time, and focus by listening too closely and trying to respond to the ‘others.’

6. Relationship with pilot or trial research activities.

I end this paper on the 13 aspects of preparing a proposal by arguing doing pilot work with others or in the site is not just lively and useful, it is essential to getting going, to clarifying focus, to avoiding pitfalls, to building one’s personal confidence and to developing conceptual clarity. It is pilot work that ensures a proposal is feasible, and closely related to what the students think they want to do. Engaging in pilot work can be considered building a relationship between oneself and the actual research work.

Pilot activities can be about any aspect of the proposal. They can include:

- speaking out loud the specific focus;
- trying out recruitment procedures,;
- asking a friend to read a draft consent form;
- selecting several sample documents and preparing summaries of them;
- taking an hour to do an interview with a colleague using draft questions;
- transcribing interview results;
- spending a half day observing and taking notes of a possible site of inquiry;
- preparing physical places for holding the information;
- experimenting with possible analytic procedures including draft categories, themes, tables, semiotic squares etc.

Piloting is practicing what you must do to answer your research question. When bored, eager, worried, impatient, stuck, or pressed with worries about the proposal, try collecting some information closely related to your proposal. What do you learn? What more will you need to do, or what must be done differently? What discard? Why not try some other procedure? What makes sense to start in another direction? Engaging with yourself and pilot activities helps to sort through efficiently what is far too general in a proposal and what is not feasible. Conversely, pilot work promotes curiosity and confidence in what you know is the purpose and value of a proposed project or thesis.

Discussion of Tensions and Joys

After presenting the above 13 aspects to developing a research proposal in the spring of 2005, I was asked if there inevitable tensions or problems to the task. Good question. It is helpful to identify problems and classify those that can be solved or minimized, and those that are inevitable tensions by virtue of the structural context in which a proposal is developed, such as institutional rules, academic traditions, or human frailties.

These are some preliminary observations and points. I see three tensions that at this point in time, within University of Victoria, cannot be solved, but have to be lived with. Seeing them clearly, however, ensures they do not become monsters, or the fault of oneself or others.

One is the way academe pursues and rewards excellence, and penalizes anything that is not “the best”. The current and common, but not only way, of pursuing excellent ideas and persons, is through grading, awards, and funding that arranges people and ideas into a hierarchy, with only the top few deemed as excellent, or an A, while the others may be good, but not worthy of funding, publishing, giving awards etc. This stringent hierarchal way of establishing worthiness in academe is internally absorbed by students by the time they get to graduate school. For years they have been graded, and they now grade others and evaluate ideas into “the best”, knowing their livelihood, funding, success, and potential jobs depend on these types of assessments.

On one hand this pursuit of excellence structurally pushes everyone supposedly to “do their best”, and to test ideas for rigor and worthiness. On the other hand, this approach to excellence pushes people to evaluate ideas and the worth of persons continuously-- in ways that produce arrogance, contempt, and anxiety. These emotions cost energy. These emotions can prompt excessive, sharp critical comments about what is wrong with an idea or paper, and only the rare sunny comment about what makes sense or works. Arrogance and its sister anxiety can also lead to sharp gossip, chilly climates, endless emails, not asking for help, not sharing first drafts, obsessing to get better writing, procrastination, or hurried attempts to finish and get out, or just disappearing and not finishing. Every day, every person in academe carries out activities of evaluation and assessments of worth that makes them and others feel less than or greater than someone else, or some other paper. This institutional press to evaluating excellence, through public assessments of worthiness, produces enormous anxiety, with flashes of arrogance and glee when occasionally a person feels their idea is better than someone else’s idea, or their thesis is accepted without revisions, or their writing, and they personally, receive an award.

It could be otherwise, and fortunately there are many activities in academe that avoid, resist, or ignore the tyranny of these hierarchal, evaluative assessments. The joy of academe is found in learning, through reading and arguing, writing and discussing, and above all in developing positive relationships and interesting ideas that nurture curiosity. These types of activities can escape being graded, but they are essential to the development of a proposal and thesis or project. Through argument, experiment, reflection in individual and collective forums, strong and useful ideas are created and shared, sometimes in publications in academic and other settings.

The second tension is one of time. Pressed to finish by a deadline, self imposed or otherwise.
.....to be developed

The third tension that is inevitable and inherent in academe and in most of any work we engage in. There is the tension between product and process, between means and ends, between finishing the thesis and the relationships with others while doing the thesis.to be developed.

Finally, there is a tension that Pamela Moss identified in an SPP proposal seminar February 2005. That is, choosing a focus for a thesis closes doors on other options to explore. It is inevitable one cannot answer several valuable questions at the same time in one thesis or study, no matter how hard one works or how clever the design. Writing a proposal about something means one has to close the door on something else. As we can be reluctant to let go of some favored question or important mystery, it is common that two or three questions jostle for attention in a proposal and thesis. In early stages, pursuing several questions creates interesting possibilities and energy. But, at some point, everyone must say: “What is this proposal NOT about?” What are the questions I cannot, or will not answer? What doors must one close—for now.

To end, a comment about the joy of developing a proposal. It gives energy and a way to actually answer some questions, to learn something you and others do not know, in a way that can be convincing. A good proposal opens a door to something unknown. An excellent proposal also gives you a push to go through the door, and some tools to begin exploring that room of wonder.