

# PS801: Dissertation Proposal Research and Writing

Department of Political Science  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
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Fall 2024

Class times: Tuesdays, 1:20–3:15 pm

Class location: North Hall 422 (the Ogg Room)

Class website: [canvas.wisc.edu/courses/424160](https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/424160)

Office hours: Thursdays, 9:30–11 am

(Sign up at [calendly.com/rikhil/](https://calendly.com/rikhil/))

E-mail: [bhavnani@wisc.edu](mailto:bhavnani@wisc.edu)

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## Requisites

Declared in Political Science doctoral program.

## Course description

Provides structured support and mentorship for political science dissertation proposal writing. Includes topics such as defining relevant research questions, incorporating existing scholarship, developing a theory and research design, and drafting a full prospectus.

## Detailed overview

The purpose of this course is to develop, over the course of the semester, a strong dissertation proposal. The course will be student-driven. Once we move past the first couple of weeks, the general format for each class will be short student presentations followed by peer assessments and discussion. The course is thus taught in a workshop format in which you will have the occasion to think, write, assess, and rewrite.

Over the course of the semester, I will ask each student to submit written work and to present on four occasions. Written work should be posted on the class's Canvas website *by noon the Sunday before the class meets*. The in-class presentations should be very short—no more than five minutes in which each presenter indicates any specific concerns or questions that they may have. The focus should be on the comments and discussion that ensues. I expect students in the class to read each other's work and to comment in a constructive fashion. It is the responsibility of the students not presenting in a given seminar to lead the discussion. By the end of the class, each student should have a solid working draft of a dissertation prospectus that they can defend in short order.

I want to stress that the class is for your development. The more that you invest in the class, the more you will gain from it.

## Instructional mode

Face-to-face.

## Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Fully form their dissertation committee,
- Produce a draft of their dissertation prospectus.

## Regular and Substantive Student-Instructor Interaction

1. Providing direct instruction;
2. Assessing and providing feedback on students' coursework;
3. Providing information and responding to questions about the course content;
4. Facilitating group discussion regarding the course content.

## Course credits

This is a three-credit class. The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities, which include class meetings, reading, writing, etc.

## Assignments and grading

The class grade will be based on:

1. Active, informed class participation, for 20% of the class grade. The quality of this workshop-style class depends on the active participation of all students. Everyone is expected to have read the assigned works—mainly your colleagues' assignments—closely and to participate actively in discussion.
2. The four written assignments, for 20% of the class grade each. Note that these are due the at noon the Sunday before they are presented, so that we all have enough time to read and reflect upon the submissions.

All assignments will be given one of the following letter grades: A, AB, B, BC, C, D and F. To calculate the final class grade, these grades will be converted to numeric scores (A = 96.5, AB = 90.5, B = 85.5, BC = 80.5, C = 74.5, D = 68, F = 63), which will then be summed using the weights mentioned above. A total score greater than 85.5 (that is, a B average) will be given a Satisfactory (S) grade; anything below will be given an Unsatisfactory (U) grade.

The participation grade will be assigned as follows—

A: This student never misses class, always completes assigned readings, and comes to class prepared to think carefully, making connections between readings and across topics. He or she is willing to take the lead in discussion periodically, posing interesting questions

or taking risks by answering tough questions. He or she avoids dominating discussion, instead participating mindfully in discussion with other students, considering their ideas and responding thoughtfully and respectfully. He or she helps to create a sense of a shared conversation in the group as a whole. This student shows passion for the work of the class and is committed fully to our work while in the classroom.

AB: This student does most of what an A student does, but may be slightly deficient in one area – for instance, he or she may be a conscientious reader and thinker who tends not to listen to other students or otherwise dominates conversation instead of engaging in productive deliberation. Or, he or she may have been late to class a few times, or may have missed a reading or two.

B: This student participates often, but not consistently. He or she may attend every class and do all the readings but avoids taking the lead in discussion, instead only responding to questions or adding periodically to others' ideas. This student may participate well but may have missed a class and failed to submit the makeup assignment.

BC: This student may be a frequent but superficial discussion participant. The student may let shyness keep him or her from participating as fully as he or she should. At times the student may seem not to have done the readings, though he or she usually comes prepared.

C: This student is intermittently prepared for class (e.g., participates well but has missed two classes without submitting a makeup assignment). He or she may have flashes of brilliance, but rarely participates beyond the occasional superficial comment.

D: This student very rarely participates, and only in superficial ways.

F: This student has missed three classes without submitting a makeup assignment and/or attends most classes but never participates.

## North Hall

The Political Science department is located in North Hall, the oldest building on campus. Due to its age, this building is not accessible to individuals with mobility disabilities and does not have an elevator or accessible restroom. The department is committed to equal opportunity for all students to attend office hours, advising, and other department-related events. Please contact me if North Hall presents a disability-related barrier to you, and the department will gladly work to ensure access. If you require a disability-related accommodation for the academic requirements of this course unrelated to North Hall, please review the “Accommodations for students with disabilities” section below.

## Rules, rights & responsibilities

See <http://guide.wisc.edu/graduate/>.

## Course evaluations

You will receive an official email two weeks prior to the end of the semester when your course evaluation is available. You will receive a link to log into the course evaluation with your

NetID where you can complete the evaluation and submit it, anonymously. Your feedback is important to me.

## **Academic calendar and religious observances**

See <https://secfac.wisc.edu/academic-calendar/#religious-observances>.

## **Academic integrity**

By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UW–Madison’s community of scholars in which everyone’s academic work and behavior are held to the highest academic integrity standards. Academic misconduct compromises the integrity of the university. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these acts are examples of academic misconduct, which can result in disciplinary action. This includes but is not limited to failure on the assignment/course, disciplinary probation, or suspension. Substantial or repeated cases of misconduct will be forwarded to the Office of Student Conduct & Community Standards for additional review. For more information, refer to <http://studentconduct.wiscweb.wisc.edu/academic-integrity/>.

## **Accommodations for students with disabilities**

The University of Wisconsin–Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW–Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform me of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. I, will work either directly with you or in coordination with the McBurney Center (at 1305 Linden Drive and 608.263.2741; see [www.mcburney.wisc.edu](http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu)) to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student’s educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

## **Diversity and inclusion**

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW–Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin–Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background—people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

# Class schedule and assignments

## Week 1 (9/10): Introduction

## Week 2 (9/17): Topic and Committee Selection

### Assignments

- Read the following:
  - Hall, Peter. Not dated. “Elements of a Good Dissertation Prospectus or Research Proposal.”
  - Tilly, Charles. 2006. “Selecting a Dissertation Topic: Range and Scope.”
  - Tilly, Charles. 2003. “All All-Purpose Questionnaire for Research Proposals.”
- Find and read two to three dissertation prospectuses that could serve as possible models for you. You might ask your advisor, committee members, a graduate student who has defended recently, or a colleague at another university. I also would encourage you to look at the recent APSA dissertation award winners in your field, write to the winner, and ask to see his or her prospectus, if he or she would be willing to share it. Please come to class ready to discuss what you think worked best in the prospectuses that you read.
- Submit your prospectus defense committee. Think about people in your field as well as in other fields who may have complementary knowledge and skills.

## Week 3 (9/24): No class meeting

*Please work on your drafts*

## Weeks 4 and 5 (10/1 and 8): The Research Question

Every good proposal asks a clear research question and explains why the question matters. Think of this as the statement of the problem and why we should care. More specifically, your research question needs to do at least two things:

- The question must be important to answer—both for Political Science and the broader public. Why does your question matter for the discipline? What is at stake in your question? Is there a political science puzzle at the heart of your question? On the broader public side, what will we learn substantively from answering your question? Should a reasonably intelligent person ask you about your dissertation, how would you answer and how would you justify it? Lastly, is the question a real question, one that is inherently interesting or not yet answered?
- Is your question tractable? Can you answer your question through evidence or, if you are a Theorist, through close textual analysis or other philosophical methods? A question such as, why is there no world peace, is interesting but not very tractable. In short, you have to select a question that you will be able to answer through your systematic research and analysis.

### Assignments

- Prepare a 1-2 page single-spaced document that lays out your question and its significance. This document should become ultimately a part of the introduction to your prospectus.
- Presentations by Group 1 on 10/1 and Group 2 on 10/8.

## **Week 6 (10/15): No class meeting**

*Please work on your drafts*

## **Weeks 7 and 8 (10/22 and 29): The Analytical Framework**

Every proposal must anchor the project in existing scholarship. In addition, most proposals will present a set of hypotheses or initial arguments. To my mind, these should be two separate sections but there are other ways to organize this section of your prospectus.

1. Literature Review: Some call this section “Relevant Literature,” “Literature Review,” “Theory,” and “Existing Scholarship.” In any case, you must demonstrate to the reader that you have engaged and wrestled with the existing scholarship that pertains to your study. The best literature reviews synthesize and develop the literature in new ways and show why your study is an important contribution. Is there an important contradiction or gap in the existing literature? Does the existing literature not answer your question? Think about your job as showing why your study is necessary given the state of knowledge. Is the existing field contradictory or confused? Is there an oversight in the field? Do the existing literature justice! Lousy proposals simplify others’ studies and create straw men and women. Engage existing scholarship, show the reader how your study fits, and explain why your work matters.
2. Hypotheses: What are your initial arguments? Your hypotheses section need not wed you to an argument. Many people who have written a dissertation will tell you that, as they gathered data and completed their analysis, their arguments changed. The work generated findings that led them to tweak, develop, or change their argument. But a strong prospectus demonstrates that you have some initial hunches that explain your outcome of interest (if you are in the empirical sections of the discipline). Readers want to see you work through a logic or argument; moreover, your hypotheses will inform your research design (the next section). For the empirical fields, think about this section as providing a guide to what you will collect data on.

Some prospectuses also will have a section on alternative hypotheses. In some ways, alternative explanations should emerge from your literature review. Implicit in your review of existing scholarship is the idea others have answered similar questions, and in your dissertation you will need to address these alternative approaches.

### **Assignments**

- Prepare a 5-9 pages single-spaced document that presents the existing literature and your hypotheses.
- Presentations by Group 1 on 10/22 and Group 2 on 10/29.

## **Week 9 (11/5): No class meeting**

*Please work on your drafts*

## **Weeks 10 and 11 (11/12 and 19): The Research Plan**

The research design section is of utmost importance because it signals what you plan to do once you are a dissertator. Research designs are sunk costs: once you go out and collect data, it is very difficult to do it over again. You can always collect more data, but putting as much thought up front into what your research design will be is critical.

This section of the prospectus addresses two questions: How will you study your question? What is your research plan?

1. Research Design: Research designs vary considerably across subfields and projects, but to my mind your research plan pays careful attention to conceptualization, units of analysis, case selection, data collection (again, assuming an empirical field), empirical strategy, and validity. How are you defining your key variables and concepts? Assuming an empirical field, how will you measure your variables? How will you know what you are looking for? Where will you study what you will study? Why are you studying your question there? If a Theorist, why are you choosing a particular author or text? If a modeler, what are the assumptions in your model? What exactly will you study? Whom will you interview and why? What will your sampling technique be? What is the size of your sample? Will you do a survey? What will your survey instrument look like? What questions will you ask? Will you embed an experiment in your survey? How will you find whom you will interview? What text will you analyze? Where will you get the text/data to analyze? If you are creating a dataset, what will the inputs to the dataset be? Are those reliable inputs? How do you anticipate analyzing your data? How will you estimate credible causal effects? Test mechanisms? Do you have the necessary skills to do the analytics that you propose? Will you triangulate with existing datasets? How will we know that whether your claims are internally and externally valid?
2. The Research Plan: What will you do, when, and for how long?

### **Assignments**

- Prepare a 6-10 page single-spaced Research Plan section.
- Presentations by Group 1 on 11/12 and Group 2 on 11/19.

## **Week 12 (11/26): No class meeting**

*Please work on your drafts*

## **Weeks 13 and 14 (12/3 and 10): The Full Prospectus**

Now is the time to put it all together! Prepare a full draft prospectus.

- In addition to the sections outlined previously, some dissertation prospectuses include a draft dissertation outline in which you tick off the chapters you intend to write. Your call on this section.

- Most prospectuses are 25-35 pages, double-spaced, not including the cover page and references.

#### Assignments

- Assignment: Prepare a full draft of your prospectus.
- Presentations by Group 1 on 12/3 and Group 2 on 12/10.