

THESIS AND GRANT PROPOSALS: SOME ADVICE

Process (how to do it)

- Look closely at departmental specifications (about timing, scope, length, readers).
- Ask other graduate students in your department about their experiences; find a way to look at past proposals.
- Try out your ideas as widely as possible, especially with your supervisor and committee members (informal discussions, drafts, preliminary meetings, presentations at colloquia, etc.).
- Don't procrastinate: delay just isolates you from sources of help.

Function (what it's for)

- Show why your research idea is interesting within the field: discuss what others have done and not done.
- Show that you can carry it out: sketch your methodology.
- Limit your promises: exclude texts, topics, methods that you won't use (and say why) as well as outlining those you will use.
- Remember that your thesis proposal is a document to be filed, not a publication of results.

Rhetoric (how it gets through)

- Start with *why* your idea is worth doing (contribution to field), then fill in *how* (technicalities about topic and method).
- Give enough detail to establish feasibility, but not so much as to bore the reader.
- Show your ability to deal with possible problems or changes in focus.
- Show confidence and eagerness (use *I* and active verbs, concise style, positive phrasing).

A Note on Grant Proposals

Graduate students are often asked to write grant proposals, sometimes along with their thesis proposals, and they also find themselves part of teams writing proposals for funding to support their lab activities. Compared to a thesis proposal, a grant proposal typically contains more detail about practical matters such as resources, budget, and timelines. It may need a section on how you will monitor and evaluate the results of your research. Use the advice above (including the recommendation to gain the reader's interest early), within the constraints of length and format guidelines. When writing as part of a team, work out individual responsibilities before starting. Take extra care to ensure that all parts of the document are included, correctly formatted, and consistent with each other.

You will find useful information about grant and doctoral proposals at the websites for Canadian granting agencies. Note the agencies' emphasis on public perception of research projects, and thus on the need to be clear about your purpose.

*Prepared by Dr. Margaret Procter, University of Toronto Coordinator, Writing Support
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