

**POL 2812 – PhD Dissertation Proposal Seminar  
Professors Steven Bernstein and Antoinette Handley**

**Monday 12-2 p.m.  
SS 3130**

**CONTACT AND OFFICE HOURS**

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**COURSE OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES**

The goal of this course is profoundly practical: to assist PhD students to produce a dissertation proposal by the end of the course. A dissertation proposal, which is a departmental and graduate school requirement, identifies what research questions you want to tackle in your dissertation; it lays out the reason/justification for taking on that topic, and it outlines a plan for tackling that research. The proposal is often the most difficult part of the entire PhD process but is indispensable to making the transition from coursework to dissertation.

Over the course of the year we will discuss elements of research design, practicalities of dissertation proposals, and workshop your ideas and drafts of key elements of the proposal. The course will include sessions with faculty and advanced graduate students talking about their own experiences with dissertation research and proposals. The culmination of the class is the presentation to your supervisor (and committee where possible) and the rest of the class of your dissertation proposal.

Each step that you undertake in making progress towards that proposal must be in close consultation with your supervisor. Securing a supervisor is therefore a top priority and one you should embark on immediately if you have not done so already.

Main objective:

- A draft of a dissertation proposal

Other objectives:

- Exposure to multiple approaches to research design
- Exploration of elements of a dissertation proposal
- Practicalities of proposal writing and committee formation/management
- Workshopping proposal elements and proposals—providing and receiving feedback

## REQUIREMENTS

**This class is graded pass/fail. Each student *is required to*:**

1. Secure a dissertation committee chair. *Deadline: September 24 (week 3)*

We realize that this task may take some time but have put it up front to signal its urgency. If you will be unable to meet this deadline, please make an appointment to meet with one of the course instructors and/or the Graduate Director to discuss this issue.

2. Produce a one-page statement of research interests *Deadline: September 24 (week 3)*

This statement should also preview preliminary or possible research questions for circulation to other students in the class.

3. Develop, circulate and present a 4-5 page pre-proposal. *Deadline: Nov. 12 – Dec. 5 (weeks 9-12).*

The proposal should i) outline your research question, ii) situate that question in the broader literature, including why your question responds to a puzzle, debate or gap in the literature (or what we already know), and iii) depending on the stage of your research, identify preliminary hunches to answer your question (i.e., your argument, propositions, and/or hypotheses) and propose a research design to examine whether your hunches are correct. **Please note that your precise and personal deadline for this assignment is no later than a week before your scheduled presentation, to give the class time to read your work.**

4. Circulate and formally present your draft proposal. *Deadline: March 4 – April 1 (weeks 19-24).*

Presentations will be 15 minutes, followed by a peer response and Q and A. Supervisors, committee members, and interested faculty are invited to participate in these sessions (via your invitation and consent) scheduled for the last meetings of the course. **Again, please note that your precise and personal deadline for this assignment is no later than a week before your scheduled presentation, to give the class time to read your work.**

5. Serve as peer reviewer for the proposal of a colleague (see item 4) and present that review in class.

6. Attend seminar sessions having read the assigned readings and/or the statement/draft proposal under review for that day and actively participate in seminar discussions.

## TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Much of the schedule is flexible, to accommodate student presentations and different rates of progress. After the first weeks of more classic seminar discussions, the schedule will depend on the composition and progress of the class. These sessions will comprise workshops, faculty presentations, and public presentations of pre-proposal and proposal drafts by students. The timing and distribution of these sessions depend on students' progress, on supervisor availability, proposal topics, and the variety of topics being pursued by students. Additional background readings may be assigned depending on the progress of the course and interests of the students.

### Fall Meetings

#### **Week 1**

##### **September 10: Introductions and assessments; What's a proposal?**

Course set up, assessment of students' progress and needs, elements of a proposal discussion.

#### **Week 2**

##### **September 17: Finding a supervisor and managing committees**

Discussion with instructors and Graduate Director that emphasizes approaching supervisors and discusses different styles of working with committees.

#### **Week 3**

##### **September 24: What's the puzzle?**

Research questions can come from multiple sources—theory, day-to-day experience, empirical research. There are also very different kinds of questions that can be asked. In this session we examine different types of knowledge that you might be interested in and that therefore might drive how you think about and develop research questions.

#### Background Readings:

Karl Gustafsson and Linus Hagström. 2017. What is the point? teaching graduate students how to construct political science research puzzles. *European Political Science*. Online first, Available [here](#).

Alexander Wendt. 1998. "On Constitution and Causation in International Relations" *Review of International Studies* 24 (5): pp 101-118. Available online [here](#).

Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. 2014. "Wherefore Interpretive: An Introduction." In *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, 2nd Edition, edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharp, pp. xiii-xxxi. Available online [here](#).

Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton University Press, chapter 1. Available online [here](#).

## Week 4

### October 1: Developing an argument

This week we will explore the theory/design/method relationship and the promises and pitfalls of policy relevant research.

#### Background Readings:

Ronald Rogowski. 2004. "How Inference in the Social (but not the Physical) Sciences Neglects Theoretical Anomaly." In *Rethinking Social Inquiry*, edited by Henry Brady and David Collier. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 75-83.

Dvora Yanow. 2014. "Interpretive Analysis and Comparative Research." In *Comparative Policy Studies: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges*, edited by Isabelle Engeli and Christine Rothmayr. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 131-59. Available online [here](#).

Craig Parsons (2007) *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*. Oxford UP, Chapter 1.

Steven Walt. 2005. The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations. *Annual Review of Political Science* 8: 23-48. Available online [here](#).

OR, if you're pressed for time... Joseph Nye Jr. 2008. Bridging the Gap between Theory and Policy. *Political Psychology* 29 (4): 593-603. Available online [here](#).

*Longer general treatments of research design, for your reference, include:*

Gary King, Robert Keohane, Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton University Press. Available online [here](#).

Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds. 2014. *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharp. Available online [here](#).

H. Brady & David Collier, eds. 2010 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). *Rethinking Social Inquiry*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

### October 8: No class, Thanksgiving

## Week 5

### October 15: How to know if you're right or wrong? I

This week we will think about standards of evidence and issues of method selection. If you have time, have a look at the week 6 readings on case selection as well (all of which you should have encountered in previous courses).

## Background Reading

James Mahoney and Gary Goertz. 2006. A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research. *Political Analysis* 14 (3): 227-249. Available online [here](#).

Andrew Bennett and Coin Elman 2006. Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence. *Political Analysis* 14 (3): 250-267. Available online [here](#).

Frieder Wolf. 2010. Enlightened Eclecticism or Hazardous Hotchpotch? Mixed Methods and Triangulation Strategies in Comparative Public Policy Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 4 (2):144-167. Available online [here](#).

Jason Wittenberg. 2007. Peril and Promise: Multi-Method Research in Practice. *Qualitative Methods* 5 (1): 19-22. Available online [here](#).

## **Week 6**

### **October 22: How to know if you're right or wrong? II**

We continue the discussion this week and get concrete, hearing from faculty guests about their research design choices. The background readings are on case selection. Since you will have encountered these readings in your methods courses we will not be discussing them formally. Skim them to jog your memory and come prepared to engage faculty on their research design and case selection choices.

### Background Readings:

Arend Lijphart. 1971. Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method. *American Political Science Review*. 65 (3): 682-693. Available online [here](#).

John Gerring. 2004. What Is A Case Study and What Is It Good For? *American Political Science Review* 98 (2): 341-354. Available online [here](#).

Barbara Geddes. 1990. How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get. *Political Analysis* 2: 131-150. Available online [here](#).

David Collier and James Mahone. 1993. Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis. *American Political Science Review* 87 (4): 845-855. Available online [here](#).

*Longer treatments of case study and multi-method research, for your reference, include:*

George, Alexander. L. and Andrew Bennett. 2004. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Yin, Robert K. 2003. *Case Study Research: Design and Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Goertz, Gary. 2017. *Multimethod Research, Causal Mechanisms, and Case Studies: An Integrated Approach*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Symposium: Multi-Method Work: Dispatches from the Front Lines. *Qualitative Methods* 5 (1), Spring 2007: 21-44. Available online [here](#).

Symposium: Cautionary Perspectives on Multi-Method Research. *Qualitative Methods* 7 (2), Fall 2009: 2-32. Available online [here](#).

### **Week 7**

#### **October 29: The proposal process: Advice from a panel of your peers**

Panel discussion with recently ABD students on their proposal writing and completion experience.

*November 5-9: Reading week*

### **Week 8**

#### **November 12: No class meeting; work on your pre-proposal.**

*NB: As outlined above, you are required to pre-circulate your pre-proposal by no later than one week before you are scheduled to present it. No extension of this deadline is possible.*

### **Weeks 9 – 12**

**November 19, 26 and December 3: Presentation and workshopping of pre-proposal**

## Winter meetings

### **Week 13**

#### **January 7: Ethics of Research**

Seminar discussion and an exercise with the university's ethics form.

### **Week 14**

#### **January 14: Field Work Experience Panel Discussion**

This week you will again hear from colleagues and faculty—this time about fieldwork experience and the process of putting your proposal into practice.

### **Weeks 15-16**

#### **January 21, 28: One-on-one consultations by appointment**

The course instructors will be available during class time for this purpose.

### **Weeks 17-19**

Work on your proposal; invite your supervisor and committee to attend your presentation.

*NB: As outlined above, you are required to pre-circulate your proposal by no later than one week before you are scheduled to present it to the instructors, the rest of the class and especially of course to your peer reviewer. No extension of this deadline is possible.*

### ***Feb 18 – 22: Reading week***

### **Weeks 19-24**

#### **Mar 4, 11, 18, 25 and April 1: Proposal presentations**

Each student will prepare a 15 minute presentation to be followed by 10 min of an assigned peer review and 20 minutes of Q and A. Supervisors (and committee members where practical) should be invited and attend if at all possible (it may be necessary to schedule presentations outside of class). Presentations will be posted in the department and open for anyone to attend. We will hold a maximum of 3 presentations per week. All students are required to attend each session, having read the scheduled proposals and ready to engage in discussion.