

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

Mondays 12-2 p.m.

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 question 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.

In this course, we will discuss elements of research design, practicalities and varieties of proposal writing, and supervision and committee formation. For most of the course, however, we will 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 of your research proposal to your supervisor (and committee where possible) and the rest of the class.

Each step that you undertake in making progress towards that proposal should 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.

REQUIREMENTS

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

1. Secure a dissertation committee chair. *Deadline*: September 11, 2023.

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 1-2 page statement of research interests. *Deadline*: September 11, 2023.

Professors will briefly present each statement in class Sept. 18 and 25, followed by class feedback.

The statement should briefly describe your research interests and ideally address the following three questions:

Q. 1: What is the puzzle or problem you wish to investigate, explain or understand?
What are you curious or passionate about? This may be an empirical or theoretical puzzle in your field, textual/interpretive puzzle, an insight into power/injustice, or a normative intuition.

Q. 2a: What is your research question and what kind of question is it, e.g., why (causal); how possible (constitutive)?

Q. 2b: Why is your question important (theoretically and/or practically)?

Q. 3a: How did you come up with it? And/or, if relevant...

Q. 3b: Is there a book that accomplishes something similar to what you want to do in your dissertation? In what way does it serve as a model?

3. Develop, circulate and present* a 4-5 page pre-proposal. *Presentations*: Weeks 11-14.

The proposal should i) outline your research question, ii) situate that question in the broader literature, including how your question responds to a puzzle or debate in the literature (i.e., 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 iv) propose a research design or strategy to examine whether your hunches are correct. For Theory students where iv) may be less relevant, you may identify a preliminary list of texts or sources you plan to consult and, if relevant, lines of inquiry you plan to pursue. **Please note that your personal deadline for this assignment is no later than a week before your scheduled presentation, to give the class time to read your work.**

*Format of presentations: A peer will briefly recap/present each proposal in class. A discussion will follow, with the rest of the class providing constructive feedback.

4. Circulate and formally present your draft proposal. *Presentations*: Weeks 19-24.

Presentations will be 5 minutes, followed by a 10-minute peer response and Q and A. Supervisors and committee members are invited to participate in these sessions (via your invitation and consent) scheduled for the last meetings of the course. **Your personal deadline for this assignment is no later than a week before your scheduled presentation, to give the class time to read your work. Details on signing up will be posted on the Quercus course page.**

5. Serve as peer presenter and peer reviewer for a colleague's pre-proposal and proposal (see items 3 and 4).

6. Attend seminar sessions having read relevant readings, and/or the statements/draft proposals under review for that day and actively participate in seminar discussions.

***A Note on Readings and Where to Find Them**

Readings are assigned as "background." Some may be familiar to you from methods or core courses. Some will be more relevant for some subfields than others. Their purpose is to provide a wide range of resources to assist in developing different types of research projects. This list is by no means

exhaustive, and we encourage you to consult with your supervisor, other faculty members and peers to identify the resources most suited to your project. While we recommend that you consult works from the list relevant to your project, we do not plan to systematically discuss them. Additional readings may be suggested depending on the interests of students.

NOTE: All readings, in addition to being listed below, are listed with links or information where they are available, on the Library Reading List page on Quercus. Readings not available online have been placed on course reserves at Robarts Library where possible. Check the Library Reading List page for full availability information.

CLASS SCHEDULE

June 9 Workshop

10-11:15 a.m.: Introductions; What's a proposal?

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

11:15 a.m. – noon: Finding a supervisor and managing committees

Discussion with instructors and Graduate Chair (Peggy Kohn) on approaching supervisors and different styles of working with committees.

12-12:30 p.m.: Lunch Break

12:30-2 p.m.: How do I get started?

Part I: 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 and different starting points, from finding a “puzzle” to diving into a text. In this session we examine different starting strategies and types of knowledge that might interest you, which therefore might drive how you think about and develop research questions.

Part II will split the class into two groups so we can begin discussion of your research topics and see where you are in the process.

Background reading:

Please read in advance: Karl Gustafsson and Linus Hagström. 2018. What is the Point? Teaching Graduate Students How to Construct Political Science Research Puzzles. *European Political Science* 17. Available [here](#).

The following additional readings are for your reference going forward. We DO NOT expect you to read them for this workshop session, and will not discuss them explicitly. However, they may be useful as general background reading on research design and getting started.

William Roberts Clark. 2020. "Asking Interesting Questions." In *The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*. Edited by Luigi Curini and Robert Franzese. Newbury Park, CA: Sage: 7-25. Available [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](#).

David Leopold and Marc Stears. 2008. *Political theory: methods and approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Course reserves.

Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, M. O'Connell, trans. (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1972). See Library Reading List page.

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

H. Brady & David Collier, eds. 2010 (2nd edition). *Rethinking Social Inquiry*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Available online [here](#).

Fall Meetings

Week 1

September 11: No Class Meeting

Deadlines for choosing a supervisor and 1-2 pager. The latter should also be posted in the "discussion" on Quercus.

Weeks 2 and 3

September 18 and 25: Class discussions of research interests and puzzle/problem

Professors will briefly present each 1-2 pager followed by class discussion/feedback.

Week 4

October 2: Developing an Argument and Leveraging Evidence

This week we will explore the theory/design/method relationship. We will discuss strategies to link research questions to research designs that provide leverage on answering those questions. Topics of discussion may include how to situate a project in the literature (i.e., designing research in relation to what the literature expects and developing original arguments or choosing a theoretical framework that speaks to your question and the literature), case selection to maximize analytic leverage, choosing appropriate methods to know whether you're right or wrong.

Background Readings:

Ravitch, Sharon M. and Matthew Riggan. 2016. *Reason and Rigor: How conceptual frameworks guide research*. 2nd Edition. Sage. See Library Reading List page.

James Tully (ed.) 1988. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*. Princeton. Princeton University Press. Course reserves.

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. Available online [here](#).

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. Available online [here](#).

Gary Thomas. 2011. A Typology for the Case Study in Social Science Following a Review of Definition, Discourse, and Structure. *Qualitative Inquiry* 17 (6): 511-521. Available [here](#).

Background Readings on Case Selection:

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

Background Readings on choosing Qualitative, Quantitative, and Multi-method Approaches

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](#).

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

Bennett, Andrew, and Jeffrey T. Checkel, eds. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Strategies for Social Inquiry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 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](#).

Goertz, Gary. 2017. *Multimethod Research, Causal Mechanisms, and Case Studies: An Integrated Approach*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Available online [here](#).

Background Readings on the relationship between normative, critical, and empirical methods:

Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka. 2019. Fieldwork in Political Theory: Five Arguments for an Ethnographic Sensibility. *British Journal of Political Science* 49 (2): 763-784. Available online [here](#).

Joseph H. Carens. 2004. A Contextual Approach to Political Theory. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7 (2): 117-132. Available online [here](#).

Week 5

October 16: The proposal process: Faculty panel on their research design choices and thesis project experience

Profs. Filiz Kahraman, Menaka Philips, and Chris Cochran

Week 6

October 23: No class meeting; work on your pre-proposal

Week 7

October 30: The proposal process: Advice from a panel of your peers

Thomas Bergeron, Michaela Pedersen-Macnab, Isaac Lawther, and Stefan Macleod.

November 6-11 (reading week)

Week 8

November 13: Research Ethics Process and Protocols

Lee Ann Fujii. 2012. "Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45 (4): 717-723. Available [here](#).

Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education video with Dean Sharpe, Research Ethics Board (REB) Manager, UofT:
<https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/354bbdcdbdf4cc8c144c26b094de6df5e>

Guest Speaker from UofT's REB: TBC

Weeks 9-10

November 20 and November 27: No class meetings; 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 11 – 12

December 4 and 7 (Thursday – Thanksgiving Make-Up): Presentation and workshopping of pre-proposals.

Winter meetings

Week 13 and 14

January 8 and 15: Presentation and workshopping of pre-proposals continues

Week 15

January 22: Research Ethics and Fieldwork

Bring your draft ethics protocol or outline to class – this will be a working session. Exact format TBA.

Weeks 16-18

January 29-February 12

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 your peer reviewer. No extension of this deadline is possible.

February 19-23: Reading Week

Weeks 19-24

February 26, March 4, 11, 18, 25 and April 1: Proposal presentations

See instructions under requirements, #4 and #5, above.