Guidelines for Proposing Dissertation Topics

The Department requires that each student, beginning in the third year, present a research proposal to the selected dissertation committee. The candidate is expected to participate in a conference of faculty and graduate students, ordinarily held mid-year. Higher Degrees in History states, “As soon as possible after passing the General Examination, and in no case later than two terms after passing it, doctoral candidates must identify a dissertation director, a dissertation committee, settle on a dissertation topic and, with the director's approval, present a proposal on the subject of their projected dissertation to their committee members.” The committee is composed of the director, who must be a permanent member of the Department, and two others, one of whom may not be a permanent member.

The Department suggests that a suitable proposal will be from 15 to 20 pages in length, and include or address the following points.

1. **Statement of thesis.** What is the problem you wish to study and what is its interest or significance in current historical thinking? State clearly and concisely how you presently conceive of this problem and how you suppose it can be resolved.

2. **Historiographic context.** What work has, and has not, been done in this field and on this problem? Discuss relevant scholarship critically. You need not belabor specific failings, which may sound tendentious; simply show what you understand to be the merits and limitations of relevant works. How do you propose to develop, challenge, or depart from existing positions or themes in historical literature?

3. **Method and theory.** Outline an approach to your subject. If your conception has theoretical aspects, discuss these critically. Have scholars in other fields, historical or other, developed concepts of potential interest to your topic? In short, think carefully about method and theory, even if you decide not to engage much with external perspectives and theory. The faculty neither encourages nor discourages such engagement, but cautions that original historical work should not simply illustrate other people's ideas.

4. **Sources.** Give an account of the sources for your subject so far identified. Stress primary sources. What difficulties do they present? Where are they located, in print or manuscript (or in other forms)? Are they accessible? Identify the principal libraries and repositories as well as other locations and persons. Do not overlook unpublished doctoral or master's research.

5. **Schedule.** Draft a schedule of tasks and stages in which you plan to write the dissertation. Allow appropriate times for research, travel to collections, writing, and revision of draft chapters. Project, as nearly as possible, a chapter outline, which will be read in the understanding that prospective titles, chapters, and topics may change as you work.

6. **Bibliography.** List the primary and secondary sources used to develop your prospectus.