Writing Proposals for MA Research Theses in Philosophy

©David Morris, 2016, Concordia University. Revised October 2022.

Here are the guidelines for the research thesis (formerly called MRP) proposal from our website:

Proposals are to be no more than 3000 words, including all footnotes/endnotes, but not the bibliography or title. The proposal is double spaced and submitted electronically, preferably as an editable document (DOCX, or RTF), to facilitate review and comment by the committee (PDFs may also be submitted). The bibliography is formatted in Chicago style; generally, it is expected that it will comprise 30-40 items.

The proposal should first offer the thesis statement the student wishes to defend, and indicate the main arguments in its favour (2 to 3 pages). As well, it should provide context for the paper and its thesis in relation to the bibliographical sources, and include, as needed and where appropriate, clarification of specialized technical terms for a general philosophical audience. It should then supply a breakdown of the projected sections and their content.

Your statement of the thesis should be short, a paragraph or so, and really not much longer than one half to two thirds of the first page; the outline of the argument should not be much longer than 2 pages. The rest gives context: the textual and conceptual background that will make your proposal accessible to a broad philosophical audience, and let that audience understand how your thesis and argument are making an original contribution.

Below are further guidelines and specifications for the proposal. The guidelines concern two interrelated things:

- What the **paper itself** should look like in the end, as having bearing on the proposal, e.g., picking a good title, a thesis of appropriate scope, and thinking of the *genre* of your paper.

- How you should write up and structure the **proposal** that lays out what you are going to do in the paper.

Audience:

A CRUCIAL THING TO KEEP IN MIND FOR THE PROPOSAL, WHICH MAKES IT DIFFERENT THAN THE RESEARCH THESIS PAPER ITSELF: **AUDIENCE.**

The audience for the proposal is the Graduate Studies Committee in the Philosophy Department. Committee members will not necessarily have knowledge or technical facility with the precise area of your proposal. (When you submit the paper itself for defence, the audience for will be narrower: the examining committee is selected for ability in the area specific to the paper.)

So you have to make sure that your proposal is accessible and intelligible to a broad philosophical audience. It is not meant for a scholar well versed precisely in your topic. Make sure you define your terms, and clarify the context in an accessible manner. The committee will be wanting to see evidence of someone who has done their homework, has a topic of appropriate scope, who is taking into consideration questions, problems, difficulties, that might come to mind for any thoughtful and philosophically trained reader of such a proposal. This does not mean you have to write for a novice and explain everything so that everyone can understand every last detail: the thing is to lay out your argumentative boxes, their scholarly context and their order in your proposed paper, without expecting that everyone will fully understand the *content* of the boxes and how they necessarily lead to one another. You want to make the moves clear, even if your reader may not necessarily be able to do the moves herself on her own.

Title:

Choosing a clear, succinct, and informative title is CRUCIAL. Your title should convey something of your thesis (at least what it's ABOUT, if not your specific position) and also flag the context in which you are operating. Don't be too clever or cryptic.

Think of someone coming across your title in a database: Would they know what your paper is about? Would they be drawn in/be intrigued? Would the actual paper fulfil the expectations set up by the title? Or, think of someone *searching* for a paper on your topic in a database: Would the words they would choose to search for this topic generate 'hits' on your title?

Thesis:

Start with a paragraph in which you *succinctly* and *clearly* state the thesis. This works well if you spell out the thesis in the context *a brief abstract* of the paper.

Regarding your thesis:

- Remember that you should choose a thesis and topic that allows you, in your paper, to: 1) show mastery of the content and argument of a body of scholarly literature in philosophy; 2) demonstrate your ability to analyze and respond to this literature; 3) show some originality in arriving at a thesis vis-à-vis the literature.

- Caution: do not pick too big or ambitious a thesis.

- Also remember that your paper should end up being the *sort* of paper that can be published as a journal article. So, research and find articles in the *genre* of your intended paper, to find a *model* for writing your paper.
  - E.g., a paper that points out an error in interpretation and revises views of a topic based on that; a paper that finds a new way through a longstanding dilemma; a paper that introduces new resources into a debate, or looks back to older resources to show how overlooked ideas can help out.

- This thesis statement should really work in the abstract, and as abstract: you are stating what your thesis is, and in the abstract saying how you are going to pursue it. Your reader should not need to have technical knowledge of the area of philosophy in which you are working to understand this abstract. You can mention technical terms, but grasping the abstract should not depend on knowledge of such terms.
  - E.g. you can say something like: "I will be showing how what philosopher Heidegger calls "being-in-the-world" is central to a scholarly debate in the literature. I will do this by showing that X," where X and what follows it are the sort of claims that someone could grasp without having a technical grasp of being-in-the-world.
  - In this sort of move you are positioning yourself in relation to a term in a scholarly debate, or are saying something in terms understandable to a broad audience about what's at stake in a term. Key point: you are *not* relying on the reader's ability to herself use and understand that term.

- In general, in this initial statement and throughout the proposal, you want to make sure that your proposal is accessible to a broad audience. This means that your proposal cannot rely on knowledge of: technical vocabulary, status of current scholarly debates, etc. You have to

educate your audience—briefly and without getting bogged down into much detail—into the meanings of key terms, basic issues, status of current scholarship, etc. This is why the next section on context of argument is crucial. The abstract provides a general map that shows the topic and the moves. The context section starts educating your reader into what's at stake, what your thesis means, and how it fits with scholarship.

Context of argument:

After you have laid out the thesis, *briefly* elucidate/clarify the thesis by situating it against its scholarly context in the literature/debates. In doing so you can also give a very compressed synopsis of the *argument* you will be pursuing in defending your thesis. It can help to set this discussion of context off as a separate section.

Outline of argument:

In the remainder of your proposal, outline the main arguments/steps that you will use to defend your position. In the proposal, you should avoid actually *making* your argument or going into detail about it. (Read some abstracts of articles to get a sense of this difference: abstracts rehearse arguments in the abstract, without actually making the argument.)

What you want to do is narrate, in cogent and compact from, the steps and strategies that you will take in your paper, and also indicate the way you will muster your sources. Your narrative should show awareness of the background scholarly issues that you have researched, what it will take to defend your position against counterarguments (either imagined or already in the literature, etc.), particular issues that will need attention, etc. An analogy is of telling someone in advance how you are preparing yourself for a voyage of discovery: lay out your itinerary and your resources/preparations for foreseeable eventualities, e.g., you're going to bring an inflatable raft because at this juncture you are likely to run into floods.

In this section it is helpful to indicate the anticipated structure of your paper, e.g., "The paper will proceed in three parts, n, m, p." It's helpful to give titles for anticipated parts of the paper.

Here are some examples of the *sort* of language you might find in this part of the proposal:

- I will be defending my claim against arguments made by X, Y, and Z in papers n, m, p.

- I will do this by drawing on resources from Y. May aim is to show that despite q, r is correct. To do this I will specifically refer to [article x; a passage on page N of book P].

- Scholars often argue that q, but I will be showing that r. I will do this by drawing on some material that has been neglected….

- My argument for this position will proceed in three steps, n, m, p.

- This argument turns on an insight from Z.

- Developing this argument will depend on clarifying concept C. I will do this by a careful analysis of topic T.

- My strategy for challenging Y depends on a novel methodological/conceptual strategy [or: introducing a result from somewhere else].

List of references:

Give a list of the works that you have used in arriving at your proposal and that you will be referencing in the paper. This should be 30-40 primary and secondary works, either books or articles.

Your list should demonstrate that you have done thorough research in the area, and should include both central/indispensible works, and, as appropriate, the most recent scholarly results.

You want a list that shows both depth (getting the fundamentals right) and breadth (knowledge of the scope of the scholarly debates, and perhaps also the ways debates in your area verge into broader issues).

Also make sure to include works that hold views opposed to your thesis. These help legitimate your topic as being important to debate. Or, absence of any such works, or of much work on your topic, can be used to show that your topic/position has been overlooked.

Remember that the references you make can do a few things in your paper: support your position; get you off the hook for going into important sub-arguments, sub-theses or clarifications (e.g., in a footnote that says: "This would lead to the following problem, but X has already taken care of this, so I don't need to go into that here."); give context for your ventures.