

Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto

PhD Proposal Recommendations

Note: These are recommendations only, and are not intended to replace information in the Anthropology Graduate Students' Handbook (the Handbook should be consulted carefully during the writing of the proposal). Rather, they are guidelines created by the Archaeology faculty that are intended to convey the "normal" expectations for archaeology PhD proposals, and to help students avoid problems as they proceed through the proposal defense process.

Preliminary Meeting:

- By the end of October of their second year, PhD students must meet with their advisory committee to discuss progress on the research proposal. At this stage, students are not expected to have a fully developed research plan, but should have identified their central question, and be prepared to discuss, in a general way, the data, method, and theory which will be employed to answer it. Committee members will provide advice and suggest specific readings, and may also advise the student to discuss aspects of the proposed research with additional faculty members.
- Be sure to think about implications for human and/or animal subjects reviews for your case, and begin working on this process as soon as possible.

The Proposal:

- The handbook asks for a length of "about 20 pages" – this translates to a real length of 17 - 25 pages (double-spaced, 12-point font). If you go under this length, you're probably not including enough information; if you go over you are not achieving a critical aspect of academic writing: summarizing extensive and complex information in a limited space. These lengths refer to text only; diagrams, maps, graphs, and references will add additional pages.
- A proposal should begin with a clearly defined research question and/or hypothesis, from which all of the remainder of the proposal flows. This central question is critical, as it provides constraints on theory and method which are employed, appropriate collections, sites or regions for fieldwork, and so forth. At the PhD level, the research question should lead to results which are clearly significant (and ideally, exciting) to a wide range of academics and others.
- Normally, an excellent proposal covers several distinct aspects of your planned research. Following presentation of the research question, it briefly reviews the current status of knowledge related to this question, which often entails, in part, the cultural and historical framework within which it is situated. It also addresses the sources and nature of the data on which the proposed research will be based, the methods that will be used, and the body of theory that will inform the research. Importantly, the proposal needs to strike a balance in order to allow all the relevant topics to be covered in about 20 pages; students should avoid emphasizing any one aspect of the proposed research to the extent that other aspects are not covered in enough detail.
- Students should read, and cite, a significant body of the most relevant "classic" and current literature relating to all aspects of the proposal (theory, method, history, etc.).
- A strong proposal includes tactical and practical implications of the research, including financial feasibility, considerations of field safety, acquisition of ethics and research permits, access to materials, and/or a timeline of proposed research and writing activities, as relevant to each case.
- The single most common, and fundamental, problem encountered with PhD proposals is a "disconnect" between the central question or hypothesis and the data. Therefore, students should think very hard about how these fit together. Thus, for example, if a student is keenly interested in a particular theoretical approach, she may have to change aspects of fieldwork or lab analysis to make it fit. On the other hand, if a student is wedded to a particular data set or field project, this will place constraints on the range of questions which can be addressed.

The Proposal Defense:

- The defense begins with a brief statement from the student, lasting no more than 20 minutes. Normally, this statement summarizes important parts of the proposal, including background literature, method, theory, fieldwork goals (if relevant), and so on. Additionally, the presentation gives the student an opportunity to respond to specific questions or concerns raised by faculty responses to the proposal.
- The proposal defense normally lasts from 90-120 minutes. Committee members ask questions relating directly to the proposed research, as well as more generally to areas of method, theory, and culture history related to the proposal. In other words, the student is expected to have a good command of the full intellectual context within which the research is situated, including the historical and other literature on the region; not only of the narrow specifics of the proposed research.