

Guidelines for Writing the DSW Dissertation Proposal

General Structure and Content of the Dissertation Proposal

The dissertation proposal is a succinctly written summary of the research project you plan to undertake. Typical length is 25-50 pages. It should include the introduction of your topic and your rationale for studying it, your question(s), how your question/topic is related to existing literature/theory/research, what theoretical framework, lens or perspective you will use, and your research design (how you will go about answering the question). A successful proposal is informed by existing literature, theory and research; clearly written; convincing in its logic; and compelling in its rationale.

Important Note: This is only a guide; each student should work closely with the dissertation chair and follow the expectations for proposal content and structure set out by the chair.

The proposal:

- Is built around a carefully reasoned and bounded research topic or question;
- Demonstrates that you are knowledgeable about theory and research related to or leading to your question;
- Describes in detail how you plan to go about answering your question, whether through analysis of existing literature and research; use of existing data (secondary analysis); or primary data collection;
- Provides a convincing argument for why your research question is important and worthy of study.

The proposal should include:

- a statement of the problem or question;
an argument for the importance of the topic. (This should be concrete—how it develops practice, solves a problem, advanced knowledge in a particular way relevant to social work—its not enough that nobody can find any research on it).
- a critical review of prior research that informs the study;
- a description of the research methodology;
- a discussion of limitations and potential outcomes.

Each major section—the problem and research questions, literature review and methodology—must be related to the others. The literature review informs the development of the research questions, and the methodology must be designed to answer the research question(s).

Components of the Proposal

- Clearly written research topic.
- Brief (approximately 10 page) critical review of the literature, theory and research relevant to the study and any underlying issues.
- Description of the significance of the study for social work practice.
- Research design including the overall structure of the study. If quantitative, specify independent, dependant and control variables and their operational definitions, if relevant. If qualitative, specify concepts to be investigated and their operational definitions.
- Sampling procedures, if applicable.
- Methods of data collection.
- A discussion of instruments and copies of instruments or interview questionnaires to be used, if applicable.
- A statement of human subjects protection, including such issues as informed consent, confidentiality procedures, and institutional review.
- Methods of data analysis.

Outline form of Proposal Contents (Corresponding to Sections in Proposal)

- I. Introduction
 - a. Statement of the Problem
 - b. Purpose of the Study
 - c. Research Question(s)
 - d. Significance of the Study
 - e. Theoretical Framework or Perspective
- II. Literature Review (critical review of the literature, not just summary)
- III. Methodology
- IV. Implications (for social work) and Limitations of Study
- V. Timeline
- VI. Bibliography