

Devising a research project is challenging and time-consuming. The steps required and articulated below will likely take between three and 12 months. They are designed to help streamline the process for you and your committee and – crucially – to ensure that you are set for a successful oral defense of your prospectus.

A cautionary note: the writing of a two- and five-page version of your proposal are often the most challenging and time-consuming steps in this process. Importantly, all the work that goes into the prospectus stage will make the research and writing stages that follow that much more straightforward!

This document is designed to make clear my expectations and to push you to think systematically as you start work on a prospectus. This is a general guide. You and I may decide to deviate from it. Generally speaking, there are six steps that will lead to a successful oral defense.

Step 0. Before getting started

Before you start on research and writing your prospectus, please ensure you (re)familiarized yourself with the requirements of the doctoral program (see the Graduate Handbook). It is advised that you meet with the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) at this stage to ensure you are on track and that your plans for courses and research timeline match the requirements of the program.

Please also see my “Beyond the Program Advice for Graduate Students” document which offers some advice as you move from course work to independent research, including links for additional methods, research, and teaching training as well as funding suggestions.

Step 1. Write a “Two-Pager”

The first step in the research process is to articulate your thoughts in a short document and gain some feedback. This is a really important, and challenging step. The document must be two single-spaced pages (references excluded) – thus, a “two-pager”. It must concisely and clearly outline your early thoughts. They won't be polished or complete, and that is okay. But the document should answer the questions in a concise, clear way:

1. What is the topic of your proposed research and why does it matter?
2. What is the interest, empirical puzzle, and/or question you seek to understand or answer?
3. What do existing accounts in relevant literature(s) have to say about this topic?
4. Why do these existing accounts miss or not address sufficiently well? What more could be said?
5. What is your proposed answer?
6. How will you develop and defend that proposed answer? (i.e., What theoretical or conceptual tools will you draw on and develop? And what methods and data do you propose to use?)

Once you're happy with your answers – and you've ensured you can answer them in 2 pages – share this document with me. I'll review and likely suggest a meeting to talk more. At that point we can also talk about who would make a good committee member to contribute to your project.

Step 2. Write a revised “Two-Pager”

The second step is to revise the two-pager and bring it to your would-be committee. After receiving feedback from me, you will be asked to revise the two-pager. I may ask to review it again (and again). And once it is set, you will share with potential committee members for their feedback and interest in joining your committee.

Once they have agreed to join the committee, you should meet with the committee members (in person or virtually) and solicit feedback on your two-pager. Please do this *before* devoting time to expanding your proposal. This is the time to build your committee, commit to your project, and start thinking about the project in real detail.

Form required: This is the time to formally establish your committee by signing the committee form (available from Jennifer Gregory in the POLS office) and complete any other paperwork required.

Step 3. Write a “Five-Pager” and Tentative Timeline

After you have received feedback from me and the rest of your newly established committee on the two-pager, the third step is to will expand your proposal into a five-page (single-spaced) outline of your proposed research (excluding references and timeline) and devise a tentative timeline. The five-pager should address the following topics (which can serve as headings in the document):

1. Introduction (~0.5 pages): sell the project as interesting and important.
2. Question and/or Puzzle (~0.5 pages): tell us what you want to answer, understand, or explain.
3. Existing and Alternative Explanations (~1 pages): tell us what we know about this topic and why we need to know more. Show us why your topic is interesting, puzzling, and/or important by reference to relevant theories, concepts, and studies.
4. Answer in Brief (~1 page): tell us about your answer and how you'll approach your topic in theoretical and conceptual terms (i.e., the literatures and concepts you will draw on).
5. Methods and Case Selection (~1 page): tell us how you'll know you're right. Articulate and defend your approach to your answer by explaining how and why you have selected your case(s) and what methods of inquiry and data needed and why.
6. Prospective Findings (~0.5-1 page): conclude by telling us a bit about what you think you'll see in your case and your data, and why.

In addition, provide a tentative timeline for your research in a one-page appendix. This may not be strictly upheld in full, but it must be a reasonable and actionable plan that you can commit to. Consider when and how long it will take to complete the following: proposal steps 4-6 below, IRB approval or waiver (see below), engagement with literature, fieldwork and data collection, and writing. If you are travelling for research, it is especially important to think now about where, when, and how your plans will be financed. For funding suggestions, please speak to the DGS and myself and review suggestions in my “Beyond the Program Advice for Graduate Students” document.

Form required: At stage you should complete your IRB process, whether you require research with human subjects or not (if not, you will submit a waiver).¹

¹ For the IRB form and process, please visit <https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/human/irb/index.shtml>.

Step 4. Draft Prospectus

After you have received feedback and approval from me and the rest of your committee on the five-pager and your timeline, you will expand the proposal into a draft prospectus. This should be no more than 40 double-spaced pages (excluding references). The draft will provide some version of the following sections (as discussed with me):

1. Introduction (1-2 pages)
2. Interest, Puzzle, and/or Question(s) (3-5 pages)
3. Existing and Alternative Accounts (5-10 pages)
4. Proposed Argument (5-15 pages)
 - a. Theory and Foundational Literature(s)
 - b. Your Answer in Brief
 - c. Hunches or Hypotheses and Observable Implications
 - d. Operationalization of Key Concepts
5. Methodology and Case Selection (3-6 pages)
6. Proposed Chapter Breakdown (1 page)
7. Proposed Research Timeline (1 page)
8. Conclusion and Proposed Added Value (1-2 pages)

Step 5. Prospectus

After you have received feedback and approval from me and your committee on your draft, you will be asked to revise and produce a final version of the prospectus that will be defended orally. At this point we may schedule the oral defense, or I will request to review the prospectus again before doing so. That final prospectus must not exceed 45 double spaced pages (excluding references). Generally, it is expected that the final prospectus is submitted two weeks or more in advance of the oral defense.

A reminder at this stage: the more work and clarity in the prospectus, the more straightforward much of your dissertation writing is likely to be. So, there is little downside to taking time at this stage.

Step 6. Prospectus Defense

Once agreed to by the committee, you will sit a one to two-hour oral defense of your prospectus with your committee. This may be in-person or virtual, or a hybrid event. The defense is a time for us all to come together to explore the project and get you set for the research and writing ahead. You will present for 15-20 minutes, surveying the project and reminding us of the core elements of the proposal and your planned research. After the presentation, we will discuss the project together as a group. Generally speaking, this is a time for you to articulate the importance of your puzzle, question, and case(s) in some detail; defend the novelty and/or suitability of your proposed theoretical approach; explore the utility and effectiveness of your proposed research design; discuss the logistical details of the research process (including fieldwork, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, ethical concerns around research, your proposed timeline, and financing plans), and; speak about the contributions or added value of your investigation vis-à-vis existing literatures.

After the defense, it is time to get to the real research and writing! As you do, please familiarize yourself with the Graduate School's dates and requirements for writing and submitting your dissertation here: <https://www.niu.edu/grad/thesis/>. As you start writing, I encourage you to write in accordance with the Graduate School's formatting requirements.