Finding and Narrowing a Dissertation Topic
Presented by the UW-Madison Writing Center
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- Draw on past seminar or course papers, asking yourself which kinds of papers have been most successful.
- Look at books, journals, and dissertations in your field.
- Keep a journal of ideas to help you classify and theorize what you’re reading.
- Keep a working bibliography of everything that pertains to your dissertation. Save abstracts of journal articles, or consider writing your own abstracts to keep a record of what you’ve read.
- Join field-specific listservs that are likely to discuss your potential dissertation topic. Visit appropriate websites.
- Use a process of elimination to help narrow your focus by figuring out what topics you know you don’t want to pursue.
- Consider what kind of methodology you’ll use, such as whether it will involve a qualitative or a quantitative approach.
- Begin by thinking in terms of questions that you want your dissertation to answer. Try to find brief answers to these questions as a way of gaining a firmer sense of potential arguments that might guide your work.
- Establish “the rhetoric of the gap” by identifying what areas associated with your topic have not yet been treated thoroughly, what your contribution to the field will be, and how your dissertation will affect your research community.
- Write your way into your topic by “looping,” a kind of freewriting exercise in which you freewrite for a particular length of time or for a particular number of pages. Next, pick topics or ideas that seem the most promising. Freewrite on those topics or ideas. Repeat.
- Know that in some fields, you may be associated with your topic for at least a few years after you complete your dissertation. Consider a topic that you wish to be associated with and that will serve as the basis for the beginning of your career.
Find multiple models for your project. Proposals can differ significantly among and even within fields.

Continually take notes on your reading and/or research. Synthesize these notes into longer passages that articulate your project and thus move toward your proposal.

Write early and often. In other words, begin writing your proposal as soon as possible, knowing that you may not keep much of your initial drafts. In most fields, you don’t need as much research as you think to start writing.

Build on freewriting exercises by generating outlines for your proposal, moving between the big picture issues of your proposal and the details of your outline.

Be honest and realistic with yourself about your project, trying to strike a balance between originality and feasibility/relevance. In some fields, you need to ask yourself if the project is relevant enough to be funded.

Remember that the proposal is a document in flux and that it will likely need several revisions as you narrow your topic and find your focus.

Research enough to know key debates within your field that pertain to your topic. Know where the gaps are in your research area. In your proposal, address these debates and gaps to help situate your project.

Break your proposal into manageable sections. In some fields, the format you need to follow will largely do this separation for you. In others where the format does not follow strict guidelines, create sections of the proposal yourself. Breaking the proposal into sections will help you set several composition goals along the way to writing the whole proposal.

Set deadlines, both for the overall proposal and for the sections into which you’ve divided it. It’s easier to meet several deadlines for smaller sections of the proposal than to meet one overall deadline by itself.

Get help with your proposal. Especially useful might be a regular appointment with a Writing Center instructor, both in terms of writing assistance and with helping to enforce deadlines you’ve set. Participation in dissertation groups is an additional option.

Writing conference papers and grant/fellowship proposals are good ways of working toward your proposal as well as the dissertation itself.