

# **Quick Start Guide to Preparing the Thesis Proposal for Social Science (especially INTR) Concentrators Seeking an ALM in Extension Studies**

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**Concentrators in INTR who have completed six courses in the ALM Program are encouraged to call Doug Bond at any time to discuss how to begin your thesis proposal. (781) 929-0006  
Alternatively, email him at [doug.bond@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:doug.bond@fas.harvard.edu).**

## **Introduction**

This Quick Start Guide is designed to supplement information in the thesis proposal section of the ALM in Extension website. Specifically, the information contained herein is designed for international relations concentrators as a condensed version of the more complete [ALM Thesis Guide](#) that is available on-line.

Please note that this Quick Start Guide is *not a substitute* for the on-line guide, and students are responsible for complying with all policies on the website; rather, this Quick Start guide is designed as a ready reference to support social science concentrators as they begin to design their thesis research and prepare their thesis proposal.

Note also that this guide is oriented around the thesis proposal document, but many aspects of the proposal format are also relevant to the thesis. Thus, the information in this guide may be used to inform the formatting of the thesis as well, but with the understanding that certain requirements for the thesis (destined to become a Harvard University publication) are more stringent than for proposals. For example, the inch-and-a-half left margin is needed more for the thesis than for the proposal since the latter is not going to be published. Likewise, much of the information on the thesis front and back matter is not relevant to the proposal.

Before you type anything into your proposal document file, make sure the “points before” and “points after” setting is 0 (zero). In Word, you can do this by clicking on “Format” on the toolbar. Then, from the dropdown menu, click on “Paragraph”, and under “Spacing” there are two boxes preceded by “Before” and “After”. Make sure the numbers in those boxes are 0 (zero). That will ensure that your line spacing is what you intend it to be and not what Word thinks it should be.

## **Thesis Proposal Structure and Contents**

The proposal should have a title page, with the following eight sections – a table of contents is not needed for the proposal.

1. Tentative Title (succinct working title; may be modified in the course of the thesis research)
2. Research Problem (address the six questions below; should read like an *executive summary*)
3. Definition of Terms (a glossary of key terms is optional)
4. Background of the Problem (includes a literature review of what is known about the problem)
5. Research Methods (presents the research questions and how they are to be addressed)
6. Research Limitations (include assurance of compliance with human subjects’ policy if applicable)
7. Tentative Schedule (must comply with the DCE published deadlines)
8. References (APA style is recommended for INTR concentrators, but CMS may also be used)

## Logic of the Research Process

The following six question framework is designed to help you begin to develop your ALM thesis proposal. Specifically, the framework offers a template for the “research problem” (see section 2 above) of your proposal. This “research problem” section introduces your research, presenting its logic in outline form, and as such it is usefully considered an executive summary of the proposed research, beginning with the problem to be addressed and ending with how the research results are to be determined.

Your brief responses to these questions can be used almost as is for the first draft of your problem statement section as they are designed to illuminate the flow of logic of your thesis research. Here are the questions:

1. What is the problem you are addressing? (use clear language, relating it to real world phenomena, and also describe its scope)
2. What is the significance of the problem? (explain why this problem is important)
3. What is known about the problem? (base this on your review of the relevant literature)
4. What are the gaps or puzzles in what is known about the problem? (identify what is missing from or inadequately answered by the current literature)
5. What is your suggested contribution that might fill in one or more of these gaps? (your response may take the form of a description, explanation or hypothesis, and it may refute, extend or reformulate existing knowledge that needs to be tested)
6. How do you propose to test in a transparent and replicable manner your suggested response and what evidence will you use? (your response should offer an initial statement about what will become the methods section of your proposal)

As you address these questions, note that this exercise guides you through a *theory-informed, data driven* and *transparent* approach to advance knowledge about a problem; in other words, your proposal represents a social scientific approach to inquiry.

As you respond to these questions, do so in the context of the “problem statement” section of your proposal. It may be useful to consider your responses as an “elevator pitch” for to support a research project in which you have enough confidence to invest up to a year of your life to conduct. As noted above, your responses to these questions may be viewed as an executive summary of your proposed research. Such an executive summary typically runs no more than four to six pages when the responses are presented as a narration of the research process rather than questions and answers.

A key assumption of this Quick Start guide is that you are already reasonably familiar with the scholarly research related to your research problem. In other words, it is assumed that you have already begun your literature review to the extent that you are aware of what is known and what is not known about your research problem. At least you should be aware of the “state of the art” relevant to the problem your thesis research addresses.

You may also view your responses as a roadmap for your proposed research. Although you are already somewhat familiar with the relevant literature, it is important to recognize that keeping up with the literature is an ongoing process. It is highly unlikely that you will be satisfied with your first draft of this, or any other section as you develop your proposal; indeed, the research process is not linear, and you may revisit and revise the problem statement and all other sections as you complete your proposal.

For many students, the sixth (methods) question poses the biggest challenge. If this is the case, complete the first five questions and then schedule a meeting with your Research Advisor to get guidance on appropriate methods to describe, explain and/or test your hypothesized contributions.

By addressing these six questions up front, you will not be burdened or distracted with having to write up the full proposal until you have the guiding outline provided by your responses to the six-question framework. Once you have completed the second (research problem) section of the proposal, the rest of the sections should flow from the logic of this executive summary.

The length of the proposal is variable, ranging from about twenty pages to forty or more. More than any arbitrary page number guide, it is the current state of knowledge and the logic of the proposed research, its scope and evidence and methods that dictate the proposal's actual length.

For students whose research involves the use of human subjects (e.g. interviews or surveys), please visit Harvard's IRB (Institutional Review Board) site [www.cuhs.harvard.edu](http://www.cuhs.harvard.edu) to learn about the required protocols for the use of human subjects in research at Harvard. Although the formal application process typically begins after a thesis director is assigned, your proposal must include a compliance statement to be approved. Much of the preparation for an IRB submission, can be done during the proposal development process.

Finally, as soon as you complete six courses, it is recommended that you contact your research advisor about your thesis research. Do so well in advance of your program deadlines.

For INTR concentrators, your Research Advisor is Doug Bond [dougbond@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:dougbond@fas.harvard.edu) (781) 929-0006  
For GOVT, LEGL & HIST concentrators, your Research Advisor is Don Ostrowski [don@wjh.harvard.edu](mailto:don@wjh.harvard.edu) (617) 495-4547.

Following are some notes on citation style, fonts, indentation and spacing; please refer to the [www.thesis.extension.harvard.edu](http://www.thesis.extension.harvard.edu) website for more complete information, templates and sample documents. Perhaps the single most important issue that permeates all of the requirements below is consistency; *make sure that all of the requirements below are met consistently throughout your proposal or thesis.*

1. For INTR proposals, APA is preferred. For Government, History, Legal Studies, Medieval Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and all other non-INTR, social science proposals, use of Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), 16th edition is required (the current edition is 17). That usage includes the style of your footnotes and bibliography, which should be done according to the CMS, "Documentation I: Notes and Bibliography, pp. 653–784.
2. The font within the text should be consistent (12pt); however, a smaller font (11pt) may be used in the footnotes.
3. Indent first line of paragraphs and footnotes by one half inch.
4. Use one-inch top, bottom and right margins, and an inch and a half for the left margin; this is a requirement for the thesis and not the proposal, but doing it for the proposal will save time as you progress into thesis writing.
5. Double-space throughout the text except for lengthy quotes (four or more lines). Also double-space between footnotes and references (single space within footnotes and references). Certain tables and figures may use single space as appropriate.
6. Eliminate all bold font throughout your proposal and thesis, except in tables.
7. There should be no any extra space beyond the normal double line space before the first line of a new paragraph. This means you should eliminate all extra point spacing throughout your proposal. You can do this by going to "Edit" on the tool bar and "Select All". Then go to "Format" on the tool bar. Select "Paragraph". In the dialog box, you will find a section marked "Spacing". In the boxes that are designated "Before" and "After", set the pts. at 0.
8. Change all neutered apostrophes (') and neutered double and single quotation marks (" ") and (' ') to their smart equivalents (" ") and (' '). Note that Word will put a neutered apostrophe after a number. You have to change it manually.
9. Make sure you identify the author of all quotations in your text.
10. Be consistent with abbreviations: either US or U.S.; either USSR or U.S.S.R. Abbreviations within direct quotations, however, are left just the way they are.
11. Note that URLs are not underlined, and they should not be in a different color. If you wish you can set the URLs apart by enclosing them in angle brackets: <http://www....>.
12. Following the recommendation of both the Chicago Manual of Style and the MLA Handbook, we are now lower-casing all prepositions in titles, including prepositions that are five letters and longer.
13. Do not put quotations in italics; italics are used for foreign language text and book titles only.
14. ALM style is to write decades without an apostrophe, thus, 1860s, not 1860's.
15. The form "African American" (i.e., without a hyphen) should be used when the phrase is being used as a noun. When used as an adjective, then put in the hyphen: "African-American."
16. All section heads should have a quadruple line space (i.e., 2 double line spaces) before them (unless they are at the top of a page) and 1 normal double line space following them. The Roman numeral of the section head should be on a separate line 1 double line space from the title of the section head.
17. Make sure footnotes appear on the same page as the equivalent superscript numerals in the text. You can accomplish this by going to "Edit" on the menu tool bar, then clicking on Select All. Then go to "Format" and "Paragraph". Under line spacing, select "Exactly" instead of "Double Space" and set the spacing to 26 points. Then go back through your text to reset text that should be single spaced.
18. Divide the proposal bibliography into "Works Cited"; "Works Consulted"; and "Works to Be Consulted." Use the single section heading, bibliography (CMS) or references (APA), for the

thesis. You may also add an annotation to the "Works Consulted" items in your bibliography / references (see the ALM thesis guide website) in the proposal only.

19. Be sure to review and mimic the formatting of the proposal samples on the thesis webpage <https://thesis.extension.harvard.edu/social-sciences-proposal-examples>.

Below is a sample listing of issues identified in an initial format review. It contains the many of the most common issues encountered.

- Left-hand margin should be 1½ inches throughout the thesis.
- Note that URLs should not be underlined, and they should not be in a different color. In other words, eliminate the hyperlinks.
- Do not put two or more footnotes at the same spot. Combine the references into one footnote. In other words, don't stack your footnote superscript numbers in the text.
- In the footnotes, the author's name should be given in normal order (i.e., first name first, last name last). Only in the bibliography are first and last names reversed.
- Continue to single-space your footnotes *within* each footnote, but double-space *between* footnotes. You have double-spaced between some footnotes but not all.
- Following the recommendation of both the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *MLA Handbook*, we are now lower-casing all prepositions in titles (even those prepositions that are five letters and longer).
- Chapter headings should begin 1½ inches down from the top of the page, and have a quadruple line space (i.e., 2 double line spaces after them [no more and no less]). The same goes for the headings of front matter sections: 1½ inches down from the top of the page, and have a quadruple line space (i.e., 2 double line spaces after them [no more and no less]).
- Double-space the Table of Contents. Include entries for Dedication and Acknowledgements
- Make sure each footnote ends with a period.
- Indent the second and subsequent line of each bibliographical entry.
- Make sure that each entry in the bibliography ends with a period.