**Prework requirements for SSCI E-497B Crafting the Thesis Proposal in Anthropology, Government, and History Tutorial** (taught by Research Advisor Dr. Don Ostrowski)

The Crafting the Thesis Proposal (CTP) is intended for students who are fully prepared to begin the thesis process. As part of the preparation, candidates **need to finish the CTP prework requirements listed below, and have them approved by their CTP instructor before being allowed to register for the CTP**. Students who are able to do this in time (June 15th for the fall CTP, and Nov. 1st for Spring CTPs) are expected to be ready to start independent research and should be prepared to go straight from the CTP tutorial to thesis registration with no extended breaks.

To demonstrate your readiness for the fall CTP tutorial, you need to write a two to three page document addressing the following five questions and send it to thesis_proposals@extension.harvard.edu by June 15th (or by November 1st if you plan to take the CTP in Spring 2019). **Be sure to include “CTP prework” in the subject line, along with your full name and field of study.** The earlier you are able to do this, the better as you should expect to have to make some revisions to your document before your prework has been approved and you are allowed to register for the CTP tutorial.

Dr. Ostrowski would like to meet with each tutorial candidate before the CTP tutorial begins as well to discuss your work on these questions – plan on doing that as early on as possible, well before the June 15th (or Nov. 1st) due date, so that you have time to make revisions to your prework document.

**1. What is the thesis topic you have in mind?**

Provide a brief general description of your topic. Be a bit specific. Don’t write, for example, “The Supreme Court”. Write “The Supreme Court’s decisions concerning free speech.”

**2. What is your research question?** (What is the question you seek to answer?)

This question should be an authentic one; that is, one that you do not know the answer to but would like to find out. If you already know the answer, then write a book or an op-ed piece for the local newspaper. The ALM thesis is a research thesis with the emphasis on “research.”

Beginning researchers may still assume that all their questions are foolish and simply betray ignorance. Certainly not all questions are equal: some will in fact not grow into satisfying research topics. They may be trivial or based on ignorance of or lack of familiarity with a discipline. However, a simple test will help differentiate between productive and non-productive questions. Has someone else already answered the question satisfactorily? Since many theses rely heavily and even exclusively on written materials to answer their questions, the issue is not whether we can construct an answer based on information from the literature. Rather, can we find “our” question stated and answered as such, in a text, journal, or dissertation? If so, it may not be appropriate as a research topic unless we disagree with an already-stated answer. Even if we can find several published sources that seem to address our question and posit answers to it, they may not necessarily be correct answers. We must be prepared to investigate their answers; and if we find them flawed in some way, our own research may become a refutation of these views and may substitute a new answer to the already-stated question.

Learning is rarely a straight-line phenomenon and is definitely process rather than product. Do not be impatient. A wonderful fringe benefit of testing questions for research suitability is that you get to do this exploratory reading and thus learn about assorted interesting things. Even once you have decided upon a question or a hypothesis and it has passed the “suitability test,” the question, like the hypothesis, may change and change again, as we think and read more about it. We answer some parts of it, reject others, and discover still others.
3. What is your hypothesis (i.e., tentative answer to that research question)?

A hypothesis is an assertion, conjecture or premise, subject to verification via research. It is the consequence of organizing our questions and other information and the expected answers that grow out of them. What are the criteria for evaluating hypotheses? One can use three criteria: correspondence, coherence, and conceptual elegance. By correspondence I mean correspondence to the available, relevant source testimony; by coherence I mean a logical, well-focused, internally consistent hypothesis; and by conceptual elegance I mean the absolute minimum of abstract constructs and unstated assumptions within the hypothesis.

That means substantial research must be completed before it will be possible to construct even an initial hypothesis. During the formal collecting of data, as during the preliminary questions and development of the hypothesis, matters rarely proceed so smoothly as one might like. At any step, it is possible and actually likely that data or answers will differ from those we expected. Many things can happen during research. Perhaps we discover that someone else has already tested our hypothesis or answered our questions. Perhaps the hypothesis was based on a misunderstanding or an erroneous assumption, either our own or one commonly held by researchers in that discipline. Perhaps we discover something unexpected, which completely changes the research situation. Remember two things, however. First, you can change your hypothesis as you gather more evidence. In other words, you are not committed to defending or “proving” a hypothesis, you are committed to testing to see whether it adequately and coherently explains the evidence. Second, to paraphrase the philosopher of science Karl Popper, hypotheses can never be proven, they can only be disproven. A hypothesis stands as long as it explains the evidence and falls when it no longer does.

4. What types of evidence will you be using to test your hypothesis and is the evidence accessible to you?

Will you be using official documents, memoirs, diaries, newspapers, statistical compilations, personal interviews, films, audio recordings, and so forth? Are the written sources published? Do you have access to them? Are they in a language you can read? Can you be sure you will have access to the unpublished and/or non-written material when it comes time to do the thesis.

For a hypothesis to “work” it must be potentially refutable. The principle is that no matter whether you end up corroborating or refuting your hypothesis, you have contributed to the storehouse of human knowledge. We will know more at the end of your research than we did before.

In several ways, formulation of the hypothesis and research protocol or methods is the most difficult part of the entire thesis process. Since it serves as the outline, flow chart, or general recipe for the whole project, it can scarcely be too thorough. This does not mean that it must be immense. Rather, it must be clear, precise, and succinct; it must be feasible on theoretical grounds and logistically feasible; and it must honestly consider its own shortcomings and limitations.

5. What do you think the significance of your research will be no matter whether you end up corroborating or refuting your hypothesis?

In other words, answer the “So what?” question. I would prefer that you did not write that you will submit your thesis to some organization and that your findings will change the way that organization is doing things. Your purpose in doing the research is to solve a puzzle. Explain what puzzle you are trying to solve and why solving that puzzle is meaningful.