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ON PROPOSING[1]

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Proposals and proposal defenses have symbolic and instrumental functions. The symbolism entails a public commitment between faculty and students to work on a certain project; it also entails a commitment on the part of faculty to work for the author. There is wide variation is how faculty honor that last commitment, varying from those who read the dissertation a couple of nights before the final defense to those who read every chapter, often several times over, giving line by line editing as well as global commentary. The better committee will have more close editors, of course, but not everyone has the time, interest, or capability to function that way. So it's crucial to ensure that you have at least two who can. It works well if those two are close together in their conceptions of good work; it can also work well if those two (or more of course) are of different minds. Neither intellectual agreement nor intellectual disagreement are straightforwardly correlated with compatibility. Compatibility is something to judge in the interaction and can't be adjudicated in the abstract.

Another aspect of symbolism is that the proposal defense, like the dissertation defense later on, is not a test. Or at least it should not be. No responsible committee allows a defense to be scheduled if there is any doubt at all about the outcome. Yet while the outcome should be a forgone conclusion the content of the hearing should not be.

This is a natural place to segue into the instrumental functions, which are more important than the symbolic ones. Never again in your career will you have four or five people so completely devoted to reading and commenting on your work *as it takes shape*. Rarely will you have that many people in the same room working together to fashion a lovely piece of scholarship that is all yours. When proposal defenses go very well what happens is that the candidate does a little show and tell, on which more in a minute, and then everybody gets down to the job of planning and discussing and generally heaping a a lot of intellectual attention on the candidate. When they don't go like that it's disappointing because it's a lost opportunity. At my own defense I was so nervous that all I could think was, "when will this torture be over?" In other words, I thought of it as a test and so the event never got beyond an awful, stultifying atmosphere. It was a lost opportunity.

The mechanics of the proposal defense are these (NB: there is variation in how this works; much of it depends on how the chair wants it to run):

First, the candidate talks for 10 minutes about the project: what you're proposing, why you think it's worth proposing (i.e. why the project is interesting and important), how you'll go about answering the key questions. Basically, this is a quick summary of the proposal itself.

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[1] I recall that *How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation* by, David Joel Sternberg (NY: St. Martin's, 1981) was useful (haven't read it in a while so there must be *something* in it).

Second, the faculty members take turns asking intelligent and searching questions. But, and this differs from dissertation defenses, the questions asked by the faculty should be occasions to start discussions about the project. In that way we hopefully avoid a formalistic exercise and instead create a seminar, totally devoted to the candidate's work.

Third, we sign the document.

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On to the proposal itself.

A dissertation proposal is meant to focus the problem, and to tell the readers how the proposed research is related to that problem. Broadly framing the problem in what we know and don't know about The Thing (intellectual, practical, or both) then directs the thinking and the writing. Put differently, and still quite broadly, the proposal is a statement of the intellectual question (known as "the problem"), an appraisal of what we know and don't know about that question (known as "the literature review"), and a set of procedures that will address the question (known as "research and methods"). You should be able to relay those things in about 30 pages of text. (Never give someone a colossal document expecting them to divine for you that which is worthwhile in it.)

INTRODUCTION

The introduction broad-brushes your key idea, why you think that idea is interesting and important, and what you're going to do to demonstrate the idea.

Start right out with something you think is interesting. Keep in mind that you're proposing that you have a single idea that warrants a book length manuscript. This is an arrogant claim because it is a claim that other people ought to read some two to five hundred pages of what you've written. So it's your responsibility to make it worth the readers' time, and part of that responsibility is posing some issue, question, paradox that captures their attention. Perhaps you know what that issue is before you write the proposal, or perhaps you will use the proposal to discover it. But you must know what it is before the proposal is finished. You should state it in the first page at the latest. If the style suits you, start the proposal with it. Your issue is in one form or another an interrogative. Imagine that the statement will end up in the first pages of the book. Fine writers illustrate my point:

In *The Protestant Ethic*, after pointing out a correlation between being in modern business and being Protestant, and after dismissing some obvious explanations of that correlation, Weber asks,

> …why were the districts of highest economic development at the same time particularly favorable to a revolution in the Church?

That appears on the second page of the real manuscript. There's an introduction that precedes it, but introductions to books are always written last. Immediately, the inquiring mind wants to know the answer to the question. We have swallowed the baited hook; the author need only reel us in.

On the very first page of *The Power Elite* Mills says that,

> The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed…But not all men are in this sense ordinary.

Before we're on page two we're screaming, "Who are the non-ordinary ones?" You can hear the spinner on the fishing rod.

Finally, we hear Patterson open *Slavery and Social Death* with the proposition that

> There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery.

What? Slavery is so abhorrent that it just *must* be peculiar. I have no choice but to read on to see if this guy is making sense. Here, fishy fishy.

It is no accident we use the term "hook" synonymously with "the problem."

Note that in two of the examples the thing, the problem, the paradox, the hook is not in the form of a question. They could easily be so. Note also that our authors are not equivocal but provocative, asserting they know something interesting about the world. The church is "particularly favorable" to making money. Some of us have a heck of a lot more freedom than others (big news in the mid-1950s). Slavery isn't special. Our authors assert these claims with authority, commanding attention with the audacity of being certain. Their words are crafted carefully enough so that we're not put off by excess and pretense but neither do we have that sense of wavering qualification that we so often see in academic writing. It is audacious to be certain because social life is much more probabilistic than the claims allow. But equivocation and qualification are for later in the manuscript.

The introduction should be a few pages long and should comprise a crisp, summary statement of the problem and what we know and don't know about it. By crisp I mean it should have little or none of the qualification I referred to just a moment ago. By summary statement I mean you situate the problem intellectually but without referring specifically to other work. It's a broad treatment in that there appear few if any details about this intellectual context you're constructing.

Here's an example of a provocative problem statement:

> The history of all modernity is the history of formal organizations. Most of social life—including politics, economics, even the family—has been soaked up by organizations.

Note not only the provocation but the incipient claim that the problem is **important**.

> Oddly, we have almost no theory and even less research on this central fact of modern life. Some scholarship even holds that there is little or nothing distinctive about the modern day at all. Other views completely ignore formal organization, claiming that what is distinctive about modernity is the form of moral integration, or people's relations to the gods, or the presence of very fine chocolate.

This begins to set the intellectual context, framing the original problem statement in what others have said about the problem, but in very general terms. This will go on for a few pages, perhaps (I don't want to have the rules be too rigid here).

Now of course the key goal you're trying to accomplish in the introduction is to convince the reader that your idea is interesting and important.[2]

THE LITERATURE

The Literature is divinely wicked. We are utterly dependent on it because one of the differences between scholarship and non-scholarship is that we build on the ideas of others. We are part of an intellectual community, whatever our disagreements with that community, and so have an obligation to consider that which has gone before us so that we can add to the greater stock of knowledge. Using the literature is much more than bowing in the direction of the dead and the great.[3] For one of the ways to make the case that our ideas are interesting and important is to show how they illuminate that which was previously hidden or unnoticed. And I may as well be explicit about it: no one is interested in having demonstrated something we already know or think we know. The textbooks talk about scientific replication but that's just talk. In behavior replication is better known as "obvious."

As with all power-tools, The Literature can be helpful or very, very dangerous. It gets dangerous when people believe that they have to know everything in it, and when they think they have to write about what everybody said. The literature becomes lethal when people think they can ignore it. Use other people's ideas as frames for your own. Use their findings to buttress your own argument. Use their theories to help develop your concepts and to critically evaluate your own theory. Using the literature effectively is an enormously difficult skill that develops with experience and reflection on what you're writing. The fundamental posture, though, as with The Introduction is one of muted insolence: presume without declaration that other work exists for *your* purposes. Avoid having your story—and by this I mean either your empirical story or your conceptual story—hang off the line that runs through previous work. Assume that *you* are the line, that your work is the organizing principle of the intellectual universe in which you live. Decide what part of the literature is helpful, then consider and ignore the rest. *Use* the literature and it won't subdue you. Write what you know, not what others tell you they know.

Notice that the ritualistic literature review appears in none of the books that you think are good. That's because literature reviews are boring and because good book editors won't publish them. So if you assume you are writing a book—and there are excellent reasons *not* to write a book for a dissertation—don't think you'll have a literature review in the document. For the proposal this advice means that you report prior work judiciously. Concretely: in the section after the introduction is the proper place for the literature review. Yet I don't advise a real literature review. What I advise instead is that you use the section to consider why your problem is interesting and important intellectually. Another way to put this is to answer the question, "so what?" Imagine an inquisitor at your proposal defense claiming that what you say is interesting is in fact obvious. "Don't we know that already?" Answer *that* question in the section that comes after the introduction. All of what you write on this issue, incidentally, will reappear in the dissertation.

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[2] See, by all means, Murray Davis, "That's Interesting!: Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology", Phil. Soc. Sci. 1 (1971), 309-344

[3] On which see Arthur Stinchcombe, "Should sociologists forget their mothers and fathers," American Sociology 1982, 17(Feb):2-11.

THE METHOD OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

There is, as you would expect, an enormous amount of variation in what goes in this section. Some proposals read, appropriately, like the methods sections in journal articles. Other are broad ruminations on epistemology with occasional dips into real method. The basic question to answer in this section is, "How will you demonstrate your argument?"

To discuss properly how you will demonstrate your argument entails what you *cannot* demonstrate, too. This means being explicit about the limits of your project. "All of western society?" "All organizations?" "Does science work this way all the time?" What, in other words, might be some of the *conditions under which* your idea, concept, theory, or argument will hold up? Posing this question immediately suggests some methodological questions. Here's an example from one of my projects: I analyze the symbolism of plans and planning processes. In particular some plans, especially those for responding to extreme catastrophe (yes there are non-extreme catastrophes), are so utterly devoid of instrumental function that they warrant the term "fantasy documents." Notice the empirical claim that there is a class of events—fantasy planning—that has properties unto itself. The very claim suggests its opposite, plans that are *not* fantastic. Thus I have a chapter on "non-fantasy documents" that delves into the *other* class of events. This helps delimit my empirical claim, but more importantly it helps frame a theory of the relations between organizations and uncertainty: in one class of events there's a lot of uncertainty but in the other there isn't. My method and methodology are connected to my theory.

When we talk about the "conditions under which" issue—and there's plenty of variation in the language available with which to talk about it; that is, there is no requirement that you write in the scientific mode—we are thinking about, and talking to the reader about, what would be different if the world were arranged differently. Since we don't always or even often have the luxury of comparing cases directly we must often use counterfactuals to consider the alternatives. These things are mind experiments about alternative realities, and they permit you to clarify your argument and to consider carefully what difference it would make if the factor or condition you think is so important were to disappear.

More concretely, in this section you should spend some words explaining why the methods you will use are particularly appropriate for addressing the question. Why these cases and not others? Why logistic regression when 2x2 tables are available? Another case study: how will you defend that? We seek economy of effort so one function of this section is to encourage you to connect as tightly as you can the procedure or method or plan of progression, on one hand, to the key idea(s) of the dissertation, on the other. Giving some thought to this now will help direct your efforts. It's not a straightjacket. What you say here can, indeed certainly will, change. Thinking through the issues now as clearly as possible will be one of several ways you sharpen your logic and advance rigorous argument.

DISSERTATION CHAPTER OUTLINE

For the proposal I ask that you write a dissertation chapter outline that is as detailed as you can make it. Although the proposal is indeed something of a contract between you and your readers the bonds it creates are not so strong that you can't move. In fact you can and will move a lot, so don't recoil from committing something to paper for fear that you're trapping yourself.

You should title the chapters and each chapter title should indicate an important sub-theme of the work. Notice that writing a good outline requires you to think through the key parts of the project. That's no accident, as I'm sure you've guessed. You should also outline the chapters themselves, again in as much detail as you can.

Writing a dissertation outline, in as much detail as you can muster, will encourage rigorous thought and presentation. So while an outline is not always part of a proposal, I will require one of you. Rest assured that the outline will look almost nothing like the final document. Outlines are living things, for active thinkers so they change all the time. That's as it should be because projects change along the way. The "problem" gets redefined as you get smarter about other theories or about how the world actually works. Sometimes you just get bored with the problem as it sits and so rearrange your ideas and materials to create a different project. Hopefully such changes won't be massive, but sometimes they are. As long as you keep working toward something that you believe in, and of course something that stands up to high expectations of others, rearrangement is not a problem. Dynamic outlines reflect dynamic thinking.

Now I know there are people who say they don't work with outlines; it's stifling, they say, or they just don't think that way. But I insist. And what I insist is that people who don't work explicitly with an outline work with one anyway. They just aren't clear about it; were they more explicit I'll bet they would be even more productive.

But what to outline? Well that's the point. Thinking through an outline—an outline that you must present to other people—will encourage you, ever so gently, to think about how you want to tell your story. When you think about how to tell your story you force yourself to imagine your audience more than would otherwise be the case. That's good because imagining your audience clearly fosters clear thinking and expression which are like Ginger and Fred. They just go together.

You have a pretty free hand in constructing your outline. But I'll tell you three outlines I've had experience with, all of which have advantages and disadvantages. The first is the standard format: "the problem," "the literature," "methods," "data chapter 1…x," "conclusions." This style is quite straightforward which allows writing to proceed quickly. It does so because the sequence of presentation requires little recurring agonizing reappraisal, as do the other styles. The standard format is also quite useful if you intend to cut up the dissertation into articles and you never intend to turn it into a book. That's fine. Some people aren't comfortable writing books; some projects don't warrant the length of a book. You can see examples of this format in any library or graduate secretary's office.

The second format that I'm familiar with avoids the literature review and methods chapters. The first and last chapters are broad while the middle chapters are very much data chapters as in the standard format. In this style the chapter titles, which should always reflect the main point of a chapter's content, are about the *empirical* story that you're telling. Actually, a methods chapter often appears in such books but as an appendix not as an afterthought; yet someone could skip it if they're not interested. My own dissertation, which resulted in *Acceptable Risk?* (Univ. of CA Press, 1989) is organized this way. One advantage of this format is that, as with the standard format, it's fairly easy to organize the materials so that you can write subplots off the main story. The disadvantage of this format is big: it gives the impression that the book—and here we're talking about formats that lend themselves to book production—is mainly about the empirical story that you're telling. That's OK if that's what you want to do; it's also OK if the story is in

fact important enough to warrant that kind of attention. In my own case the story was about a building that was contaminated with toxic chemicals, something decidedly *not* important enough to so warrant, which meant that too many people got the impression that the book was about a dirty building. I always thought the book was about organizational constructions of reality (astute reviewers saw it), and I could have relayed that message more effectively by avoiding the format I chose and relying instead on the third format.

The third format has *every chapter* organized around key ideas, concepts, theories. This is by far the hardest of the three styles but also the one with the largest payoff. The introduction in this kind of book is a broad ranging discussion of issues related to your main point. That broad discussion wraps around the real, key function of the chapter: to make an extended, considered case about the problem. By extended, considered case I mean you should answer the questions, "why is it interesting?" and "why is it important?"

The definitions of *interesting* and *important* are highly contentious. Were I to write down my own conceptions of these things I fear I would leave the impression that mine are the *only* acceptable ones. They're not, and that's one reason sociology is a divided house, so here I will only say what they mean rhetorically. To make your work *interesting* is to wonder aloud, in a thoughtful way, who would be surprised by what you have to say. Writing is a claim on someone's time and a good author leaves the reader thinking, at the end of every chapter, "It will probably be worth my time to read more. I wonder where this will go?" The great author leaves the reader feeling, "I *burn* to read more." I'm not privy to the secrets of great authors. But I do know that to convince sociologists that it will probably be worth their time to read more you need to tell them why what you're doing is not obvious. To make your work *important* is to explicate what difference it would make—to social theory, to common ways of thinking, to how the world is organized—if what you say has been ignored or neglected were instead a central part of social theory, or common sense, or social organization.

POSTSCRIPT: REVISING

My view of proposals is that they should be nearly done on the first draft that you hand in, and that no proposal ought to go beyond the second draft. (Of course, you'll revise your dissertation more than that.) That means the first draft has to be darn good. Now, there are two reasons I don't think proposals ought to be redrafted multiple times (of course they are redrafted many multiples of times in *your* computer). First, the hardest part of the dissertation is in fact the proposal because that is where you first define The Problem in a major way. That's very difficult because it requires a lot of hard thinking. Once you "get it," though, there's not a lot of point in the endless refining of something that's going to change anyway. Second, the proposal is one of the few things you write, at this stage of your career, that won't find its way to publication. It is "pre-work" and while a bit of it might fold into the larger work or while it may end up developing into a grant proposal or a book prospectus (and those are *very* important things) it's not *the thing*. Obviously I think proposals are extremely important, but the real action, the real intellectual contribution, the real joy is in the dissertating. Go for the joy.