

**ADJUSTMENTS FOR PANDEMIC REALITIES  
A MESSAGE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS (AND THEIR ADVISORS) ON DESIGNING THE  
PLAN FOR THE DISSERTATION**

**Cynthia Verba, 2020 (GSAS fellowship adviser, retired Director of Fellowships)**

There is an increasing awareness of a crucial need for adjusting dissertation plans and proposals that take into account the restrictions on travel and library access that have come with the pandemic, along with the severe damage to our economy, which could have an impact for an even longer period.

**The first question people have been asking: Given the current travel restrictions and the growing spread of covid-19, should I apply for the traveling fellowship competitions that are now open, such as the Fulbright and other traveling fellowships? The answer is yes: Next year is a long way off, but application deadlines are around the corner. However, to live with the inevitable uncertainties, please read the accompanying advice below that also suggests having a Plan B.**

**Don't be discouraged by pandemic restrictions, try to produce a strong dissertation plan and proposal, but also be ready with alternative paths to reach your goals.**

The good news, presumably for your dissertation, is that you can and MUST continue to ask the research questions that matter most to you and, hopefully, to the field as well. What you may have to adjust is how you go about addressing the questions that matter, especially if traveling abroad is a central part of your current plan or if your plan entails high costs to accomplish. Before you decide that you must jettison your topic, take a fresh look, working closely with your advisors, to see if you can get at the favored questions from another direction, relying on resources many of which have come into fairly common use during the recent decades.

In all probability your alternative plan will be a more modest one, but with the possible advantage of reducing cost and time spent. I would quickly emphasize that this reduction does not have to mean a more modest or less significant set of questions for your potential dissertation. It is possible and even desirable to approach questions with a new sharper attention to feasibility, keeping the scope within more reasonable bounds. It can well lead to a more highly polished finished product that is more compelling in its findings, precisely because of the more reasonable bounds.

There are positive developments that facilitate alternative research plans. Hand in hand with the digitization of resources, there is a new spirit among scholars, even prior to the pandemic, of sharing research data that they have acquired. Typically, scholars collect more data than they can use for their own projects, data that often can be used for other purposes. Harvard scholars have already been engaged in this sharing, using a newly created computer platform that facilitate this sharing in a highly efficient and economic manner.

Going beyond working closely with your advisor, you can consult with other experienced scholars who have had ample and recent experience in those countries that are integral to your project, not necessarily confined to the Harvard faculty. Above all, be sure to avail yourself of the splendid services of Harvard research librarians, who can make you more fully aware of resources relevant to your project and also guide you in how to use them. (Note that since research practices are often discipline-specific, find your liaison librarian at <https://fasliaisons.library.harvard.edu/gsas> or send an inquiry to Ask A Librarian at <http://ask.library.harvard.edu> and request an appointment.) Finally, and this may lie in a more distant future, hopefully we will see a reorientation of present fellowships to match the new realities, placing less emphasis on travel per se, and recognizing that "field work" may have a new meaning.

**Whether it's Plan A or Plan B, don't neglect the more timeless aspects of designing a dissertation plan and writing a fellowship proposal. Look at what should be retained, and what may need to be adjusted to respond to the restrictions of the pandemic.**

I have already emphasized the importance of posing research questions that can make a contribution to the field. When you get to proposal writing it is equally important to articulate your questions in a manner that is reader friendly, which means creating a highly polished and persuasive argument of why the topic matters. While this is timeless advice, it acquires special force in the context of the pandemic, where there may be required shifts in implementation. Below are some of the key strategies that focus on writing a compelling proposal, including pandemic impact adjustments. Much of it has to do with Do's and Don't's, with the Don't's based on some of the more common tendencies that are anything but user friendly. (Many of these points are presented in greater detail and with samples of winning proposals in my online publication, *Scholarly Pursuits: A Guide to Professional Development During the Graduate Years*, available at the GSAS Fellowship web site.)

**A well structured argument is a must.**

The structure of the proposal, the ordering of items, plays an important role in the strength of the proposal; it can help to overcome any draw-backs caused by the pandemic restrictions. Build a strong foundation by telling the reader as early as your opening paragraph all the major points of your project as a whole, doing so in succinct not-shell fashion, with further elaboration, as needed, in subsequent paragraphs. The first major point should be the topic of your research, which essentially entails posing your central question and argument. (You may need a lead-in if the subject of your research is an obscure one, but be sure to keep it brief.) The next point should be how you will address the question, what is your methodology. It is on this point that pandemic restrictions might come into play if you have been obliged to adopt an alternative path to your destination. Once you have presented your topic and methodology you are ready to say how it fits into the field and contributes to it. This is the key item that often determines the outcome of the fellowship competition. People are often taught that good writing means building gradually so that the main point comes at a climactic moment towards the very end. Not so with the proposal genre. The opening should be so compelling that the reader will want to read further.

With the opening paragraph doing its job of laying out the whole in concise fashion, it can then serve as an outline for the rest of the proposal. Just follow the main points that need elaboration and you will have a clear and well structured formulation of your project. It should also include any needed explanations of the path chosen if determined by pandemic restrictions. You can describe it as offering a new lens for addressing your questions.

When elaborating on the existing literature and your contribution to the field, make sure that you cover all the scholarly areas to which your project will contribute, since projects often contribute to more than one field. This may prove helpful if your methodology departs from a business as usual approach, whether determined by the pandemic or not. If there are multiple relevant fields, a unified treatment is the most effective. As a Don't there is a common tendency to scatter references to the literature throughout the proposal, which makes it harder for the reader to get a complete grasp of your contributions.

**When discussing methodology state the HOW, make it match the WHAT.**

You may need to elaborate further on the methodology after the opening, especially if you are forced to circumvent forbidden travel. In this case, it is even more important to make sure the methodology

matches the stated topic; keep looking back to the introduction. As another Don't there is a common tendency to leave a disconnect between the HOW and the WHAT: a topic is presented, but the method for implementation is poorly matched with the stated topic.

**Limit the number of questions posed and distinguish between the main central question and subsidiary ones.**

This advice is timeless but of particularly importance when the proposal hinges to a greater extent on the questions or arguments than it does on access to original materials that may not be available. There is another common tendency for the writer to present a multitude of specific questions in neutral fashion, scattered throughout the proposal, without distinguishing between the main central question and those that are subsidiary. You need to do the hard work yourself of determining which is which rather than leaving it to the reader. Furthermore, if you pose 20 questions you don't yet have a topic, or if you do, it is too buried in secondary questions to identify.

**Be concise and precise, present one version of the topic**

It is important to make all statements concise. The use of fewer words is the best path to clarity. There is a common tendency of adding clause after clause, burying the main point of a statement and making it unmanageable for both reader and writer. Another common tendency is to present the main topic in multiple versions that are just different enough from one another to leave the reader confused (all too frequently, there are even versions that contradict one another). Once a topic is clearly and concisely presented at the opening, there is no need to repeatedly tell what the topic is. When further elaboration is presented subsequently, stay as close as possible to your opening formulation. For the same reason, it is far better to avoid synonyms or pronouns, often used for the sake of avoiding repeating the same key words. Synonyms seldom are a perfect or clear match for the original noun; they make life harder for the reader.

**Finally, there is an admission to make:** that producing a compelling plan and highly polished proposal is indeed hard work, especially if there are the further challenges posed by the pandemic restrictions. It is hoped that the suggestions offered here will prepare you to meet the challenges and set your engines going so that you produce a work that meets the challenging demands of the time.