



PhD Dissertation Proposal Guidance

University of Alberta – Faculty of Nursing

1. Purpose and Scope

This document provides suggested guidance for preparing a dissertation proposal in the PhD in Nursing program. The proposal serves as both a scholarly plan and the basis for the Candidacy Examination. These guidelines are based on the [Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies \(GPS\) thesis formatting guideline](#) and the Faculty of Nursing's academic expectations. Students are encouraged to discuss with their supervisor whether any deviations from this guidance are preferred.

2. Candidacy Examination Alignment

The dissertation proposal is a critical formative milestone in the PhD journey. It provides the foundation for the candidacy examination, which assesses the student's ability to:

1. Demonstrate **specialized knowledge** in a clearly defined area of inquiry, supported by a comprehensive and current review of relevant literature.
2. Critically understand the historical, philosophical, theoretical, and scientific foundations of **nursing knowledge** that underpin the research.
3. Conceptualize rigorous research **methods and design**, appropriate to the research question and consistent with scholarly standards in nursing research.

In short, the candidacy exam evaluates whether the student has:

- Selected a viable, significant, and original research question;
- Developed a sound and methodologically coherent research plan;
- Positioned themselves to make a substantive contribution to nursing knowledge.

3. Proposal Format Options

Students may choose one of two formats in consultation with their supervisor:

- A. Traditional Dissertation Proposal
- B. Paper-Based Dissertation Proposal

In both formats, students must explicitly demonstrate alignment with candidacy criteria listed above.

A. Traditional Dissertation Proposal Format

Typically structured in three chapters (approx 15-25 double-spaced pages for each chapter) plus supporting materials.

Abstract

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Background and significance of the research area
- Clear articulation of the problem
- Purpose and/or research question(s)
- Rationale for the study
- Critical analysis of the historical, philosophical, theoretical, and scientific foundations of the area of inquiry as it relates to nursing knowledge development.
- Overview of theoretical approach and/or conceptual framework (depending on supervisor preference this can be placed in Chapter 1, 2 or 3).
- Students may wish to add a section on their social location/positionality as it relates to the area of inquiry or methodology

Chapter 2: Literature Review

- In-depth review of literature relevant to the research question

NB: To support the student's preparation for the candidacy exam, a broad review of the literature is recommended regardless of whether the thesis includes a more focused formal literature synthesis (e.g. systematic/scoping/integrative review).

- Position/contextualize the dissertation within the context of the broader bodies of literature and disciplinary knowledge development to which they will contribute.
- Identification of the novel contribution of the thesis and/or gaps in current knowledge and/or limitations in assumptions underlying the current field of research.
- Typically takes the form of a more descriptive narrative/ traditional review of the literature to discuss how the studies will generate knowledge in the chosen field of study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

- Methodological approach and justification
- Methods: Sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis
- Ethical considerations

- Knowledge translation plan
- Significance to nursing and health care knowledge, practice, and policy

References

Appendices

- Timelines and milestones
- Budget
- Ethics related attachments (e.g. recruitment materials, consent forms, surveys, interview guides, etc)

B. Paper-Based Dissertation Proposal Format

This format presents a plan for a set of thematically linked, publishable papers. The final paper-based dissertation will include an introductory chapter, multiple independent though interrelated papers in journal-article format, and a concluding chapter. The paper-based *proposal* will consist of the following core sections

* note an alternative format below

Abstract

Introduction (e.g. 8-12 pages double spaced)

- Background and significance of the research area
- Clear articulation of the problem
- Purpose and/or research question(s)
- Rationale for the study
- Critical analysis of the historical, philosophical, theoretical, and scientific foundations of the area of inquiry as it relates to nursing knowledge development (*here or in literature review*).
- Theoretical/conceptual framework (*may be here or in literature review*)
- Overview of each manuscript (title, aim, journal target, authors) and how they are linked
- Students may wish to add a section on their social location/positionality as it relates to the area of inquiry or methodology

Literature Review (e.g., 10-15 double-spaced pages)

- In-depth review of literature relevant to the research question

NB: To support the student's preparation for the candidacy exam, a broad review of the literature is recommended regardless of whether the thesis includes a more focused formal literature synthesis (e.g. systematic/scoping).

- Position/contextualize the dissertation within the context of the broader bodies of literature and disciplinary knowledge development to which they will contribute.
- Identification of the novel contribution of the thesis and/or gaps in current knowledge and/or limitations in assumptions underlying the current field of research.
- Typically takes the form of a more descriptive narrative/ traditional review of the literature to discuss how the studies will generate knowledge in the chosen field of study.

Methods (e.g., 15 to 40 pages double spaced, depending on how many studies are described)

- The proposal should include the methods for all studies to be completed in the PhD dissertation (the methods for each study should be described separately). If one or more of the papers (e.g. a literature synthesis, conceptual/theoretical paper) is already completed, the methods of that paper do not need to be described in this section, instead the reader can be directed to the relevant paper in the appendix.

Sub-headings will include:

- Methodological approach and justification
- Methods: Sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis
- Rigor
- Risk & mitigation strategies
- Ethical considerations
- Knowledge translation plan
- Significance to nursing and health care knowledge, practice, and policy

References

Appendices

- Timeline and milestones
- Budget
- Ethics related attachments (e.g. recruitment materials, consent forms. surveys, interview guides, etc)

* Alternative format: Another option, for a thesis that includes a number of discrete studies, is to present each study sequentially within the proposal, with a brief background section and methods for each (essentially presenting the background and methods sections of the eventual manuscript for the study). With this approach, the proposal would still start with the Introduction section (as described above) and a Literature review to contextualize the dissertation as a whole (may be abbreviated in this instance). For example, a thesis proposal that

includes a scoping review, quantitative study, and qualitative study would have the following sections: Introduction; Literature review; Background and methods for the scoping review; Background and methods for the quantitative study; and Background and methods for the qualitative study; followed by References and Appendices.

4. Formatting Guidelines

For the proposal, students should consider following the GPS formatting guidelines for the final thesis unless otherwise agreed to with their supervisor.

5. Example proposals

Example proposals can be found on the Canvas site "[Resources for Nursing Graduate Students](#)" under the heading [PhD Dissertation Proposals](#)).