Before you can write a dissertation, you must write a dissertation proposal. How to do that is worth a closer look.

In my July 24 column, "It's a Dissertation, Not a Book," I emphasized the importance of viewing a dissertation in practical terms, beginning with the fact that it is, first and foremost, the credential for a Ph.D.

Questions about what a doctoral dissertation should look like are essentially teaching questions. Professors are finally starting to ask those questions, especially in the humanities, where they most need to be asked. Commentators like Louis Menand, a writer and Harvard professor, and Sidonie Smith, recent president of the Modern Language Association, have suggested that we revamp the dissertation into something radically different. Menand proposes—polemically, perhaps—that a single scholarly article stand in for the omnibus that we currently demand, while Smith calls more generally for a reconception of the traditional dissertation in light of new possibilities offered by technology and the kinds of work patterns (such as greater collaboration) that it engenders.

Certainly such conversations about the future of the dissertation should continue. But even as we seek to devise new and better approaches, we're stuck—for now—with what we have, and we have to figure out how best to work with it. The dissertation process is the longest stage of graduate education and it begins with the proposal, the crafting of which is dominated by a few central and simple yet elusive truths.

**The purpose of a dissertation proposal is for it to be approved.** Only then can you start writing. A lot of misunderstanding swirls around dissertation proposals. One foundational fact cuts through it: A dissertation proposal has no
independent existence. It's a provisional document, a way station to an eventual goal.

In the laboratory sciences, the dissertation proposal—or, as it is often called, the prospectus—is increasingly viewed as an implied contract with the adviser (who will finance the work in his or her lab) and the committee. If the approved experiments are then conducted, the thesis will usually be acceptable even if the results don't support the initial hypothesis. That understanding removes the incentive for publication bias or fraud, but it also attaches understandable weight to the experimental plan. The point is that it remains a plan. That sense of its provisional nature needs to be stressed.

**A dissertation proposal is not an essay.** In the humanities and some of the social sciences, a proposal looks a lot like an essay, but it differs in one fundamental respect: While an essay must prove a thesis, a proposal needs only to advance one. It's enough, in other words, for a proposal writer to demonstrate an argument and show how to prove it at a later date—given approval, space, and time.

**A dissertation proposal is not a mini-dissertation.** If a dissertation is a small world that you (as god of the microcosm) will bring into being, a proposal is a map of that space within the larger universe. The emphasis here is on the idea of mapping rather than creating. Before you can become a god and invent your own world, you have to become a cartographer.

That means that the goal in your proposal is not to create your world, but rather to suggest what it will look like when you do create it. Because you're mapping a world that doesn't exist (and here my metaphor becomes strained), you should imagine that you're diagramming a place you haven't been to yet.

It's a common mistake for a proposal writer to fall into writing the actual dissertation in the process of laying it out. That's not entirely a bad thing: It offers you a head start. But because students and faculty members too often misunderstand the nature of the project, most dissertation proposals take too long to complete. Students should ordinarily finish writing the proposal in three to six months, and their advisers need to recognize the point at which students should be turned loose to work on their actual dissertations. It's far
too common for advisers to put students through needless extra drafts of the purpose, perfecting a document that doesn't need to be perfect because it's just a step on a long road. Extending the proposal stage only makes that road longer and more costly.

For their part, students generally don't recognize the proposal for what it is, either: a provisional document that marks a point of transition, not a polished work of compressed scholarship that need only be inflated to become a dissertation.

A proposal describes your project from both inside and outside. First, the inside stuff:

**A proposal puts forth your argument.** It points toward how it will be proved, giving well-chosen examples without unspooling them in detail. A few exemplary details will help illustrate your presentation, but a profusion of them will distract. Such details serve the purpose of demonstrating—not fully proving—your argument.

**A proposal describes how your argument will fit together.** What examples will you use, in what order, and why? How is the argument sequenced and subordinated? You will probably need to provide a chapter outline, but you should offer a clear and extended overview of your argument long before that.

**A proposal outlines methodology.** How will you make your argument? What theoretical, historical, contextual, and interpretative tools will you use? Will you employ any particular approach?

Your proposal should fit your dissertation topic. A proposal to edit a scholarly edition, to pick one exceptional possibility, will require a different presentation than a dissertation laid out in the model of a monograph (introduction plus four chapters on related topics). The shoe must fit the foot and not the other way around.

From the outside:

**You need to show the place of your dissertation in the critical field.** Which field and subfield conversations will your project enter, and how? Which critics will you be building on, and which ones will you be revising? Your dissertation marks your formal entry into the community of scholars, a world of intellectuals...
engaging in overlapping conversations of varying size and scope. Your proposal must show your awareness of those multiple discourses and show the place your research will occupy within them.

Accordingly, you should include a thorough bibliography in your proposal so that readers may look at what works you plan to consult, as well as those you have consulted already. Your committee will review that list and use it as the basis for further suggestions.

Finally, I offer proposal writers a commandment and a postulate.

**The commandment:** Consult your adviser as you develop your proposal. The myth of the writer as solitary genius striving away in the garret has surprising persistence. I've seen many graduate students teach their undergraduates to collaborate without realizing that they're not following their own advice. (That is a mistake I made often enough myself.) You should not imagine that you will be writing your proposal on your own. Instead, draw on the experience of your peers, and especially your adviser, as you shape your topic so that it may be the most relevant, the most challenging, and the most marketable later on.

**The postulate:** Your dissertation will be different from your proposal. That's to be expected—and the differences can be substantial. Your proposal outlines a hypothetical dissertation: what your thesis looks like to you from where you stand now. The goal of a proposal is not that it should outline your future dissertation. Rather, it should outline one possible dissertation, and do so plausibly.

If you can offer up a credible possible dissertation based on your ideas, then it follows that the dissertation you actually wind up writing will benefit from this early exercise. Your proposal will get finished faster, and so will your dissertation—because unlike diamonds, dissertation proposals (and dissertations) are not forever. And graduate school shouldn't be, either.

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Thank you for your sound, commonsense summary advice. If you have not addressed other dissertation-related topics, you should. God knows, too many faculty need to hear it. Sadly, as you point out, the dissertation proposal charts unknown territory. Just so, that uncharted territory is precisely what needs to be glimpsed in advance of selecting a graduate school in the first place. I identified my targeted topic early-on in my graduate studies (during the first year), only to be given permission to proceed with no one in the department qualified to advise me (the faculty would certainly agree). For years, I fumbled about, striving to advise myself, while the only feedback I received in submitting some 200 pages was "you seem to slip into a bit of editorializing on p.x; keep writing." After 700 + pages and years of financial ruination from which I would never recover, I finally attended my defense hoping for my first real feedback. No surprise, I didn't get it. The "defense" was a joke; they asked me nothing of substance, but rather engaged in idle chit-chat--because only 1 person had even waded through the study (looking for spelling or grammatical errors). They passed me with an A, to get me out the door. But I was cheated of an academic education, having attained only lessons in hardship, worth nothing in the competitive job market. In the wake of his scholarly malpractice, my 1st advisor promptly dropped my study into the waste basket on his way out the door after my defense. And did I mention, that same year he won a national award for "excellence in teaching?"

This was an interesting and practical piece of advice. However, at some universities, the proposal is part of the dissertation in a significant way. Where I am earning my doctorate, the proposal is the first three chapters of the dissertation. Most students are advised to leave those first three chapters as they are after the proposal is accepted (the only thing writers must do is go back through the first three chapters and change the future tense to the past tense for the final submission of the dissertation). The actual dissertation stage is the completion of the research described in the proposal, followed by the writing of the last two chapters that describe the results and reflect.

Suppose I do that this is generally good advice. Two points:

1. "Before you can write a dissertation, you must write a dissertation proposal."
   Well, not necessarily. Not if your program or advisor doesn't require it. In some programs, part of the oral part of the Preliminary / General (depending on the particular terminology used) Examination. So it's a kind of oral proposal.

2. More interesting here, and possibly more troubling, is the poster original's prominent featuring of these two points:
A proposal puts forth your argument.
A proposal describes how your argument will fit together.

How can you know what your "argument" is going to be until you've done the research? Or is this a Yurpeanized Humanities way of talking / writing? I ask this last because while over the years many have asked me what my dissertation was about, only one, a Yurpean, has asked me "What did you argue?"
And she was in the humanities.

If this is merely a terminology matter and 'argue' here does not mean what normal people take it to mean, or even what it means in philosophy / logic but rather something like 'general topic, or theme', then it is not troubling. If however "research", i.e. scholarship in the humanities these days is starting with the "argument" and the rest of the research is about how to support it, and a dissertation is really meant to be a persuasive essay and position - paper, then that may explain why the humanities in "postmodernist" times sometimes seem to some of us to have become intellectually bankrupt and substantively vacuous.

And the fact that scientists routinely posit political claims without knowing that they are engaging in ideology is why it seems to us in the humanities that science has become intellectually indulgent and substantively dangerous. In other words, that scientists engage in argumentation (yes, they "argue") even while claiming (and believing themselves) to be objective frightens us humanists.

This is all sensible advice, though as other commenters note, practices differ from one department to another. Here is another variation--Professor Cassuto claims that the proposal should advance an argument and show how it will be proved. But in both the humanities and the sciences, the actual research undertaken in the dissertation may, if fairly done, NOT prove what the candidate had supposed at the beginning. For this reason, my advice would be that the proposal should advance a well considered QUESTION and show how it will be investigated.

This is a good point. In the sciences, we do not aim to prove anything. The goal is to disprove hypotheses. The goal of a proposal is to lay out the hypotheses and show that there is sound evidence to consider them and make them viable as a research project, and then to describe the experiments that would be required to test the hypothesis. It shows that the student has made the first steps toward developing hypotheses and understanding the process of testing them. The argument to be made is that there is a good reason to test the hypothesis, and that it is actually an hypothesis and not a random guess pulled from thin air.

Aside from looking at these aspects of the proposal to make sure the student is ready to move on with actually conducting the experiments, a diligent committee should also be looking at the sequence of experiments at this stage to identify dependent experiments. In other words, is there a series of experiments that would all be thrown out the window if the first of the series fails, either because the hypothesis is disproven early (insufficient work done toward a complete dissertation-worthy project), or due to technical failures? This is the stage where we should be preventing students from getting stuck on the path of earning tenure as graduate students and identify these potential sticking points and map out alternative options. That way, when they hit a sticking point (and there will always be one), they are not starting from scratch, but have a plan B on hand. At a proposal defense I recently attended, the one key thing I insisted the student do was to map out a flowchart of how the experiments would be conducted, and identified a key experiment that could be a stopping point. The student was sent back to her mentor to map out an alternative path around that point; I didn't ask for new details about those alternative experiments, but just to have the hypotheses considered so it would be a quick leap should that critical experiment fail or terminate the line of inquiry before
sufficient work was done toward a full dissertation.

To me, this is the real purpose of a proposal and proposal defense, to ensure the research plan is viable. This doesn't really require a proposal defense, but adding that level of formality to the process simply makes it mandatory to prepare the proposal and get committee input early on.

There appears to be some confusion about the use of the word "argument" in these comments thus far. Cassuto says: “While an essay must prove a thesis, a proposal needs only to advance one.” This means, of course, that the thesis or argument isn't already determined; it isn't already proven. He also points out that the proposal will be different from the actual dissertation; he probably didn't think it necessary to point out the obvious: the research and discoveries that come along the way almost inevitably changes the conclusions or arguments made.

A proposal lays out a good question, justifies why the question is important and worth researching, and then proceeds to explain how the question will be answered. So the next time a humanities person asks a researcher, "What's your argument?" please understand that this really means: "What do you think you're arguing? What's the point of your research?"

I'm more comfortable with ...9776's terminology -- a QUESTION, or a problem or problem area. What are we investigating, and why is it significant?. That's not at an "argument" stage. At the proposal stage, and indeed well into the dissertation research stage, one may not yet be "argueing" anything.

what I like about this advice is not the particulars...whether it be an argument or a problem statement or a question...but that the underlying theme is one of practicality. The perspective is most important here. The proposal is part of a process that leads to the final phase of achieving one's doctorate. The dissertation phase itself is the ritual transition from being told what is important by experts to becoming an expert in a particular area.. Hopefully it becomes a jumping off point for more writing and research. Lets focus on this as being a beginning not one's life achievement. Writual describes a very disheartening process that is everything faculty should protect their candidates against. Imagine what valuable work could have been done and contributions to the field offered if they had not had spent years fumbling about? Do we ever discuss the ethics of such abusive behavior?

Amen, hallelujah! Right there in keeping with my observations as a coach of dissertation proposal and final product writers are these views!
Thanks for this timely clear and practical explanations about dissertation proposal. I have always wondered whether the distinction we make between prospectus and proposal at Walden University is universal. I think the distinction is necessary though being an online institution. Unlike regular institutions where students have opportunities to contact their prospective dissertation mentors personally, a lot more writing communications would have had to transpire between the mentor and the student without the prospectus. In Walden University the prospectus is like a summary proposal because it is the only way the mentor can clearly understand what the student has in mind, perhaps having never met the student personally. A good prospectus at Walden University is like one having a proposal in place. The problem statement must be very clear and understandable supported with relevant literature. The theoretical base of the dissertation has to be clearly set out and the method of investigation must be clearly stated. In fact, one must be able to state the purpose and significance of the dissertation as well. That is, one must have clearly thought through the dissertation proposal. The Committee nominated by student along with the prospectus have to be approved by his/her Department before one proceeds to write and defend the proposal. This subtle distinction needs to be made clear to students in Walden University.