RESEARCH DESIGN/PROPOSAL WRITING

This course is part seminar, part practicum. Its purpose is to help students conceptualize and design a research project, to craft effective research and grant proposals, and to prepare for ethnographic and archival work. The first and longest part of the course will focus on formulating a researchable project, in all its various elements; how to write a statement of problem, to frame arguments/theses, to situate work in the appropriate anthropological literature/s, to develop a methodological approach, and techniques, commensurate with the objectives and claims of the study, to make a case for its significance and contribution to the discipline, and to prepare for an IRB submission. The second part will address the specific requirements of proposals directed to the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren, and similar funding agencies. To the extent time permits, the class will also pursue a secondary objective: imparting professional skills, primarily in the area of writing and publishing, but also in oral presentation, that will be useful to students throughout their professional lives.

The course is compulsory for social anthropology G3 students who have done most of the background reading for their doctoral projects and are actively working on their research proposals. With the permission of the instructors, it will also be open to students in African and African American Studies at a similar stage in their graduate training.

Copies of research proposals that have been successfully submitted to funding agencies in the past, and/or have laid the foundation of successful doctoral projects in different parts of the world, will be made available to participants in the course on its website. All inquiries concerning the website, and other issues related to the running of the course, should be addressed to Alma Medina (almamedina@fas.harvard.edu).

The class will meet on Tuesdays, 5.00-8.00pm, in the Locke Room, Barker Center. Office hours are by appointment; write to either jeancomaroff@fas.harvard.edu or jcomaroff@fas.harvard.edu to arrange times to meet.

During the semester, please read the relevant sections of the following texts for each of the exercises. Although we shall not discuss them directly, they will help you as you prepare your written sections, as outlined in the schedule below.


Michael Watts, 2001, “The Holy Grail: In Pursuit of the Dissertation Proposal.” [Click on “Nuts and Bolts,” and then, in turn, all the tabs on the left of the page.]


For preparing your IRB, a topic not covered in the course – as each student has to handle this in consultation with their advisor – you might wish to read the following:


Also: please look at the website of the FAS Committee on Human Subjects; http://cuhs.harvard.edu/

COURSE SCHEDULE:

NOTE: fine-tuning the course schedule will depend on the number of students in the class; its size, obviously, will determine the time needed to discuss each person’s work. As a result, we may have to make adjustments as we go along.
ALSO: the session on 11/14 will have to be rescheduled, as we are traveling on that date. We shall attend to rescheduling it when the class is together and a suitable alternative can be found. Also because of travel commitments, there will be no class on 10/24.

IMPORTANT: FOR EACH SESSION IN WHICH YOU ARE EXPECTED TO PREPARE WORK – WHICH IS FOR MOST SESSIONS – KINDLY EMAIL THAT WORK TO ALMA MEDINA (almamedina@fas.harvard.edu) NO LATER THAN THE SATURDAY BEFORE THE CLASS SO THAT IT MAY BE POSTED ON THE COURSE WEBSITE AND CIRCULATED TO ALL PARTICIPANTS. EVERY CLASS MEMBER IS EXPECTED TO READ EVERYONE ELSE’S SUBMISSIONS FOR EACH SESSION.

9/5 Introduction

9/12 Prolegomenon: The Anatomy of a Proposal

In this class we shall analyze a few select examples of successful proposal, focusing on their form, content, and appropriate guidelines. Those samples are to be found on the course website; please read them carefully in preparation for this session.

9/19 Beginnings (1): Formulating a Problem

For this session, everyone in the class is expected to prepare a single paragraph statement of research problem. In framing yours, keep in mind the following interrogative: “To what question (or set of questions) is your research project to be an answer.” You also should add into the paragraph (a) the geographical location of your proposed research, (b) some sense of its significance, and (c) a general mention of research method; in sum, “What, why, where, and how.” All of these things will, of course, be elaborated further in later sessions.

9/26 Beginnings (2): Stating an Argument

What is the proposed argument/central thesis of your doctoral study? Address this question in a paragraph, indicating why your argument is original/significant as an anthropological exercise. Remember: this is a proposal; you will not be held to that argument if the research suggests that it cannot be sustained, or that a more compelling argument is to be made with your data. The point of framing a thesis is to have a point of
analytical and theoretical reference for your data collection.

10/3 Middle Movements (1): Composing a Literature Review

Write a 2-3 page literature review, making plain what anthropological (and/or broader social science) fields of discourse/inquiry/theory frame your project, your statement of problem, and your proposed argument/s. Pay attention to the question of what your work is expected to bring to these discursive fields.

10/10 Middle Movements (2a): Writing a Project Statement

Write a 6-7 page statement of what you intend to research in order to address the problem/s at the heart of your project – and where. (In doing so, you may wish to refer back, albeit briefly, to your statements of problem and argument earlier, thus to tie this part of the proposal to what has come before.) Obviously, demonstrating knowledge of your fieldsite/s is crucial here. Avoid generalities or vagueness of any sort; the more detail the better – but do not hold back from saying what you already know, and how it relates to your empirical objectives.

10/17 Middle Movements (2b): Writing a Project Statement, continued

10/24 No Class

10/31 Back Ends (1): Attending to Methods

Write a 2-3 page statement of the methods you intend to use. In short, the question that you are answering here is “how?” By what means are you going to accomplish the objectives detailed in your project statement? What techniques of data collection are commensurate to the analytical claims you hope to make. In preparing this section, please consult the model proposals available to you for guidance. For many anthropologists this is the most difficult part to write, especially since granting agencies are rarely satisfied with platitudes like “participant observation,” unless it is carefully qualified, its content spelled out.

11/7 Back Ends (2): Assaying Significance/Contribution

Write a one or two paragraph statement – which should build carefully on (and may repeat briefly) what has come before in the proposal – to make plain what you hold to be the significance of your work, and its contribution to existing scholarship. In so doing, remember that most people who will read this proposal are unlikely to share knowledge or (or particular interest in) your regional focus, and may even have limited
interest in the topical foci of your work; assume that it is incumbent on you to persuade them why it is worth reading that work.

11/14 The End: Presenting a Complete Proposal

By now, you should be in a position to complete a draft of a full proposal, and are expected to do so for this class – in which it will be discussed. Please circulate it, through Alma, by midnight on 11/26. Everyone is required to read ALL the proposals in preparation for the final session on 11/30. Please note that this session could run on, depending on the number of students taking the course; if so, we shall simply continue, with appropriate breaks and refreshments, until we finish. Please ensure that you clear your calendar for that afternoon.

11/21 THANKSGIVING BREAK (No class)

11/28 The End: Presenting a Complete Proposal (continued)

* Because time does not permit a session dedicated to writing budgets, we offer the following suggestion: that you prepare a mock itemized budget, using the model cases discussed earlier in the semester – but adjusting them for the particular cost-of-living requirements of your region, length of time in the field, cheapest quoted airfares, equipment needs, etc. In so doing, you may wish to check online the current budgetary limits and templates set by the NSF, Wenner-Gren, and SSRC; these change over time, and need to be taken carefully into consideration.