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<http://www.rasmusen.org/special/proposals.pdf>.

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PhD Proposal Defenses

A PhD proposal defense is just that: a defense of a proposal for a PhD thesis. You are trying to persuade a faculty committee that you have an idea that is interesting, new, and workable. You are **not** trying to explain the idea, lay out a model, give a history of the idea, or show how much you know. A proposal defense is not a workshop. Also, the point is not to get through a presentation smoothly, and certainly not to avoid questions. Usually the absence of questions means you are doing very badly, that what you are saying is obvious, or irrelevant, or incomprehensible.

The 3-essay form has contributed to the problem. Students tend to give a workshop on the first essay, spend 10 minutes trying to give a workshop on the second, and spend 2 minutes mumbling about what they might do for a third, with no attempt to relate the essays even if in fact they could be a unified dissertation.

I've decided I am going to vote No on any more such dissertation proposals. A proposal is really much easier than a finished dissertation. I think the hurdle should be relatively low, and a proposal should be done about 18 months before the dissertation is completed. It is, after all, just a proposal. No part of the dissertation needs to be finished. But every part needs to be started.

So what should you do?

1. Lay out your idea briefly. Don't lay out a model, necessarily, or show any regression results. Just state one proposition— in words— or propose one regression and say what it will be showing.
2. Say why your idea is interesting.

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3. Discuss related work, or why there isn't any, to show that what you are doing is new.

4. Say what you need to do to finish the dissertation, and demonstrate that you can do it. This means, for example, showing us that you have an idea for a model that can prove the proposition, or showing that the data exists and you can get it.

You can give the committee any essay drafts you have written, but you don't have to. What you do have to give them is a proposal. The essential part of this is a 5-page document answering the questions above briefly. Among other things, this document should describe the datasets you are using and at least one regression or theoretical proposition for each essay. It should not contain a full literature review, but it should very briefly discuss why your idea is different from the one article which is closest to your idea.

Then, in your oral presentation, ration your time. Usually students talk about the part of the dissertation that is closest to being finished. That is backwards. If you have already written a draft of one chapter, and the committee have seen it, the writing can defend itself, or at least provoke the right questions. The part of the dissertation that is not written yet is totally defenseless unless you talk about it. So spend the most time talking about that.

Usually faculty are merciful, perhaps overly so, and do not do a good job of quality control. The advisor is worn down by continual lack of progress by the student, and the rest of the committee sympathizes with him and wants to be deferential. I've decided I'm going to be tougher and say No to any proposal that isn't presented as a proposal.

As I said earlier, though, I don't believe in a high hurdle for proposals. I will continue to approve mediocre proposals and even to act as primary advisor for them. But you should propose a thesis, not give a seminar, at your defense.