



University Resources

Navigating the Dissertation Series:

http://www.upenn.edu/gsc/programs/TA_PhD/nav_dis.html
3615 Locust Walk
Phone: (215) 746-6868
Fax: (215) 746-6874
E-mail: gsc@pobox.upenn.edu

The GSE Student Handbook:

<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/student/handbook.html>

Learning Resources Center:

<http://dolphin.upenn.edu/~dasp/trlpage.html>
3820 Locust Walk (Harnwell College House / High Rise East) Suite 110
Hours: Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Phone: (215) 573-9235
Fax: (215) 898-9301
E-mail: tutoring@pobox.upenn.edu

Counseling and Psychological Services:

<http://dolphin.upenn.edu/~caps/>
133 S. 36th Street, 2nd Floor Mellon Bank Building
Phone: (215) 898-7021
Fax: (215) 573-8966
E-mail: caps@pobox.upenn.edu

Van Pelt Library:

<http://www.library.upenn.edu/vanpelt/>
3420 Walnut Street
Phone: (215) 898-7555
Fax: (215) 898-0559
E-mail: library@pobox.upenn.edu

GSE Student Records Office:

3700 Walnut Street, Second Floor
Forms on-line: <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/academics/forms.html>
Phone: (215) 898-7379
E-mail: sro@gse.upenn.edu

GSE Computing:

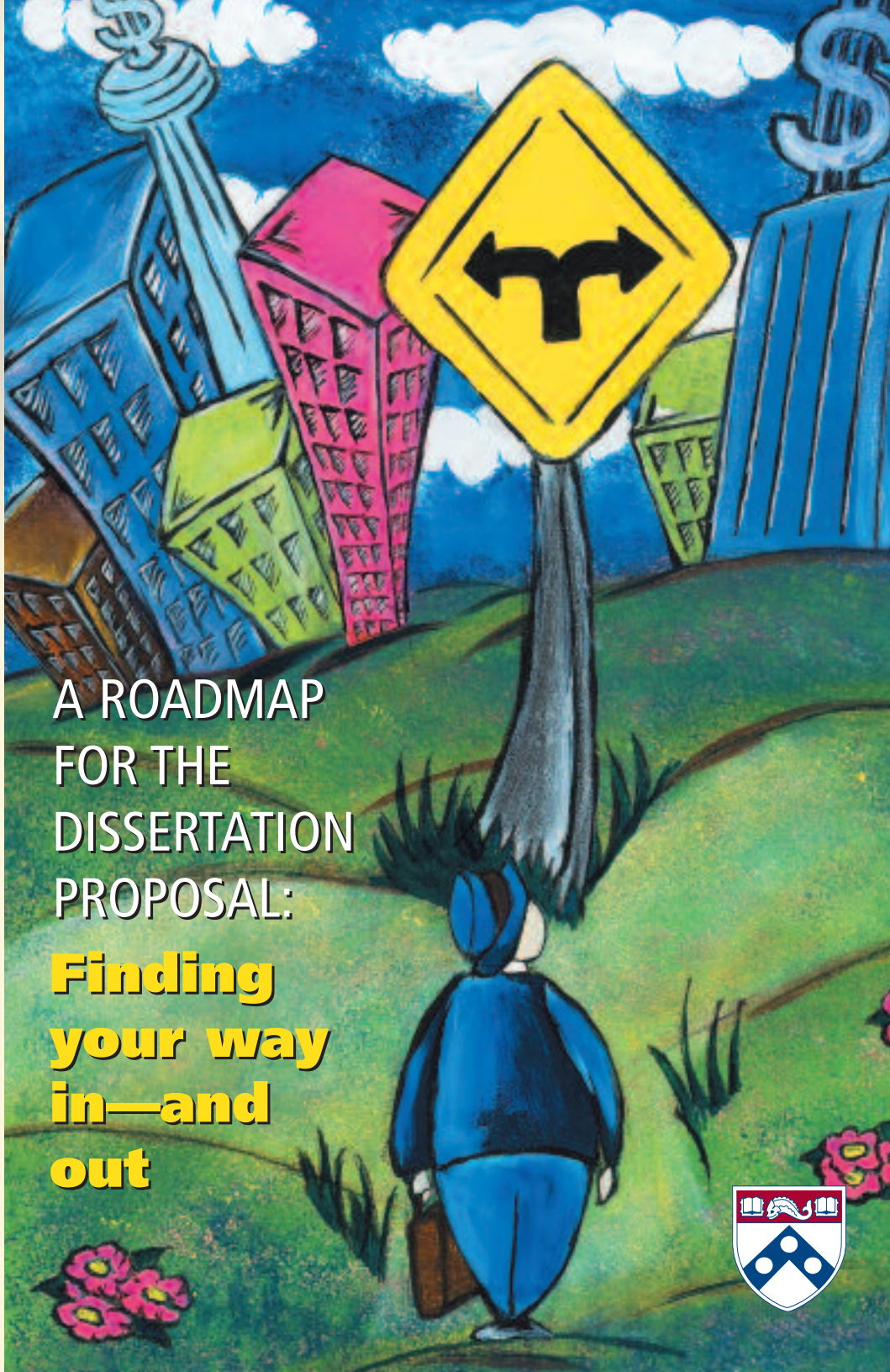
<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/computing/index.html>
GSE Computer Lab Room 125
Hours: Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Phone: (215) 898-1847
E-mail: help@gse.upenn.edu

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A ROADMAP
FOR THE
DISSERTATION
PROPOSAL:

**Finding
your way
in—and
out**



From the starting gate to the completed proposal

This roadmap, while it appears linear, represents a process that is frequently recursive. Its purpose is to break down the often-overwhelming task of developing the dissertation proposal into more manageable steps. An additional goal of this roadmap is to offer some structure to the dissertation proposal process within which there is still much room for individuality and creativity.

7 Look at some recent dissertations and/or proposals in your field

Dissertations are located in the Van Pelt Library (<http://www.library.upenn.edu/>), or can be obtained by inter-library loan or from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan. GSE oral proposal and final defense hearings are on-line at http://www.gse.upenn.edu/academics/hearings_search.html. Focus your attention on the abstract, research questions, and methodology. Reading the first chapter can be most useful.

8 Do some preliminary writing

Draft research questions based on your own curiosity and interest in the topic. Write one paragraph describing your research interest. Share this writing with other people including your advisor, fellow students, and individuals outside of your field.

ROADBLOCK

Writer's Block—Do you find yourself waiting to be “in the mood” before you can start writing? The most prolific and successful writers write as a ritual, establishing a set routine, time and location. Understand that everything doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, all will be edited.

9 Consider the individuals who might serve on your committee

At least two committee members must be members of the standing/associated faculty at Penn. Consider the individuals' areas of expertise and what each can contribute. Also, consider the relationships among the potential committee members and their availability. A list of current faculty and their research interests is available on the GSE website at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/>. Just follow the link for faculty research. Be sure to talk with other students about their experiences.

10 Persistence Pays Off!

Recognize that you need to negotiate successful membership within your department and committee, just as you do in other communities such as family and work.

11 Forms to Complete

A request for Appointment of the Dissertation Committee form must be completed, signed by your advisor and division chair, and submitted with a copy of your proposed dissertation abstract to the Student Records Office. The Assistant Dean must formally approve the committee at least two weeks prior to holding your Oral Proposal Hearing.

NOTE: Any proposed committee member who is not associated with the University of Pennsylvania is considered an external member. The External Committee Member Request form must be filled out then signed by the proposed external committee member, with his/her curriculum vitae (CV) attached. All forms are available on-line at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/academics/forms.html>

1 Meet with your advisor

The place to begin the dissertation journey is by (re)connecting with your advisor. You can share your updated plan for beginning—and completing—your dissertation proposal. Your conversation might include an update on your recent work experience or a text that has suggested a possible topic for your research. This is an excellent opportunity to share your ideas for dissertation topics or a research site. An important objective of this meeting should be to develop a timeline that will move you forward with your dissertation.



2 Take ownership of your dissertation

Don't expect your advisor to be your support system! You are responsible for making it happen. Take the initiative in creating the kind of structure and deadlines you know you need to be successful.

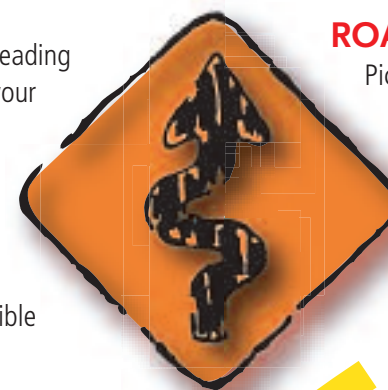


5 Connect with other students in your program

Other students can offer their valuable advice, perspectives, and experiences. It is highly recommended that you join a group of students who are at the same stage in the dissertation process. They can provide support in ways that even close friends and family cannot.

ROADBLOCK

Picking the right group of colleagues is important. Pick fellow students with whom you do not feel competitive and who are positive problem-solvers.



6 Dabble in the research on this topic

What is the focus of recent research? What disciplines, theories and/or genres inform the topic? Do you find this reading interesting? The goal is to get an updated view on the topic, not to do a complete literature review at this point.

Caution: Do not get sidetracked by reading at any point in the process. Monitor your reading so you can catch yourself procrastinating.

ROADBLOCK

Picking a dissertation topic that is accomplishable as opposed to a possible Pulitzer Prize winner is important.

4 Consider possible topics for your dissertation

What *matters* to you? What questions emerge from your own experiences or practice? What current issues are particularly fascinating to you? What courses did you most enjoy? Think about the access you have to certain populations and locations for data collection. Another source of ideas might be the people in a setting in which you could do your research. Consider your professional goals. How do you want to use this dissertation to help you meet these goals? The objective is to determine a topic for your dissertation that will captivate you and hold your interest over time. You might want to keep a journal of your ideas.

ROADBLOCK

Sometimes students have difficulty with decision-making. Are you the type of person who is afraid of making a mistake, or picking the wrong topic? Speaking to your advisor, colleagues and friends about possible difficulties may help.



13 Draft the proposal and the abstract

The structure of the proposal should include a statement of the problem or question, the importance of the topic, prior research that informs this study, the research methodology, possible assumptions, limitations and potential outcomes. Each major section—the problem and research questions, literature review and methodology—must be related to the others. The literature review informs the development of the research questions, and the methodology must be designed to answer the research questions. Study other students' dissertation proposals as examples of how this works. Depending on your particular field, there may be other expectations.



14 Meet with each committee member for feedback

Be sure to give them ample time—at least 3 weeks—to read your draft(s). You will want to continue to be productive during this time by reading, talking to peers, and incorporating feedback that your committee members will offer.

At least two weeks prior to the hearing date, submit your request for an oral proposal hearing at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/academics/oralproposalhearing.html>. The request will be sent to your committee chair for approval. Once approved, the Student Records Office will notify you and your committee members.

12 Meet with each potential committee member to discuss your research

Prepare a one-page summary of your ideas drawn from the preliminary writing that you have done. You may want to send this to each committee member prior to this meeting. Based on these meetings, ask a member of the standing faculty to serve as your dissertation chair and discuss with him/her your choices for other committee members.

15 Refine the proposal and prepare for the proposal hearing

Incorporate the comments from each committee member into the proposal. After these meetings, you may be ready to set a date for the proposal hearing with your committee members.

Discuss with your dissertation chair, his/her expectations for the proposal hearing. You may be expected to begin the hearing with an oral presentation. It is a useful exercise to anticipate questions that may arise during the proposal hearing and think about—or outline—your responses. Plan to tape record the hearing with your committee's permission.

ROADBLOCK

The dissertation process is paved with frustration and blows to one's self-esteem. It can stir up behavior patterns and emotional vulnerabilities, such as:

- Feeling incompetent and not smart enough to be a Ph.D. or Ed.D.
- Feeling that earning a doctorate will cost you a relationship
- Feeling like an imposter
- Feeling overwhelmed, like there is no end in sight

Remember: Self-doubt is normal in this process. Try to focus on the task at hand. If these feelings consistently distract you from your work on the proposal, speaking to a close friend or counselor may help.

