

DISSERTATION PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Proposal Commenting Do's and Don'ts

When reviewing a peer's proposal, the following questions are always important ones to keep in mind:

- Does the proposal succinctly introduce the topic and specific research question(s) or problem(s)?
- Does the proposal provide sufficient context for an academic reader unfamiliar with the topic, region, or author's discipline?
- How well does the proposal describe how the dissertation seeks to draw from and contribute to existing literature on the topic?
- How well does the proposal describe and justify the sources and methods of investigation to undertake this research?
- Does the proposal include information about how the researcher will analyze the evidence he/she will gather in order to answer the research question(s) posed?
- Does the proposal offer a convincing description of the researcher's qualifications to undertake this project successfully (including relevant summer research experiences)?
- Is the budget put forth reasonable given the dissertation research plans outlined?

However, the transition from merely reviewing a peer's proposal to actually making productive and useful comments on one is a learned skill. Reflecting on the Dissertation Proposal Development Program's experience in running proposal writing workshops, we have identified some techniques for peer commenting that warrant emulation, and less helpful ones that we encourage commenters to avoid.

Do's

We have found the most productive and useful comments to be ones that address the content of the proposal in a meaningful way, and that explain to the author *why* certain text works (or does not work) in the document. See below for some examples of such substantive comments that address issues of organization, clarity, and ask specific questions about research plans/methods.



Could you be more specific here about what the analytic framework is? What analytic framework is your project engaging with? Maybe it's a matter of being more direct here.

Delete

Reply

Do: Ask a question about specific parts of the proposal.



You do an excellent job in your abstract outlining the project generally, your methods, and the lenses that you plan to use on this project. The last sentence could be tailored (split up, or maybe reworded) to elaborate further on how these systems are "masked as patriotic values." The part about patriotic values seems to be added in and could be more explicitly tied in.

Delete

Reply

Do: Place critiques about word or phrase choices in context.



I think a lot of what you are saying here is really compelling—I wonder if you could push even further on how you are contributing to Japanese studies—you aren't just including them in the history, but you are reshaping that history via this inclusion—I think you are clearly getting at a significance that is larger and it would be great to articulate that.

Delete

Reply

1



I would restructure the opening sentence a bit. I see that you did that below, and I like the direction that you are heading. I would say something about how they released their processes within a few years of each other, and THEN state that it was no coincidence. This would lead nicely into your discussion of the rapid development of photographic technologies as well as tourist (if you will) photography and your important efforts in redefining the accepted historical progression of those developments.

Delete

Reply

1

Do: Give concrete suggestions based off of stated critique(s) along with any compliments.

I would like to see more on what makes Zanzibar an interesting comparison site. You briefly summarizes that "Zanzibar has a very distinct history of racial and ethnic tension, a strong focus on nativism, bloodlines and lineage, and an uneasy relationship with mainland Tanzania" but it doesn't do a convincing job of how these differences are related to your research questions and your focus (such as bodies, kinship and genealogy, and social organization).

Delete

Reply

1

This is a clearly-written introduction and description of your project, providing rationale for your project and details of its focus.

Delete

Reply

Do: Include rationale in any complimentary comments.

Do: Connect your critique(s) to other key parts of the proposal.

Don'ts

As a general rule, we ask students to avoid commenting on the minutiae of a proposal such as grammar and syntax, especially without first foregrounding why the change would impact the quality of the proposal's content. We also discourage comments that are complimentary but lack any specificity. See below for a few examples of such unproductive comments.



This seems interesting. Could this be elaborated upon, or could you bring back in your project more?

Delete

Reply



Could you put this specific information higher?

Delete

Reply

Don't: Provide vague suggestions for improvement.



Excellent abstract.

Delete

Reply



This is v. good and interesting

Delete

Reply

Don't: Provide complimentary comments without rationale.



I would choose in-line citations style rather than using endnotes because here in the literature review section, I think you might want to show that you're well aware of the relevant literatures.

Delete

Reply



I would phrase this differently—Following Guha and Stoler... Or something like that

Delete

Reply



– cut out “the decades of” part before “the 1970s and 80s”



Content analysis part needs to be a separate paragraph, rather than included in the oral history part.

Delete

Reply

Don't: Copyedit, but rather focus your comments on the content of the draft proposal.

Other helpful tips

Another productive approach to commenting is to use the third person when referring to the author, rather than addressing the author directly. Alternatively, depersonalizing comments entirely from the author and instead addressing the document can help to take the focus off of the author and onto the product.

Try this...



I had similar reaction to this paragraph. I think the first sentence is a little vague, and think it would help to have specifics throughout. In general in the first two questions, it was very clear how the methods relates to the question, but with this last one the connection is not quite as clear or as specific.

Delete

Reply



'and non-profit organizations'

This seems to be the first time, that the non-profit orgs appear in the proposal as interlocutors in the project. Why does the state have to interact with them? (Does it have to do with questions of displacement of populations etc.?)

Delete

Reply



I suggest a rephrasing of the final sentence of this paragraph..."What was it about the reconstruction.." As posed, it calls to mind readily available answers such as a universal humanism or other shared conceptions of common humanity that are often circulating in numerous political, legal, philosophical discourses....

Delete

Reply

Note: Even some comments in the "Do's" section violate the best practices stated above.

Not this...



Could you be more specific when laying out this argument? Other than applying the concept of kinship to industrial situations, I don't really get what Shever's intervention is here, or what it does for you.

Delete

Reply



you don't need to "feel that" language proficiency will be an advantage! it IS an advantage! so say that. You can also use more declarative language than just saying that your language skills "will come in handy." Finally, rather than saying your familiarity with the space and your connections "is something I can utilize," can you instead say "I will draw on my familiarity with the space and my connections within the industry to establish credibility with my informants"? This connection seems particularly important and advantageous to you since the soft-porn industry operates so anonymously!

Delete

Reply



you introduce this tension, and then immediately place the issues within western historical time by categorizing your period of study as 'early modern'. don't know if you can avoid this in your discipline, but i wanted to point out the meta-tension here

Delete

Reply