This is a sample syllabus for Geography 491: “Research in Geography.” Each year I update a large portion of the readings. So, the readings here are not necessarily going to be the readings you will see in this year’s teaching. This course is about research proposal writing. It has been the traditional course in the Geography Department to help shepherd students through the research proposal writing process. It is an important course even if you are not planning on doing masters or Ph.D. dissertation research. It is an important skill to have for your future in academia or elsewhere.

Geography 491 Syllabus
Research in Geography
(Thesis Proposal Writing)
Professor Jesse Ribot
Ribot@Illinois.edu
Place: TBA
Thought Spring Semester Each Year
This was the Spring 2015 Syllabus

This course entails detailed examination and discussion of the methods of initiating and executing research projects in human or physical geography (taught in separate sections); requires students to write a research proposal of a quality suitable for a graduate thesis. This course is designed to guide you through the doctoral and master’s thesis proposal writing process. That process involves a) identifying a good problem, b) developing a researchable question that could help us to help solve that problem, c) framing that problem and question in theory so as to make explicit its working parts and potential determinants, d) using that framing to identify independent and dependent variables, e) using that framing and your knowledge about that problem and existing theory to develop hypotheses or to sharpen your overarching research question and to develop operational questions, f) identifying the data you would need to test your hypotheses or to answer your operational questions, g) developing the methods you would need to obtain the data, h) identifying the analyses you need to do to use the data to test your hypotheses and answer your questions so as to solve your problem. The course will go through these working parts of proposal writing with an emphasis on clear exposition so that you can write a convincing proposal to a critical audience of academics and funding agencies.

21 January – Introduction
• What is a thesis
• What is a thesis proposal
• What is a good research problem
• Managing your advisor and your own time
• Schedule Presentations of your Proposals

Assignment 1: Talk to your thesis advisor
Before the 11 February class, talk with your advisor about:
• How s/he expects you to work with her/him during this semester to get your thesis proposal finalized:
  o Ask how s/he likes to work with students on thesis proposal development.
  o Tell her/him that the class you are taking suggests that you hand in materials only AFTER the thesis advisor has given you feedback.
  o Please schedule times with him/her to get feedback on your ideas, your abstracts, and your full proposals.
• Grants your advisor thinks you can or should apply for,
• The format for the proposal (if any) that your advisor requires, and
• Your thesis ideas – come to class with ideas that your advisor thinks are viable.

28 January – Presentations & discussions of your thesis ideas in class

Assignment 2: Sketch of Thesis Idea. In this meeting I want all of you to discuss your proposed thesis ideas: the topic, the problem, why the problem matters to you and to others, the main questions that you hope to ask. Each of you will have five minutes to lay out your ideas. Tell us your proposed thesis ideas to date. You need to be able to articulate your ideas to someone who is not in your discipline. We are a mix of natural and social scientists, so if social scientists use words like ‘deconstruction’ or ‘entitlement’ – you need to do so in a way that a natural scientist can understand the concept (define your terms) and why it matters. If natural scientists are presenting on ‘computer interfaces’ or ‘stream meanders’, please articulate your questions so a social scientist can understand what you are evaluating and why it matters. In short, today’s exercise is one in identifying what a good question is. It is also an exercise in clear articulation of your ideas. You need to convince us that the problem you identified is interesting and that you have a good research question to accompany it. Two things you will want to keep in mind: 1) Funding agencies want to know why your research matters and to whom; 2) They want to know how it is useful (theoretically and/or practically) and how it will bring glory to their institution. Convince us.

• If you have a good research question, you should be able answer:
  o What is the problem? Two kinds should be present in all proposals:
    ▪ Theoretical problem?
    ▪ Practical problem?
  o For whom is it a problem? Who cares and why?
  o What is the puzzle you want to solve?
  o What is the question you want to ask?
  o What is your hypothesis about the nature of the puzzle or the answer to this question?
  o Why does the answer matter? To whom will that answer be of use and why?
  o Of what is your proposed case study/project to be a case? See Lund 2014.

Come to class with your answers to these questions written down on paper. Please hand me a copy in class. You need to have thought this through before arriving in class. This is not a marked assignment. It is an exercise that you need to do for yourself.
Required Reading

- Please look over the thesis proposal outline, annexed below, to get an idea of what I think are the main components of a thesis proposal. This will differ depending on your advisor, which funding sources you are going after, and your discipline. But, in general, these are the components of a proposal. Also please look over the assignments, which are all listed below the schedule.
- Look to see what funding sources are out there. Find at least four calls for proposals and read them over.

4 February – Presentations & discussions of your thesis ideas in class (continued)

Required Readings

- Sample successful proposals – to be distributed by e-mail. Look these over. They are examples you can learn from.

Do these proposals get at the three questions that a proposal should answer (a la Watts):
- What will we learn that we do not already know?
- Why is it worth knowing?
- How will we know if they findings are valid?

Recommended Reading

- How to Read a Book: Strategies for Getting the Most out of Non-Fiction Reading http://utminers.utep.edu/trcurry/howtoread.pdf
- OWL Website at Purdue
  Standard writing guide website. Truckloads of information on everything from abstract writing to peer reviewing. http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/
- Lund, Christian. 2014. “Of What is This a Case?”

8 February Due Date for Assignment 3 (see description under ‘Assignments’), one-pagers are due

A summary of your proposed thesis is due by e-mail to the whole class on 8 February. Everyone must read and give your fellow students comments in track changes by Thursday morning, 12 February—send your comments to each author and to me. For our discussions of these written products, I expect that everyone will have read all of them (including those outside of your discipline). Discussions will be based on the written materials.
We will select four of them to discuss in class on the 11th February and 4 more for the 18th March.

11 February Class – One-pagers Discussions – Hypotheses and Methods
Required Readings:
• NSF grant reviewer tells all
  http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2310/nsf_grant_reviewer_tells_all/
• NSF Merit Review – look over.
  Criteria that NSF grant reviewers hold the proposals to. Note that these are kind of flexible depending on what discipline and sub-discipline we may apply to. The section "Merit Review Facts" may be useful.
• Some useful resources for helping in proposal writing – look over:
  http://iis.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop

18 February Class – One-pagers discussion – Formulating Hypotheses

25 February – One-pagers discussion – Getting from Hypotheses to Research Questions

4 March – One-pagers discussion – From Questions to Methods

Assignment 4: Full proposal draft for circulation: Before circulating it, you need to have your advisor look at it. Your advisor is the one who ultimately approves everything you do!

Class meetings: 11, 18, 25 March; 1, 29 April; and 6 May – Assignment 5: Discuss Full Proposals Drafts – see table below. (No Classes on 8, 15, 22 April.)

Presentations – See instructions under Assignment 3, below.

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11 May Full proposal due to your advisor and to me.
Thesis Writing Assignments
Geography 491

Requirement: This semester, please attend all colloquiums in which your fellow students present their doctoral proposals. As part of the qualifying exam process in the Geography Department, all doctoral students are required to make a public presentation of their thesis proposal. So, this is one opportunity for you to see the presentation of well thought out proposals. These presentations will also show you that no proposal is perfect or unassailable. Proposals are a steppingstone into research. They serve several purposes:

• Clarification of your own thoughts,
• Communication of your ideas to others,
• Serving as a basis for dialogue with your advisor and committee,
• Helping you to get funding,
• Acting as a road map for your entry into the ever-changing landscape of your research.

Requirement: All of you need to work closely with your thesis advisors. If you don’t yet have one you need to find one – you can talk with me about how to do that. If you do have an advisor, please meet with your advisor soon to talk over your ideas for your thesis. Your advisor is your main interlocutor concerning the development of your thesis proposal. Your advisor needs to be engaged in every step of this process and needs to approve your ideas, your abstracts, and your proposals. So, meet regularly with your advisor this semester! You need to keep your advisor in the loop. I may like your proposal and I am happy to give you feedback on it once. But I am not the one who matters. Your advisor is the one who has to approve your proposal.

Assignment 1: Talk to your thesis advisor
Your first act this semester is to talk with your advisor. This is required!

• How s/he expects you to work with her/him during this semester to get your thesis proposal finalized:
  o Ask how s/he likes to work with students on thesis proposal development.
  o Tell her/him that the class you are taking suggests that you hand in materials only AFTER the thesis advisor has given you feedback.
  o Please schedule times with him/her to get feedback on your ideas, your abstracts, and your full proposals.
• Grants your advisor thinks you can or should apply for,
• The format for the proposal (if any) that your advisor requires, and
• Your thesis ideas – come to class with ideas that your advisor thinks are viable.

Assignment 2: Sketch of Thesis Idea. In the second class meeting you must discuss your proposed thesis ideas: the topic, the problem, why the problem matters to you and to others, the main questions that you hope to ask. Each of you will have five minutes to lay out your
ideas. Tell us your proposed thesis ideas to date. You need to be able to articulate your ideas to someone who is not in your discipline. We are a mix of natural and social scientists, so if social scientists use words like ‘deconstruction’ or ‘entitlement’ – you need to do so in a way that a natural scientist can understand the concept (define your terms) and why it matters. If natural scientists are presenting on ‘computer interfaces’ or ‘stream meanders’, please articulate your questions so a social scientist can understand what you are evaluating and why it matters. In short, today’s exercise is one in identifying what a good question is. It is also an exercise in clear articulation of your ideas. You need to convince us that the problem you identified is interesting and that you have a good research question to accompany it. Two things you will want to keep in mind: 1) Funding agencies want to know why your research matters and to whom; 2) They want to know how it is useful (theoretically and/or practically) and how it will bring glory to their institution. Convince us.

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  o Why does the answer matter? To whom will that answer be of use and why?
  o Of what is your proposed case study/project to be a case? See Lund 2014.

Come to class with your answers to these questions written down on paper. Please hand me a copy in class. You need to have thought this through before arriving in class. This is not a marked assignment. It is an exercise that you need to do for yourself.

**Assignment 3:** Write a two-paragraph (less than one page) summary of your thesis proposal (12 pt font). Plus, two pages with some supplementary information.

**Page 1:**

**Opening Hook:** What is the puzzle you are trying to solve. What is the problem your question will address – give us a good hook for the exciting interesting crux of why your thesis is worth reading. Two or three sentences only.

**The Problem, Question, Hypothesis:** Include the core problem you are addressing, your questions and hypotheses, why your questions matter for theory and in application to practice.

**The theoretical foundations/framework that you use to link your questions and hypotheses to the data that are required:** Help us understand how your questions and hypotheses lead you to need certain data in order to address them.

**Case and Methods:** Describe your case study and your methods. What data do you need (based on your theory)? How will you get that data (methods)?
Page 2:
1. The sources of funding you will be pursuing (list at least four – and list them even if you are already funded, list places you would look if you needed funds).
2. A list of the imagined audiences for your research findings.

Page 3:
1. The 20 documents most relevant to your hypothesis. By now you should have read them. These should be peer reviewed articles or books. This is a bibliography. It should not be web pages or gray literature. You can supplement it with gray literature and web sites, but only after listing 20 peer-reviewed articles or books.

Be prepared to present your two paragraphs to the class. Come in with questions on issues you are struggling with!

Send this assignment to everyone in class by the due date (8 February). Before class, read and comment on all of your colleagues’ first pages. Ask questions. Provide editorial guidance. Then send your comments around to everyone in the class.

Assignment 4: Draft your thesis proposal. A first draft of the proposal is due to me and TO ALL OF THE PEOPLE IN CLASS the Monday before your thesis is scheduled to be presented. The second draft will be due to me at the end of the semester. I will read and comment on your drafts. These drafts may not exceed ten pages single-spaced (12pt font) [even if you are using a grant application format that allows more than ten pages]. Please write the drafts following the template of one of the sources of funding you intend to pursue (note the funding source you are after on your proposal). BEFORE you give me your first draft or your second draft, your thesis advisor must have already seen it and given you feedback on it—feedback that you must have also worked into the proposal. Schedule your meeting with your advisor well in advance of the deadline above. I suggest you have a draft for your advisor at least two weeks before the date your thesis is presented and two weeks before the final draft is handed in if you are to have the feedback you need. I also suggest that you warn your advisor NOW that you intend to send them a draft and that you will need their feedback within one week.

Assignment 5: Presentation and critique of your full thesis proposal in class. You will not present your own thesis. The classmate who is in the schedule table will do so based on the draft you delivered to them the Monday before your proposal will be presented. Your classmate will present your work based on only the written proposal. You will not be allowed to coach them, correct them, comment on their presentation or intervene in any way. All of the other students will be asked to read and give comments on your proposal during the session. We will go over all of the elements of your proposal outlined below. After the 5 to 10 minute presentation, we will discuss your proposal for 20 minutes without your participation in the discussion. We will make recommendations for improvement. After the first 30 minutes, you can reply to what you have heard—with questions and clarifications. In our discussion we will try to cover all aspects of thesis proposal development including research design.
Developing a research proposal involves the following activities:

1. developing a research question or hypothesis;
2. locating it within the literature;
3. explaining its broader practical significance (that is, making it clear why anyone should care about what is being investigated and what might be found);
4. explaining its broader theoretical significance (that is, making it clear why scholars should care);
5. explaining what data are necessary for answering the question;
6. explaining the methods to be employed for obtaining and analyzing the data (i.e. tracing out how empirical observations will be related to the question or hypothesis);

A good doctoral-level research question must have applied as well as theoretical significance. Other research questions may have significance only for theory. I suggest that any good proposal has both. But, it is between you and your thesis advisor to decide these core matters of orientation for your research. By the time you complete your doctorate, you should have made a significant contribution to knowledge, theory, and/or methods development. Research is about finding something we do not already know or do not already have proof of. A doctorate is a certificate stating that you know how to do research. It does not mean you find something. It means you know how to find it. Hence your job is to conduct research that addresses pertinent questions and is methodologically sound.

Assignment 4: Second draft thesis proposal due at the end of the semester (11 May). This too must be read, commented on by your thesis advisor, and revised before you hand it to me. These drafts may not exceed ten pages single-spaced (12pt font). You may exceed this length if you are using a real grant proposal format for a donor you intend to approach. In that event, you may write a proposal as long as the grant proposal format calls for.

Thesis Proposal Sample Outline

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Instructions to presenters of theses: Summarize the argument and case study in 3–4 minutes [ASSUME EVERYONE HAS READ IT, so you do not have to spend much time]. Give us comments and constructive criticism in 5 more minutes. Please refer to Michael Watts’ Holy Grail article (to be circulated) for guidance on how to critique a thesis proposal. After the presenter presents, the class will discuss and comment on the proposal for 20 minutes without the author intervening – NO MATTER HOW WRONG or off the mark our discussion is! If authors want a discussion that focuses on their concerns, they must write clearly. If there are areas the writer of the proposal is stuck on, let us know in a few lines at the top of the proposal where those spots are and what your problem areas are – you can pose questions to us in writing on your proposal. Use this feedback session to it fullest. After the discussion of your proposal by everyone, the author will have a chance to ask us questions. We do not want explanations or defense – except where it is part of you asking us for help in clarifying what you are doing. Everyone must read everyone’s proposal and come to class ready to discuss it—with questions and comments.

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3. explaining its broader practical significance (that is, making it clear why anyone should care about what is being investigated and what might be found);
4. explaining its broader theoretical significance (that is, making it clear why scholars should care);
5. explaining what data are necessary for answering the question;
6. explaining the methods to be employed for obtaining and analyzing the data (i.e. tracing out how empirical observations will be related to the question or hypothesis);
7. estimating a time line; and
8. estimating funding needs.

A research question addresses an unresolved problem that has practical relevance. The question must also have theoretical relevance—let us know how answering it will contribute to the broader understanding of this problem for instances other than your particular case. At a minimum, your proposal should identify a problem where better understanding or information is likely to help us to formulate a better solution.

A typical research proposal has the following components (this is just an example—you can use a different outline if you wish):

I. Abstract—200 words
II. Introduction
   a. Problem statement
      i. What is the problem to be explored
      ii. Why is it important and to whom is it important
   b. Summary of debates around the problem
   c. Summary of hypothesis and research questions
III. Background—What does the literature have to say about your problem
IV. Research Questions and Hypotheses
V. Case
   a. Where you are going to study your problem
   b. Why this is an advantageous place for studying your problem
VI. Methods [see table below]
   a. How you get from your questions to answers
   b. Time line
VII. Budget
VIII. Bibliography

I suggest that you write your proposal based on the above outline and using the guidelines for a real existing research call for proposals (e.g. NSF, SSRC, Fulbright, MacArthur....). Write it as if you want funding.
Hypotheses/Questions/Data/Methods table: One useful way to organize a methods discussion is to break down the problem as follows:

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<th>Hypothesis or Primary Research Questions</th>
<th>Operational Questions</th>
<th>Data Required to answer operational questions</th>
<th>Methods for gathering data</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 1: Decentralization reforms leads to better representation.</td>
<td>How has representation changed over time (before and after decentralization)?</td>
<td>Measure of representation (i.e. accountability plus responsiveness) change over time in each case: -Change in accountability -Change in responsiveness -Change in citizen engagement -Change in popular demands being reflected in decisions being taken</td>
<td>Measures before and after decentralization policy implementation of: -Observation of sanctioning by population -Surveys of popular demands -Surveys of decision maker understanding of popular demand -Observation of decision making processes -Decisions (or policies) made</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 2: More democratic representation leads to more efficient forest management</td>
<td>How have outcomes varied over time (before and after decentralization reforms)?</td>
<td>Measure of outcomes over time -Change in forest management -Change in hectares under management -Quality of forest health -Change in local income from forests</td>
<td>Observation and historical interviews concerning change in forest management -Documentation of forest service of forests under management -Transect studies of ligneous density and species mix before and after decentralization reform</td>
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Question: What is the relation between representation and forestry management outcomes before and after decentralization reforms?

This table is just an example based on my own research—in the problem definition or background section you would also have to define your variables and explain what theory has to say about the relations—and why you expect a particular kind of relation. Typically such a table can be five to twenty pages long by the time you are done elaborating it. From this table you can identify the kinds of data you need, from whom and from where you need it, and the methods you will use to collect it. This can then be synthesized into one or two paragraphs in your proposal.
Recommended Methods Readings for Social Sciences: