Preparation of a Dissertation Proposal

Dissertation proposals vary immensely in their length and degree of detail and in the amount of time from inception to completion. Departments and fields also vary in their requirements and expectations. Drawing on my experience in the Heller School, I would say that the typical proposal is ideally 35-50 pages long and can be written in as little as six weeks but usually takes from 3-6 months from first draft to the proposal hearing.

Steps in the Process

1. Focusing on a topic and doing some preliminary reading.
2. Identifying the question.
3. Developing the design and specifying the data source.
4. Starting the draft and deepening all of the above.
5. While doing all this, selecting a committee chair and members; locating data; gaining access; spelling out Human Subjects provisions (if needed)

Outline of the Proposal

Think of the proposal as an embryonic version of the dissertation in which the main task is to develop a workable plan that can be reviewed by your committee in time for them to make useful suggestions and caution you on potential difficulties. Like an embryo, it has a large head and small tail. That is, the rationale and plan for collecting and analyzing data is well spelled out, but the portion on the expected findings is relatively brief and undeveloped. Here are the main sections of the proposal with suggested page allocations. Each section is parallel to a chapter and should be demarcated by a I-level heading (centered, all caps, in bold).

- **Background and Significance of the Problem** 5-7 pp.
- **Alternative Theories and Explanations** 5-7 pp.
- **Methods** 12-15 pp.

This should be the most developed section of the proposal and should contain a plan for sampling, data collection, and analysis of the data. You need to make rationalize
your question by translating the dependent and independent variables into indicators, then show where these indicators will be found in the data. If you are using an already available data set (such as the NLSY), you need to specify which individuals in the total sample will be selected for your study. You must also spell out which survey items correspond to your indicators. If you are gathering data by interview or your own survey form, you need to present the draft interview guide or survey form and specify which items correspond to your indicators. If you are interviewing or surveying or conducting focus groups, you must provide assurances to the Brandeis Office of Sponsored Programs on the use of Human Subjects. (For details, see Sponsored Programs at Brandeis website.)

Expected Findings 5-7 pp.
Here you spell out your hypotheses and describe what analytic procedures you will use to make sense out of your findings.

Research and Policy Implications 5-7 pp.

Appendixes (such as interview guide) and Bibliography 5-10 pp.
This adds up to between 37 and 53 pp. just as a rough idea of total size and shape.

General Advice

1. The hardest part is finding the question. Nobody ever tells you this. So don't be discouraged, and develop a strategy for exploring potential research questions.

2. Use headings as a way of organizing your thoughts and telegraphing the point of a section to your reader. A good way to get from start to finish without getting bogged down is to map out your headings so that they tell a story from beginning to end.

3. Start systematically listing citations in your bibliography right from the beginning. Alphabetize them. Decide on a format for publication details and follow it religiously. Then you can always look at the list you have made and feel you have accomplished something. Besides, you won't forget what you meant by (Miller, 1999) when you get to your final draft in 2004.