HOW TO BAKE A PROPOSAL: BASIC INGREDIENTS
(Prepared by Shauna Butterwick, Graduate Advisor, February 4, 2005)

What is a Proposal – a proposal provides basic information on the what, why, how, who, & when of your thesis or graduating project/paper. It is a plan or blueprint that provides an outline to you and your advisor and committee.

Basic Components: Programs and individual faculty have somewhat different expectations about the amount of detail that should be provided in a proposal; some want the equivalent of several chapters and others want something shorter. All proposals, however, usually address in some way the following questions:

What is the Problem - what is/are the issues you want to investigate? Many graduate students in education identify problems from their practice.

What is the Purpose - what is the focus of your study, how will you approach it (methodology) and what is the desired goal.

What is the Significance - what difference does your study make; what new information/knowledge can be generated as a result.

Who is the Researcher - locate yourself in relation to the problem and your study; what do you already know about the issue(s); what assumptions to you bring to the project.

What is already known – what has been written/published about the issues/problems? The bulk of your review of the literature should consist of academic published material but can include other sources of information. The purpose of the literature review is to document what's already been written about your topic, what is the current understanding or knowledge and to help you delimit your study. Many graduate students run into trouble because they have not limited their work to an area small enough and sufficiently specific. It is better to undertake a study of a selected and specific problem than to try and cover too broad a territory in a superficial manner. You may find little literature or reports of research that address *exactly* what you want to study. In those cases, you need to look at the related literatures/research reports. Ask questions of this material: How have other researchers approached the topic, what concepts have they used, what methods and what conclusions have they reached? *Keep full reference information on all your literature!* As a result of this review, what gaps in knowledge can be identified and how does your project relate to and build on the current state of knowledge? Pulling together related literatures and summarizing current knowledge on a topic or problem can be as significant a contribution as data collection.

What are the Research Questions: What questions does your study to answer? List the main questions and subquestions. These questions should bear some relationship to the description of the problem and the literature review.

Conceptual Framework: What theories and concepts will you use to inform your inquiry? Another way to think about this is, what lens will you use to look at your problem and your data. Research problems can be investigated from many different perspectives. In order to get a sense of the kinds of conceptual terrain you are working in, ask yourself the question 'what is this a case of'....the language you use to describe your project will give you clues as to the theoretical and conceptual resources you'll be looking for.

What is the Methodology - How are you going to approach your inquiry? What data do you want to gather and what methods will you use to access this data? There exists a wide variety of approaches to examining problems, including philosophical, empirical, narrative, arts-based, etc. Don't get caught up too quickly in finding a methodology and then making your question fit the methodology. Your approach or methodology study should be *logical* i.e. it should *make sense* given the kinds of research questions you have and the issues you want to examine. Decisions on how you approach your project also need to be made based on the resources and time you have at hand ('do-ability'). Describe your 'sample'. If, for example, you are going to interview people, how many will you talk to, how will you select them, how/where will you find them, what are the criteria for selecting your study participants? If you develop a survey, how do items/questions on your survey relate to your overarching research questions? What are the ethical considerations if you are using 'human subjects'.

Do you need to complete an ethical review: If your study involved collecting information from people or gathering data that is not in the 'public' domain, you need to get ethical approval. There are guidelines and forms that must be filled in before any data can be gathered. Go to this website to download forms: http://www.orsil.ubc.ca/ethics/behavioural/index.htm

Timeline: when do you want to graduate? Where are you at now? Develop a timeline that maps out the dates of the various tasks and activities to be completed. Remember to build in time for feedback from supervisors and committee members, for revisions and defenses. Pay attention to university policies and deadlines for graduation. Know when your supervisor and committee members are on leave or holiday.

PICK A TOPIC THAT YOU ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT, THAT WILL SUSTAIN YOUR INTEREST THROUGH THE PROCESS. USE THE RESOURCES OF THE ACADEMY TO DO RESEARCH ON ISSUES THAT MATTER TO YOU AND OTHERS. ENJOY YOURSELF AND THE LEARNING YOU WILL UNDERTAKE