

## Theory

The proposal's theoretical section occupies a critical, but subsidiary position in the proposal's text. You must at once demonstrate disciplinary mastery, highlight critical theoretical debates, point to shortcomings in existing research and approaches, and indicate how your work will help fill the void. All without miring your proposal in a swamp of disorienting sources, sub-themes, and subtleties. While the specifics of a proposal's theoretical section must, of course, be determined by a fellowship's requirements, the following points may prove helpful in maintaining your focus and clarity.

**Establish the context.** The primary purpose of your theoretical review is to demonstrate your familiarity with present intellectual currents and concerns. Your review should not, however, be a general survey of the field. Your discussion must quickly situate you and your work within the context of the field's theoretical themes. If you intend to conduct cross-disciplinary research, you should highlight points of intersection between various theoretical fields and justify why you are drawing on what some skeptics may consider obscure sources. At all times, keep in mind that your theoretical review must justify your research question and help determine your research design.

**Point out debates and disjuncture; expose the cracks and highlight the payoffs.** Your second primary task in reviewing existing theory and literature is to justify the need for and interest in your proposed research. Justification for research can come from a variety of sources. At one level, new events or developments may justify an empirical review of a long-accepted theory's empirical foundations (e.g., why no democratization in places with a strong middle class?). You may also highlight rival claims within the literature of your field that can only be resolved through empirical work (e.g., some claim peasants are motivated by economic forces, others say they are not). Regardless, attempt to highlight seeming paradoxes or internal contradictions in the existing literature. Then demonstrate how your work will contribute to their resolution.

**Privilege elegance over expansiveness.** Graduate students tend to use the theory section as a thorough review of past approaches while pointing to minor subtleties and differences. Unless yours is a purely theoretical project, the theory section is intended to provide only the foundation and justification for your research, not a treatise on the theory itself. As with the rest of the proposal, aim for a clear and democratic tone that is accessible without being shallow.

**Show your knowledge and expertise without being pedantic or dismissive.** As with the rest of the proposal, you must demonstrate your expertise and qualifications without being dismissive of others' work and ideas. (See also the section on style for more on tone). Many students stereotype or 'straw man' past approaches in an effort to highlight weaknesses and shortcomings. Committee members may interpret the too easy dismissal of previous works as lacking respect or appreciation for the field. You also run the risk of offending committee members who are attached to a particular approach or author. For all you know, one of the people you criticize could be reviewing your proposal. As Przeworski writes, "Good proposals demonstrate awareness of alternative viewpoints and argue the author's position in such a way as to address the field broadly, rather than developing a single sectarian tendency indifferent to alternatives." Hyperbole and hubris will, needless to say, go unappreciated. Without low-balling your qualifications, avoid presenting yourself as your discipline's savior or prophet.