Purpose: These guidelines describe the expected format for PhD dissertation proposals in the Division of Public Health. Some proposals may require modification due to the nature of the research proposed. Substantive deviations from these guidelines require the approval of the candidate’s committee.

Length: Sufficient to include all necessary components, with a minimum of 15 pages and a maximum of 25 single-spaced pages including figures or tables. Pages must be single-spaced, with 1 inch margins, and 11- or 12-point font. References do not count in the page count but must be referenced at relevant points in the proposal (i.e., in Significance, Innovation, and Approach) and included in a separate section at the end in a well-organized bibliography.

Title Page: include project title, student’s name, chair of committee, and committee members (if known) and date of this document.

The Body of Proposal:

Specific aims – This section should describes the goals of the project and also serve as an executive summary of the project. Clearly and succinctly describe the project’s immediate goals in terms of hypotheses to be tested and/or research questions to be answered. Succinctly describe the study design and procedures. Briefly give enough background information to indicate the long-term importance of the specific information being sought through this study. Do not cite references in this section. This section should not exceed 1.5 pages in length and normally should be about one page.

Significance – Describe the scientific context for the study, summarizing previous related research. Describe the gap(s) in the literature that this project will address. This section should be well-referenced, including the most relevant references for the proposed project. It may also include highlights of prior research that you or your advisor or other committee members have done. You may use subheadings for this section if appropriate for your proposal. This section should generally be 3-5 pages in length.

Innovation – Describe what is innovative or new about your proposed research, and how it addresses the gaps or needs you described in the “Significance” section. This section should be the shortest, anywhere from one paragraph to one page long.

Approach – Describe your proposed research methods in detail. The format of this section may be tailored to meet the needs of the specific study being proposed. Use subheadings such as those listed below to organize the Approach section. Not all these subheadings will be relevant to every proposal, and some proposals will need other subheadings. This should be the longest section of the proposal, usually 10-15 pages in length.

Preliminary Studies – If you have done preliminary work for your research that is part of your dissertation work, describe the relevant details of what you’ve done so far. This could include any data already collected, any initial exploratory or descriptive analyses of data or database, initial drafting or development of a questionnaire, related pilot studies, etc.
Study setting – Describe the location, organizational context, clinical site(s), or other setting in which the research would take place.

Study subjects – Indicate the source(s) of study subjects, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the anticipated number to be studied.

Intervention – If an intervention is to be implemented and/or evaluated, describe it.

Data collection – Describe the sources of key data items on each subject. When applicable, the sequence of data collection activities for a typical subject should be given. A diagram can be helpful when data will come from several sources or when multiple observations over time are to be obtained. If there are plans to monitor and assure data quality (such as duplicate data for some or all subjects, cross-checks of one data source against another, or other techniques), describe them briefly. Also specify what role you, the doctoral candidate, will play in data collection.

Measures – Describe the instruments or measurements used, and what ways they have been validated in past studies, or will be validated in this study.

Data analysis – Describe how the data will be organized to address each of the specific aims, indicating the statistical techniques to be used. Dummy tables or figures may be helpful.

Sample Size and Power – Summarize the results of statistical power or sample-size calculations.

Human Subjects – Describe whether an IRB approval has been obtained or when and how it will be obtained. Describe the risks and benefits for human subjects to participate in this research. Address the inclusion or exclusion of racial or ethnic minorities, women, children, and vulnerable populations (such as pregnant women, prisoners, critically ill persons, or mentally incompetent persons) from this study, and the rationale for their inclusion or exclusion. This section should usually be about 1 page in length.

Outlines of Papers – Give a succinct working title and description or outline for each of the 3 papers to be generated from this work in fulfillment of the dissertation requirements. This section should usually be 1.5 to 3 pages in length.

References cited – Provide citations to key literature references used in the proposal. The exact number of references will depend on the topic of research, but there should be a minimum of 15 references, and there will often be many more. There is no page limit for this section.