BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM SECTION
AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

Definition of Terms
(See The Guide to the ALM Thesis, page 42)

In this section, all important terms and acronyms should be explained, especially those that may be ambiguous, not readily understood, or used in a special way. Examples include such terms as “romantic revolutionary,” “embargo trope,” “aggression,” or “negative reinforcement.” Often when you have worked closely with a topic for a while, it becomes difficult to believe that any terms could be ambiguous, since you think you have a clear idea in your own mind about what they should mean. If you are unsure which terms need definition, show your proposal to a friend unfamiliar with the topic or to your proseminar Instructor.

In the social, biological, and behavioral sciences it is especially important to establish operational definitions. “Crime,” for example, might be defined by police reports, victim reports, vital statistics, arrest reports, self-reports, or direct observation, or it might be defined as some composite measure of these instances. “Old age” would be defined as twelve years for dogs, but twelve days for the mayfly. How you define such operational terms will considerably affect the conclusions you reach in your thesis. Be sure also that you will be using these terms in a consistent fashion; the way you define “crime” in Chapter 1 of the thesis should be the way you still define it in Chapter 4, unless you have good and explicit reasons for not doing so.

You will have to search through your research problem section and the background section to make sure you have located ALL the terms and acronyms. When you finish the methods and limitations sections, you should add the terms and acronyms from these sections to your list. You should locate glossaries in the literature and on the Internet. It would be prudent to find several meanings and prepare the meaning that is proper for the use of the word or acronym in your thesis proposal. You should not just make up definitions. In some cases, you may want to cite a reference for either the definition itself or a place the reader could go to learn more about a background topic that is important in the development of the focused topic you have selected. If your targeted thesis director has defined a term in a certain way, you would be wise to adopt that definition.

Background of the Problem Section
(See The Guide to the ALM Thesis, pages 42 and 43)

The fourth section, the background of the problem, should explain the origins of the research question or problem, drawing on your preliminary reading. All cited materials should be presented with specific references, prepared according to one of the three
methods shown later in this section of the Guide. In the background section, you should review what has been done already in this area of research and the way(s) in which the proposed project will differ from earlier work. You should show that you are familiar with the major current opinions or interpretations concerning the problem you have chosen so that you do not simply duplicate existing or outdated research.

The background section, usually several pages in length, must be directed specifically to the research problem and must indicate the carefully documented views of experts. The aim is not to provide simply a general overview of the topic or to present a string of references to others’ works. Rather, it is to demonstrate that a specific problem has been identified and to show its relationship to the research of other investigators. If, for instance, you were writing about George Orwell, you should mention the work of his principal biographer, Bernard Crick, and show how your views about some aspect of Orwell’s work differ from, corroborate, or extend Crick’s views, as well as those of several other recent critics of the Orwellian texts on which you intend to write.

Longer than the statement of the research problem itself, this section must be well organized. Others’ research should be considered in a systematic fashion, according to topic, date, perspective, or some other logical means. It cannot be an unorganized mass; it must have some obvious flow, a sense of continuity, and an overall theme or point(s). In order to write the thesis itself, you will have to impose order on large amounts of material. Here is your chance to show your proseminar Instructor, the research advisor—and ultimately your thesis director—that you have mastered the organizational skills required for the job.

Once you have established the focus of your own research in relation to this prior scholarship, one or more detailed examples should be presented that illustrate how your approach to the subject will illuminate it. These examples also demonstrate that you have begun to envision the kind of precise analysis expected in the thesis.

In the biological and behavioral sciences, this section uses current literature to demonstrate that your hypothesis is the most obvious next step in your field of inquiry. This part of your proposal is a robust section that will subsequently serve as the introduction to your thesis.

You need to make a clear connection of your work to the Harvard University research community since you will need to find a thesis director here that knows about and is interested in your work.