What is the Current Issues Paper?

The Current Issues Paper is intended to help you bring together ideas and skills acquired during your degree and make the transition from the academic world to the professional world of planning. It is not a thesis, although it contains some academic elements such as a literature review. Success will require that you think deeply and apply knowledge gained over the course of the program. It should resemble a professional report on a real-world planning question. It should demonstrate that you understand and can explain the complexities of a specific planning issue; that you can identify, analyze, and present relevant context and facts; and that you can take a position on the issue and argue for it effectively.

You need to show that you can think independently, conduct appropriate research, meet deadlines, write clearly and concisely, make a persuasive presentation before an audience, and revise your work after receiving comments from others.

Your paper must be useful and applicable to a real world problem. This means that you will:

- choose and work with an outside advisor—that is, someone working in the field that interests you;
- focus on a single, manageable issue that is genuinely important to the field of planning;
- take “real-world” constraints into account (there’s no point coming up with a perfect model or proposal if it cannot be implemented);
- conduct original research and independently analyze the information you collect;
- write a concise document in a professional style that will be accessible to non-specialists.

Content

The Current Issues Paper should be structured as a planning argument that supports an evaluation, one or more recommendations, or both.

- Evaluations: Your paper concludes that something about a particular situation is desirable and should be supported or undesirable and should be remedied. Planning arguments that defend evaluations must specify the criteria you will use to determine what is or is not desirable. Your paper will ask the reader to uphold or accept your assessment of the situation. Your judgements may be based on economic, environmental, technical, financial, legal, logistical, social, political, cultural, or ethical grounds, or any combination of these elements.

- Recommendations: Your paper concludes that a clearly identified institution or government body should undertake a specific action or series of actions. You will explain why these actions are necessary and the expected results of these actions. The recommendations must
be directed to the institution or government that has the authority to implement them and you must be very specific about the kind of action to be taken.

The paper should not merely consist of an array of data followed by a conclusion or list of recommendations. The paper should define the issue clearly, explain why it is important, present relevant empirical evidence, analyze the evidence, and argue for a logical and practical conclusion. Avoid vague rhetoric or abstract principles. Be concrete, practical, and specific.

Don’t try to tackle too broad an issue. At the same time, don’t settle for an issue that is too narrow and does not give you an opportunity to do meaningful research.

**Class meetings**

The class does not meet every week. Some class times are set aside for student presentations. Scheduled classes are designed to boost your skills in research, writing and presentations, and to give you additional opportunities to ask questions and discuss your progress with the course coordinator and your classmates.

**Consultations with course coordinator**

At least once a term, you should make an appointment with the course coordinator. These meetings give you an opportunity to discuss your progress and deal with any concerns or questions you have.

**Grading**

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<tr>
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<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Assignment Information</th>
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<tr>
<td>Proposal</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Assigned by your supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral progress report</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Assigned by the course coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft 1</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Assigned by your supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft 2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Assigned by your supervisor, your second faculty reader, your outside advisor, and the course coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Report</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Assigned by your supervisor and the course coordinator</td>
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**Number of copies and recipients for reports (please submit reports in the format requested by the recipient. Submit PDF’s to the course coordinator. Title your files by your “Lastname Firstname document name” i.e. Stephens Lindsay proposal)**

- **Proposal**: Submitted to your supervisor and course coordinator, graded by your supervisor.
- **Draft 1**: Submitted to your supervisor and your second reader, graded (and possibly only read) by your supervisor.
- **Draft 2**: Submitted to the supervisor, the second reader, the outside advisor, and the course coordinator. If hard copies are requested (offer this to all your readers) please bind or staple very well so they don’t fall apart with vigorous reading. If you are preparing an additional product, such as a model or computer program, ensure that all four readers have an adequate opportunity to evaluate it.
- **Final Report**: submitted to the supervisor and the course coordinator.
**Alternative options**

With the permission of the course coordinator and your supervisor, you may submit at least part of your final “paper” in a different form – such as an architectural model (computer or physical), a piece of original software, a GIS program, or a video. It must be accompanied by a short paper that presents the planning analysis for your project: the problem you addressed and its significance for planning, the method you used to arrive at the final product, the criteria used to test its validity or usefulness, and an evaluation of its performance in relation to the planning problem you identified. Your final presentation may include a demonstration of your work.

**The importance of meeting deadlines**

The current issues paper is a rehearsal for professional life, and you are expected to approach this assignment in a professional manner. In particular, this means that *you must meet all deadlines*.

Only in exceptional circumstances will your supervisor *and* the course coordinator adjust the scheduled dates (permission is needed from both), and this will occur *only* if you have told the coordinator and your supervisor about your situation *well in advance*, and worked out a new deadline. If you simply let a deadline go by with no advance explanation, you will reduce your grade by up to one point per day (changing a B+ to a B, for example, is a reduction of one point). Therefore, when in any doubt or difficulty, consult your supervisor *and* the course coordinator *immediately*.

**The current issues paper, step by step**

**September: Define your research question, choose a supervisor, find an outside advisor, write a proposal that includes ethics information**

The work you do in the first month may well determine whether you find the current issues paper experience enjoyable or difficult. *Get started now*. Talk to everyone you can about your ideas and read up on the topic. Write the proposal, get others to read it, revise it a few times, then submit it.

**October 3rd: Submit a written proposal**

Submit a **written proposal**, to your supervisor and the course coordinator. It must include:

- the research **question(s)** you plan to tackle (*IT MUST BE A QUESTION, NOT A TOPIC*);
- why the question is **relevant to planning practice**;
- the approach and **methods** you plan to use to analyze the question;
- the **main sources of information** on the subject and relation to previous research;
- the name of your **supervisor and second reader**;
- if possible the name of your **outside advisor** and his or her complete contact information, including mailing address. You have two additional weeks if you cannot confirm by this date.

*More detailed instructions on the preparation of the proposal will be presented in the class on proposal writing.*
Before October 17th: Present the Proposal to your Supervisor and another Faculty Member,

Negotiate a convenient time to meet with your supervisor and a second faculty member, who may or may not become your second faculty reader. You will give a brief oral summary of your proposal and answer questions about it. These sessions are usually about 30 minutes long.

After your presentation, if your supervisor is satisfied, he or she will sign a form that will give you the go-ahead to start your research. You must then submit this form to the course coordinator who must also sign it. If there are problems with your proposal, your supervisor will ask you to submit a revised proposal.

By October 17th: Submit proposal sign off form, confirm outside reader

Submit your signed proposal sign-off form to the course coordinator. This should include comments from your supervisor about any changes you are making to your proposal.

The form must also provide the course coordinator with the name of your outside advisor and his or her complete title and contact information.

Any time in October or November

Make an appointment with the course coordinator to discuss your proposal and research design, and any other questions you have.

October/November: Research Methods Troubleshooting

There will be three class periods in Oct/November focusing on research methods and your research plan. You will have chosen your basic research methods in consultation with your supervisor by this point, and you may have even started in on the research, but this is your opportunity to work out the details or troubleshoot obstacles that have arisen. You must attend one but may attend more of these three sessions – the focus of each week will be guided by your proposed research and announced on Quercus in advance. You will have an opportunity to fine tune and problem solve issues related to population, recruitment, interview or survey questions, quantitative data acquisition, data analysis and mapping. This is an instructor and peer supported process so come prepared to help your classmates and get input from others on your own approach.

First three weeks in January: Oral Progress Reports

Three class periods will be devoted to presentations. You must attend at least two of these three classes, and participate in the discussion. This is your Oral Progress Report and it is worth 5% of your grade. At one of these meetings you have to give a 5-minute oral presentation of your research. This is a chance to practice talking about your work before the more comprehensive public presentation in March. You will be working on your first draft so this is an excellent opportunity to get some initial feedback from the course coordinator and class about the directions you are going in your draft. This should not be a complete overview of your research (there is not time for this). Use this time to your greatest advantage by presenting a portion of your work that you are working through.
Any time in January or February

Make an appointment with the course coordinator to discuss your progress and any other questions you have.

January 25: Submit Draft 1

Give your supervisor and second reader the first draft of your Current Issues Paper. The supervisor should return the draft to you by February 1st. This draft will be assigned a mark that reflects your progress to date.

February 27: Submit Draft 2

Submit your complete paper to your supervisor, second faculty reader, and the coordinator on this date, no matter when your paper is scheduled to be presented. This paper must be complete, including the executive summary, appendices, and references.

The main text of the paper should be no more than 12,000 words, and can be shorter. You can add appendices to include relevant information that does not fit into the body of the paper. The report should be neat and professional-looking, but do not waste hours on complicated formatting. Spend the time revising the content instead. If your topic demands special formatting, talk to the course coordinator before proceeding. Otherwise, follow these rules:

• portrait (not landscape) format;
• minimum 1-inch margin on all sides;
• NOT SINGLE-SPACED: allow at least 4 extra points between the lines or use 1.5-line spacing;
• standard font: Times New Roman (12 point minimum) or Arial (11 point minimum); font can be smaller for tables, graphs, figures, and footnotes and you may use a different font for headings;
• a clear and consistent system of headings;
• tables and figures must be numbered; any photographs must have a figure number and a caption;
• no sidebars or text boxes – all relevant information must be incorporated into the text;
• colour restricted to photographs, maps, or complex charts, not used for decoration;
• no clip art or illustrations that are not directly related to the topic;
• include a detailed table of contents;
• include a one-page executive summary (one page means one page);
• indicate the word count on the cover page.
• Title your file “lastname firstname CIP draft 2”

March 6th to 29th: Present Draft 2

Present your paper to a panel made up of your outside advisor, your supervisor, a second faculty reader, and the course coordinator, as well as interested students or staff members. Presentations last 20 minutes (they are timed), with 30 minutes for questions and discussion. You must negotiate a time that is mutually convenient for everyone and find a first-year student to act as chair of the session. If you want to use PowerPoint, set it up in advance, so that the
session starts right on time. Your outside advisor must receive the report at least 5 days before the presentation.

April 3: Submit Final Report and covering memo

The purpose of this final stage is to demonstrate your ability to respond constructively to suggestions, criticism, and additional information from others—an important professional skill, since in the work world, it is rare that individuals work on documents in isolation.

This version should be accompanied by a memo (point form is fine) that explains where and why you have made changes to Draft 2 in response to feedback.

If you would like to do more elaborate or distinctive formatting from that used for the second draft, you may do so in the third and final version of your paper. The only requirement is that the font must be large enough to read comfortably – minimum 11 points.

As well you must send a PDF of the final report to the Geography Main Office for archiving.

Questions? When in doubt – ask! And the sooner you ask, the sooner you will have an answer.

There are many routes to completing this course, provided that you demonstrate the required skills and meet the deadlines. If you need to discuss the way in which these guidelines apply to your work, or would like to attempt a more innovative approach to fulfilling the requirements, do not hesitate to contact me during my office hours or at Lindsay.stephens@utoronto.ca.

Summary of Important Dates

First term

Wednesday, September 12, 2018 In Class: overview and explanation of requirements

Wednesday, September 19, 2018 In Class: preparing a proposal, overview of ethics protocol, recruitment, consent etc.

Wednesday Sept 26, 2018 In Class: Laying the groundwork, surveying the literature, writing literature reviews, making it relevant and focused.

Wednesday, October 3, 2018 Proposal due by 5 p.m. No Class

Wednesday, October 17, 2018 Proposal approval form due to course coordinator by the start of class on this day. Last day for presenting proposal to supervisor and second faculty member; Confirm outside advisor.

Wednesday, October 17, 2018 In Class Methods Troubleshooting 1: Topic Interviewing

Wednesday, October 24, 2018 In Class Methods Troubleshooting 2: Topic TBD

Wednesday, November 7, 2018 In Class Methods Troubleshooting 3: Topic TBD
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>November 21, 2018</td>
<td>In Class: tips and advice from planning graduates</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Second term</strong></td>
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<td>January 9, 16, 23, 2019</td>
<td>In Class: Oral progress reports</td>
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<td><strong>Friday, January 25, 2019</strong></td>
<td>Draft 1 submitted to supervisor by 5 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Friday, February 1, 2019</strong></td>
<td>Supervisor to return Draft 1 with comments by this date</td>
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<tr>
<td>**Wednesday, February 6, 2019</td>
<td>Class: Editing, writing recommendations and executive summaries</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday, Feb 27, 2019</strong></td>
<td>Draft 2 submitted to supervisor, course coordinator, and your second faculty reader by 5 p.m. Give a copy to your outside reader at least five days before your presentation.</td>
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<td>March 6 to 29, 2019</td>
<td>Presentations to supervisor, second staff reader, outside reader, course coordinator. Other students and faculty welcome to attend.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday, April 3, 2019</strong></td>
<td>Final Report and covering memo submitted to supervisor and coordinator by 5 p.m.</td>
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