Writing a research proposal

A guide for prospective PhD or MPhil students

Some schools and departments may require you to write an outline research proposal and submit this with your application to study for a PhD or MPhil. The content and structure of the proposal will inevitably vary depending on the discipline area and the nature of the project you wish to pursue. In some cases, you may be provided with some guidance in terms of what information should be included in the proposal and, if this is the case, you should read this carefully and follow it. However, where this is not the case, the general guidance, and suggested headings, provided here should help you to structure and present your ideas clearly in your proposal.

Your overall aim is to produce a research proposal that is clear and coherent in every respect. You should therefore avoid the use of overly long sentences and of technical jargon. It is important that the proposed research is realistic and feasible so that the outcomes can be achieved within the scale of a typical research degree programme, which is typically three years full-time for a PhD (or two years for an MPhil). In general, most good research proposals are typically between 1000 and 2000 words in length, but some areas might specify different word counts or require specific formats. It is recommended that you check the 'How to apply' information on the department's PhD webpages for any before finalising your proposal. Funding applications may also have different research proposal requirements.

A strong research proposal can and should make a positive first impression about your potential to become a good researcher. It should show those reading it that your ideas are focused, interesting and realistic.

Although you should write the proposal yourself, it is best if you discuss its contents with your proposed supervisor before you submit it. If this is not possible, then try to get someone else (such as an academic at your current or previous institution) to read and comment on it to ensure that it is sufficiently clear.

Title

Your proposal needs a clear working title that gives an indication of what you want to study. You are not committed to continuing with the same title once you begin your studies.

Your research question

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You will probably need to address questions such as:

- What is the general area in which you will be working and the specific aspect(s) of that area that will be your focus on inquiry?
- What is the problem, shortcoming, or gap in this area that you would like to address?
- What is the main research question or aim that you want to address?
- What are the specific objectives for the proposed research that follow from this?
- Why is the proposed research significant, why does it matter (either theoretically or practically), and why does it excite you?
- How does your work relate to other relevant research in the department?

Methodology

You will need to explain how you will go about answering your question (or achieving your aim), and why you will use your intended approach to address the question / aim.

Questions you might need to cover include:

- What steps will you take and what methods will you use to address your question?
- How will your proposed method provide a reliable answer to your question?
- What sources / data will you use?
- If your project involves an experimental approach, what specific hypothesis or hypotheses will you address?
- What specific techniques will you use to test the hypothesis, such as laboratory procedures, interviews, questionnaires, modelling, simulation, text analysis, use of secondary data sources, etc?
- What practical considerations are there; for example, what equipment, facilities, and other resources will be required?
- What relevant skills / experience do you have with the proposed methods?
- Will you need to collaborate with other researchers / organisations?

- Are there particular ethical issues that will need to be considered (for example, all projects using human participants require ethical approval)?
- Are there any potential problems / difficulties that you foresee (for example, delays in gaining access to special populations or materials) that might affect your rate of progress?

Timetable

You will need to provide a rough timeline for the completion of your research to show that the project is achievable (given the facilities and resources required) in no more than three years of full-time study (or part-time equivalent) for a PhD and two years for an MPhil.

Expected outcomes

You need to say something about what the expected outcomes of your project would be. How, for example, does it make a contribution to knowledge, how does it advance theoretical understanding, how might it contribute to policy or practice?

If you are aiming to study for a PhD, then you need to say how your proposed research will make an original contribution to knowledge. This is not essential if you are aiming to study for an MPhil, although you will still need to show originality in the application of knowledge.

List of references

You will need to provide a list of any key articles or texts that you have referred to in your proposal. References should be listed in the appropriate style for your subject area (e.g. Harvard). You should only reference texts that you think are central to your proposed work, rather than a bibliography listing everything written on the subject.

Format and proof reading

Make sure that your proposal is well structured and clearly written. It is important that you carefully check your proposal for typographical and spelling errors, consistency of style, and accuracy of references, before submitting it. The proposal should be aesthetically well presented, and look professional (e.g. no font inconsistencies, headings clearly identifiable, if figure present, then they should be accompanied by captions underneath).