Guidance on how to write a research proposal
INTRODUCTION

This guide will help you to write an excellent postgraduate research proposal. It will enable you to think about your proposed PhD research in a clear, structured and meaningful way.

A successful research proposal will depend on many factors including:

- The nature of your proposed research
- The quality of your ideas
- Your ability to commit to and focus on an intensive period of research study
- The effectiveness of your research proposal in communicating your ideas and the match between the proposed research and the potential supervisor

WHY A RESEARCH PROPOSAL IS IMPORTANT

The quality of your research proposal will play a significant role in your application, and thus a considerable factor in the university’s decision to accept you onto a PhD programme.

In short, the better your proposal, the better your chances of being accepted. So make it your finest work.

HELP US GET TO KNOW YOU

Your research proposal is a crucial part of the PhD application process, so it’s certainly worth investing your time and energy into it. A good proposal needs to outline the aims of your PhD study and give some indication of how you will conduct your proposed research.

Remember, a research proposal is about what you want to achieve; it immediately reflects your initial understanding of, and commitment to, PhD level learning. A research proposal can and should make a positive and powerful first impression about your potential to become a good researcher.

Your research proposal should demonstrate two key things:

1. That you are capable of independent critical thinking and analysis
2. That you are capable of communicating your ideas clearly
At this stage of the application process, your title will be first thing that will be read, so it is really important. Think about key words which describe your idea and how best to arrange them attractively; a clear title will make your proposal stand out.

If you will be sponsored to undertake your PhD please indicate any requirements your sponsor has regarding your research topic and its title. This increases the likelihood of any offer we are able to make you which meets the needs of your sponsor.

Your proposal should include a concise summary of your intended research (max. 250 words). This should set out the central question which you wish to address. This summary will also be required on the online application form.

You should explain the broad background against which you will conduct your research. This section should include a brief overview of the area of study within which your proposed research would fall, summarising recent notable debates and publications on the topic and current knowledge in the field.

This section should explain the central aims and questions that will guide your research. Remember: it’s important to reflect on your key research question to make sure your research proposal is sufficiently focused and also possible to complete in the timeframe.

For example, you could consider the main milestones for each year of your PhD, any challenges you might encounter and how you might overcome them.

The proposal should outline and justify your research methods. For many disciplines, the majority of research is desk based. If this is your case, you will need to articulate which online resources or books will help shape your project. If you plan to conduct field work or collect empirical data, you should provide details about this. This section should also explain how you hope to analyse your research findings.

PhDs are awarded for original research which adds to an existing body of knowledge. Therefore, a strong research proposal will demonstrate the originality of your intended research. You should therefore explain why your research is important and how it contributes to the existing knowledge in your field. It is in this section that you should be really trying to sell your idea and its value to the academic community, so be persuasive but also realistic.

Your proposal should include a short bibliography identifying the most relevant sources for your topic and any references that you have included in the proposal.
BEFORE YOU SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL:

Refine and edit your proposal a number of times before it is submitted. It’s important to demonstrate that you have given your proposal a lot of individual attention and care.

Demonstrate a clear sense of the purpose and direction of your research project.

Double-check your spelling and grammar – your proposal should be well written.

Ensure you leave the reader interested, excited and wanting to find out more about your ideas… and about you!

Common mistakes:

Ignoring or neglecting the wider academic context

Losing focus – remember to be persuasive and go into detail about your major arguments

Poor proof-reading – ensure you have referenced or cited consistently and checked your spelling and grammar.

FINALLY

Remember that your research proposal should leave a positive first impression about your ability to complete a PhD with us.

It is your project, so it is important to demonstrate leadership in this first stage of the application process. An excellent proposal should leave the reader feeling in no doubt that you are ready to tackle the challenges of a PhD.

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