

What is a Research Proposal?

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A research proposal ranges between 1000 and 3000 words. It is written by the candidate to put forward a focus for research to be undertaken at doctoral level. The proposal is used to assess:

- the suitability of the topic for doctoral research by showing that the topic addresses a current debate in the national and international literature;
- that the study is important and it builds on previous research;
- that the candidate is aware of the strengths and limitations of different research methods.

A research proposal is usually written under five main headings: 1. title; 2.background and rationale; 3. literature review; 4. methodology; 5. references. This short document provides some pointers for how to write each section.

1. Title

The title is used to focus the core content and concerns of the research. It is helpful if the title is phrased in terms of a correlation (e.g. investigating the relationship between educational achievement and obesity) or a problem (e.g. an investigation into contrasting ideas of democratic education). Keep your title well focussed on the topic of the research.

2. Background and Rationale

This section provides an introduction to the proposal. It outlines the context of the research. This may be defined in terms of a policy; historical events and/or current reflections in the literature regarding the topic under investigation. The background sets the scene for the research. It tells the reader about the reasons for selecting a particular topic and what the new research hopes to bring to the existing level of knowledge. A good background section will point the reader to a clear synthesis of the state of current knowledge, indicating that other people have researched the topic and summarising what questions remain open. The proposal is thus clearly building on previous work and setting out what is new. It persuades potential supervisors and funders of the importance of the work and of the suitability of the approach used. You can also use this section to make links between the proposed research and the existing strengths of the department. Visit the School's website to find out about existing research taking place in the department and how your project can complement this. This section can be around 500 words in length.

3. Literature Review

A review of relevant literature and theories relating to your proposed research area shows that you understand the major lines of argument that have been developed and the ideas and findings **of key researchers** working on your topic. Be as specific as possible in identifying influences or debates you wish to engage with so that you can clearly define the theoretical context into which your work will fit. The literature review provides an indication on how you envisage your research to contribute to debates and discussions in your particular subject area. Will it make an original contribution? This section should not extend into a detailed analysis of existing debates but it is intended to 'sign-post' and contextualize a set of key research questions, which will form the basis of your investigation. This section can be around 1000 words in length.

4. Methodology

This section gives an indication of the research methods you will use and the form and location of any empirical work you plan to undertake; where and for how long might you collect any relevant data? For example, outline the sources of information you might need:

- a. comment on the geographical area in which the study will take place – what are the advantages and disadvantages of this choice?
- b. Discuss the subjects of your research – individual? Groups? Companies? Why?
- c. Discuss how you can gain access to your subjects and what relationship will there be between the researcher and the subjects of the research.
- d. Give specific objectives (e. g. 'complete 20 interviews with members of group x').
- e. Give a brief discussion of the timeline for achieving this.

A well-developed methodology section is crucial. While the actual empirical work you undertake may differ to your proposal, it is essential that you have an understanding of the issues associated with conducting research. Be sure to include specific techniques, not just your general approach. This should include: kinds of resources consulted; methods for collecting and analyzing data; specific techniques (i.e. statistical analysis; semi-structured interviewing; participant observation); and (brief) rationale for adopting these methods. For example, you need to show awareness of both strengths and the limitations of particular methods and assess the suitability of the design to address a specific set of issues. This section can range between 500 and 800 words in length.

5. References

Your references should provide the reader with a good sense of your grasp on the literature. Include reference texts and resources that you think will play a large role in your analysis. Remember that this is not simply a bibliography listing 'everything written on the subject'. Rather, it should show critical selection of texts that are appropriate and relevant to the study. Use standard reference systems (i.e. Harvard; Chicago style or APA).