

# How To Write a Good PhD Research Proposal

# A PhD Proposal

**A PhD proposal is an outline of your proposed project. It needs to:**

- Define a clear question and approach to answering it.
- Highlight its originality and/or significance.
- Explain how it adds to, develops (or challenges) existing literature in the field.
- **Persuade potential supervisors of the importance of the work, and why *you* are the right person to undertake it.**

❑ Research proposals may vary in length, so it is important to check with the Department(s) to which you are applying to check word limits and guidelines.

Generally speaking, a proposal should be around **3,000 words** which you write as part of the application process.

# The aims of a research proposal

1. Potential supervisors, admissions tutors use research proposals to assess the quality and originality of your ideas, your skills in critical thinking and the feasibility of the research project.
2. Research proposals are also used to assess your expertise in the area in which you want to conduct research, your knowledge of the existing literature (and how your project will enhance it).
3. Crucially, it is also an opportunity for you to communicate your passion in the subject area and to make a persuasive argument about what your project can accomplish.

# How to Structure a Research Proposal

## 1. Title

- ❖ This can change, but make sure to include important 'key words'.

## 2. Overview of the research

- ❖ You should provide a short overview of your research and where it fits with. Be as specific as possible in identifying influences or debates you wish to engage with.
- ❖ Be sure to establish a solid and convincing *framework* for your research. This should include:
  - ✓ research questions (usually, 1-3 should suffice) and the reason for asking them.
  - ✓ the major approach(es) you will take (conceptual, theoretical, empirical and normative, as appropriate) and rationale.
  - ✓ significance of the research.

### **3. Positioning of the research**

- ❖ This section should discuss the texts which you believe are most important to the project. You need to demonstrate your understanding of the research issues, and identify existing gaps (both theoretical and practical) that the research is intended to address.

**This section is intended to ‘sign-post’ and contextualize your research questions, not to provide a detailed analysis of existing debates.**

## 4. Methodology

- ❖ This section should lay out, in clear terms, the way in which you will structure your research and the specific methods you will use.

Your methodology should include (but is not limited to):

- ✓ A discussion of the overall approach (i.e. is it solely theoretical, or does it involve primary/empirical research?) and your rationale for adopting this approach
- ✓ *Specific* aims and objectives (i.e. 'complete 20 interviews with specific members)
- ✓ A brief discussion of the timeline for achieving this

## 5. References

- ❖ Your references should provide the reader with a good sense of your grasp on the literature and how you can contribute to it. Be sure to reference texts and resources that you think will play a large role in your analysis.

# Pitfalls

- Make sure that your research idea, question or problem is very clearly stated, persuasive and addresses a demonstrable gap in the existing literature. Put time into formulating the questions- in the early stages of a project, they can be as important as the projected results.
- Make sure that you have researched the departments to which you are applying to ensure that there are staff interested in your subject area and available to supervise your project.
- Make sure that your proposal is well structured.
- Ensure that the scope of your project is reasonable.
- Make sure that your passion for the subject matter shines through in the structure and arguments presented within your proposal.

The following books are available and may help in preparing your research proposal (as well as in doing your research degree):

Baxter, L, Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2001): *How to Research*, (Open University Press, Milton Keynes).

Bell, J. (1999): *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers in Education & Social Science*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford).

Cryer, P. (2000): *The Research Student's Guide to Success*, (Open University, Milton Keynes).

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (1997): *Supervising the PhD*, (Open University Press, Milton Keynes).

Dunleavy, P. (2003): *Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire).

Philips, E. and Pugh, D. (2005): [How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors](#), (Open University Press, Milton Keynes).