

## Writing a PhD research proposal: A 6-step general guide for prospective PhD researchers

### Introduction

This short guide is aimed at helping you to write a good research proposal. It is intended to help you to think about your proposed PhD research in a clear, structured and meaningful way.

It should be stressed that the following is only a general guide and it **does not** guarantee acceptance onto a PhD programme. Accepting PhD students onto a research programme depends on many factors, including the nature of your proposed research, the quality of your ideas, your ability to commit to an intensive period of research study, the effectiveness of your research proposal in communicating your ideas, the “match” between the proposed research and the potential supervisor and the capacity of the research department.

The key message in this guide is that it is **your** research proposal and the quality of it will be a considerable factor used 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.

Note: If you are applying for a specific pre-defined research project in science, technology, engineering, mathematics or medicine you may not need to submit a proposal.

### Why a good research proposal is essential to the application process

As outlined above, your research proposal is an integral part of the PhD application process, so it is certainly worth investing time and energy into it. It needs to outline the nature of your proposed PhD study and give some indication of how you will conduct your research.

Remember that a research proposal is about what **you** want to study; it immediately reflects your initial understanding of, and commitment to, PhD study. A research proposal can and should make a positive and powerful first impression about your potential to become a good researcher. Importantly, the main purpose is to enable the university to assess whether you are a good ‘match’ for our supervisors and our areas of research expertise.

Therefore, in a good research proposal you will need to demonstrate two main things:

1. that you are capable of **independent critical thinking and analysis**
2. that you are capable of **communicating your ideas clearly**

Applying for a PhD is like applying for a job, you are not applying for a taught programme. When you start a PhD you will become a valued researcher in an academic department. Through your research proposal your colleagues want to know whether they can work with you, and whether your ideas are focussed, interesting and realistic. Try and impress them!

Since you are going to be investing a minimum of three years of your life working hard on your PhD, a few days spent researching and writing a thorough research proposal is a small initial investment to make. In short, a research proposal is an essential first step in your PhD journey. Make sure you give it your fullest consideration and effort.

### **You are not expected to be the expert**

Remember, you do not need to have a PhD to write a research proposal! Your proposal should be indicative and it should **outline** your areas of interest and your general insight into the research topic. You are **not** expected to be an expert and to be familiar with all the specific details of your subject. However, you are expected to have a good level of knowledge about the subject and where you might make a valuable contribution to research.

### **6 steps to a successful research proposal**

Some people seem to think a research proposal is too complicated and an inconvenient part of the application process. A good research proposal should not be complicated. However, it can be challenging to write and it is important to get right. A PhD is challenging, so it is good training working on your research proposal.

Although there is no exact prescribed format for a general research proposal (across all subjects), all of the following are deemed important to consider. You need to check your own subject's particular conventions and expectations (by looking on the appropriate Exeter college website). In summary though, a research proposal should generally include **six** main sections, as detailed below:

#### **1) a clear working title for your research project**

- what will you call your project?
- what key words would describe your proposal?

#### **2) a clear statement about what you want to work on and why it is important, interesting, relevant and realistic**

- what are your main research objectives? – these could be articulated as hypotheses, propositions, research questions, or problems to solve
- what difference do you think your research will make?
- why does this research excite you?
- what research 'gaps' will you be filling by undertaking your project?
- how might your research 'add value' to the subject?
- is your research achievable in the time allocated? (e.g. 3 years full-time)

#### **3) some background knowledge and context of the area in which you wish to work, including key literature, key people, key research findings**

- how does your work link to the work of others in the same or related fields?
- would your work support or contest the work of others?
- how does your work relate to the expertise within the department you are applying to?

**4) some consideration of the methods/approach you might use**

- how will you conduct your research?
- will you use existing theories, new methods/approaches or develop new methods/approaches?
- how might you design your project to get the best results/findings?

**5) some indication of the strategy and timetable for your research project and any research challenges you may face**

- what would be the main stages of your project?
- what would you be expecting to do in each year of your PhD?
- what challenges might you encounter and how might you overcome these?

**6) a list of the key references which support your research proposal**

- references should be listed in the appropriate convention for your subject area (e.g. Harvard). Such references should be used throughout your research proposal to demonstrate that you have read and understood the work of others.
- other relevant material that you are aware of, but not actually used in writing your proposal, can also be added as a bibliography

All of the above six sections are important, but section 2 is particularly important because in any research project, establishing your main purpose represents the whole basis for completing the research programme. Therefore, the value of your proposed research is assessed in relation to your research aims and objectives.

**The appropriate length of a research proposal**

A good research proposal is as long as it takes, but a guide would be 1000-2000 words. Remember that it is meant to be an accurate overview, not a thesis, so you need to provide enough detail for the reader to understand it. It should not be too long, or too short. A paragraph would not be enough, and 5000 words likely too much.

**The perfect research proposal**

In addition to the above, an excellent research proposal also needs to:

- follow any university and college/departmental guidance on websites. Conventions can, and do, differ across subjects and therefore across the University of Exeter. Therefore, you must check the college/department website for specific (subject) advice and guidance.
- be refined and edited a number of times before it is submitted. You must demonstrate that you have given your proposal a lot of individual attention and care. Make sure it is well written, without any errors.

- leave the reader with a clear sense of the purpose and direction of your research project. The reader should not have to read it twice to understand it.
- leave the reader interested, excited and wanting to find out more about your ideas, and about you!

### Follow the '3 Cs' rule:

When you have written your research proposal, ask a friend to read it critically and provide you with feedback. Also, ask yourself whether it follows the '3Cs' rule:

**CLEAR:** is what you have written intelligible and clearly articulated? Does it make sense, or is it vague and confusing?

**CONCISE:** have you written your proposal in a succinct and focussed way?

**COHERENT:** does your proposal link together well so that it tells the reader a short story about what you want to do, why you want to do it and how you will do it?

If you can answer all of these '3C' questions with confidence, you have probably put together a good proposal.

### Last thoughts...

Remember that your research proposal should leave a positive first impression upon the reader about your 'fitness' to study a PhD. It is **your** project, so it is important to demonstrate leadership in this first stage of the application process. An ideal proposal should leave the reader feeling in no doubt that you have done some preliminary research about your subject and that you are knowledgeable and ready to tackle the challenges of the PhD.

Give your proposal your utmost attention and time, but also be realistic - you are not expected to know everything at this stage. Your proposal can also be flexible. It is not a contract. Always ask someone else to read your proposal before you submit it, and to offer you some critical but supportive feedback.

Finally, remember that a research proposal instantly reflects your potential competence to undertake a PhD effectively. A proposal is ultimately about **your** ability to demonstrate that you are capable of PhD study, so you should put time and effort into it.