

University of Reading's Institute of Education

Guidelines on the content of a PhD applicant's research proposal

The main sections of this proposal would normally consist of the following:

a) Rationale for the research: why is this important to you and to the field? (A general statement of a problem or issue which has arisen in your professional work and/or in your reading of academic research.) This will lead into a more detailed statement under heading b).

b) The Literature: main fields of reading which you have consulted and some major works within each. (Obviously, not a full bibliography or review, but a brief outline of the main conceptual areas, and the main representatives of particular theoretical positions and lines of research within each which are relevant to your study.) You need to establish clearly how your proposed study fits into the particular domain under review, and how it is designed to fill gaps in our knowledge and/or improve on previous work.

c) Research question(s) to be answered: these can be stated in fairly general terms in the proposal. However, they should not be TOO general! A question such as 'How can we improve second language learners' reading comprehension skills?' would be too imprecise. A question such as: "Do learners who have received instruction in skimming and scanning skills outperform learners who have received vocabulary instruction in assessments of their reading comprehension skills? would be better. A question such as the latter would be linked to controversies and gaps in previous research, and possibly to your own experience. (See a) above.)

d) Design of the study. The reader expects to find information on whether this is a qualitative or a quantitative study, or a mixed methods study, with key information about the design included. For example, for quantitative projects, further details need to be provided on whether this is a correlational study, a quasi-experimental study, a longitudinal study, etc. State the independent and dependent variables that will be studied.

- *Data source(s)*: Usually human participants, but could also be texts, corpora, primary and secondary research reports etc.
- *Methods*. Give information about Participants, Instruments and Procedures. Participants: Number of informants, how they will be sampled from your population, and how they will be distributed over different groups (if any).
- *Instruments*: questionnaires, interviews, observations, tests, experiments, authentic/semi-authentic/structured language samples, focus groups). Procedures: how will you go about collecting the data, where will the data collection take place, how long will it take, etc.
- *Methods of analysis*: how the data will be organised / coded / tallied etc and, where relevant, how, in broad terms, it might be subjected to statistical analysis.
- *Feasibility*: access to data/assistance. Indications of how practicable the research will be.

e) Significance of results: general indications of what the outcome of the research might be, and how the results might affect theory and practice in the field.

The proposal should be no longer than 1,000 words in length.