School of Law

Guide to Writing a Research Proposal for a PhD

When you apply for admission to a PhD programme you will be required to submit a research proposal. A good proposal can significantly increase your chances of receiving an offer of admission.

How long should a research proposal be?

Aim for 800 - 1,500 words. However, if an application form sets a maximum word limit then do not go over that maximum.

Project title

Choose a title that describes your project clearly. A person who reads your title should immediately know what your project is about.

Structure and content

A six part structure is a useful way to proceed:

(1) Background, context and significance (150 – 300 words)

Explain the issue you propose to deal with. Outline the relevant context(s) in which it sits. It may be an important issue in law, policy, or practice. It may have political, economic or philosophical significance.

(2) Literature review (400 – 700 words)

Outline the existing scholarship in the area. Explain how the existing literature addresses the issue which will be focus of your project. You should make reference to specific works in the area. It may be helpful to identify and distinguish the way that different works (or groups of works) take different approaches to the issue. Having explained the state of the existing scholarship, you need to then explain what are the gaps or shortcomings in that existing scholarship. What has not yet been done? Or what has not been done adequately? Or is it that something has not been approached in a particular way?

How much literature do I need to review? Your literature review does not need to cover every single work in the field. It needs to refer to enough literature to make it clear that you are familiar with the major works in the field and with the works that are of specific relevance to the issue you are dealing with. As a very rough guide, if you have referred to
fewer than 10 sources then that is probably not enough. You should be able to make a reasonable case by referring to 10–20 relevant sources (though of course you may well have read more widely than just those 10-20 sources).

(3) Research question or aim (15 – 50 words)

State your question or aim. State it clearly. It is helpful to simply use the words, ‘This thesis asks: …’ or ‘This thesis aims to …’.

Try to have just one single question or one aim. The question or aim should be quite obviously linked to the gap(s) or shortcoming(s) you have just identified in your literature review.

(4) Methodology (200 – 500 words)

Many applicants find methodology the most difficult part of the research proposal. An easy way to think about it is to ask yourself, ‘What am I going to have to do in order to find an answer to my question or to achieve my aim? What steps will I need to take? And in what order?’ Then – in a clear, logically structured way – describe the steps you will take.

Some things to consider are:

- Be as specific as possible when describing the steps you will take.
- Explain why your chosen method is a sensible method. Convince the reader that it is an approach that will enable you to answer your question.
- As a very rough guide, somewhere between 4 and 8 steps is probably what you should be aiming for.
- You may need to set out the scope and limits of your project.
- Remember that your project needs to be feasible – you must be able to do it within three years.
- Consider your ideas carefully. Are there criticisms that could be made? Try to anticipate and rectify any possible criticisms by refining or developing your methodology in some way.
- Does the research require materials or documents which may be hard to access? Explain how you will go about obtaining those materials.
- Does the research require any particular skills that you already have or would need to develop in the course of the programme (e.g. statistical analysis skills or a foreign language)?
- Are there any ethical concerns? Research involving human subjects will require approval by the University’s Research Ethics Committee. This includes any research that uses surveys, focus groups or interviews.
(5) Timeline - preferably in a list of points

At what points or over what periods will you do the different steps you have identified in your methodology? Be realistic! If you think something isn’t quite possible then you may have to refine your methodology, or narrow the scope of your project.

(6) The original contribution to knowledge (50 - 100 words)

State clearly and simply how your project will make an original contribution to knowledge. This should already be apparent in light of your literature review, research question and methodology, but it is worth stating separately.

If thinking about your contribution, ask yourself, ‘When I have completed my project in three years’ time, what will the world know at that point that it does not know right now?’ You don’t have to provide the answer to your research question (by definition, you cannot provide the answer, because you have not yet done the research), but you do need to indicate how the fact that you have answered it will make a difference to the state of knowledge in the field, or to policy, or to practice.

Referencing and citation

Your work should be very thoroughly and carefully referenced. All references and citation should be complete, correct and consistent. The OSCOLA Fourth Edition is an excellent style guide and is now close to the standard citation guide in UK law schools: http://www.law.ox.ac.uk/publications/oscola.php

Format

The document should be clear and well presented. It can be useful to use 1.5 spacing between lines as that makes it a little easier to read. Be sure you have checked all spelling. Be sure that your name and email address are on the proposal

Further reading

There are numerous books written about writing research proposals. Among them, the following may be useful: Keith F Punch, Developing Effective Research Proposals, 2nd Ed, SAGE, London, 2006.

Dr Lawrence McNamara
School of Law, University of Reading
1 March 2012