

Writing a research proposal

This is a guide for:

- a) **PhD Applicants.** This document will help you to structure a proposal (2 to 10 pages is expected) through using some of the headings below. For such a short proposal there is no need to provide an executive summary or have a contents page. Also, if you are unsure of which research topic you would like to pursue you could describe two or more areas that interest you.
- b) **PhD students that have started their PhD.** This document will assist you to write a research proposal of 10 to 20 pages.

Purpose of the proposal

The proposal is like a map of your research. It does not need to be an excessively detailed document, but it should provide you (and us) with a clear enough idea as to where you intend to go and how you intend to get there. The proposal describes your initial thoughts based on your current knowledge and any preliminary research undertaken. It is understood that the research aim and methodology may change considerably in future as you become more familiar with the research area and skilled as a researcher.

Your proposal is expected to:

- 1) State the research aim and objectives;
- 2) Describe why the research is important to undertake;
- 3) Provide a suggested work plan (3-6 months and beyond), against which your progress can be measured.

Contents of the proposal

Refer to the recommended contents below when writing your proposal (you may wish to omit or merge some of the sections dependent on their applicability and the length of your proposal).

a. Executive summary

Too many people make the mistake of writing an executive summary as an introduction to a proposal or report. This is incorrect; the executive summary should provide a summary of all the key sections of your proposal. It is typically half to a full page in length.

b. Contents

A list of the contents of the proposal should be provided with page numbers. Prior to writing your proposal it is often useful to start off by planning the contents and the sequence that they will appear to ensure that there is a logical flow.

c. Introduction

This is a place to state clearly 'the key question' or key aim which your research sets to address. Also, you may wish to include the background / context for selecting this topic. In this section you should describe the structure of your proposal so that the reader knows what to expect within the report.

d. Definitions of key concepts and terms

In this section, you may wish to clearly define central concepts and terms which will feature throughout your research.

e. Rationale for the project

In this section, you have to justify your project by explaining why it is important and worth conducting. This justification will come from your initial research (for instance from a literature review, meetings with experts, and/or an initial survey). Your rationale should demonstrate your familiarity with the subject and include relevant prior research / theories of significance. Through this exercise, you should be able to demonstrate the viability of your research and its potential contributions to the relevant field(s) of study / knowledge.

Subtitles in this section may include:

- **Aims, objectives, scope and key questions or hypotheses / propositions**
What is the aim of your research? What are your key objectives or questions, and, if relevant, the key hypotheses / propositions you will be testing. How through answering these will it help you to achieve your aim? The scope of the research should define what will be investigated and what will be excluded so that it is clear to the reader.
- **Significant prior research**
In order to prove the value of your proposed study, first you have to demonstrate your basic understanding of the subject. Therefore include a brief summary of relevant previous research and its strengths and any research gaps that you will be addressing.
- **Likely outcomes / results / findings**
It is impossible to know the exact content of the outcomes / result / findings of your research at this early stage of the study (although you may have some ideas). However, you should be able to state clearly what they will be about and in what form they will be produced.
- **Expected contributions to knowledge**
How are these expected outcomes / results / findings of your research likely to enhance the existing body of knowledge? A good idea is to state how your research will assist or be of interest to different groups of stakeholders. For example, what will be the contribution to the academic community, individual businesses, business service providers, and consultants? Contributions can be in different forms, for example., generation of a new theory or models/frameworks, validation or modification of existing theories, insights into how to improve a process/method, accumulation of new information / knowledge / best practices, introduction of new research methods, etc.
- **Limitations**
You should be aware of the likely limitations of your research. Identifying these now may help you to limit the impact of these through making adjustments to your research design.

f. Methodology

Before deciding on the research methods to use it is necessary to break down the aim of the research into key objectives or research questions. This is perhaps the most critical part of the PhD as focussing on the wrong objectives is likely to severely hinder your progress in meeting your overall PhD aim. Therefore, you need to be able to clearly demonstrate/state the links between the accomplishment of objectives and the accomplishment of the overall PhD aim. Once you have clearly defined your objectives (and perhaps broken them down into further sub-objectives) it then becomes much easier to decide on the appropriate research methods to use.

In some cases you may decide that further initial exploratory analysis is required before you can clearly state your key objectives and provide a well-defined research method. If this is the case, you need to justify your reasoning and state how and when this will be accomplished.

In describing your chosen research methods, you need to demonstrate why the chosen methods – and not others - are best suited to accomplishing the purpose. The forms of data gathering (for example, questionnaire surveys, structured interviews, case studies, expert consultation, further literature reviews, internet surveys, conferences, etc) as well as how collected data will be measured / analysed (quantitative or qualitative) need to be outlined. Although it might be difficult to state precisely how variables will be measured at this stage of your study, the more detailed the proposed methodology the better. Also, remember that the methodology/approach needs to be suitable for carrying out your project and practical and efficient (therefore, can it be successfully implemented within the time-frame of your PhD?)

g. Ethical considerations

Are there any ethical concerns such as data confidentiality and how will these be addressed?

h. Resources

Here list the likely cost of your research (for example, equipment cost, travel for meetings/research and conference fees).

i. Research work plan

This plan should cover: 1) the next 3-6 months in detail, and 2) the whole period in outline.

j. Chapter outline

Providing an early outline of your thesis can be a useful exercise to undertake. This can only be done if you currently have a good understanding of the subject and you know what you want to achieve.

k. Conclusion

Here you should emphasise the importance of your research and demonstrate your confidence in achieving your research aim. Therefore you may wish to comment on your research design and your personal commitment to the research.

l. References

A list of the literature which you have reviewed and referred to in your proposal needs to be placed here.

m. Bibliography

A list of the literature which you have reviewed but not referred to in your proposal needs to be placed here. This list should contain books, academic and journalistic articles, website articles, and conference papers of significance in the area of your chosen topic.