

Putting a research proposal together

If you are applying to be part of an established research project, you may not be asked to write a research proposal.

But a research topic chosen and led by individuals is still the most usual route to a PhD in some of the sciences, in the social sciences, arts and humanities and you will normally be asked to write a research proposal as part of the application procedure. Guidelines for the proposal should exist in the institution and/or graduate school where you wish to study. But here are some general guidelines and some suggestions for students who may have difficulty with the language or organisation of information for the proposal.

What is a research proposal?

A research proposal sets out the broad topic you would like to research (substance), what the research would set out to achieve (aims and objectives), how you would go about researching it (methodology), how you would undertake it within the time available (outline plan) and what the results might be in relation to knowledge and understanding in the subject (potential outcomes).

How do I go about it?

Look at the context of your ideas; read widely and relevantly to make sure that your proposal has originality, will add knowledge to the field and builds on existing sources.

Then in clear, concise and fluent language:

1. Work out and explain the questions you want your research to address – the hypotheses you want to test or more open-ended questions.
2. Look at the current literature in your proposed area of research and write about the relevance and value of your research.
3. Think about what you would seek to achieve by your research – the key objectives – and write them down.
4. Given your objectives, think about what would be involved in achieving them – reading, reviewing, designing experiments or questionnaires, collecting data, analysis and interpretation. Provide an outline of the way in which you intend to conduct the research.
5. Work out how you will go about your research and the writing up in the time you have available (usually 36 – 48 months).
6. Describe what you hope to discover at the end of your research and what new areas it might open up. This can prove difficult as you cannot know what your research will lead to until you have completed the research. But there needs to be a range of possible outcomes e.g. a new interpretation, a new discovery or a problem solved.

It is a good idea, if you are applying to a sponsor, to look at their current priorities and, where appropriate, tailor your proposal accordingly.

Who can help?

1. If you are a student at the university to which you are applying for a PhD, then you will already know academic staff in your subject area. They will know what a successful proposal looks like and you can test out your ideas on them. You may find the most helpful person is your potential supervisor. They can advise on relevant sources and methodology for your PhD.
2. Talk to your peers; use them as sounding boards for your proposal. Talk with doctoral students in your field.
3. If you have dyslexia, written language issues or find it difficult to organise your ideas, talk through your proposal with a disability adviser at your university. They may be able to assist you to structure and express your ideas. Some students have talked about the gap that exists between the ideas in their head and effectively conveying them on paper. A learning support tutor will help you to reduce that gap.
4. Make sure that someone proof-reads your proposal.

Here is what one doctoral student said about her experience:

When I had decided to apply, I needed information, advice and assistance with developing a research proposal as it was an entirely new concept for me. My future supervisor offered this help and lent me books so that I could read some of the research undertaken in this field.

PhD student who is blind

What else should I consider?

Whatever else, you need to be sure that the subject is something you really want to focus on for the next 3 to 4 years of your life. It will be at the centre of your learning; you will need to be self-motivated and committed to it. Above all, it will have to be something you will enjoy exploring. After all, the route and the destination will be largely determined by you.

Further information

You will find some good advice in the [Berkeley University website](#) and their guidance on the style and wording of a proposal are particularly helpful.

Books that will provide sound guidance include:

- Pat Cryer *The Research Student's Guide to Success* (2000), Buckingham: Open University Press
- Estelle M Phillips and Derek Pugh *How to Get a PhD* (2000), Buckingham: Open University Press
- Gina Wisker, *The Postgraduate Research Handbook: Succeed with your MA, MPhil, EdD and PhD.* (2001) Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave

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