

Writing a Research Proposal

While we do not insist on a definite format, we encourage students to keep the following guidelines in mind when writing a research proposal.

A typical research proposal will be between 1000 and 2000 words long.

Begin by explaining the subject area of your research, and provide an indication of the key theoretical, policy or empirical debates your research plans to address.

Present a brief review of the literature you plan to contribute to in conducting your own research. You need to demonstrate a familiarity with the relevant academic literature and theories relating to your research proposal, and an awareness of the major lines of argument that have been developed in your chosen field.

Discuss the research questions you plan to address. Importantly, you need to demonstrate how your research questions derive from gaps in the existing empirical literature; from the application of a particular theory in a specific industry or national context; or from a synthesis of a number of bodies of literature, for example. Although not essential, research questions that are topical or have policy relevance will be particularly welcome.

Be as specific and focused as possible. If your research is driven by gaps in the existing literature, which of these gaps will you attempt to address? If it is driven by theoretical or policy debates, which specific points of these debates are you going to focus on?

Provide some explanation of what led you to the topic. So, if your topic emerges from a long-standing interest, or from interests you developed while studying for a former qualification, do not hesitate to say so - it will help to express your motivation for pursuing doctoral studies.

Depending on the nature of your subject, it is desirable to give some indication of the research methods that will be used to conduct the research. A variety of different research methods exists, so you should seek to identify the method that is most suited to your area of research - for example, econometric modelling, participant observation, survey data analysis, case-study analysis, the analysis of historical records.

Most doctoral work involves empirical research. Successfully completing doctoral work in the time allotted therefore often depends on the ability to obtain the necessary data. If your proposed research involves empirical work you should provide an indication of how you might collect any relevant data. For example, you might like to say something about access to particular sources of information (whether you will need online access to databases, whether you can use relevant archives etc). You could also comment on the country or geographical region in which the study will take place and explain why you have chosen it. It might also be worth saying something about unit of analysis for the research (whether you are looking at individuals, groups, workplaces, companies etc.) and provide some justification for your choice. Importantly, you need to explain the manner in which the data you collect will enable you to address your research questions.

Pay special attention to the feasibility of data collection. Your proposal may contain interesting and highly relevant research questions, and it may be well grounded in the literature, but it may not be practical. You must balance the scope of your proposal

against the practical problems of data gathering. Does your research proposal call for special access to managers or organisations? How many potential variables or factors does it require you to address? Can you examine all of them? If your project involves data gathering outside the UK, you need to carefully consider the issue of feasibility and indicate in your proposal how you plan to finance your data gathering.

It is often beneficial to conclude by indicating the contribution that your research will make to the literature in your particular subject area, or by indicating the potential practical or policy implications of your research. This means providing an indication of the extent to which you think your research will make an original contribution, suggesting how it may fill gaps in existing research, and showing how it may extend understanding of particular topics.

While your research proposal is judged mainly on content, it must also look professional. It should be word-processed and written in good English. Particular attention will be paid to clarity of expression and also the structure, coherence and flow of your argument.

Always include a bibliography (in a standard format – e.g. Harvard) with your proposal that lists the books and articles you refer to.

Finally, it is natural for ideas to evolve and change, so you will not be obliged to adhere to the specifics of your proposal if you are offered a place on the programme. However, the proposal is the foundation of your working relationship with your supervisors, so it cannot be radically altered without discussion and consultation with your supervisors.