

A PhD research proposal

Section	Purpose	Comments
Title	Identify the precise topic (and possibly indicate the approach)	The aim here should be to be as precise as possible. Use a colon if you want to add important extra information to pin down the main title further. You will not be held to the exact wording of the title, but it's important to produce something which clearly identifies a suitable topic.
Introduction	This should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pin down the topic precisely • identify the relevant research space • show why the research is worth doing • indicate what you hope to achieve 	This is probably the most important part of the proposal, not least because if you can't briefly and succinctly cover these points it suggests to the reader that your research proposal is woolly, inadequately researched or trivial.
Aims and objectives	This expands on the first of the above topics. In this section you should set out clearly what you take the aim of the research to be (it's therefore an opportunity to develop your research question or hypothesis) and specify the intended outcomes from the research. All of this should be contextualised in terms of the relevant literature.	If your research topic is too broad, this is where that will become apparent. You should be able to state your research question or hypothesis in one sentence, although elaboration of this and the intended outcomes of the research will take longer (remember, though, that specifying intended outcomes is not the same thing as predicting what you will discover). When contextualising your research, it's useful to think in terms of the contribution it is intended to make to a wider debate.
Contextualisation	This builds on the previous section and sets your work more specifically in the context of previous work and wider issues. In it you set out a justification for your own research in the context of other studies, showing how it builds on and/or orients to these. The section should demonstrate to the reader that you have read around the subject broadly and are acquainted with current issues.	You might think of this section as a literature review, but this is a misleading term because it suggests that a simple review of the literature is sufficient when what is needed is a properly developed justification of your own work in terms of other contributions to the field. Make sure that the reader is able to follow a clear line of argument demonstrating the value of your research and your own knowledge of the relevant field and sub-field.
Methodology	In this section you will need to provide a justification for your methodological approach and you should expect to include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a statement of the paradigm and tradition(s) within which you will work • a description of the data collection procedures to be used and a justification for these (showing why 	This is the section that some candidates tend to dismiss lightly, settling for a general statement along the lines that, for example, the approach will be "ethnographic" and data will be collected by interviews and observation. In fact it demands as much reading and preparation as the last section because it is on the success of this that the outcome of your research will depend. You need to demonstrate here that you are familiar with relevant techniques and issues. In a sense, while the last section

	they are appropriate and why alternatives were rejected)	demonstrated that you are aware of the outcomes of relevant research, this one shows that you understand what lies behind such research.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a consideration of practical issues (e.g. permissions, gaining entry, ethics), showing that data collection is possible • the analytical approach which you plan to adopt 	
Timetable	Present a realistic timetable for the research, corresponding to the time available for the project (usually 3 years for a full-time and 4-6 years for a part-time PhD, including writing up).	You will not usually be held to the details contained in this section, but it will be the basis for what follows and your proposals must be realistic. Break the timetable down into manageable segments, each with a realistic target.
References	All references should be presented consistently, in a standard format.	Take the time to get this right. It's surprisingly easy to make mistakes (e.g. omit a reference or two) and this gives a bad impression to the reader. If in doubt about the format for references, simply copy that of a leading journal in the field.

In a nutshell...

The assessor of a research proposal will have these basic questions in mind:

- What does the research aim to do?
- Is it worth doing?
- Can it be done?
- Can the writer do it?

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