

Faculty of Business and Law

How to write your research proposal

The content and structure of the research proposal will inevitably vary depending on the discipline area and the nature of the project you wish to pursue. The general guidance, and suggested headings, provided here should help you to structure and present your ideas clearly.

If the proposal relates to an [advertised project](#) on the Faculty of Business and Law website, you should take this document as a starting point from which to develop your own ideas. The suggested readings listed at the end of the advertised project will be helpful in enabling you to do this.

It is important that the proposed research is realistic and feasible so that the outcomes can be achieved within the scale of a typical research degree programme, which is typically three years full-time for a PhD, six years part-time. Your overall aim is to produce a proposal that is clear and coherent. You should avoid the use of overly long sentences and technical jargon. Although you should write the proposal yourself, it is helpful if you discuss its contents with your proposed supervisor before you submit it.

Your proposal should be at least 1,000 words and no longer than 2,000 words.

Research context

You will need to explain the context in which your research sits, explain its significance and locate it within the relevant literature. Questions might include:

- What is the general theoretical area in which you will be working and the specific aspect(s) of that area that will be your focus on inquiry?
- What is the problem, shortcoming, or gap in this area that you would like to address?
- What are the specific objectives for the proposed research that follow from this?
- Why is the proposed research significant and why does it matter (either theoretically or practically)?
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Your research question

For most projects there is usually one main question that you would like to address, which can sometimes be broken down into several sub-questions. You will need to state your main research question(s), explain its significance, and locate it within the relevant literature (remembering to refer only to research that is directly relevant to your proposal). You will probably need to address questions such as:

- What is the general theoretical area in which you will be working and the specific aspect(s) of that area that will be your focus of inquiry?
- How will your research contribute to theory in that area?
- What is the problem, shortcoming, or gap in this area that you would like to address?
- What is the main research question or aim that you want to address?
- What are the specific objectives for the proposed research that follow from this?

Research design

You will need to explain how you will go about answering your question (or achieving your aim), and why you will use your intended approach to address the question/aim. Questions you might cover include:

- What steps will you take and what methods will you use to address your research question(s)?
- How will your proposed method address your research question(s)?
- If your project involves a deductive, theory testing approach, what specific hypothesis or hypotheses will you address?
- What specific data collection and analytical methods will you use, e.g. interviews, questionnaires, documentary/content analysis, use of secondary data sources, etc.
- What practical considerations are there; for example, what equipment, facilities, and other resources will be required?
- What relevant skills / experience do you have in using the proposed methods?
- Are there particular ethical issues that will need to be considered (all Open University research projects involving human participants require ethical approval)?
- Are there any potential problems / difficulties that you foresee (for example, delays in gaining access to populations or materials) that might affect your rate of progress?

Timetable

You will need to provide a rough time line for the completion of your research to show that the project is achievable (given the facilities and resources required) in no more than three years of full-time study (or part-time equivalent) for a PhD.

Expected outcomes

You need to say something about what the expected outcomes of your project would be. How, for example, does it make an original contribution to knowledge, how does it advance theoretical understanding, how might it contribute to policy or practice?

List of references

You will need to provide a list of any sources, such as key articles or texts, that you have referred to in your proposal. The information provided must be complete and accurate.

Proof reading

It is important that you carefully check your proposal for typographical and spelling errors, consistency of style, and accuracy of references, before submitting it.