
Writing a Research Proposal

A research proposal is an essential element of any application for a research degree like a PhD or MSc by Research. Writing a 15,000 or 30,000-word dissertation is less daunting than writing a 100,000-word PhD thesis, but in either case, the research needs to be planned—and it helps to get a plan down on paper at the outset.

The first stage is to identify a research topic. You can do this in consultation with one of the Graduate Officers (History - Dr Gordon Pentland; Classics – Dr Glenys Davies; Archaeology – Dr Kathleen McSweeney), or with a prospective supervisor directly (all research postgraduates have two supervisors). Members of staff are usually happy to discuss ideas for research which they might supervise, or make their own suggestions. If you have a general idea of the geographical area, period, texts, materials, or theme that you want to study, they can often offer guidance on how to turn it into a more closely defined topic. If you have a specific research idea of your own, the Graduate Officers can help you find a supervisor, or you can browse the individual web pages of members of staff. The best applications are usually those which have been discussed beforehand with a prospective supervisor.

At this stage, you can start to write the research proposal. This is a brief essay, often 1,000 words or less, saying what you want to do. It should usually be organised something like this:

- Title. A clear title indicating the scope of your proposed work.
- Research question or questions. What do you intend to try to find out? Why is it important?
- Research context. What work has been done on the subject up till now? Mention the main scholars who have contributed to our current understanding of it. How will your research be new?
- Sources and methodology. What main primary sources will you use? Are there any special issues like access to archives, museums or archaeological materials, travel, languages or copyright, and if so how will you address them? How will you analyse the sources? Will you draw on any other related disciplines (such as economics, literary theory, art history, or geography and the sciences)?

You have to write the research proposal yourself, but prospective supervisors will usually comment on drafts.

Although a research proposal must be well defined, it should also be flexible. Original

research is a venture into the unknown, and the journey may well involve blind alleys or unexpected detours. What will happen, for instance, if you find once you start research that there isn't as much evidence for your research questions as you'd hoped? Or if you find there's too much? It will help to have room for manoeuvre, for instance by broadening or narrowing the period or area covered. A good proposal doesn't have to discuss this in detail - it's impossible to predict all the obstacles that you might encounter; but if you think about these issues and discuss them with your prospective supervisor, your proposal is likely to benefit.