Proposing a PhD Research Project

A PhD proposal is a statement of intent. It is a difficult document, because it has to be written before you have done the research. It should consist of not more than five pages, which should include a short bibliography of up to ten relevant sources, and must quickly and simply communicate your research project to any reader. The proposal will likely require a number of drafts before you get it right, but each will bring greater clarity to your project.

A PhD proposal should be written in an active voice, and make statements like, "this research will," do so-and-so. You can break the text up with sub-headings, suggestions for which are included in the numbered sections below. But *any* reader will want to know **what** you will work on, **why** it's important and **how** you will do it. One way to convey this is to make clear what your main research questions are, why these are important questions to research and how you are going to do the research to answer the question. The reader will also require a quick picture of the overall structure of the thesis, and section 5 below will help to deliver this.

1. **Introduction:** Following the title, open your proposal with a simple and strong statement describing your research topic. Use only a couple of sentences for this, and quickly show the reader what issue you intend to tackle. This needs to be more focused than merely to name a field of study. Remember also that you can give additional detail later in the document. To construct these introductory sentences, ask yourself: What is the central problem I am interested in? What specific question(s) will I investigate? What hypothesis does my research seek to test? What is my research about? What is its primary aim? What will it do?

2. **Background to the Project:** Try to state, in a second paragraph, *why* it is that your chosen problem is important. Here, you begin to give background to the research project, and to outline the way in which your question relates to current debates in your area of study. This section can be almost a short literature review, and should include a few select references. It concludes with the reason your chosen topic is important. How do you justify your project? What is the point of doing it? What other research is going on around this topic? What is original about your project? What do you have to say that's different?

3. **Project Outline:** Here, you can give more detail on *what* you will actually do. Having established why your project is important and new, and how it relates to existing research, you now have an opportunity to give more detail on precisely what your project will entail. What additional detail on the nature of the project does the reader require? Is there a particular secondary question you intend to address? What will your research achieve or produce?

4. **Research Methods:** Try to describe *how* you intend to go about researching your chosen problem. It is here that you show the research method(s) (sometimes referred to as 'methodology') you will use to collect data, and the areas of knowledge you will need to cover in order to deliver on your aims. What literature, data, bodies of knowledge, must be covered in order to deliver this thesis? What research methods will you use to collect data? (Quant? Qual?) Is the research primarily empirical or theoretical? If both, how will they be weighted and how will they relate? Is there a comparative component to your research, and if so, how will this work? Do you need special research or language skills to collect your data? If so, do you have them? If not, how do you plan to get them? What problems must you allow for in using these research methods? Are there any ethical or confidentiality issues arising?

5. **Provisional Chapterisation:** To give a sketch of how the thesis will be *structured*, list around six chapter headings with clear and communicative titles. Put a couple of sentences under each to show what will be in them. Indicate some of the literature to be covered in each chapter by including names in brackets.

6. **Bibliography**: Up to ten key sources.