



Writing a Research Proposal

Applications to undertake doctoral research at the School of Advanced Study need to include a research proposal.

There is no strict format, but the following guidelines are designed to help you frame your research proposal:

- A typical research proposal will be somewhere between 1000 and 2000 words.
- The proposal should begin by explaining the subject area in which the research is to be located, and providing an indication of the key theoretical, policy or empirical debates it plans to address.
- The proposal should 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 research field. You then need to discuss the research questions you plan to address. You need to demonstrate why your research questions arise. Although it is not essential, research questions that are topical or have policy relevance are welcome.
- Your research proposal should be as specific and focused as possible. If your research is being driven by gaps in the existing literature, which of these gaps will you attempt to address? If your research is being driven by theoretical or policy debates, which specific points of these debates are you going to focus on?
- The research proposal can also provide some explanation of what led you to the topic. For instance, if your topic emerges from a long-standing interest or from interests you developed while studying for a previous qualification, let us know – it will help to convey your motivation for pursuing doctoral studies.
- You should give some indication of the research methods that will be used to conduct your research. You should seek to identify the method that is most suited to your area of research: survey data analysis, case-study analysis, analysis of historical records, for example.

- If your proposed research involves empirical work you should explain how you will collect that data in the time available. For example, you might like to say something about access to particular sources of information (access to databases, whether you can use relevant archives, etc), the country or geographical region the study will take place in and why you have chosen this area. It might also be worth saying something about the unit of analysis for the research (whether you are looking at individuals or groups, for instance) and provide some justification. You will need to explain how the data you collect will enable you to address your research questions.
- You should give special attention to the feasibility of data collection. Your proposal may contain interesting, relevant research questions and be well grounded in the literature, but it may not be a practical research enterprise. You must balance the scope of your proposal against the practical problems of data gathering. Does your research proposal call for special access? How many potential variables or factors does it require you to address? Can you examine all of them? Students whose projects involve data gathering outside the UK are advised to pay close attention to the issue of feasibility (including the financial aspect).
- Try to demonstrate the impact you believe your research will make. This can range from the narrow (contribution to the literature in your particular subject area) to the broad (potential practical or policy implications). This will also mean providing an indication of the extent to which you feel your research will make an original contribution.
- While your research proposal is judged mainly on content, it must also look professional: typed and written in good English. Attention will be paid to clarity of expression and the structure, coherence and flow of your proposal. Finally, include a bibliography (in a standard format – for example, MHRA or Harvard) listing the books and articles you reference in your proposal.
- 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. However, the proposal is the foundation of your working relationship with your supervisors and should not be drastically altered without discussion and consultation with them.