

Writing a PhD Research Proposal

There is no one-size-fits-all template for writing a research proposal. The content and structure of a proposal for doctoral study depends very much upon the subject area, your field of specialism and the team who will be supervising the research project. At GCU we strongly recommend that prospective PhD applicants contact the appropriate staff associated with their proposed field of study and ask for their expectations of what the proposal should include. Details of PhD projects and staff can be found on the PhD Opportunities page at:

<https://www.gcu.ac.uk/research/postgraduateresearchstudy/phdopportunities/>

Details of PhD study in the Academic Schools and Research Centres can be found at:

<https://www.gcu.ac.uk/graduateschool/postgraduatestudy/phdstudyatgcu/>

Nevertheless, we do recognise that prospective students may wish to compose a proposal to frame their initial discussions with research staff. In terms of structure and content we would offer this guidance:

Before you start

- Check with your prospective supervisors to find out whether a specific template is provided or required for your PhD application. If not, follow these basic guidelines.
- Write in sentences and paragraphs; avoid the over-use of bullet points
- Reference your text according to the appropriate format for your subject area:
<https://www.gcu.ac.uk/library/subjecthelp/referencing/>
- A PhD proposal is not just your 'good idea'; it has to be researched.

Title/Introduction

In the early stages of a PhD the title is often framed as a question or set of questions. However, this section of the proposal should reach beyond a single statement, question or description and should also tell the reader why the research is important.

Literature Review/Overview of the research

In this section you should provide a concise overview of your proposed research and explain where it fits within the existing academic discourses, debates or literature. Be as specific as possible in identifying influences or debates you wish to engage with, but try not to digress – be specific and stick to the context into which your work will fit. Many applicants use a concise literature review to identify the gap in the existing research that their project will fill, but make sure that the gap is a significant or interesting gap – sometimes a gap is there because there is no need to fill it.

Make clear your assumptions and the limits of your topic and provide an indication of your argument or hypotheses.

You can also use this section to show how your project will fit with the research focus and staff expertise of the department to which you are applying. It is always a good idea to read the research papers and/or theses of the researchers who may become your supervisors. Again, you can find out more about our research interests and how they may fit with yours at:

<https://www.gcu.ac.uk/research/>

Research Design, Methods and Methodology

This section could provide details of the way in which you hope to structure your research and the specific methods you may use. Research design could include a detailed outline of how you will answer your research question(s), the approach you will adopt (for example whether you are considering a qualitative, a quantitative or a mixed-methods project) and may include a timeline for your proposed PhD (this is best done in a table format). The methods you intend to use can be included in the research design, but you should always provide a rationale for why you are designing your research in that way and why you believe your methods are the best possible way to collect your empirical data in order to answer your research questions.

You should also account for the philosophy behind your methodology.

This section can be difficult for novice researchers, but there are many resources to help you develop an understanding of Research Design, Methods and Methodologies. We would recommend starting with:

Creswell, J. (2018) *Research Design*. SAGE, London.

Conclusion: Finally, you need to conclude by discussing briefly how the empirical analysis you propose will respond to your research question in such a way as to make a meaningful contribution to the field you have described in your literature review.

References/Bibliography

Your references should provide the reader with a good sense of your grasp on the literature and how you can contribute to it. Be sure to reference texts and resources that you think will play a significant role in your analysis as well as informing your literature review. As with any academic bibliography, this should not simply list *everything written on the subject*, but should indicate critical reflection and analysis in the selection of appropriate texts.

We would also recommend the guidance on how to write a PhD proposal on FindAPhD.com:

<https://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/writing-phd-research-proposal.aspx>