

How to write a PhD proposal

A PhD proposal is not a legally binding document; it doesn't matter if you change your mind between now and the start of your PhD. In fact, given all the intellectual growth that your MA will stimulate, it would be rather disappointing if you didn't want to dramatically revise your ideas in a few months' time.

The point of the PhD proposal is to demonstrate that you can come up with a coherent and interesting question that is answerable in 80–100,000 words and three–four years of serious research.

Where do PhD topics come from? MA or BA essays of course, but also from problems and questions in supervisions, chats with staff and fellow-students, inspiring or annoying books... But it has to be *your* idea, *your* topic: this is something that you are intending to spend three whole years of your life on, so you really do need to feel passionately committed to it.

A good PhD proposal should do the following things, probably in the following order:

1. **What.** Explain what *historical problem(s)* you want to understand. i.e. What are your research objectives, and what else do we need to know to understand why you're framing the historical problem as you are? This opening section may well include question marks – you literally need to explain your question.
2. **How.** *How* are you planning to answer your question(s)? i.e. Describe the sources and methodology to be used. And, crucially, as you do so, remember that this has to be a realistic research programme for three/five years of full-/part-time study.
3. **Why.** Explain why your project is interesting, what its broader implications are, and – if you think this is relevant – why *you* are particularly well placed to tackle it.

What does this mean in practice?

- Choose a clear and engaging title that says what the project is going to accomplish.
- Explain the topic for an intelligent outsider. Why is it interesting? Why does it matter?
- Try to formulate a particular question or problem that you want the answer to.
- Who has worked on the topic before? Are there any good articles or books you can draw on — or bad ones you can kick against? Useful approaches, theories, methodologies from other subjects that you can apply to it?
- What prior knowledge and skills do you bring to the project? What extra training will you need? What sources and resources will you need, and where are they located? Do you have access to them?
- What primary sources are pertinent to your project? How accessible are they?
- What approach(es) will you take the subject and why is it/are they appropriate? Which current department members (academics, postdocs, graduate students) would it be beneficial to work with?

- Can you show that this is a PhD-sized topic and not just an MA essay —or an entire lifetime's work? Drawing up a timeline for completion is a valuable component of the rhetoric here, however artificial or fanciful it seems.
- Limit your proposal to between 1000 and 1500 words. You want plausible detail, but no one expects you to have done exhaustive research at this stage. Nor do you want to bore your readers with unnecessary waffle.
- Be as concrete as you can. Examples are good.

Do make contact with your potential supervisor(s) *long before the application deadline*. They will read through your draft proposal and make suggestions to help you improve it. This is particularly important if you are applying for funding, as it will be read and judged against many others, by academics who are not experts in your field.

Eleanor Robson & Adam Smith, UCL History, 2018