How to Write a PhD Proposal

1. Introduction

A PhD proposal is a focused document that introduces your PhD study idea and seeks to convince the reader that your idea is **interesting**, **original** and **viable** within the allocated study period and with the resources available. It also provides a preliminary review of the literature and proposes how the research should be carried out. The purpose of this guide is to assist prospective PhD students write good quality proposals.

2. Some vital Assumptions

You have the ability to study in your chosen area: This is normally indicated by a previous lower qualification, such as a Masters in a related discipline. However, this does not mean that you should already have all the capabilities required as doctoral research is a developmental process.

You have a viable idea: The purpose of a PhD proposal is to convince other researchers that you are able to study your chosen topic up to a doctorate level. Fundamentally your idea should make sense, be of a doctoral standard, have not been done before, and be achievable with the resources you have available.

Your idea interests you: There is no point just borrowing an idea from a prospective supervisor that means nothing to you. One of the first questions you should try to answer is, "my PhD idea is interesting because…" Your answer will not have an authentic ring to it if you cannot express this from within. Extrinsic motivations like pursuing someone else's idea will not get you through (the equivalent of) a three year full-time research project.

You are at a position in your life where obtaining a PhD is achievable: Whilst there is no age limit, and no background or personal circumstances which disqualify anyone from attempting a PhD, it should only be attempted by people who are sufficiently committed to the endeavour to overcome any distractions in impedances.

3. Front Matter

Spend time researching, reflecting on and discussing your PhD topic idea until it crystallises. This will involve doing a literature search to see what other people have already done in this area in order to establish the **originality** of your idea. It is quite normal for an idea to evolve and change during this process.

You will then be in a position to write your **title**, **aim** and **main research question**. These should all be synonymous but have a different style:

- The title should describe the research that is going to be carried out. It should be less than about 20 words long and should not be written in the form of a question. It should also indicate the scope of the study so that it can be assessed as being a **single PhD project**. Most titles start off as too broad. For a data analysis PhD, a good way to narrow down a title is often to consider where you are planning to obtain your data.

- The aim should explain **what** the research study is seeking to achieve. A good word to start with is "to".

- The main research question is the overall question the study is seeking to answer. Some studies have several research questions or a main question and sub-questions.

Once you have written these, you can now write your objectives. Objectives state **how** the aim is going to be achieved and are more specific. They sometimes follow the process of carrying out the research (e.g. starting with a literature review then moving on to data collection and analysis) or they may relate to different facets of your aim. A rule of thumb for the number of objectives is to write **between 3 and 7**. In summary, all your front matter should be **consistent**.

4. Structure and Length

A common structure for a PhD proposal is:

> **Title**
>
> **Introduction/background** (use one or the other)
>
> **Problem statement**
>
> **Aim, objectives and research question(s)**
>
> **Literature review**
>
> **Method/methodology**
>
> **References**

The literature review is sometimes included in the introduction/background. The research question(s) is(are) sometimes left out.

Additional optional features are:

> **Table of contents** – this is useful with proposals which have subsections or are over 4 pages long as they can help the reader navigate your document
>
> **Rationale**
>
> **Significance of the study**
>
> **Limitations**
>
> **Schedule of events**

The purpose of a PhD proposal is to convince other academics that your research idea is viable and worth studying. Overly long proposals with unnecessary descriptive detail are normally less convincing that well written, focused, short proposals. A suggested optimal length is **between 2,000 and 3,000 words**, not counting the reference list.

5. Fundamentals of Academic Writing

In order to write a good proposal you will need to have a grasp of the principles of academic writing. These can be viewed as a tree (see right). The basics of academic writing are **vocabulary**, **spelling**, **punctuation**, **grammar** and **sentence construction**.

There are two free websites which can help this process:

- **Grammarly** (https://www.grammarly.com/) – a free application for checking grammar, spelling, punctuation and sentence construction. It can be downloaded in different formats.

- The **Manchester Academic Phrasebank** (http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/) provides examples of vocabulary at different stages of research writing. It can help you to vary your language, but make sure that you understand every word that you use.
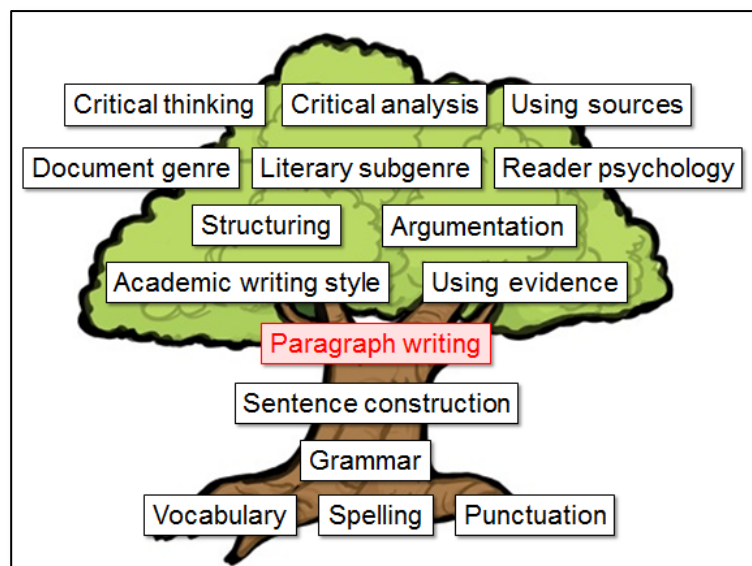
6. Follow Academic Writing Style and Use Evidence

Write clearly and concisely (don't try to impress your reader with long words or complex sentences). Avoid personal (first person) language by using the passive voice. Introduce acronyms (abbreviations for noun phrases) before you use them. Don't use a journalistic style or colourful metaphors. Avoid rhetoric (asking questions). Avoid subjective judgments without evidence. When evaluating evidence, be cautious about the conclusions you draw so that they are consistent with the strength of the evidence you have presented. This is known as **hedging**. For more information, see http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm > Features.

All specific claims you make should be backed up with citations. Do not steal other people's work by using their claims or ideas without correctly attributing them (this is known as **plagiarism**). Even if you put their claims or ideas in your own words you still need to acknowledge them. For more information, see http://www.turnitinuk.com/.

7. Learn to Write Good Paragraphs

Learning to write good paragraphs is the most important lesson in academic writing. Academic paragraphs should be about **125 words long** on average (or within a range of about **70 to 180 words**); they should start with some kind of **topic sentence** then **develop** this topic by providing explanations and examples, then evaluating the evidence presented, drawing the topic to some kind of conclusion. Paragraphs should be **coherent** and contain **one main point**. For more information, see http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm > Paragraphs.

8. Argumentation and Argument Planning

Make sure you have a clear thread of argument running through your proposal. There are two basic argumentation styles in academic writing:

Single argument/opinion: a claim on a topic is introduced then justified with supporting evidence. You may consider contrary opinions, but these will be argued against. The evaluation or conclusion will come down on one side, confirming your original claim in your topic sentence. It is often used in **shallower, descriptive** writing.

Discursive: a topic is introduced neutrally without a specific claim, evidence is presented then it is evaluated, drawing a conclusion about the topic which could not have been expected from only reading the original topic sentence. It is often used in **deeper** writing.

Single argument/opinion style is more appropriate for your introduction/background, your problem statement and for the first part of your methods section. Discursive argumentation is more appropriate for parts of your literature review and methods sections.

Now allocate an estimated word count to each section of your proposal using the 125 words per paragraphs rule to estimate the number of paragraphs you need to write. You can now **plan your argument** by pretending to give a presentation using one bullet point per paragraph.

1. Introduction
- Point 1
- Point 2
- Point 3

2. Problem statement
- Point 1
- Point 2

3. Aim and objectives
(Not applicable)

4. Literature review
4.1 Introduction
- Point 1
4.2 Theme 1
- Point 2
- Point 3
4.3 Theme 2
- Point 4
- Point 5
4.4 Theme 3
- Point 6
- Point 7
4.5 Discussion
- Point 8

5. Methods
5.1 Data collection
- Point 1
- Point 2
5.2 Data analysis
- Point 3
- Point 4
- Point 5
- Point 6

Style key:
Black points = single argument/ opinion
Green = discursive

Think about your points: Do they follow a logical sequence? Are they equally important?

9. Individual Section Genre

9.1 Introduction

Your title, introduction, problem statement, aim and objectives are the most important parts of your proposal to write well because **they will be read first**. Your introduction should establish a broader context than your proposed topic, drawing your reader towards it by creating **interest** and a **rationale**. It should be descriptive and not contain a deeper argument (that belongs in your literature review).

9.2 Problem statement

Your problem statement should follow on from the broader territory established in your introduction and focus upon the actual issue you are proposing to study (known as your **niche**). The conclusion at the end of the last paragraph should be equivalent to your aim.

9.3 Literature review

Your literature review should provide your reader with the necessary background to evaluate your topic. It should be more than a sequence of paragraphs summarising individual academic sources (known as an annotated bibliography). One approach is to organise your literature into about **three themes** which address wider research topics. The sources you identify will not be equally important/relevant; this should be reflected in how much you write about them.

As your word count is limited, one approach is split your literature review into subsections, starting with an introductory paragraph then followed by a descriptive paragraph and a discursive paragraph on each theme. The former should address shallower questions (such as who, what, where and when); the latter should address deeper questions (such as how and why). Finally, a discussion subsection can be provided with summarises and combines the findings from the themes and introduces any research studies specifically relevant to your own.

A rule of thumb is to have about 25 sources in your literature review with about 7 per theme and only a few on your niche topic. It is also wise not to over-read: Try to obtain about 50 sources then select **half** of them. A useful tool for this is Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/).

You will need to use critical thinking in choosing your themes and selecting evidence, and critical analysis in the way that you evaluate it. For more information, see http://www.criticalthinking.net/ and http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm > Functions > Writing critically. Your conclusions in each discursive paragraph should be cautious and use hedging (see above).

9.4 Methods

Some proposals call this section the **methodology** (the theory of how research should be undertaken) whilst others call it the **methods** (the techniques and procedures used to obtain and analyse research data). The former should not discuss all aspects of methodology but focus upon key elements such as the **strategy** (e.g. experiment, survey, case study, ethnography or big data) along with the associated methods (Saunders et al., 2016).

The methods section is often divided into **data collection** and **data analysis**. Your proposed methods should contain some detail but not too much, backed up with an evidence-based argument that connects back to your literature review. They should be introduced cautiously in order to leave room for future changes (based on your PhD literature review). Deeper writing may include a discussion of the validity and accuracy of your data, the way your proposed methods are suggested to be applied, and any limitations.

Reference

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2016) *Research Methods for Business Students*, 7th edn. Harlow: Pearson.