

Guide to writing a PhD research proposal

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What is a good PhD proposal?

A good PhD proposal tells a story that a reader can really engage with. It is structured into clear headings. Crucially, the most interesting proposals are the ones that highlight the overarching research question prominently at the very start, and then clarify why this question is important, and yet unexplored, in the context of the existing literature. The research aims and objectives lead on to a clear methodology, outlining how data are collected, and what resources are available.

Is a PhD proposal set in stone?

No. A good PhD will evolve and change direction as new avenues are investigated. It is normal for students to refine their original proposal. However, the proposal is your first chance to show a potential supervisor your ability to think critically and to succinctly form an argument. On this basis we evaluate your ability to conduct a PhD as an independent researcher. We assume that the proposal submitted is thorough and the best that you can produce for the application process.

Recommended length:

No more than 2500 words (excluding title, abstract & references); 5 - 7 pages is sufficient.

Structuring a PhD proposal

1. Title

A title should summarize the main idea of the project.

Include key words in the title, that can already draw in potential supervisors.

2. Abstract (250 -500 words)

An abstract is a condensed version of your proposal, which includes the most important information.

State why you wish to embark on the project. Why is this particular topic important?

State what your project is about.

State your research question (can be broad).

State how you plan to do the project.

State your expected results.

Include how these results contribute to the field of Peace and Conflict Studies.

3. Succinct Project Summary

Set up the large general topic of your research: What it is about?

On which literature and theoretical framework do you build your work?

Which gap of knowledge does it address?

What is the significance of your proposal?

Link to Research Questions (see point 4).

4. Your research question/s

Building on the opening, you should state your research question/s (1-3 should suffice). The research question should be a clear, focused question that summarizes the issue that you will investigate.

It can be the formalized question/s or predictions, which will be answered through the research.

It is important that the question/s relate to the literature review, thus contributing to the body of knowledge but are also answerable inquiries through your PhD.

5. Specifics of your project

This section gives background information, such as location, history, context and the relevant literature.

The literature review (current state of the art) should be short but relevant.

If applicable, state how you apply the theoretical framework to your research project.

This section is intended to 'sign-post' and contextualize your research questions, not to provide a detailed analysis of existing debates.

You should also use this section to make links between your research and the existing body of knowledge regarding your proposal.

6. Study design

Describe your proposed methodology.

How exactly do you intend to address your research questions through your approach?

How do you intend to collect your data?

What insight do you expect to gain from the specific study design?

Is your data collection feasible in the scope of a PhD?

This is the section some applications struggle with, as it is difficult to envision how exactly the data might be collected. However, this section shows the feasibility of the study (can it be done?) and also gives an insight into skills you need to acquire at the beginning of their PhD journey.

7. Conclusion
Reiterate, what do you expect your PhD thesis to contribute to the broader field of Peace and Conflict Studies

8. Reference (not part of the word count)
Cite your references

9. 3 Year Timeline
Provide a monthly/quarterly outline of how you will complete the work within the time scheduled. A full-time PhD normally takes 3 years.

10. If applicable: Feasibility
If you work with a difficult-to-access data/ population (often in relation to fieldwork) explain in 1-2 paragraphs how you plan to collect the relevant data for your thesis.

11. If applicable: Ethical consideration
Peace and Conflict Studies often work on sensitive topics or with vulnerable populations. Explain in 1-2 paragraphs which ethical consideration you have taken into account.

We understand that different universities have different templates for a PhD proposal. While you don't need to follow this structure to be admitted to the programme, we recommend that you ensure that the sections listed are included in one way or another in your proposal.

However, please note, that following this outline is no guarantee of acceptance into our programme. Besides the entry requirement of sufficient GPA, a faculty member needs also be interested in your subject area and available to supervise your project. A strong PhD proposal can help to raise this interest.

ⁱ Building on:

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(<https://www.adelaide.edu.au/graduatecentre/forms/admission/docs/admission-research-proposal-template-guide.pdf>)

The professor is in (<http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/>)

Career advice: how to write a PhD proposal (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/career-advice-how-write-phd-proposal>)