

UNIVERSITY OF  
**EXETER** | DOCTORAL  
COLLEGE

# HOW TO WRITE A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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One of the best things about doing a PhD at Exeter is having access to such a diverse community who think in different ways.



Myles-Jay Linton PhD,  
Health Economics

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I feel I can ask any staff member here for help and advice and they will be unfailingly generous with their time.



Nicole Goodey PhD,  
Biosciences

# INTRODUCTION

This guide is aimed at helping you to write an excellent postgraduate research proposal. It is intended to assist you in thinking about your proposed PhD research in a clear, structured and meaningful way.

Being accepted onto a research programme depends on many factors, including:

- The nature of your proposed research
- The quality of your ideas
- Your ability to commit to and focus on an intensive period of research study
- The effectiveness of your research proposal in communicating your ideas and the match between the proposed research and the potential supervisor

**It should be made clear that the following is only a general guide and it does not guarantee acceptance onto a PhD programme at the University of Exeter.**



## REMEMBER...

You do not need to have a PhD to write a research proposal!

# WHY YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL IS IMPORTANT

The key message to take away from this guide is that the quality of your research proposal may be a considerable factor in the University's decision on whether to accept you onto a PhD programme.

**In short, the better your proposal, the better your chances of being accepted. So make it your finest work.**

## Help us get to know you

Your research proposal is a crucial part of the PhD application process, so it's certainly worth investing your time and energy into it. A good proposal needs to outline the aims of your PhD study and give some indication of how you will conduct your proposed research.

Remember, a research proposal is about what you want to achieve; it immediately reflects your initial understanding of, and commitment to, PhD level learning. A research proposal can and should make a positive and powerful first impression about your potential to become a good researcher.

Therefore, in a research proposal you will need to demonstrate two main things:

1. That you are capable of **independent critical thinking and analysis**
2. That you are capable of **communicating your ideas clearly**

Applying for a PhD is more like applying for a job than a taught university course, so think of your proposal as a covering letter.

When you start a PhD you will become a valued team member in a working academic research department. Through your research proposal your colleagues want to find out whether they can work with you, and whether your ideas are focussed, interesting and realistic.



# WHAT YOUR PROPOSAL SHOULD INCLUDE

## 1. Title

This is just a working title for your intended research. You'll be able to revise your title during the course of your study but it is likely to be the first thing the University will read, so it is highly important.

Think about the key words to describe your idea and how to arrange them attractively; a clear title will make your proposal stand out.

## 2. Abstract

Your proposal should include a concise statement of your intended research (100 words at the absolute maximum). This may be a couple of sentences setting out the problem that you want to examine or the central question that you wish to address. Tell us why this project excites you and get your assessor excited about it too.

## 3. Research Context

You should explain the broad background against which you will conduct your research. This section should include a brief overview of the area of study within which your proposed research would fall, summarising the current state of knowledge and recent notable debates on the topic.

## 4. Research Questions

Within this section you should explain the central aims and questions that will guide your research. There might be a temptation to make your proposal too broad, so reflecting on your key research questions is a good way to make sure that your project is sufficiently focused and also possible to complete in the timeframe.

## 5. Research Methods

The proposal should outline your research methods, and also justify why that will be your chosen method.

For many disciplines, the majority of research is desk based. If your proposed research is likely to be mostly in the library, you should explain where your key resources might be found. If you plan to conduct field work or collect empirical data, you should likewise provide details about this. This section should also explain how you are going to analyse your research findings.

## 6. Significance of Research

A good research proposal will demonstrate the originality of your intended research. You should therefore explain why your research is important and how it contributes to the existing knowledge in your field. It is in this section that you should be really trying to sell your idea and its value to the academic community, so be persuasive but also realistic.

## 7. Bibliography

Your proposal should include a short bibliography identifying the most relevant works for your topic and any references that you have included throughout.

## NOTE...

A good research proposal is as long as it needs to be, but a rough guide would be somewhere between 1,000 and 2,500 words.

# STYLE GUIDANCE

In addition to the previous tips, an excellent research proposal also needs to:

- Follow any University and College/departmental guidance on websites. Conventions can, and do, differ across subjects, therefore, you must check the College websites for specific subject advice (for example, a Management proposal should follow the style guidance of the Business School).
- Be refined and edited a number of times before it is submitted. You must demonstrate that you have given your proposal a lot of individual attention and care.
- Be well written, without any grammatical or spelling errors.
- Demonstrate a clear sense of the purpose and direction of your research project. The reader should not have to read it twice to understand your aims.
- Leave the reader interested, excited and wanting to find out more about your ideas... and about you.



The support you get from other postgraduates shouldn't be underestimated at research level, because you're all going through a massive journey for a fantastic achievement.



Tara Etherington PhD,  
English

# COMMON MISTAKES

Here are some common mistakes you should look out for when writing your research proposal:

1. Not creating an obvious context for your work
2. Neglecting important landmark studies in the field
3. Failing to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions made by other researchers
4. Losing focus on the research question
5. Forgetting to be persuasive
6. Not going into enough detail in your major arguments
7. Incorrect referencing or citation inconsistency
8. Writing a proposal that is too long
9. Writing a proposal that is too short
10. Poor grammar and spelling... please proofread!



# ACADEMIC CV

Along with your proposal, you may also be asked to provide an academic CV:

- An academic CV is similar to one you would use in the professional world;
- However there are extra features to focus on: past research activities, publications, any funding awarded;
- You may include a PhD extract, any teaching experience, conferences attended/contributed to, and any research interests;
- Your academic CV will not be as brief as a professional CV, but usually no more than four pages;
- Your academic CV should be tailored to each application.



I've really enjoyed being challenged by my supervisors and having the opportunity to develop my research skills.

Lorenz Adams PhD,  
Economics



# INTERNATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The University of Exeter warmly welcomes international students and we try our best to provide all the support you may need during your stay in the UK.

Exeter city centre has facilities which cater to all major religions and cultures and our University proudly accommodates students from approximately 130 different countries from around the world.

If English is not your first language, you will need to submit evidence of a good command of English before starting your degree programme. We accept the IELTS (International

English Language Testing System – academic version) and TOEFL IBT test along with a number of other English language tests.

However, if you have undertaken a full degree programme in a majority English language speaking country, the English language requirements may be waived provided that your degree was completed no more than two years before the start of your programme. To find out more, feel free to view one of our Virtual Open Days via the University of Exeter website, or come and meet us in person.



## OUR LOCATION

# OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

## Important Factors

Choosing where to do your research degree can be complicated, and there are a number of factors:

- The reputation of the university
- The research expertise of the academic staff
- The relevant facilities and resources for your research area
- Location and, crucially, the availability of funding

There are different types of funding available for postgraduate research:

- External funding bodies
- Government grants
- Private sector companies
- Self-funding and also internal sources such as University scholarships and funded studentships.
- Finding funding is a competitive process and will depend on your personal qualities, however perseverance is key

## Does my Project need a Proposal?

At the University of Exeter we have six distinct Academic Colleges, each covering a different set of disciplines. All Colleges at the University of Exeter require PhD candidates to write a research proposal in most instances (certain projects are exempt).

Please note, every College is different, and your subject may have special requirements.

We would recommend that you contact the College responsible for your discipline and discuss your idea with a potential supervisor before you start writing a research proposal.



As a member of the Russell Group, we attract funding to support postgraduate study and research from all major research councils and endeavour to provide information on some external sources, as well as investing heavily ourselves.

## LAST THOUGHTS...

Remember that your research proposal should leave a positive first impression upon the reader about your ability to complete a PhD with us.

It is your project, so it is important to demonstrate leadership in this first stage of the application process. An excellent proposal should leave the reader feeling in no doubt that you are ready to tackle the challenges of a PhD.

Give your proposal your utmost attention and time, but also be realistic. Your proposal can still be flexible at this point. It is not a contract.

Always ask someone else to read your proposal before you submit it (even if English is your first language), we all make mistakes!

Finally, remember that a research proposal instantly reflects your potential competence to undertake a PhD effectively, so sell yourself and your project.

Apply online at [www.exeter.ac.uk/postgraduate](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/postgraduate) or visit us in person.



# EXTRA SOURCES

Extra sources of useful information for writing research proposals and postgraduate study in general:

- FindaPhD.com (online)
- Vitae.ac.uk (online)
- University of Exeter Postgraduate Research Website (online)
- Bell, J., 1999, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers in Education and Social Science*
- Baxter, L., 2001, *How to Research*
- Cryer, P., 2000 *The Research Student's Guide to Success*
- Delamont, S., 1997, *Supervising the PhD*
- Philips, E., 2005, *How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*
- Hall, G., 2008, *The Postgraduate Companion*
- Bentley, P., 2012, *The PhD Application Handbook: Revised Edition*
- Denscombe, M., 2012, *Research Proposals: A Practical Guide*







# Good Luck!



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