

Writing a research proposal

Nottingham provides an excellent environment for postgraduate research. Our research generates discoveries, many of which have profound social, economic and cultural benefits that address major global challenges.

If you are applying for a PhD programme, you may need to submit a research proposal with your application. The proposal helps an academic school or department establish whether it has the expertise to support your proposed area of PhD study. It will also be used in assessing the overall quality of your application.

A typical research proposal:

- is read by academics with an interest in your field. Please check on the school website for your area of study to ensure there is a member of staff with relevant expertise.
- ranges from 1,000 to 3,000 words
- is judged both on content and proposal format

A postgraduate research proposal should:

- clearly define the topic you're interested in and show you understand your research area
- show you have started to identify and develop an original and interesting research question
- demonstrate you understand how to conduct research
- look professional – it should be typed, in good English, well-structured with suitable headings and clear and legible
- include a bibliography, listing the books, articles and websites you have referred to

What should a research proposal contain?

- an introduction to the proposal, identifying the subject for research in terms of theoretical issues and relevant empirical applications
- a review of relevant literature and theories relating to your proposed research area that shows you understand the major lines of argument that have been developed and the ideas and findings of key researchers working on your topic
- an indication of the research methods you will use and the form and location of any empirical work you plan to undertake; where and for how long might you collect any relevant data? **For example:**
 - outline the sources of information you might need
 - comment on the geographical area in which the study will take place – what are the advantages and disadvantages of this choice?
 - discuss the subjects of your research – individuals? Groups? Companies? And why?
- an indication on how you envisage your research will contribute to debates and discussions in your particular subject area. Will it make an original contribution? How might it fill gaps in existing work or extend understanding of particular topics?

While the actual empirical work you undertake may differ to your proposal, it is essential you have an understanding of the issues associated with conducting research and the potential to design a research study to address a specific set of issues.

You can still make changes to your proposal once you have been accepted for a research degree, however as it is the foundation of your working relationship with your supervisor, it cannot be radically altered without discussion and consultation.

For further information on submitting a research proposal, please contact your school of interest.