

Guidelines for the Doctoral Research Proposal

What is a DPhil proposal?

A DPhil proposal is an outline of your proposed project that is designed to:

- Define a clear question and approach to answering it
- Highlight its originality and/or significance
- Explain how it adds to, develops (or challenges) existing literature in the field
- Persuade potential supervisors and/or funders of the importance of the work, and why *you* are the right person to undertake it.

Research proposals vary in length, but generally speaking, a proposal should be around 2000 to 3000 words. The potential supervisors of the research will need to see and consider this proposal before your application can be processed.

Research proposals are also used to assess your potential expertise in the area in which you want to conduct research, and, to a certain degree, your knowledge of the existing literature (and how your project will enhance it).

Crucially, it is also an opportunity for you to communicate your interest in the subject area and to make a persuasive argument about what your project can accomplish. Although the proposal should include an outline, it should also be approached as a persuasive essay – that is, as an opportunity to establish the attention of readers and convince them of the importance of your project.

Good DPhil proposals evolve as the work progresses. It is normal for students to refine their original proposal in light of detailed literature reviews, further consideration of research approaches and comments received from the supervisors (and other academic staff). It is useful to view your proposal as an initial outline rather than a summary of the ‘final product’.

Structuring a Research Proposal

In general, the following elements are crucial in a good research proposal:

- *Title*

This can change, but make sure to include important 'key words' that will relate your proposal to relevant potential supervisors, funding schemes and so on. Make sure that your title goes beyond simply describing the subject matter – it should give an indication of your approach or key questions.

- *Overview of the research*

In this section you should provide a short overview of your research and where it fits within the existing academic discourses, debates or literature. Be as specific as possible in identifying influences or debates you wish to engage with, but try not to get lead astray into a long exegesis of specific sources. Rather, the point is to sketch out the *context* into which your work will fit.

You should also use this section to make links between your research and the existing strengths of the department to which you are applying. Visit appropriate websites to find out about existing research taking place in the department and how your project can complement this.

Be sure to establish a solid and convincing *framework* for your research in this section. This should include:

- research questions (usually, 1-3 should suffice) and the reason for asking them
- the major approach(es) you will take (conceptual, theoretical, empirical and normative, as appropriate) and rationale
- significance of the research (in academic and, if appropriate, other fields)

- *Positioning of the research*

This section should discuss the texts which you believe are most important to the project, demonstrate your understanding of the research issues, and identify existing gaps (both theoretical and practical) that the research is intended to address. This section is intended to 'sign-post' and contextualize your research questions, not to provide a detailed analysis of existing debates.

- *Research design & methodology*

This section should lay out, in clear terms, the way in which you will structure your research and the specific methods you will use. Research design should include (but is not limited to):

- The parameters of the research (ie the definition of the subject matter)

- A discussion of the overall approach (e.g. is it solely theoretical, or does it involve primary/empirical research) and your rationale for adopting this approach
- *Specific* aims and objectives (e.g. 'complete 20 interviews with members of group x')
- A brief discussion of the timeline for achieving this.

A well-developed methodology section is crucial, particularly if you intend to conduct significant empirical research. Be sure to include specific techniques, not just your general approach. This should include: kinds of resources consulted; methods for collecting and analyzing data; specific techniques (ie statistical analysis; semi-structured interviewing; participant observation); and (brief) rationale for adopting these methods.

References

Your references should provide the reader with a good sense of your grasp on the literature and how you can contribute to it. Be sure to reference texts and resources that you think will play a large role in your analysis. Remember that this is not simply a bibliography listing 'everything written on the subject'. Rather, it should show critical reflection in the selection of appropriate texts.

Possible pitfalls

Quite often, students who fit the minimum entrance criteria fail to be accepted as DPhil candidates as a result of weaknesses in the research proposal. To avoid this, keep the following advice in mind:

- Make sure that your research idea, question or problem is very clearly stated, persuasive and addresses a demonstrable gap in the existing literature. Put time into formulating the questions- in the early stages of a project, they can be as important as the projected results.
- Make sure that your proposal is well structured. Poorly formed or rambling proposals indicate that the proposed project may suffer the same fate.
- Ensure that the scope of your project is reasonable, and remember that there are significant limits to the size and complexity of a project that can be completed and written up in three years (or two years if proposing an MPhil). We will be assessing proposals not only for their intellectual ambition and significance, but also for the likelihood that the candidate can complete this project.
- Make sure that your passion for the subject matter shines through in the structure and arguments presented within your proposal. Remember that we may not be experts in your field – it is up to you to make your project and subject matter engaging to your readers!