



What should I include in my thesis proposal?

The great value of a research proposal carefully crafted early on in one's graduate training is that it acts as a sort of foundation upon which a program of work can be constructed; that is to say it provides an intellectual and methodological roadmap for you.

(“The Holy Grail: In pursuit of the dissertation proposal”,

Michael Watts, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley. Page 4)

Available at: <http://iis.berkeley.edu/sites/files/pdf/inpursuitofphd.pdf>

To be considered for the PhD or MPhil program, prospective students must submit a 5-10 page thesis proposal for consideration by NCIS.

Some initial considerations

A thesis proposal is preliminary; not fixed for all time. A thesis topic may change or its focus shift, along with other aspects of the study, during different phase of a research degree. On the other hand, a radical change of topic later on might mean that an appropriate supervisor cannot be found, or that one of your panel members no longer feels able to supervise your project.

So this early proposal is an important first step; it gives you the opportunity to pull your ideas together and clarify your thinking. It's important to take the scope and focus of the research seriously, avoiding either over-reaching into unmanageable topics that simply cannot be done, or too narrow underachievement. You are committing yourself to 3-4 years of work so you need to choose an intellectual problem which inspires you, in order to sustain your confidence and momentum over the inevitable slumps that face every HDR scholar.

The purpose of a preliminary proposal is to enable the NCIS to initially assess the viability of your proposed research and to provide useful feedback to you. Accordingly, proposals should include sufficient broad content to assess whether:

- The research proposed is worthwhile for the level of the degree you wish to undertake; there are big differences between the kind of contribution required of research and word length for a shorter MPhil thesis, than say for a longer PhD thesis (e.g., a PhD is a substantial piece of research that shows evidence of advanced knowledge, with mastery of appropriate methodological techniques and theoretical interpretation, and makes an original contribution to the field).

- The scope of the research is suited to the level of the degree; clearly the breadth and depth of research expected, and the length of the written thesis, will be different for MPhil and PhD theses.
- The methods proposed to complete the research are appropriate.
- It will be possible for the HDR scholar to access the resources needed to complete the research, to conduct interviews proposed, to carry out field research etc.
- The proposed research is feasible in terms of time available to complete the degree.

These matters will be taken into account in assessing proposals, so bear them in mind.

There is no single 'right' way to write up a thesis proposal. Much depends on your topic and research approach. But there are some components that they all share in common, which are set out below and can be adapted to suit your project.

1. Title

A precise and informative description of the project. Avoid acronyms and phrases such as "A study of ..." or "An investigation into..."

2. An Abstract

A summary of the proposed research (approx. 300 words) that includes the key research question/s and/or hypothesis, the rationale for the research, and the methods to be employed in the study, and what you are hoping to learn and achieve.

Writing an abstract is a real challenge. You have to be succinct and able to give an explanation of your proposed research in ordinary language. The chances are that if you cannot do that, you do not yet understand what your topic is actually about. But remember, the point of a proposal is make a start in setting out your ideas and posing your research question; it will evolve as your research takes shape.

3. The Research Context

Your purpose here is to describe the broad context of your study—the BIG PICTURE. What is the nature of the problem or issue to be researched? It can include preliminary reference to the key

research that has already been carried out in the field (including perhaps particular methodological or theoretical approaches). This should not simply be a list of authors or summaries, but an integrated explanation of why these previous studies, techniques or theories are important to your research. Contextualise your proposed research and identify the problems, paradoxes or gaps which your research will address.

4. Aims & Significance

A clearly focused statement of the overall purpose of the proposed research is needed here (ie, why is it important?).

A PhD requires an original and distinctive contribution to the research field. Answering this section allows you to convey the nature of your contribution and say why you think it is important to conduct the research in the first place.

What contribution do you aim to achieve? What will be new or distinctive about your work? Show that the question is a serious one and a legitimate focus for your academic enquiry, which is to say that it must relate not only to the existing literature and debates in some sustained way, but also to the world in which we live.

Apart from providing information on the contribution you expect to make to knowledge, it may also be important for you to mention the practical and professional value attaching to your proposed research, e.g. contribution and outcomes to Indigenous studies and peoples, industry application, commercial uses, practical reforms, etc.

5. Research Questions &/or Hypotheses

Outline the questions that the proposed research will address and/or the hypotheses that will be tested. For example, what is the relationship between several concepts, variable, events, processes, phenomena etc. This can include identifying your preliminary approach to defining key CONCEPTS.

A research question is not the same as a thesis title. A research question can be derived from summarising the significant issue your research will investigate and then posing that in the form of a set of questionS to be answered by your analysis. In a thesis, you propose a relevant question and then you answer the question.

'Hypothesis' is defined as 'a proposition put forward as a basis for reasoning or argument, without any assumption of its truth' so it can be tested out by your research (New Shorter OED). It allows you to frame your research topic around an intellectual problem, puzzle or paradox which analysis of evidence is then going to resolve.

Whilst this is a preliminary proposal, having clarified your major aim or central question, you might want to break this down into a set of subsidiary aims or questions.

6. Methodology

Methodology is more than simply the methods you intend to use to collect your data. It is a rationale and systematic analysis of the methods that you choose to apply to your field of inquiry. Consider what are the relevant concepts and theories which underlie your chosen methodology.

There are many possible ways to approach any given research topic. Why are you intending to use some processes, sequences, sampling, approaches to collect and analyse data, rather than others? If there is creative element to your topic indicate that and how it fits within the overall research design.

Provide an explanation of what type of data will be required to answer the research questions or test the hypotheses, and how the data will be collected and analysed. It may include qualitative and quantitative, field-based and archival methods. It may involve methodology derived from a single disciplinary focus, or the use of a mixed-method framework.

If field-based research is intended, provide a preliminary indication of where and for how long. Will you work in one or several locations? Will you develop a comparative methodology or investigate different research issues in different locations? Indicate whether specific field methodologies will be used, and provide a preliminary consideration of any ethical issues that will need to be addressed.

7. Timetable

Give an indication of how the research will be carried out over the duration of a full-time or part-time candidature. The idea is to provide a general overview of what you think needs to be done to complete your research and in what order.

8. Your relevant work experience

Where appropriate, give a brief account of any research-oriented work you have done and are presently doing, putting special emphasis on your experience that will be relevant to the research you are proposing (including professional employment, volunteer research, courses you might be taking or teaching).

Work experience may feature prominently, particularly if your experience is highly relevant to your thesis topic and is a key reason for receiving strong support for your proposal from people with whom you wish to work, OR from academic and other referees.

9. Resources

An indication of the funding and other resources that will likely be required over the course of the candidature (eg, for fieldwork, substantial statistical analysis or archival research, capital equipment, producing and analysing creative work) as well any special materials or training that may be necessary for the successful completion of the project.

10. Institutional fit

Provide a statement as to why NCIS is an appropriate 'home' for the project, and give an indication of potential supervisors/advisors.

11. Bibliography

A list of references cited in the proposal.