

Writing a research proposal

Guidance for PhD applicants

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

The 1,500 word research proposal is an important element of your application to doctoral study, whether full-time or part-time. It offers you the opportunity to outline the research you intend to conduct, including how you plan to go about it, and how your research might make a contribution to a theoretical or empirical evidence base. It is your chance to showcase the strengths of your proposed study, your understanding of your field, and how it may be valuable to others.

This proposal is one of several elements considered during the application process. It contributes to an understanding of your potential for research and your proposed work's likely strengths.

As you write your proposal, consider which of the academic groups or research centres in the Faculty of Education your work would best fit within. Explore the research in your chosen group or centre to understand the topics, issues, or challenges they address in their research and the methods they use to conduct their research. If you have identified a potential supervisor, consider if your proposed work aligns with their expertise.

You should write your proposal in clear, jargon-free, simple text. You may use technical language if this is required of your proposed project, but consider that your proposal may be read by education researchers with specialisms broader than your chosen field.

In writing your proposal, cover the following aspects:

- The topic that you propose to research: provide a clear title for your study; outline and provide a motivation for your proposed research question(s); offer a justification of your choice of topic with reference to academic or other relevant literature.
- The research context: explain how your proposal relates to other work in its field, including a discussion of key pieces of academic literature, theoretical models, empirical evidence, or methodological examples to which you relate your proposal. This is an opportunity to illustrate your knowledge and critical understanding of the field you are proposing to research.
- The research design and methods you propose: describe the overall research design and the specific methods you propose to use to answer your research questions. Justify why your proposed methods are feasible and suitable for your study and its field. If appropriate, you should refer to relevant methodological literature that informs your research design.
- The contribution that your work will make: offer a considered account of your proposed study's contribution to its research field, to knowledge in general, or to policy or practice if relevant. Include an account of the debates your work might address; an outline of any methodological innovations you might want to make; and a discussion of the questions your work may raise, including how others in the academic or practical field might make use of your proposed research.

When writing your proposal, please also consider a few practical points:

- Indicate the research group or centre your proposal best fits within at the top of your document. Indicate a possible supervisor for the topic, or name more than one if you have identified more than one person whose research aligns with your interests.

- If you have identified a specific supervisor, please also indicate this in the appropriate space on the application form.
- Revise your proposal at least once, considering your academic tone, and clarity and accuracy of your writing.
- The word limit for your proposal is **1,500 words**. This includes footnotes, appendices, figures, tables, etc., but does not include references.