How to write a research proposal

How you write a research proposal for your research degree will depend on a number of factors, not least the area of study and your previous experience of it. Writing a research proposal is one of the first tasks that has to be undertaken by all research programme students at the Digital Business research centre.

Please note *that this is a guide and not a rule for research proposal writing and it does focus our research traditions and hence will not necessarily fulfil the requirements of other research centres. Whether you are studying for a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), MPhil (Master of Philosophy) or MSc by research - a research proposal will allow you to focus your work and find a suitable supervisor; thus it is an important starting point for your research training journey.*

Your writing of a research proposal will depend on a number of factors. Before you commence, it is important that these factors are explored and identified by yourself and if possible with your potential research supervisor. The option discussed in this guide on writing a research proposal is to approach it as a mini project - meaning that your research proposal writing project has its time deadlines, quality benchmarks and associated costs. The information in this example draws on developing a PhD study research proposal that would be accepted for submission of study in the Salford Business School.

In this guide:

- How long to spend writing your research proposal
- Research proposal subject area
- PhD research proposal topics inspiration
- Research proposal quality benchmarks
- Research proposal structure
- What next?
- More advice

How long to spend writing your research proposal

Dependent on your experience of the subject area, the average time allocated to writing a proposal could be anything from one day (for someone who has just finished their MSc and plans to develop their MSc thesis into a PhD) to about a month (perhaps where you have found a new area of interest and you want to take your career in this direction). For example, if you have recently graduated with an MSc in an area where you would like to develop your work further, the PhD research proposal could be the natural progression of your MSc dissertation – hence you could start with the conclusions chapter where you reflect on your findings and identify new areas of study. Alternatively, you might have developed a new concept and would like to test it further in different settings such as organisations or other countries or with larger samples of data. So – set yourself realistic expectations.

Research proposal subject area

It is always advisable to see your research proposal writing as a first step to advancing your future career and not simply as writing a research proposal for its own sake. There are a number of reasons for this, not least the financial necessity to fund your work and the potential use of your findings for commercial purposes in the future. Also, unless your work is unique, the contribution to knowledge (which is a requirement of a PhD) would be, difficult to achieve. Although there are exceptions to this, and there are some researchers who simply take their degree to gain a research qualification, it is important that you are interested in the research area yourself and are not considering it simply because of your supervisor or a journal paper that mentioned that specific area as important.

PhD research proposal topics inspiration

The opportunities for research proposals in the area of digital business are endless. A good starting point for inspiration are PhD research proposal topics - these can be found on the Business School PhD pages. The latest publications can be viewed on the [University of Salford Institutional Repository](#), from the profile pages of the individual members of academic staff by exploring their research areas and publications or more generally via Google Scholar: [scholar.google.co.uk](#)

Research proposal quality benchmarks

In answering the question on how to write a research proposal we have so far identified that it is not something that should be done without a longer term perspective and there are a number of issues that have to be considered before you finalise your research proposal draft. The following numbers should be used as a guide and not a rule – there are always exceptions but generally:
- Word count is between 1500 to 2000 words (not counting abstract and references)
- Number of references should be about 10 to 20 (recent academic journal publications)
- You should always read the work of those who you intend to supervise you and include your views on their relevant work.

Generic proposal structure could include:
- **Title page:** - your research proposal title and your name etc.
- **Abstract**: - circa 300 words summarising What? Why? and How? you are proposing to undertake this research.
- **Research Context:** - setting out the "research problem" area and what others have done about it thus far.
- **Research problem statement:** - why is this still a problem warranting your research; highlighting limitations or weaknesses of other studies and identifying what is necessary to address these limitations. This leads you to stating your research questions.
- **Research aim and SMART objectives:** - the aim of your research should logically follow from the research problem statement. The SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) objectives should break your research proposal into major stages and state an output, which would guide you in planning

and negotiating your work with your supervisor. For example, one of the objectives could be: Objective 1 – literature review: To undertake a literature review of 100 most relevant journal articles and writing a 20,000 word literature review by the end of the first year.

(Note here that the 20,000 word literature review is a measurable output which will guide you in your final thesis production. The final word count for a PhD thesis is about 85,000 to 100,000 words and you have to plan your chapter writing outputs accordingly.)

- **Research method:** - This section is logically derived from your research questions, aim and objectives and deals with the practical implementation of your data collection, data analysis and conclusions' drawing. It is important to differentiate that the term 'method' is sometimes interchangeable to mean methodology, research approach or research strategy – dependent on which research methods books you are following. Since you are only at the proposal stage of your study it is not expected that you make statements here about the philosophical stance of your work. For example, discussion of your philosophic beliefs (such as positivist, interpretive or critical research paradigms) and hence the methodological considerations are not necessary at this stage. However, it is useful to demonstrate your appreciation of some consideration to the methods you are planning to use – i.e. is it going to be action research, case study, experiment, grounded theory or other widely accepted information systems research methods. At this stage, the following information systems research book is recommended reading and would be a good companion for your PhD studies: *Oates. B. J. (2006). Researching Information Systems and Computing. London: Sage Publications.* On a more practical note you also need to consider the primary data collection tools (assuming that you are planning to use these) such as questionnaires, observations, interviews, document analysis, focus groups etc. Finally, your section on research methods could end on the discussion of data access – that is how you are planning to negotiate access to primary data collection.
- **Research plan** – the last section could be a brief reminder of what it is that you are going to achieve and what will follow from your research method and research objectives. For example, each objective could be broken down into smaller tasks that would guide you in allocating time to your work. When developing timelines, you have to be aware of the timelines frameworks as set out by the University of Salford regulations. At the time of writing this "how to write a research proposal guide", a PhD normally takes three years full-time or five years part-time study (January 2013). The MRes or MPhil programmes usually last at least one year, if studied full-time and two or more years if studied part-time. The development of outputs could be your milestones and would guide your progression of study. A plan is a communication medium for you and your supervisor and it is always worth trying to keep the balance between too much detail and too little – for example, you don't want to have too many detailed tasks for all years but perhaps at the beginning of your work you might want to be explicit about your first year and keep the latter stages more generic since they are likely to change based on your work in the first year. Examples of a plan of activities could include:Objective 1 – literature review tasks:
  - Attend research training on undertaking a literature review

- ○ Identify 10 most recent authors in the area and critically review their work – Month 1
  - ○ Identify 10 most frequently cited journal articles in the area and critically review their work – Month 2
  - ○ Identify 10 most relevant journals and conferences in the area and quarterly review their recent publications – Month 4
  - ○ Present your literature review drafts to peers – Month 5
  - ○ *Mile Stone:* Produce a draft literature review chapter of circa 20,000 words and 100 references. – Month 6
- **References:** – In the Salford Business School, the work is mostly published using the Harvard referencing standard. This means that in the body of your research proposal you need to state the author's last name and the year of publication, for example (Bell & Heinze 2004), and at the end of your proposal in the references section you have to state the full reference stating the title, journal details and the page numbers such as this: Bell, F., & Heinze, A. (2004). With regard to respect: a framework for governance of educational virtual communities. International Journal Web Based Communities, 1(1), 19- 34. Additional information on how to reference can be found on the University of Salford library support pages.

You have written your research proposal: what next?

Now that you have written your research proposal, you have to check that you have all the other necessary documents for your application. The main thing is not to worry if you find that your proposal is still not perfect - it is a proposal and during the first year of your study you will refine it and when it comes to the final submission it might be a totally different document, which is not uncommon. It is often the case that once you get into the area of research you will refine and re-focus your work in light of the feedback from the supervisor and others to whom you present your work as part of your research training – this would include seminar presentations, conferences etc. So apply now!

Need more help on how to write a research proposal?

Have an informal discussion with a member of staff who you are hoping will be your supervisor. You can contact them directly or contact the College Research support staff who will help you to find a potential supervisor for your work and or who will provide further clarification on the above guide.

However, there are a number of additional resources, which could help you with your work, and the University of Salford provides these centrally:

- Application details and online application form
- Prospective students support