

# Guidance Notes for Writing a Proposal for Research Degree Application

## Personal Particulars

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
*Family Name* *Given Name(s)*

Intended Month & Year of Entry \_\_\_\_\_ Programme:  MPhil /  PhD

## 1 Title of Project

The project title should give a clear and succinct indication of what the proposed study is about. Avoid technical and theoretical jargon so that the title is understandable to lay readers and researchers from other disciplines.

*Helpful points to consider:*

- Remember that the title is usually readers' first opportunity to get a sense of what the study is about.
- The choice of title relates to the choice of topic, which is an important decision for any postgraduate research project. Seeking advice before beginning work on the proposal can help clarify aspects of the topic that are of most interest to you, and that can be strategic in career terms.

*Common mistakes to avoid:*

- Titles that are lengthy and overly-descriptive, and that lack a sharp focus.
- Titles that are catchy but don't capture the essence of what the study is about.

## 2 Detail of the Proposed Research

Please complete the following parts in between **6,000 – 8,000 words**:

1. Aims and objectives of the project; and the research questions / hypotheses, where appropriate

An overarching research question (and sub-questions, as appropriate) or hypothesis (depending on what is most appropriate to the discipline area) is helpful to articulate the main focus of the study. Aims and objectives should be directly related to how the research question or hypothesis will be addressed. Aims are generally broad, referring to the ultimate goal/s the researcher hopes to achieve. Objectives are more specific and refer to the steps that will be taken in order to achieve the research aims. Hypotheses are testable predictions about relationships of variables.

*Helpful points to consider:*

- When developing research questions, consider why these questions are important to ask, whether they've been asked or answered before, and if so, what will differentiate this study from other studies in the literature
- Keep the list of aims and objectives succinct so that the project is manageable and feasible within the candidature timeframe.
- Getting feedback on this section can help identify any points that are unclear, repetitive or need refinement.

*Common mistakes to avoid:*

- Confused terminology – terms such as research questions (or hypothesis), aims, objectives and outcomes have different meanings and should not be used interchangeably. Similarly, significance and impact have different meanings. Applicants are advised to look up any terms about which they are unclear prior to writing their proposals.
- Overly ambitious goals – while it is important to approach your topic with thoroughness, remember that it is impossible to cover everything in a single study.

**2. Significance and/or impact of the proposed study**

Significance of research refers to its importance – why does it matter, to whom, and for what reasons? What will be its contribution to new knowledge, and how will this be of benefit to advancing research in the field, or to others (eg, a particular profession, community, society, or others)? The definition of ‘impact’ used here for the purposes of writing the research proposal is the one defined in the Research Assessment Exercise 2020, which ‘refers to demonstrable contributions, beneficial effects, valuable changes or advantages that research qualitatively brings to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life; whether locally, regionally or internationally; and that are beyond the academia’

([https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/in\\_out.html](https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/in_out.html)). Impact is often described quantitatively (for example, the number of beneficiaries of the study), but it may also be described in terms of the nature, scope and scale of the problem the research aims to address.

*Helpful points to consider:*

- At proposal stage, applicants ideally will demonstrate an understanding of why their proposed study is important to their field of study.
- In fields that prepare people for the professions (eg, education, psychology, counselling, etc), research studies may have significance to the profession or may have an impact on some aspect of a particular practice, or on the knowledge of professionals about a particular issue.

*Common mistakes to avoid:*

- Understating significance and impact – remember to consider whether the topic, research problem and/or approach original in some way? Is the study looking at an old problem in a new way, or from a theoretical perspective that has not been used in the field before? Will findings lead to improvements in an area that has previously been neglected?
- Overstating significance and impact – being ambitious about contributing to meaningful change is great, but being realistic about what a single study can accomplish is also important. Changing the world sometimes takes many studies and future collaborations, so it can be helpful to think about your postgraduate project as providing the foundation for future research.

**3. Theoretical, empirical and/or conceptual basis, and background evidence, for the proposed research**

This section is important for positioning the proposed study in relation to other work in the field. It should demonstrate the applicant’s understanding of key issues and debates of relevance to the topic, theoretical knowledge/framework that will guide the proposed research design and analysis of data, recent research that has been conducted on the topic, and gaps in the literature that the proposed study will seek to address.

*Helpful points to consider:*

- There are numerous disciplinary differences and scholarly debates about the role of theory in research. It is important to be informed by the theoretical debates in your field, and how theory informs the work of scholars whose work you respect. Theories (whether philosophical or scientific) typically offer a vantage point from whence a research topic is investigated, and a lens through which research findings or data can be interpreted, explained, interrogated and analysed. While there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ theory, it can be helpful for proposals to position the study within a particular theoretical or scientific paradigm and to convey the applicant’s understanding of its relevance to the proposed study.
- Many postgraduate students begin with a serviceable knowledge about their proposed theoretical framework, but find that their thinking changes along with new developments in their field and with further learning as they progress through their candidature.
- Research proposals should demonstrate the applicant’s knowledge of the current ‘state of play’ in the literature of their discipline area, as well as the key developments, major contributors and influential studies in the field.

*Common mistakes to avoid:*

- Limited references – appropriately supporting claims with reference to the research literature is an important skill that helps readers ascertain the candidate’s knowledge of the recent, relevant literature in the field, and their standard of scholarship.
- Overuse of outdated or non-academic sources – unless referring to influential or pivotal studies that have shaped the field in significant ways, it is best to avoid using references that are more than 5-10 years old. Non-academic sources such as government reports and policy documents, or major organisations such as WHO and UNICEF can be useful for providing context and statistics, but in general it is best to avoid referring to sites such as Wikipedia and unofficial or non-peer reviewed sources.

#### 4. Research design and the methods to be used

This section should be specific about what the applicant is proposing to do – how will they go about researching their topic/research questions/hypothesis? What methodological approach will they take, and will the methods or research techniques proposed be suitable for enabling the researcher to address the research questions. It is also important that the proposed methods are feasible so that the study can be completed on time.

*Helpful points to consider:*

- A thorough, well-designed study should enable candidates to answer their research questions.
- Proposed projects should briefly address any key ethical issues pertaining to their projects, and how these will be managed. This is particularly important for projects on sensitive topics or with vulnerable participants.

*Common mistakes to avoid:*

- Unnecessary methods – avoid proposing to conduct data collection at multiple points in time for no particular reason other than to gather more data, or proposing numerous methods without any particular rationale (apart from trying to ‘capture everything’).
- Complicated methods – avoid proposing potentially intrusive methods such as recording videos in classrooms unless there is a rationale that relates specifically to the research questions.

## 5. References (no words limit)

Proposals should use a referencing style that is consistent with research in the relevant discipline area. Ensuring accuracy and consistency of referencing, both in the body of the text and in the reference list.

*Helpful points to consider:*

- Accuracy in referencing is a basic academic skill that is required in all facets of academic writing and publishing. Becoming familiar with and consistently using referencing guidelines for particular styles is good practice that you will find useful in all future academic writing. There are many online resources with examples of particular referencing styles.
- If possible, ask someone to proofread your draft for accuracy in referencing.

*Common mistakes to avoid:*

- Poor referencing and/or plagiarism in the body of the text – copying the work of others without acknowledgement gives readers the impression that an applicant either does not understand the conventions of academic writing, does not have strong academic skills, or is dishonest.
- Inconsistent and/or inaccurate referencing styles – accuracy in referencing is a basic academic skill that is required in all facets of academic writing and publishing. Submitting a research proposal with inconsistent and inaccurate referencing is the equivalent of attending an important job interview wearing a wrinkled suit with your shirt stained and un-tucked – it suggests that the applicant either doesn't understand how to present in a professional manner, or that they simply don't care.

*Please submit your research proposal in a separate Word file.*

In addition to the above, when preparing your research proposal, here are some other common mistakes to avoid:

- Writing the proposal using past tense – this gives readers the impression that an applicant is writing a proposal about a study that has already been conducted.
- Writing a proposal about a study that has already been conducted – this gives readers the impression that an applicant is 'double-dipping', in other words, trying to use their own prior research (such as their Masters' thesis) or someone else's prior research (such as plagiarized work), rather than proposing new, original research that will advance knowledge in the field.
- Overpromising – remember that a research proposal is a single piece of scholarship conducted by a novice researcher. The proposal should reflect the goal of the Research Postgraduate Study Process, which is to produce a high-quality piece of research that demonstrates the student's competence as a scholar and their capability as an independent researcher, and that makes a contribution to new knowledge at the forefront of their field of study. (Changing the world usually comes later!)

## 6. Timeline for Objectives

Tasks/Milestones (◆)	Year 1				Year 2				Year 3				Year 4				... etc				
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	
	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr

for example:

Tasks/Milestones (◆)	2023				2024				2025				2026				2027				
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	
	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr	qr
<i>Systematic review</i>		◆	◆																		
<i>Presentation of proposal</i>			◆																		
<i>Design of questionnaire</i>			◆	◆	◆	◆	◆														
<i>Data collection</i>								◆	◆	◆	◆	◆									
<i>etc ...</i>																					