

Guide to Writing a Research Proposal for Studies in The Department for the Study of Religions

The application for a Master, Research Masters or a PhD should contain a preliminary research proposal. If accepted, students then have six months from first registration to produce a full research proposal for submission to the Humanities Faculty office.

The Preliminary Research proposal

The preliminary research proposal is for the department's postgraduate application committee, who will use it in assessing your application. The aim of the assessment is to consider whether you have the necessary social science background and abilities to facilitate successful studies with us, and whether we have sufficient expertise in your area of interest to be able to supervise your research. The preliminary research proposal is a critical aid in helping us make that decision, and no application for a research-based degree will be considered without such a proposal.

We are aware that producing this proposal takes time. Further, we are also aware that many people do not have a clearly defined research project at the outset of their studies, and that typically the first few months of research aims to clarify just that. We thus do not hold you to following this preliminary research proposal. We ask you to provide one nonetheless, for three reasons. First, it allows us to assess your ability to conceive of a research project. Second, it provides us with a clear sense of your research interests. Third, the proposal will provide the basis for initial discussions with your research supervisor if you are accepted.

The preliminary research proposal is usually between 1-2 typed pages, and should include the following sections:

- **A title that gives a clear idea of what your thesis may be about.**
- **A statement of the research problem you have identified and wish to explore in the thesis.**
- **A rationale that explains why the research problem arises or is of interest.**
- **A sample bibliography that provides a sense of other scholars who have written in this area, whom you take to be relevant to your project.**

Before applying, check out the research interests of staff members listed in the Postgraduate Handbook. If there is no one listing interests in your area, then there is little point in applying. If there are, then please do not contact them directly at the outset. Rather, complete the preliminary research proposal along with your application. This will be assessed by a suitable staff member with expertise in this area, who will only contact you should they require further clarification.

The Full Research proposal

Within six months of registration, you will be asked to produce a full research proposal. This is submitted to the Faculty Office and the title is officially registered by the University. The Faculty have produced a formal guide for such proposals. Their guide is reproduced below:

A research proposal is a plan of action; it sets out the aims of your research project and how you intend to achieve these aims. The proposal for a Masters thesis is usually between 3 and 6 typed pages; that for a Doctoral thesis, between 6 and 12 pages. The following headings are intended to assist you in writing a proposal. You may find that in writing your proposal, you want to use different headings, and order your account differently. This is perfectly in order, as long as the basic issues set out here are covered.

1. TITLE: As indicated above, the title of your thesis will be registered, so the title needs to be brief and descriptive. It should provide a fairly clear idea of what your thesis is about.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION: A thesis or dissertation is the investigation of a problem. This research problem or question provides the focus for the entire project. What is it that you wish to investigate? Can you specify crisply the question (or problem) that your thesis sets out to address? You should aim to state a single research question, which you may then choose to flesh out through a number of sub-questions. Bear in mind that a dissertation (PhD, Masters, mini or full) should be a well-contained, tightly-focused and coherent piece of work that examines an issue in some depth.

3. RATIONALE: Having identified the question or problem you wish to address through your research project, you need to say something about how/why this question has arisen. For some students, the research project emerges out of a theoretical interest, for others it emerges out of issues of practice. Whatever the case, you should signal briefly why you have chosen the question that you have, and what contribution you think the completed research project might make to our understanding of the field.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW: When you have registered your proposal and got into the swing of the research project, you will need to undertake a thorough review of the literature pertaining to your research question. For the purposes of the research proposal, you need to have read sufficiently in the field to justify your research question (Why is it important? Have other academics taken up this question in the same or similar ways? How do current debates in your own field of study bear on your research question? Your literature review must assist you in addressing these issues. It will provide information on how your own, or related, research questions have been investigated by other academics in your own (and other, related) fields. It will also provide you with resources to build your own conceptual framework. The literature review thus has two broad aims, to familiarise you with both the theoretical and empirical work which can inform your study.

5. TIME LINE: Try and develop a plan of work for the completion of your thesis, so that you set aside time for conducting a literature review and writing up the report. This will assist you in pacing your progress through the thesis, and also in planning a manageable project.

6. SAMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY: The last part of your research proposal should contain a sample bibliography. This provides a guide to reading you have already done, or plan to do, in developing your research project. Put down the key theoretical and methodological texts you have drawn on, or intend to draw on, as well as that literature, both theoretical and empirical, which bears on your own study. The sample bibliography should not be longer than a page.