



College of Arts & Humanities

Writing a research proposal

A research proposal provides evidence of the development of your research ideas and preparedness for doctoral study. We use the proposal as a basis for decision-making, and to ensure we are able to provide appropriate supervision for your research. It is natural for ideas to evolve and change, so you will not be obliged to adhere to the specifics of your proposal if you are offered a place. Following a successful application, the proposal will help to focus your early research and discussions between you and your supervisor.

Within your application you must present an 800-1000 word research proposal, with images if appropriate. The proposal should identify your proposed research questions, set out the research context (with reference to appropriate literature), and outline your anticipated research methodology. Because applicants vary in the types of research projects they wish to undertake we do not insist on any rigid format. We do however encourage students to keep the following in mind:

Overview of the project

The proposal should begin by stating the core research question that underpins the proposed project. An effective research proposal should begin with a question rather than being purely exploratory in nature.

Having established the question, the proposal should then demonstrate where that question is to be located, and provide an indication of the key theoretical, practical or empirical debates it plans to address. It should include an explanation of why the topic is of interest to you, and an outline of the reasons why the topic should be of interest to the wider research community.

The research area

The proposal should include a brief up-to-date review of literature in your area. You need to demonstrate a familiarity with the relevant academic literature and theories relating to your research proposal and an awareness of the major lines of argument that have been developed in your chosen research field. You should aim to present an indicative statement of the state of current scholarship, showing the gaps in knowledge that you will address. Appropriate breadth and depth should be clear, as well as the inclusion of up-to-date references and a sense of critical engagement. This statement should be presented in support of the research question and not as a generic discussion of a field. You need to demonstrate the ways in which your primary research question and subsidiary lines of investigation have emerged: for example from gaps in the existing literature; from the application of a particular theory in a specific context; or from a synthesis of a number of bodies of literature.

Methodology

The application should describe how you plan to undertake the research. There are many research methods, so you should seek to identify those that are most suited to your study. Projects may involve case-study analysis, the analysis of historical records or design archives, interviews, critical involvement in curatorship, or the analysis of textual sources. Some students apply for research involving creative practice; where this is the case you should explain the relationship between the practice and your research question. The application



should state clearly whether you will need access to specific archives, collections or other specialist resources. Importantly, you need to explain the manner in which the data you collect will enable you to address your research question.

Creative practice

If your research is anchored in creative or artistic practice you should include suitable samples of your work. Typically these are photographic evidence along with clear statements of how the creative production will lead or support the enquiry, for example through the process of making, testing, and reflecting upon practice.

Bibliography

You should include a list of references and other important sources, following a standard academic format. This is not included in the 800-1000 word count.

Contribution to knowledge

Although you are not in a position to present research findings, it is often beneficial to conclude the research proposal by indicating the contribution you envisage that your research will make to the literature in your particular subject area, or by indicating the potential practical or policy implications of your research. This means providing an indication of the extent to which you feel your research will make an original contribution, suggesting how it may fill gaps in existing research, and showing how it may extend understanding of particular topics.

Timetable

Evidence should be provided of how the project will be completed within the allotted time: benchmarks (literature review; writing the draft; final submission) should be indicated in a projected timetable of study and development.

Personal Statement

In the personal statement you should show how your own background gives you scholarly competence in your chosen area. Some explanation of what led you to the topic, especially if this is after the development of a former qualification or vocational practice, would be appropriate.

Presentation

While your research proposal is judged mainly on content, it must also look professional. It should be typed and written in good English. Particular attention will be paid to clarity of expression and also the structure, coherence and flow of argument.

Typical Weaknesses

Applications are often delayed or rejected because of the following problems:

The project cannot be supervised at Brighton

Make sure that the specialist area you wish to study is covered by a member(s) of staff. You can do this by checking individual [College of Arts and Humanities staff profiles](#) on the website. You might also contact academic staff prior to making a formal application to get an indication of how well your proposed research topic aligns with our research interests and expertise.



The project is not focused

Your research proposal should be as specific and as focused as possible. Although your project may alter significantly as you progress, we cannot accept students who have only a vague idea of a research field.

A passion to explore is not sufficient in itself. The onus is on you to state the question(s) which underpin your proposed research. Your ability to frame your research in this way demonstrates your potential to think like a researcher.

The project is unlikely to be completed

PhDs are typically 3-4 years full time and around 5-6 years part-time. Projects cannot be accepted which are unlikely to be completed on this timescale, whether because of student competence, resource issues or the extent of the topic.

The practice is not research

Your proposal should clearly describe a research project. Creative or artistic practice, however original it may be, does not qualify as research in itself. Creative practice through which research is to be undertaken must be justified.