

Writing a DPhil Research Proposal

A Research Proposal in the field of international development consists of a plan for research and for writing a thesis, including: (a) the specification of a set of research questions or a statement of problems to be analysed, (b) a discussion of relevant existing scholarship and theoretical approaches within an inter-disciplinary framework, (c) an outline of the initial argument or hypotheses, (d) a discussion of case selection and empirical sources and analysis, and (e) an account of how the analysis will bear on or address the research questions posed, or how it will make a contribution to the subject area. The Research Proposal should include a bibliography of works cited. It should be around 3,000 words long, excluding the bibliography.

The following is a **suggested structure** for a Research Proposal. However, it is not an invariable pattern. In particular, research projects vary in their emphasis (theory, the literature, the methods of gathering data or other primary materials, the methods of analysis, the results of the analysis, etc) so the relative lengths and the order of these sections can vary:

Introduction: What is your research question? In your introduction you should state your research question(s) as succinctly and clearly as you can. It is best to try to frame your project around an intellectual problem, paradox or debate. It is helpful to formulate this as a specific question or set of questions that you will answer, rather than a broad topic of interest. The introduction should also include a justification for why this is a significant and interesting question to address.

Literature review: What is the contribution your research will make to existing knowledge? The research question must be put into the context of the existing literature, both theoretical and topic specific. It may be that the existing literature has a gap (but note that a gap is not enough – it must be an interesting and important gap!), or that the accepted findings are controversial or open to doubt, or that you think that the dominant theoretical framework(s) should be questioned, or that there is a continuing conflict between two or more ‘camps’ or disciplinary approaches, or that the methods used in existing literature should be improved, or that you seek to apply established ideas in a different context or for a different purpose. In this section you need to concisely outline your interpretation of the existing literature and explain how your research project ‘fits’ and will make a contribution: how does your project relate to approaches, ideas and findings in the existing literature and how does it develop these further? Make clear your assumptions and the limits of your topic and provide an indication of your argument or hypotheses. (The account of existing scholarship and research will necessarily be brief.)

Selection of case, methods and empirical material: How will you answer your research questions? In this section, you should discuss your case selection (where a case is used), describe the kind of empirical materials that will be necessary for an adequate examination of your research question(s), explain and justify the choice of methods by which such material will be obtained, and discuss how the materials will be analysed.

First, you may want to discuss the selection of cases, events, persons, processes, outcomes, texts, etc. Why have you chosen a specific case or set of cases, a particular data set, or a particular group of interviewees or texts? Why are they the best sources to use? Second, you should discuss how you will obtain the relevant empirical material. Primary research materials are diverse, including historical or archival documents, data about organisations, bureaucracies and individuals, interviews and observational data whether from participant observation or non-participant observation, surveys and ethnographies. Existing statistics and survey data are also invaluable sources for some research projects. You should discuss your choice of research methods in some detail (archival research, collecting published documents, interviewing, ethnography, focus groups, participant observation, obtaining large scale datasets, etc), clearly stating why these are the best methods for addressing your research question. Think about practical issues too: are these materials accessible and sufficiently

rich? Where there are particular concerns about the availability of material or the sensitivity of the topic you must clearly demonstrate the feasibility of the project.

Third, you should describe how you intend to analyse your research materials. Will you be using statistical analysis (what kind?), discourse analysis, content analysis, constructing historical chronologies or analytic narratives – or, as is often the case in development studies, a combination of one or more of these methods? Be as specific as possible in describing the approach that you will use and be sure to discuss the advantages and potential limitations of your chosen method(s) and the biases of your sources.

Conclusion: Finally, you need to conclude by discussing briefly how the empirical analysis you propose will respond to your research question in such a way as to make a meaningful contribution to the field you have described in your literature review. Do all the elements of the research proposal fit together into a coherent, achievable project? The conclusion should also include a brief projected **schedule of work** so that the admissions committee and your supervisor can be satisfied that you have a reasonable prospect of completing the work in the allocated time. This is about being practical: is your project of the right size and scope to be completed within the time allowed and with the resources you are likely to have?

Bibliography: Regardless of the referencing method you are using in the text, you should include a complete list of all cited work at the end of your research design.