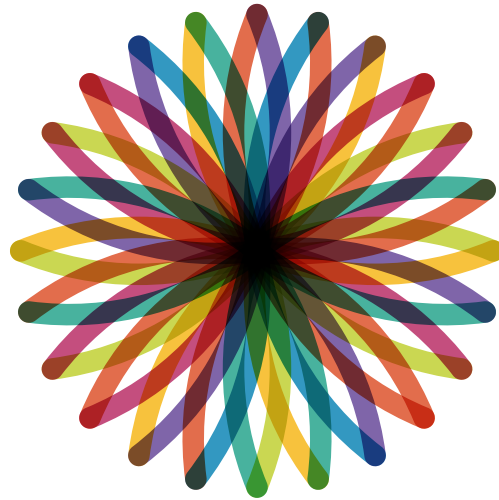




The
University
Of
Sheffield.



HOW TO WRITE A
PhD Proposal

FOR THE INFORMATION SCHOOL

**PhD Research
contains elements
of originality
and innovation,
backed up by sound
methodological
practices and a
logically reasoned,
evidence based
argument.**





Your research proposal is the best way to demonstrate to your prospective supervisor that you have original ideas, strong methodological skills and a firm grounding in the literature already published in your area.

It is the main document that is used to judge the acceptability of your proposed research to the Information School.

The research proposal should be at least 2,000 words in length and should contain the following elements:

Title of proposed thesis

Introduction to your research topic and literature review

You must show why the topic area you intend to study is interesting and how it is of theoretical and practical significance. You also need to demonstrate that you are knowledgeable about what has already been published in this field.

Specific aims and objectives

Set out what contribution to knowledge your study will make: this could be based on identifying current gaps, areas of contention in the field or new empirical findings. The aim of the project should be clearly stated and you should include focused and specific steps (objectives) required to address your aim.



Methods of research proposed, and a plan and timetable of your work

You should show an understanding of the methodological tradition within which you intend to work. If you plan to collect empirical data, you should provide a detailed justification of your proposed data collection methods, sampling strategy and methods of analysis. You should propose an ambitious but feasible plan of work to be completed within three years. You should show some awareness of the ethical issues surrounding your proposed research.

Your research proposal is extremely important in helping the School to make an informed decision about whether your proposed research is interesting, significant and viable. However, the majority of 1st year PhD students will adapt their proposal once they begin studying in more depth on the advice of their supervisory team. So, whilst the proposal should be a coherent, realistic, well thought-out description of your planned research, it is not a binding document, and it is likely to be revised and developed once your studies commence.

Your research proposal must be original, and must represent your own work.



All proposals are checked by similarity detecting software to ensure that the work is your own, and an application may be rejected if the proposal has excessive similarity matches with other sources. You must not copy and paste from other sources, however authoritative.

All the text must be in your own words.

WRITING AN Excellent Proposal

We asked Information School staff and students what made an excellent proposal. Some of their thoughts are outlined below.

An excellent proposal will have **novelty**. This implies a good grasp of existing literature, so that you can show what you have proposed has not been done before. It may not be enough to repeat or “replicate” previous studies e.g. to apply oft repeated questions to your own country context. Nor may it be enough to apply a very familiar model in a slightly different context. Novelty could come from:

- Studying a very new phenomenon;
- Applying a theory in a new way or combining theories;
- Introducing a new way of collecting or analysing data.

An excellent proposal will have **depth**. It will be evident that a lot of work has gone into it. At the end of doing a Masters dissertation on a topic, you will probably have enough knowledge of relevant literature and appropriate methods to write a proposal on a related topic. If it is not based on a Masters, it will take weeks of reading and thinking to write a proposal. You will probably need input from a possible supervisor to achieve this understanding.

An excellent proposal is likely to be **transformative**. It will be theoretically significant for the subject you are working in. It could have impact by developing a new theory or introducing a new method. It could well have significant societal or social impact.

An excellent proposal is exciting. Your passion about the topic should shine through in your proposal. It will be of interest to many researchers around the world.

An excellent proposal will be **located clearly within a research tradition or traditions**, such as Information Systems, Knowledge Management, Librarianship, Information Behaviour etc. Such traditions imply an understanding of what the key issues are and how they are to be conceptualised. One way to think about this is to look at how your project fits one of the Information School research groups or a particular staff member's work. Does your proposal build on work academics working at Sheffield have done? Or does it link to one of the topics identified in the list of topics proposed by our supervisors on our website? If your idea is not aligned with our existing research it is far less likely to be of interest and so you may find it hard to find a supervisor with expertise in that area.

An excellent proposal will have **a single, clearly stated aim**. It will then probably have 3-5 objectives, or things you intend to do to reach the aim. It will probably have 3-5 research questions which the research is designed to answer. Some of these questions will be more descriptive, others more analytical. So some questions might be about "who?", "where?", "what?" and "when?"... more analytic questions will be asking "why?"

An excellent proposal will **use the literature effectively**. It will not just be a review of some vaguely relevant background material. It will critically examine what has been written on a topic. It will construct an argument for why it is important that the proposed research is done now. It will show awareness of both influential, seminal research in the field and of the latest publications. But it will be selective about what materials are relevant to your particular approach to the topic, not just mention references for the sake of it.

An excellent proposal will be **strong methodologically**. It will not be yet another study based on a simple questionnaire. It may well suggest some novel data collection or data analysis method. It will show a systematic approach to undertaking research. The proposal will provide detail of how and when data is going to be collected. It will be feasible: you will provide evidence that you can recruit people and organisations to participate. It will also show evidence of having thought about the ethical issues around the proposal.

FINDING A Supervisor

We strongly recommend that you make contact with a potential supervisor in the School to look at your draft proposal and to develop a mutually interesting project idea. This helps ensure that there is someone who is interested and able to supervise your topic in the School. They can also help you improve your proposal.

That means looking at staff interests and seeing who might be working in the area you want to study.

On our web site there is also a list of potential topics with supervisors.

PhD topics

www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/pgr/phdtopics

Staff list

www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/staff

Of course, do not contact all members of staff - doing that only shows you have not really thought through who might be suitable!



ADVICE FROM Current Students

"I looked at the examples provided by my supervisors of successful proposals, and spent a good 3 months searching literature and coming up with a good idea. It is not an easy task, so expect that there will be some struggle. I focused on finding out i) what was already done on my topic, ii) how my project was unique and iii) that I would be able to finish it on time." - Wasim Ahmed

"One thing to consider is how your proposal fits with the interests of academics in the School. It is more likely to be accepted if it fits in with staff interests" - Simon Wakeling

"Knowing what you can and can't achieve in 3 years is difficult. Also I didn't know what a typical research design was. Having somebody else's timetable helped me as I could then work out better what could be achieved and what was expected of me."

- Sophie Rutter



A FEW Final Tips

- Don't try and rush writing a proposal. This is a major piece of work to write and will take several months and a lot of thinking.
- Undertake an up-to-date, critical literature review of your topic, to ensure that your proposed work is genuinely innovative. Explain clearly the connection between your work and previous studies.
- If you have experience of using particular methods or useful contacts that will enable you to collect richer data, make reference to this in the application.

Your proposal should be ambitious and aim to make a significant contribution to knowledge, but your plan must be practical to complete within three years, and feasible.





- A Gantt chart is a useful way to show that you have a well thought through plan of how to complete your proposed study.
- Check that your references are presented in a consistent way. Proof read the proposal carefully before final submission.
- Your proposal should be well structured. Poorly formed or rambling proposals suggest a lack of clarity in thinking.
- Do not copy and paste from other people's work in your proposal! Demonstrate that you can think for yourself.

Present your work in a professional manner. Refine your proposal and edit it a number of times.



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Information School

T: +44 (0)114 222 2662

E: ispgr@sheffield.ac.uk

 [facebook.com/infoschoolsheffield](https://www.facebook.com/infoschoolsheffield)

 [@InfoSchoolSheff](https://twitter.com/InfoSchoolSheff)