

Guidance notes: How to write a draft thesis proposal

A thesis proposal is, in many respects, the blueprint for your research. Its main aim is to help you define a what, where, when, why and how for your project. Writing a good proposal requires plenty of thought and preparation. However, this should be an enjoyable process, giving you the chance to explore your areas of interest and share your research plans with us.

Before starting work on your draft proposal, it is a good idea to make initial contact with your prospective supervisor(s), in order to express interest and discuss some of the practicalities of your research at the Open University. Certainly, successful proposals tend to be those which are developed over a substantial period of time. In the early stages of putting a proposal together, potential students normally find that they benefit from the feedback of the prospective supervisor(s). Please note, too, that you may well be advised to undertake substantial reading or skills development (e.g. in the area of ancient languages) before making a formal application.

A successful research proposal will provide evidence of:

- a strong proposition or clear central question that you want to pursue
- a description of the originality and potential contribution of your research
- a basic plan for the thesis structure
- preliminary ideas about your methodology
- familiarity with existing research in your chosen area
- an awareness of the resources, skills and sources required to successfully complete the project

Although this may seem daunting, it is worth remembering that, at this stage, the document is only a draft. We are aware that many of your ideas and plans will be reworked once the project has started. However, the more concrete elements you are able to define at this stage, the stronger your proposal will be. Thinking ahead will provide us with evidence of your potential as a researcher (and save you a fair amount of work once the project has started).

Aim for approximately three to four sides of A4 in your proposal. Your writing style should be concise, formal and clear, avoiding unnecessary jargon. In order to facilitate the design of your draft, we have divided the [downloadable draft proposal form](#) into six sections.

<h3>1. Reasons for wanting to undertake a research degree at the Open University</h3>

Are you familiar with the areas of research of our current staff? Can we provide academic expertise that is a good match for your research project? If you have studied with the OU as an undergraduate or Master's student before, you may be used to a large amount of flexibility in your work, especially in regard to where and how you study. You should note that, while we do aim to provide a certain amount of flexibility for our research

students, original research in Classical Studies often involves substantial library, archive or field work. You will also be required to attend a number of face-to-face training events in Milton Keynes (especially at the beginning of your studies). Supervisions generally take place largely or wholly in Milton Keynes – any alternative arrangements would have to be negotiated with the supervisors.

<p>2. Your preliminary proposal, including your research questions and the aims and methods you plan to use</p>

One of the most important purposes of the research proposal is to allow you to define an original central question and outline how you will go about answering it. Summaries or descriptive accounts of evidence are not sufficient for a research project. Answering your central question, establishing a strong standpoint and assessing the validity of your central argument will be the driving force of your research.

Examples of poor topics to research:

- A compendium of mythological creatures mentioned in *The Odyssey*
- A summary of the rivalries between Olympian gods
- A typology of decorative elements on Corinthian vases

These would be poor PhD topics because they lack a clear, central question. Their emphasis is on describing and summarising data, rather than analysing evidence and critically assessing its significance in order to answer the central research question.

Examples of stronger topics to research:

- The interaction of the philosophical and dramatic elements in the Socratic dialogues of Plato
- Attitudes to disposal of the dead in Southern Britain, 3500 BC-AD 43
- An investigation into the ways in which Virgil's poetry has been interpreted through visual representations

These are all topics that have been successfully researched by OU students in the past and were strong because they posed new questions, involved not only the collection but also the analysis of data, and fell sufficiently within the expertise of members of the department to ensure that the students could be appropriately supported in their studies.

Once you have defined your thesis topic, you can begin to plan the project's methodology. The methodology is the set of procedures and techniques that will allow you to locate, access, build up and analyse a body of evidence in order to answer the central question in your thesis. These techniques will vary depending on the focus of your research and the nature of your chosen evidence.

In order to develop a clear picture of how you envisage these plans coming together to form a thesis structure, it is generally useful to produce a preliminary list of chapters. Try

to keep the structure simple at this stage. For example, you may like to consider the order in which you will present and analyse the evidence, giving some thought to how chapters might break down. Remember that this is a tentative outline; the structure will no doubt change and develop in the course of your research project.

3. How your research will relate to important previous work in your chosen area

This section of the proposal allows you to demonstrate your awareness of relevant scholarly activity around your chosen subject. It also provides you with an opportunity to explain why the project you seek to work on is important to the subject as a whole. What is the expected contribution of your research? Will it support and build on previous knowledge? Will your work challenge current interpretations of existing evidence? You should aim to refer to specific scholarly publications here.

4. What resources you are likely to need to be able to investigate the research topic, including fieldwork?

The word ‘resources’ here refers to physical tools and facilities as well as intangible skills. Some of the physical resources that you may require to conduct your research are libraries, laboratories, excavation equipment, computers or audio visual recording technology, to name a few. ‘Skills’ are the knowledge and ability that allow you to perform particular tasks successfully. For example, will you need to brush up on your Latin or Greek? Will you need to learn database management? Will you need reading knowledge of any modern language? If so, how do you plan to achieve this?

5. Any further information such as a bibliography

The aim of a bibliography in a draft proposal is to demonstrate that you have read into your subject and familiarized yourself with it. You may want to divide your bibliography into thematic blocks in order to illustrate how your chosen sources relate to your research project. It is also useful to identify material that you have not yet read but may be useful for your research. We don’t expect you to have done a full literature review at the start, but it is essential for you to show familiarity with the key texts and main authors in your chosen field. It can also be useful to annotate this bibliography, i.e. to sum up in one or two sentences why each work is important and/or which sections or chapters are most relevant to your work.

6. Do you wish to be a candidate for an OU (competitive) studentship?

The Open University offers a range of [studentships](#). These may be coordinated at Departmental, Faculty or University level. It is worth noting that the application and selection processes can vary significantly. If you are considering applying for a studentship, make sure you have read the guidelines carefully (in particular the details regarding applicability and deadlines) and discuss your plans with your prospective supervisor(s).

Once you have completed your draft, check it carefully and e-mail it to your prospective supervisor(s), who will provide you with feedback and constructive comments. The final proposal submitted with your research degree application will be a reworked version of this draft. It is important to remember that this is not the end, but rather the start of the application process. When your feedback comes back, you may want to give some more thought to your expected contribution to the subject, the suitability of your chosen methodology and the scope of your thesis. Your prospective supervisor may suggest further reading and skills to develop before submitting a revised version of the research proposal. This process will improve the strength of your final proposal and your application's chances of success.