

Guidance notes: How to complete your preliminary proposal form

The main aim of the proposal form is to help you clarify what your research will be about, why you think your proposed research topic is worth doing and how you are going to set up your research. 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 undertake substantial reading or, in some cases, 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 to existing scholarship/research in your chosen area
- preliminary ideas about your methodology
- 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. However, the more concrete elements you are able to define now, the stronger your proposal will be.

Aim for approximately two 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.

1. Reasons for wanting to undertake a research degree at the Open University
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How does your proposed research match the areas of research of our current staff? Please name one or two members of our department who you think you would like to work with.

2. Your preliminary proposal, including your research questions and the aims and methods you plan to use
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One of the most important purposes of the research proposal is 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.

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 discipline 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.

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

This section of the proposal asks 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 are you 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, 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 knowledge of Latin or ancient Greek languages? 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 your draft proposal is to demonstrate that you have read into your subject and familiarized yourself with current and previous debates. 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 disciplinary, 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 eligibility and deadlines).

Finally, the 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.

Once you have completed your draft, check it carefully and e-mail it to FASS-ArtsHum-Classical-Studies@open.ac.uk. In due course, we will then provide you with feedback and constructive comments.