

Instructions for writing the Ph.D. research proposal

Research proposals are intended to present one's research project to academic professionals for critical reading. Students are expected to spend the first stage of the doctoral studies ("Phase A") writing this research proposal.

The proposal should first of all show that there is a topic to be examined in the dissertation – a historical problem or question, delimited in space and time, which deserves to be studied and has not been studied yet, at least not from the angle the author intends to examine it. The proposal should show that its author has the necessary resources (accessible source material) and research tools to complete the project in a timely manner.

The proposal is not a polished article, neither is it part of the thesis. It is a substantial statement of purpose enabling other historians to assess the importance of the topic, its originality, and the conceptual and practical tools needed for realizing the project. The proposal is not to be confused with the study itself, and should not turn into a mini-thesis. Its main purpose is to allow experts to give you helpful suggestions and prevent you from running into dead ends.

The members of the Ph.D. committee of the School of History will read the proposal and offer improvements and revisions. Once approved, the research proposal will be passed on to one (or two) external reader(s) for review. From our experience, the comments and criticism at this stage significantly enhance the chances of successfully completing the research project.

The research proposal should not exceed a total of 20 pages: A maximum of fifteen pages for the content and not more than five pages of bibliography.

The main elements of the proposal

1. Brief introduction (up to four pages¹)

The introduction offers an initial outline of the problem: What issue does the student wish to study and in what respect is it innovative? Why, according to the author, is it worth researching? What are the questions this study intends to answer, and what are the questions it raises? Presenting the main question requires placing it in its historical context and sketching the minimal background necessary for understanding it. Are there good reasons for pursuing such questions in this particular context? Are there good reasons for locating this study in this specific time and place?

2. Approach and methodology (up to four pages)

None of us formulates a research question as *tabula rasa*. We all shape our approach in relation to existing ones: with regard to existing views in existing research traditions, in relation to moves and strategies that have been previously tried by other researchers,

¹ The length indicated for each section of the proposal is a suggestion. One may apply a slightly different division, provided that the overall length does not exceed the maximum length.

using a toolbox (questions, basic assumptions, hypotheses, methods) developed by our predecessors. The purpose of this section is not to write an exhaustive review of all that has been written on the subject in question. Rather, it aims to show that the author is aware of the developments in relevant areas of study, and that he/she is able to make informed choices the scholarly literature and the methodologies that best serves his or her own project.

How is the one's project positioned in relation to the approaches, findings and problems formulated in the existing scholarly literature? Which **problems**, arising from the existing research, does one wish to address? Which **approaches** does the author wish to adopt in his/her study – and what problems arise as a consequence? Which approaches does the author seek to reject? Against which positions does s/he intend to argue? How can the existing scholarly literature contribute to delineating the course of the project? Are there other tools (concepts, models, theories) which the author wishes to use (and what precisely do they contribute, why do they matter)? How will the study of the issue at hand contribute to existing research? **The literature review serves to refine the approach to be adopted: which research method am I going to use? What are its advantages and disadvantages?**

3. The body of evidence: sources (up to three pages)

Historical questions are explored with the help of a corpus of evidence to be assembled for that purpose. This section of the research proposal examines the body of evidence that the author seeks to use in order to answer his/her questions: What are the available sources? Can they shed light on the subject under scrutiny? Are they **accessible** and what **condition** are they in? If your research is based on examining texts, are they available in scholarly editions? In which archives or collections have they been preserved? Is there a language barrier, required professional knowledge or issues of access that should be taken into account? If a different kind of source material is involved (visual arts, archaeological findings, films, observations, interviews, etc.) – how available they and which particular problems do they raise? Would this corpus of evidence allow the author to answer the questions with which he/she seeks to cope? Which **limitations** does the corpus impose on the study?

4. Questions and hypotheses (up to four pages)

This section of the proposal will outline the main questions that the project will address. After the main question is introduced (for example, why did the Roman Empire fall?), it can be broken down to a series of sub-questions (for example, what was the state of the economy of the united Empire? How did the army influence the crisis of the fourth century? How did imperial ideology deal with defeats on the battlefield? How did the rise of Christianity affect Roman society?). Answering these answers, each in its turn, should build up your overall project. Try to ask real questions. These are the seeds of your thesis chapters. It is expected that other questions may arise in the course of the study, but this initial list should give readers an idea of the likelihood of success of the research that you are planning.

5. List of sources and literature (up to five pages)

This section consists of two parts: First, a list of sources to be used. In archive-based projects, a list of specific collections, dossiers or key manuscripts should be included. This is not an exhaustive and definitive list of sources; in the course of research project one often discovers more relevant materials and it may turn out that the value of certain materials is less than initially presumed. The purpose of this list is to establish the feasibility of the research project and indicate a preliminary knowledge of archival materials available.

The second component of this section is a bibliography of existing studies on the subject. Here, too, it is recommended to concentrate on a preliminary list of important studies and to add a line or two of explanation about the most important ones.