

Guidelines for Writing a Research Proposal

Guildhall School of Business and Law

Law Proposals

At the heart of your application for a PhD in Law rests your research proposal. Your proposal should demonstrate the quality, viability, and originality of your intended research. While there is no single format or template that you should follow, these guidelines offer you tips and suggestions as you craft your legal research proposal to the Guildhall School of Business and Law at London Metropolitan University.

# **The Basics: What is a Research Proposal?**

Simply put, a research proposal is a concise but carefully constructed overview of your intended research project. The proposal should be efficient and rarely exceed 2,000-3,000 words (exclusive of a bibliography).

Remember that a research proposal is an academic document. Carefully proofread it, be sure to cite sources in it appropriately (using OSCOLA referencing), and make sure that it presents you as a professional, diligent, and contentious applicant.

# **Why is the Research Proposal So Important?**

You are embarking on a three-year project where you will work, in close communication and coordination with your supervisors, to complete a thesis manuscript. Your research proposal constitutes our primary means of discerning whether you are ready to make that sort of commitment and whether we are well positioned to help you achieve your research goals.

Put plainly, your proposal will help us assess whether:

* you have a sufficiently specific, original, and significant research project;
* you can reasonably complete your project within three years;
* your project relates to an area of law in which we have the necessary expertise and resources to help you succeed; and
* you can develop and communicate complex ideas at the required academic level of proficiency.

# **What Should Every Research Proposal Contain?**

Though brief, your proposal should address at least the following issues in some fashion:

* **The general subject matter of the research—**Your proposal needs to orient a reader to the general subject area you intend to research and provide an indication that you already have a foundational understanding of that area.

Of course, you do not need to be an expert yet. That is the point of the PhD—to develop your expertise. But your proposal should demonstrate that you have more than passing familiarity with the topic you have chosen to investigate and analyze.

Also, please remember that you are applying for a PhD in Law, so you want to be sure that your proposed research has a clear and direct link to law and legal theory. Interdisciplinary work is welcome, but your project must include a significant legal component.

* **The main goals of your research—**Think about what contribution to the field you want to make. Earning a PhD requires that you do more than merely collate existing knowledge. Your PhD research should extend existing knowledge, adding to it in some meaningful way. Your proposal should provide some indication about how you intend to do this.
	+ You could be undertaking novel research in an area where few others have written. Perhaps you are analyzing a new law or body of law. Perhaps you are analyzing a new legal institution. Perhaps you are confronting a new regulatory problem generated by advances in technology or science. Perhaps you are identifying and predicting a new trend in law or regulation. Perhaps you are unearthing new historic evidence about a law or legal idea. Or perhaps you are proposing the development of a new law or legal system.
	+ You might be recontextualizing existing law or legal studies. For instance, you might have a comparative project where you are borrowing a law, legal analysis, or policy from one jurisdiction to extend it to a different jurisdiction. Or you might be combining or contrasting seemingly unrelated legal studies or laws or policies to offer a new perspective.
	+ You might be conducting an empirical study of an area of law. Perhaps you have identified an untested or unsupported theoretical or doctrinal idea, and you want to develop a project to provide empirical analysis of that idea. Or you might propose a new theory about the law and test it with an empirical analysis.
	+ You might extend, develop, or critique an existing line of analysis or commentary about an area of law or policy. This sort of project uses current ideas and literature as a springboard to make new conceptual contributions to the area.

Certainly, many proposals will combine multiple elements of these and other approaches, but the point is that you need to identify thoughtfully the ways in which your research will go beyond being merely descriptive and derivative of existing work. You need to add something new to the field.

* **Your specific claims or research questions—**At some point in your research proposal, you want to distill your project to a short, focused, carefully crafted statement of your core research questions or claims. The length of this statement can vary, but you should be thinking in terms of a short paragraph rather than a page.

Research questions or claims usually revolve around a puzzle or problem (or limited set of puzzles or problems). Eventually, after you have completed your PhD research, you will provide some sort of solution, answer, or other evaluation of this puzzle or problem—you will, in other words, make a claim. At the outset of your journey, however, you may not yet know what the resolution of the puzzle or problem is, which is why you might frame up your proposal around research questions. On the other hand, you might already have a sense of how you want to address the puzzle or problem, so your proposal could be framed around research claims. Either way, your research questions or claims need to be as specific and focused as possible, demonstrating the novelty and viability of your project.

While you will likely revise and rethink your research questions or claims many times during your PhD work, your proposal should demonstrate that you have already given your research serious thought, and you have more than a generic or amorphous idea. You want to show that you have a targeted and concrete project that is realistically calibrated so that you can complete it within three years.

* **The significance of your research—**No project exists in isolation. Every PhD research project bears some relation to existing literature and thinking. While you will engage in a thorough literature review as part of your PhD, your research proposal should demonstrate that you have already begun to think about how your project will connect with, differ from, supplement, enhance, criticize, or otherwise relate to existing work.

PhD research should be original and innovative in some way, but it should also matter. Your proposal should talk about how and why your research will benefit academics, professionals, governments, society, or others.

* **Your research methodology—**Your proposal should provide some indication about how you intend to undertake the research. Often, in law, the methodology will rely heavily on library-based resources, but rarely is it enough to say that you will only conduct library research. Many proposals require more.

For instance, a project that focuses on some historic aspect of law may require visits to particular libraries or achieves. A comparative project may require travel or field work. A project related to a particular legal institution may require interviews with institution members, site visits to the institution, or reviews of documents at the institution. An empirical project will require development of specific research methods (surveys, document analysis, interviews, ethnographic evaluation, etc.), and it will require you to think about qualitative and quantitative approaches to the data. In many instances, you may have to confront ethical considerations related to your research methodology.

At this point in your project, we do not expect you to have a formal grasp of all the research methods you might use or a comprehensive map of your methodology. But your research proposal should demonstrate that you have considered the practical aspects of gathering, assessing, and using information to illuminate your research questions or claims.

* **Bibliography—**You should include a list of key sources that you have reviewed, referenced, or cited in preparing your research proposal. You can also include sources that you have not yet reviewed but anticipate being foundational to the project.

While there is no magic number of sources that you should list in your bibliography, you want to include enough references to lend credibility to your assessment of the significance of your research.

# **What Are Other Possible Things to Include?**

In addition to the information that every research proposal should contain, you may want to consider a few additional suggestions. These may not be appropriate for all projects, but they are worth thinking about as you craft your proposal.

* **Challenges and problems—**The course of a PhD never did run smooth. Almost every research project will, at some point, run up against challenges. We do not expect you to foresee every complication you may face, but you may help your chances of writing a successful proposal by anticipating a few specific hurdles you might encounter and how you will clear them.
* **A theoretical framework**—Every PhD project should engage with theory, and ultimately, every PhD thesis needs a theoretical framework.

A theoretical framework provides the tools that you will use to analyze the research questions or claims at the heart of your research project. For instance, imagine that one of your research questions asks “why does country X allow parties to insulate themselves from liability for misrepresentations or falsehoods made during pre-contractual negotiations while country Y does not?” There are dozens and probably hundreds of potential answers to this question. Your theoretical framework constitutes a lens through which you will look at the question. It will help you narrow down those potential answers so that you can focus on a smaller, more manageable subset of them.

In this example, you might use a law and economics theoretical framework, evaluating how the competing legal rules incentivize and motivate the parties differently. Or you might use a sociological theoretical framework, evaluating how the legal regimes in these different countries are shaped by societal views on fraud and deception. Or you might use a socio-political theory framework, considering how differing socio-political needs and concerns motivate different regulatory approaches to risks and opportunities in these two countries. Or you might use a legal history framework, evaluating the different historic paths the evolution of the law of contracts followed in these two jurisdictions.

The key point is that your theoretical framework constitutes the toolkit you will use to focus and develop your arguments and analysis.

You will likely not have a completely clear vision about your theoretical framework at this stage, but it can be helpful to identify and roughly sketch out your initial thoughts about your potential theoretical framework in your research proposal.

* **Chapter outline or organizational structure—**Even if you do not yet have a good sense of the specific chapter breakdown for your thesis, you might benefit from some consideration of the organizational approach you will take. The discipline of vividly imagining what your final thesis might look like can help demonstrate that you have a realistic grasp on your project. It can also help you refine other essential components of the research proposal, such as your specific research claims or questions and your methodology.
* **Progress goals or milestones—**You will ultimately fashion a set of progress goals with your supervisors. In your proposal, however, it can also be useful for you to sketch out a rough timetable for your work, particularly if it involves empirical methods or other non-traditional modes of legal research and analysis. This can help establish that you have manageable expectations.

**What Are Some Pitfalls to Avoid?**

We often see research proposals that could be made much stronger if they simply avoided or were mindful of several common missteps.

* **Avoid relying exclusively on generic descriptions of your research project.** We often see proposals that show promise but remain too generic. Your proposal can and probably should start by identifying a broad subject area, but it ultimately needs to highlight a discrete and thoughtfully constrained research claim or question (or limited set of claims or questions) for analysis.

For instance, a proposal that says that you want to “explore why countries do not do more to enforce human rights obligations against multinational corporations” identifies a general area for your research, but it does not identify a specific research project. Many books can (and have been) written about this general area. This is a starting point, then, for your thinking, but it does not suffice by itself for a research proposal. You need to drill down to a much narrower and more granular question or claim related to the enforcement of human rights violations against multinational corporations.

* **Watch out for projects that try to solve everything, everywhere, all at once.** Ambition is hallmark trait of great researchers. But at this stage of your academic progress, less is usually more. Be cautious about tackling too much, trying to resolve too many issues that in one thesis.

You may well have many big ideas that will reshape the world. We certainly hope so. But try to think of your research proposal as a first step in a larger progression of your work. Focus on making sure that your first step amounts to a solid one that positions you for future research successes.

Fully developing one great idea is usually far better, in a PhD, then summarily surveying a lot of ideas.

* **Watch out for project descriptions that are not sufficiently legal in nature.** You are applying for a PhD in Law. You want to be sure, then, that your research proposal clearly identifies specific and significant legal aspects to your project. Law is a broad subject, and it intersects with many other disciplines, so we welcome multidisciplinary proposals. But you want to be sure that you frame your project in terms that incorporate specific doctrinal rules, legal policies, regulations, or legal theories.

We sometimes ask applicants in an interview to explain how and why they are applying for a PhD in Law as opposed to a PhD in Sociology or Business. You want to be sure that your research proposal provides a firm foundation for your answer to that question.

* **Watch out for projects that fall into well-tread paths.** Original claims can be made about almost any subject but be cautious of tackling a project in an area where many others have already written. When a significant body of literature exists, it can be difficult or impossible to evaluate all of it, understand all of it, and then make your own novel contribution to the area.

Of course, this caution may be tempered by your own experiences. For instance, if you have a long academic or professional history dealing with a complex field, you may already be familiar with the voluminous foundational literature in the area. Your unique experiences might well position you to meaningfully contribute to an extensive body of existing research.

* **Avoid projects that are outside of the areas of expertise of the faculty at the Guildhall School of Business and Law.** While not essential, it can be helpful for you to consider faculty expertise before submitting your research proposal. Research proposals that relate to areas of law in which one or more of our faculty work or have interest are more likely to be accepted than research proposals outside of our range of expertise or interest.