

Some questions that your panel might ask, and therefore the points you should address.

Irrespective of the style you use, remember the 5 Ws and an H: Who; What; Where; When; Why; How.

Title and abstract

Is the title appropriate to the project?

Did the abstract cover key points in background, aims and methods?

You don't have to prepare an abstract, but if your proposal is very long it might help the readers.

Background and aims

Did the authors provide adequate background to the study aim?

Is the aim of the study clear and justified by the background?

Who cares about the aim?

At this level of study, the aim should be important enough that it will be an addition to current knowledge. The background should convince us of that.

Experimental methods

A good methods section should allow a suitably skilled worker to reproduce the study.

Clarity – Do I know what you plan to do? Could I reproduce it?

Appropriateness – Are you doing the right thing? Will you address the aim?

Where and when will the study happen?

Are the samples/patients etc. described, with allocation to study groups as appropriate?

Is there evidence of a sample size calculation, ie. enough samples/patients to answer the question?

Are the experimental design and outcome measures clear and appropriate?

Is there an attempt to control for bias/confounding variables?

Is the analysis of data clear and appropriate to the experiment?

Do the methods address the aims?

Resources

Are the resources likely to be available?

Think of resources in terms of: equipment; experimental samples or subjects; software; consumables; time.

Timeline

Time is an important resource in postgraduate study. A Gantt chart or similar illustrates that the team have considered the likely timescales. In addition, it allows the panel members to assess progress against the initial plan in their review.

People

Does the research team have the necessary skills and access to the necessary resources?

As well as the supervisory team, this should include the student! Occasionally, a project fails because of a poor match between student and project. You should also consider whether additional team members are important to provide technical support such as instrumentation, or access to samples or patients in a clinical study.

Does the student have the opportunity to demonstrate ownership of the entire project?

Guidance through good supervision is essential. However if the project has been tightly defined before the student joined the team, it may be difficult for them to express the independent scientific thinking that is necessary with a higher degree.

Approvals

Will ethical or other approvals be needed?

Ethical approval is important, but other approvals may also be necessary, eg. animals; radiation; hazardous chemicals; data protection.