

PROJECT PROPOSAL FORM

One possible structure for a project proposal, modified from an MSc assignment. You don't have to use this format, but it might help if you're not sure where to start.

This is rather a complete proposal outline, and would be appropriate for projects that were well-defined at outset. For many postgraduate projects the detail would not be known at this stage, and you might find the methods and analysis sections (particularly: page 2) are rather bare. However, this document might form the basis for future chapters of your thesis.

Your emphasis should be on concise, clear writing and best use of the available space. You do not need to complete all the sections, and the word limits are given for guidance; at proposal stage, it is very unlikely that you will use all the available words in every section.

You can add figures, tables or other supporting materials as appendices if you wish. Typically this might include a flowchart describing the logical flow of your project, and/or a Gantt chart showing your best prediction of the time plan. Refer to these documents in the text of your proposal. An appendix is to provide additional information and is not essential reading; the proposal text should stand alone without the reader necessarily referring to the appendices.

Irrespective of style, remember the 5 Ws and an H: WHO; WHAT; WHERE; WHEN; WHY; HOW.

Full title of your project

[40 words]

Investigators

Please explain who – including yourself - are the key investigators for this study. For each, explain what their role will be.

[300 words]

Lay summary

A brief summary of the research using language easily understood by members of the public. Explain why the research is important, and how it may come to affect the layperson in the future.

[300 words]

Background

Please provide adequate background to the study. This should include an introduction and a brief review of the literature that gives context to the research question. Explain the scientific justification for the research and lead the reader to the question(s) you are posing for your research project.

[900 words]

Research question

What is the principal research question or objective of your study?

What are the secondary research questions or objectives if applicable?

[150 words]

Situation

Where will the research take place?

[150 words]

Research design & methods

If you are able, please summarise your research design and methods. In an ideal world and certainly by the time you start your research, there should be enough detail that a worker with the appropriate knowledge, technical and clinical skills could conduct your study.

See also: Research design & methods – guidance notes

[1500 words]

Outcome measures

What are the primary and secondary outcome measures, and why are these appropriate for your study? Give consideration to validity: will your study address the question being asked?

[200 words]

Sample size/number of experimental measurements

How many subjects, experimental cases, sets of measurements or simulations do you plan to study in total, and why? If a sample size calculation was used, give sufficient information to justify and reproduce the calculation. If not, then explain why not. Give consideration to reliability: are you collecting enough of the right data to give a meaningful answer?

[300 words]

Analysis of data

Please describe the methods of analysis by which the data will be evaluated to meet the research question. This can include statistical or other appropriate methods such as may be required for qualitative research.

[300 words]

Statistical review

How have the analytical and statistical aspects of the research been reviewed?

[150 words]

Security & confidentiality

Please describe the security arrangements for storage of data during the study. You should consider the risks of accidental data loss and the measures you will take to avoid such.

Where human participants are involved, explain the need for keeping any personal data, how and for how long it will be held, who will have access and the means of assuring its confidentiality.

[300 words]

Ethics & governance

Please summarise the main ethical, legal, or management issues arising from your study and say how you have addressed them. If there are no issues, then explain how you came to that conclusion.

See also: Ethics & governance – guidance notes

[450 words]

Dissemination

How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of your study?

[150 words]

Resources & risks to completion

For the study you have described, explain the resources needed in terms of people and costs, and the projected time course of the study. Show the contingency for things not going to plan.

What are the main risks to this projection, and what will you do if these risks come to pass?

[300 words]

Future directions

The nature of postgraduate research means the path ahead can be unclear. At proposal stage, you will probably have a well-formed impression of your first year but what comes next may depend on how the first year plays out. Describe the issues and key decision points, which might help to frame your first progress review.

[500 words]

References

No hard limit, but content should be restricted to key references at this stage. This will help frame your literature review in times to come.

Supporting materials

You might attach the following as appendices. They should typically occupy one page each:

- A Gantt chart showing the expected time course of the project. Preferably, this should be marked in real time ie. with activities shown against calendar weeks, months and years. Microsoft Excel is often used in preparing Gantt charts.
- A flowchart for the experimental and/or analytical protocol showing how subjects, samples or test cases progress through the stages of the project. You can prepare the flowchart however you like, though Microsoft PowerPoint is often used.
- If you wish, you can add tables, figures and other supporting documents such as questionnaires as appendices. This is not essential.

Don't assume the appendices will be read alongside the main text. Therefore the appendices should not contain essential text, and the main document should stand alone as a proposal.

Research design and methods – guidance notes

Please summarise your research design and methods. It should be clear exactly what will happen, how many times and in what order, so that a skilled worker could execute your study.

The content of this section will vary according to your project. The following advice is guidance only. It is not prescriptive, and not all of the advice will apply to all studies. Equally, there will be specifics to your study that are not covered in the list.

In addition, there may be certain types of studies (for example: a systematic review and meta-analysis) that do not fall into either of the following broad categories.

For lab-based projects:

What are the principal defining criteria of the samples, records or test objects?

How will these be made available? This might for example include manufacturing or procurement of test objects or samples.

What equipment, instrumentation, software or simulations will be used?

Describe the experimental setup, with a description of what experiments will be performed on which samples, records or test cases. Systematic repeats should be described, and confounding factors such as environmental conditions should be considered.

If you are comparing between different experimental conditions, give appropriate detail for each group.

For projects involving human participants:

What are the inclusion and exclusion criteria for recruitment?

How long will you allow potential participants to decide whether or not to take part?

Will you obtain informed consent from or on behalf of human participants?

Are there any vulnerable groups which would include: children; the elderly; others lacking capacity to consent for themselves?

How long do you expect each participant to be in the study in total?

What equipment or instrumentation will be used?

What exactly will happen to each participant? Describe the following processes: seeking consent; interviews and questionnaires; imaging investigations; sampling of human biological material; and any treatment interventions. Indicate whether procedures are part of routine clinical care, or where you withhold any part of routine care.

If you are comparing between groups of subjects or making repeated measurements in the same subjects, please give appropriate detail for each.

Ethics & governance – guidance notes

Summarise the main ethical, legal, or management issues arising from your study and say how you have addressed them. You should address the following questions:

Will your project require approval from your institution's local Research and Development Office? Explain your institution's governance policy and why you have come to this decision, even if the answer is NO.

Will your project require ethical approval from a Research Ethics Committee? Explain how the national research ethics policy relates to your project and why you have come to this decision, even if the answer is NO. If you require ethical approval, explain the research sponsorship arrangements in your organisation.

You may also require special approvals from some or all of the following bodies: The Medicines & Healthcare Regulatory Agency (MHRA); The Administration of Radioactive Substances Advisory Committee; your local Caldicott Guardian.

If you are using human participants or data from human participants, what are the potential risks and burdens for the participants and how will you minimise them? This may also be relevant in retrospective or laboratory-based studies. For example: what if you discover previously unreported pathology in an historic record or image?