

PhD Research Proposal Guidance for Law

Your research proposal should be **no more than 2000 words in length**, including any references to existing research. References may be made in footnotes or endnotes. Take time to write your proposal as clearly and concisely as possible and remember to proofread your proposal before submitting it. A capacity to write well is vital for anyone undertaking a PhD.

Please structure your proposal as follows:

Section 1: Summary

Write a non-technical summary of your research, in which you explain the project in **no more than 150 words** and tell the reader why it is intellectually, socially, or politically important.

You should also identify no more than **five** keywords for your project.

Advice and guidance:

The non-technical summary of your research is sometimes called the “elevator pitch”; how would you explain your project in a couple of sentences, so as to capture the attention of a busy academic who may know very little about the specific subject matter of your research.

The non-technical summary should therefore be:

1. A clear and concise statement of your proposed thesis; which
2. Shows why your research matters to academics, key stakeholders and/or the public; and
3. Is written for a general, non-expert readership and is free of jargon.

The keywords you choose will situate your work within particular academic, professional or policy discourses. They should give the reader an at-a-glance impression of your project, so choose them with care! Five is the maximum number of keywords required; you may give fewer. Here are some examples:

- Secret Trusts; Law & Literature; Wilkie Collins; *No Name*; *McCormick v Grogan*
- Datafication; Artificial Intelligence; Financial Regulation; Corporate Governance
- Sahel; United Nations Security Council; Counter-Terrorism; Regional Organisations; Security
- Discrimination; Judiciary; Equality Act 2010; Gender; Feminism
- Responsibility; Insanity; M’Naghten Rules; Mental Health; Criminal Law

Section 2: Context and significance of your research

You may wish to further sub-divide this section as follows:

- a. Thesis aims;
- b. Place in the existing scholarly literature;
- c. Research questions.

Advice and guidance:

A PhD must be 'an original contribution to knowledge'. It is therefore vital that you explain the significance and originality of your proposed research project and that you show how it relates to existing academic work – especially in the discipline of Law.

1. Think about how your project relates to existing academic work on the same or similar topics, concepts, and phenomena;
2. Is the subject matter of your proposal discussed in other academic disciplines, like Criminology, International Relations or History? How does your analysis, argument or critique relate to these other perspectives?
3. Consider what your project sets out to achieve. For instance...
 - a. Do you intend to use empirical methods to gather data, generating new knowledge about a legal phenomenon?
 - b. Do you intend to show how a dominant way of thinking about a legal concept or field of practice is mistaken or outdated?
 - c. Do you want to propose a new interpretation of legal doctrine that is less logically flawed or socially counterproductive than existing ones?
 - d. Do you want to reveal preconceptions and prejudices in the academic discipline or professional practice of law?
 - e. Do you want to use a concept or approach from another academic discipline to reimagine or critique a legal idea, institution, or process?
4. Say why your project is important. For instance:
 - a. What is the intellectual value of your project? What new perspective or way of seeing do you offer the discipline of Law? Does the thesis seek to problematise or enrich aspects of the academic study of law?
 - b. Is your area of focus particularly topical? Does your project seek to make the legal system in the UK or elsewhere less unjust or inefficient? What are the political or socio-economic stakes of the research? Would policymakers or other stakeholders be interested in the results?

Section 3: Research design and approach

You may wish to further sub-divide this section as follows:

- a. Approach and/or methods
- b. Feasibility
- c. Ethics (where appropriate)

Advice and guidance:

Say how you intend to achieve the research aims/answer the research questions you have set out in the previous section. This section will depend on the kind of project you are proposing and on your previous academic experience – there is no one-size-fits-all template.

Approaches come in all shapes and sizes: empirical, historical, deconstructive, comparative, doctrinal, and so on. Approaches are often driven by either (and both) a particular theoretical or conceptual framework or a particular method. The important thing is to show how your approach is a good way of achieving your research aims or answering your research questions.

If your approach is characterised by a particular method, you should say how it will work in practice. For instance, if you want to identify and analyse historical sources, then you will need to think about which archives you may need to consult; if you want to undertake a comparative analysis of two jurisdictions, then you will need to justify that particular comparison; if you want to survey a field of practitioners, then you will need to say more about how you will design and disseminate your questionnaire, and so on.

Feasibility: Show the reviewer that you have thought about whether your proposed work will be manageable within the PhD timeframe of 3-4 years. You may do this by way of a timetable, but this is not compulsory. In any case, you will need to consider the scope of your project. Are you trying to cover too many jurisdictions, or primary texts, or jurists, or too long a historical period? Think about the availability of primary materials and your ability to engage with them: do you have the necessary language skills? If you need to travel for empirical or archival research, how will you fund this? Are the sites you wish to visit accessible?

Ethics: If you propose to use empirical methods involving human participants in your research, it will be necessary to secure approval from QMUL's [Ethics Committee](#). It is therefore vital that you consider whether your research might compromise participants' dignity, integrity or best interests.