

Writing PhD Research Proposals

Stephen A. Butterfill
< s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk >

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Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|----------|
| 1 | Notes and Slides | 2 |
| 1.1 | Who Reads Your Proposal? | 2 |
| 1.2 | Process | 2 |
| 1.3 | months before any deadline | 2 |
| 1.4 | when applying | 2 |
| 1.5 | What Goes In the Proposal? | 2 |
| 1.6 | Most Important Things | 2 |
| 1.7 | Other Things | 3 |
| 1.8 | Start with an Abstract | 3 |
| 1.9 | Sentences 1-2 | 3 |
| 1.10 | Sentences 3-4 | 3 |
| 1.11 | Sentences 5-6 | 3 |
| 1.12 | Sentences 7-8 | 3 |
| 1.13 | Aisde: Argumentative Strategy | 3 |
| 1.14 | Writing the Proposal | 4 |
| 1.15 | Immediate Disqualifiers | 4 |
| 1.16 | Additional Material | 4 |

1. Notes and Slides

Please see the fake proposals here:

- fake proposals folder

What follows is an opinionated guide based on one person's limited experience.

1.1. Who Reads Your Proposal?

- potential supervisors—Do I have sufficient expertise to be a potential supervisor? Does the proposal indicate high quality? Does this fit my research interests, or will I become interested? What will I learn? Is the project feasible?
- director of graduate studies—Does the proposal indicate high quality? Does it fit the programme (must have >1 potential supervisor in the department)?
- interview panels and funding committees—Does the proposal indicate higher quality than the other proposals? Does it fit the programme better than other proposals? Is the project feasible? How, if at all, would successful completion be significant?

1.2. Process

1.3. months before any deadline

1. Ask peers and tutors for feedback on a draft.
2. Send a proposal to potential supervisors (who may offer feedback).
3. Polite reminders after a week if no reply.

1.4. when applying

1. Add details about supervisors and target department to proposal.

1.5. What Goes In the Proposal?

1.6. Most Important Things

- What is the question you want to answer?
- What is the answer you anticipate defending?
- Why would establishing this be a significant discovery?

1.7. Other Things

- What are the key sources for your research?
- What is the gap in the literature you are aiming to fill?
- Are there any special methods you are proposing to adopt?

1.8. Start with an Abstract

1.9. Sentences 1-2

Provide some brief BACKGROUND information: a sentence giving a broad introduction to the field comprehensible to the general reader, and then a sentence of more detailed background specific to your study. These sentences will identify the central tension, puzzle, or paradox your thesis addresses, thereby providing a hook.

1.10. Sentences 3-4

This should be followed by an explanation of the OBJECTIVES: state the question you wish to address and the thesis you aim to establish. Do not make a vague promise ('explore', 'worry', ... are banned words): your thesis is a claim which, if you succeed, will become new knowledge.

1.11. Sentences 5-6

Provide a sentence introducing your argumentative strategy (see below), followed by a sentence explaining the relevance of a key source or thinker you will engage with.

1.12. Sentences 7-8

The two final sentences should outline the main CONCLUSIONS you aim to establish, in terms that will be comprehensible to all readers: first state the thesis which you aim to establish, then close with a sentence on its significance.

Do not include citations or abbreviations in the Abstract.

1.13. Aisde: Argumentative Strategy

Argumentative strategy might be conceptual analysis, engagement with the history of philosophy, experimental philosophy, or applying a specific framework to a new problem. In specifying your argumentative strategy you are describing a clue about how you will derive your conclusion.

1.14. Writing the Proposal

Replicate the order of the abstract.

Demonstrate knowledge of the current literature in your area. Ensure that readers understand what the gap is and how you aim to fill it.

Include a section on why the department you are applying to is the right place for your project. If using this proposal in applying for funding, also indicate how the proposed research aligns with your proposed supervisors' research.

Ensure consistency. It's often good to re-use phrases or even whole sentences from the abstract.

Be clear about the key sources you will draw on. Use quotes with page numbers. Only cite works you are certain you understand (unless, of course, part of the proposal is to better understand them).

1.15. Immediate Disqualifiers

- unclear question or thesis
- lacks a single, coherent line of enquiry
- any sign of poor scholarship (irrelevant source cited; incorrect quote; ...)
- any proofreading lapse
- reference list errors
- smells like ai

1.16. Additional Material

You may be asked to provide a tentative chapter outline, a writing sample or a proposed bibliography.

References