

Guidelines for Writing a Research Proposal

Applications for entry into the PhD programme with the School of Law at Queen Mary, University of London, must include a research proposal. The proposal is intended to demonstrate the quality and viability of the intended research to those considering your application you must submit a statement outlining your proposed area of research.

This document provides some detail and guidance when preparing a research proposal, as well as an outline of the criteria by which the proposal will be assessed.

What is the research proposal?

The research proposal provides a coherent and concise outline of the intended research. This allows selectors to assess the originality of the proposed topic, its viability as a doctoral research project, as well as potential supervisors if the application is accepted. There is no set word limit (upper or lower) for the proposal, however it should be concise and demonstrate the applicant's ability to convey the key elements of the research in a coherent document. The proposal should not usually exceed 1500-3000 words (not including bibliography).

Why is the proposal important?

When applying for entry to the PhD programme, the research proposal is the primary means by which selectors assess any application. The proposal must, therefore, assist with the identification of the following:

1. The applicant's proposed area of research and the originality of that research;
2. Adequate resources for the project (for example, library materials and research expertise);
3. An appropriate supervisor for the project; and
4. The applicant's ability to construct and communicate a reasoned piece of writing.

The research proposal is accompanied by the application form, which will include:

1. Academic achievements and results;
2. English proficiency; and
3. Support from referees.

Presentation of the research proposal

The proposal is an important indication of the applicant's ability to write a coherent and scholarly document. Therefore, spelling and grammar should be checked before submitting the document.

Ideally, the proposal document should be typed, double-line spaced, and presented in an appropriate font and size (for instance, Times New Roman, 12 point). Adequate margins should also be provided.

An outline of the research proposal

The following is a guide to an effective and coherent structure for the research proposal.

1. Title

2. Research Question / Thesis Abstract

The "research question" or "thesis abstract" is an important concise statement of the problem and topic of research. It may be a single sentence or a brief abstract of the thesis, of no more than 100 words.

3. Thesis Outline

The outline or main body of the thesis is very important in defining the scope of the project. The thesis outline provides an important development of the topic summarised in the thesis abstract, and is an important opportunity for the applicant to demonstrate competence in the relevant area as well as familiarity with the field. As well as indicating the originality of the topic and the capability of the applicant, the outline will also assist in demonstrating the achievability of the topic in the usual 3 year period.

As research questions

It is not necessary, expected, or even desirable that the outline presents a finished project. Therefore, it may be useful to present the research as a series of research questions to be examined by the thesis. An effective structure might be to use each question as a sub-heading to a paragraph or two of elaboration and detail on the "problem" or "issue" contained in each research question.

As chapter outlines

It is not necessary to have a chapter structure at this stage; however it is sometimes useful to identify the progress of the research through chapters.

This might be similar to (or even assisted by) the structure of the outline through research questions, as discussed above.

4. Research Methodology

In this section, an outline of the proposed research methods should be provided. For instance, research methods may include visits to particular libraries or archives, proposed field work, interviews, or sociological or other inquiry. Where research visits are a key part of the project, it may be useful to explain the decision to undertake the research in London. This could include the decision to work with particular individuals, for example.

This section may also identify important theoretical contributions that may frame the research (although this should also be explained in the outline). This will help indicate to selectors the applicant's ability to construct a viable research project.

5. Timeframe

The project should be achievable within 3 years. Therefore, it may be useful to provide a timeframe of intended milestones or progress over that period. Although this is likely to be revised as doctoral students proceed with their research, it is nevertheless important for the proposal to demonstrate that the project may be completed within the time period as well as the applicant's ability to conceive a topic of realistic scope.

6. Summary and Contribution to the Field

It is important that the proposal demonstrates to selectors an original contribution to the field. Therefore, the proposal should demonstrate:

- An awareness of the key literature and research in the area;
- The relevance and significance of the research project;
- The way in which the proposed research builds originally upon the work in the area and thus makes a significant contribution to the field.

7. Bibliography

The bibliography should be a short list of the key relevant literature in the area. Some proposals may also include a brief annotation on key primary texts (although this will vary between projects and is not necessary).

8. Personal statement

Applicants may also include a personal statement or cover letter (not usually more than 1-2 pages) which sets out in brief their expertise in the area, relevant experience, and other related material.

9. Relevant publications / writing sample (optional)

Although not essential to the proposal document, it may be useful for the applicant to list any of her/his publications or to append a writing sample.

Examples

The research proposal must make clear the relevance and significance of the project. It will not be adequate simply to describe an interesting issue or point of research (indeed, such a proposal may in reality describe merely a research paper rather than a sustained research project).

As well as identifying the important topic for research, the outline must demonstrate how that research might be achieved. It is the ability to communicate an effective and coherent strategy for an original and insightful topic of research that will distinguish outstanding proposal documents.

The examples below are intended to illustrate this distinction. They deal with a research project on the copyright laws of Fauxland, a fictional country. Fauxland is currently seeking membership of the European Union. Prior to joining the European Union, Fauxland had developed a rich genre of film known throughout the world as Follywood. Follywood has grown not through traditional film studios and systems of distribution, but through independent showings in coffee houses throughout Fauxland. This distribution has succeeded in developing a rich fan base for the films, which has led to distribution to US markets through conventional channels. However, the Ministers of Culture in Fauxland are concerned that implementation of European copyright laws in Fauxland might interfere with the established industry and ongoing successful local distribution of Follywood productions.

The first example is a less adequate articulation of the research topic (it is merely a description of a research interest). The second is a more comprehensive and successful attempt (the articulation of a research project).

Version A: a description of a research interest

In my LLM study of International and Comparative Copyright Law I became increasingly interested in the relationship between copyright and film. My research will focus on the film industry in Fauxland and the relationship to copyright protection. I will describe the Fauxland film industry, or Follywood, and the necessary changes to copyright law in Fauxland in view of its imminent accession to the EU. I will argue that copyright protection will be essential to ensuring the growth of Follywood in an international context ...

Version B: a description of a research project

This research focuses on the development of the Fauxland film industry, or Follywood, in the context of concurrent developments in copyright law. Copyright protection and film is currently the focus of intense international debate, particularly in the context of enhanced systems of reproduction and distribution, broadcasting, and webcasting.

An examination of the development of film copyright in Fauxland presents an important opportunity to consider the impact of copyright protection on local systems of creativity and distribution, while at the same time developing insight relevant to the international debate. My research will refer to the international debates, including an analysis of several key negotiations of copyright systems, such as open source and open access publishing, Creative Commons, and dedication to the public domain (available in Fauxland, following the United States). I will investigate the historical development of Follywood and the relationship to copyright developments, traditional concepts of ownership and authorship in Fauxland, as well as international systems of open access and commons approaches to distribution. An aspect of this research will include interviews with stakeholders in the Follywood industry; however I have elected to proceed with this research in London in order to access important archives on Fauxland (a former British colony in Europe) in the British Library as well as ensure the breadth of materials that will be essential to the ultimately international relevance of this research.

Key works will include those of Fauxland's active copyright commentators, which provide important insight into the local ownership structures relevant to Follywood's development, including Edward de Faker's *Film Copyright? I Can't Believe My Eyes*, and ...

Staff Research Profiles

Within the School of Law there are two departments – the Department of Law (Mile End) and the Centre for Commercial Law Studies (Lincoln's Inn Fields) – offering students a comprehensive and enviable diversity of research activity and student life across the entire School of Law. Research projects may also draw upon research expertise across the two departments, and students may wish to work with supervisors within both the Department of Law and the Centre for Commercial Law Studies.

Individual contact details and more information on the publications and research of staff members can be found at the School of Law website. Our academic staff listed in alphabetical order can be found at: www.law.qmul.ac.uk/people, which also provides links to individual staff web-pages, and the School of Law academic staff are listed by area of academic expertise within the field of Law, at: www.law.qmul.ac.uk/people/academic/expert.html

Applicants are encouraged to visit these sites to review the research profiles of School of Law researchers. The descriptions of research interests may be useful to applicants in identifying potential supervisors or research areas. Prior to preparing and submitting proposals, applicants may wish to contact individual members of staff working in the relevant area, all of whom would be most happy to discuss prospective topics.