

**Lancaster University Department of Linguistics and English Language**  
**RESEARCH PROPOSAL – GUIDANCE NOTES**

Your research proposal is very important because it is the main basis for deciding whether or not to admit you as a research student. You should allow yourself plenty of time to write a detailed proposal and check it carefully for any mistakes.

**Your proposal should be a maximum of 2000 words long** (excluding the list of references). There is no specific minimum but generally it should be at least 4 pages or 1500 words. There is also no formula for writing the proposal, but you are strongly advised to cover all of the points listed below. You may want to structure your proposal by using some of these headings.

Note that although your proposal is an important first step in your research, you can still make changes after you have begun your project – in fact most people do, and this is just part of the research process.

**1. Background.** Give details of the linguistic and/or social background to the study, the context of research in this area and the need for further research. Why is this topic interesting? Give a justification for the research you are proposing and your motivation for carrying it out. Try to give a concise and clear indication of what you want to do and why it is interesting in your very first paragraph. Show that you have a knowledge and understanding of the research that has already been done and the publications in the field, and that your proposed research makes sense against the background of current academic debates. Include references to key items of literature, and make sure that you have references to some of the most recent contributions to the field.

**2. Research questions.** Give details of two or three questions (or main questions and sub-questions) which you want to answer. Explain why these particular ones are the ones you want to research. Make sure that these questions are linked to the need for research which you have already argued for. Make it clear what the focus of your research is. Your research questions should be: *clear, well founded, well grounded (based on solid reasoning), backed up with appropriate current references, original, interesting, sensible, focused, and researchable*. It is usually best to frame these questions as interrogatives (i.e. they should have the form of questions, so that they can have answers!)

**3. Data collection** (not applicable to every proposal). Explain what form your data will take and how you will collect it. Will you be using tried and tested methods of data collection or will you have to design new ones? If some aspects of data collection are difficult or complex explain this, and explain how you will ensure access to the data you need. Explain if there are any special ethical considerations involved. Give an indication of how much data you will need and over what time span it will be collected. You need to show that it is feasible to gather the quantity of good-quality data that is needed for your project, in the time available.

**4. Methods of analysis.** Say what methods you will use to analyse your data. Go into as much detail as possible about how you will deal with your data and obtain the information you want from it. Be as specific as you can about theories or approaches which you intend to use and/or explore, and any new directions which you want to investigate. Give an indication of what you think you might discover. Show how your chosen methods relate to the research questions and sub-questions and why these are the best methods for answering them.

**5. Original contribution.** It is a requirement that a Ph.D. should make an original contribution to scholarship. Explain how your research will be original and how it will contribute to the development of theory. Also mention any other original aspects (for example, methodology).

**6. Timeline.** A Ph.D. is a research project which can be carried out within a specified timeframe. Please provide a realistic timeline which shows approximately how you intend to use the time of your proposed study

to bring your work to completion within the required time. Note: if you are offered a place to study, you will be able to vary this later after discussions with your supervisor. We want to know that you have a realistic idea of what you will be able to do in the available time.

**7. References.** Include a list of references (bibliography). Make sure you include some up-to-date (and of course, relevant) references. A list which contains only old references (however 'classic' they are) makes a bad impression. But only include a reference if you actually use it in your proposal, and can show that you have read and understood it.

### **General hints**

Be specific rather than vague. Do not assume too much; some of the readers of your proposal will not be specialists in the particular area. Make things explicit, e.g. by giving the full version of an expression rather than initials or an acronym at least the first time you mention it. Check your references carefully. Check other details and proofread carefully: badly proofread proposals and bibliographies make a very poor impression.