RESEARCH ARTICLE

PhD in English: Techniques of Writing a Winning Research Proposal

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Manuscript Info	*Abstract*
	PhD is not only the highest degree but also it is considered to be a coveted goal for a postgraduate student in English Language or Literature. Of late, it has become very competitive and getting a place for research in state universities let alone in the central universities, IITs, and NITs. In this context, this article claims that what defeats the aspiring PhD scholar is an amorphous PhD research proposal. In this article, the researcher discusses the key role played by the research proposal in securing a seat for PhD, the components of a good research proposal, and the methods and approaches one needs to adopt in order to write an unfailing research proposal. Two recent guidelines for writing a research proposal for PhD in English — Cambridge University and BITS, Pilani — are cited with a view to discussing the 'what' and 'how' aspects of a winning research proposal. Permeated with practical wisdom, this article hopes to provide cutting-edge guidelines for preparing a research proposal for PhD and to make a breakthrough in India and abroad.

Introduction

The PhD research proposal (RP) happens to be the first ever major concrete step for the prospective PhD scholar who seeks to get admission into a PhD programme but has to convince the university or research institute of his or her research worthiness in terms of the quality of his or her research plan, preparedness to undertake research seriously, and his or her roadmap to execute the research plan to accomplish his or her research objectives. In other words, the research proposal is the blueprint of research. Many students tend to think that writing a good thesis is all that happens or matters while doing PhD but that is only the tip of the iceberg. PhD usually begins with the research proposal being accepted and ends on its strength or lack of it — if the proposal is well-planned and well-written, the green signal to enter the PhD programme is received, but if the proposal is "unacceptable" then it puts a full stop to the aspirant's hope to go ahead and obtain the doctoral degree. The journey of PhD can be equated with the flight of an airplane and the three major stages of journey can be described with the help of metaphors — the take off stage, the flying stage, and the landing stage. When the take off stage for the PhD is the research proposal, the flight stage is the thesis or dissertation, and the Viva Voce is the landing stage. It must be noted that failure at any stage can jeopardize the fate or prospect of either journey and smooth, flawless operation can make the journey safe and enjoyable.

The research proposal provides the Doctoral Research Committee or the Thesis Supervisory Committee (name may vary) examining or interacting with the aspiring PhD scholar to understand the candidate's research area and topic, the background (history) of research, the rationale of the proposed research, research objectives, the

proposed plan to carry on research (i.e., research design), research methodology (the research methods, tools, and techniques to be used), research preparedness, research skills (e.g., writing and documentation skills), and whether the said research can be completed within a stipulated time, and the prospects and limitations involved, if any. With the help of another metaphor, this time borrowing from Nature, we can describe the research proposal — the research proposal is the *seed* of the PhD programme. It is widely believed that the RP gives a hopeful prognosis of the scholar's potential research competence. As such, the prospective PhD scholar should take the research proposal seriously if he or she is to avoid, as it were, any accident. A good way to begin with is having clarity about one's research: what one is going to do, why, and how.

The PhD research proposal, as we have already been aware, requires the prospective student to be acquainted with the convention of research. By convention of research I mean the guidelines of the university or institute concerned, as the structure of the proposal and specifications of length often varies from institute to institute. It is not surprising to find some universities or institutes using the word 'synopsis' interchangeably with PhD research proposal although the synopsis is needed while submitting the thesis or dissertation. It may not be an error to say that the way the research proposal relates to PhD programme the Synopsis relates to the PhD dissertation with the exception that the proposal is not a binding contract since it is "tentative" and "changeable" as one moves ahead, but the synopsis is not (unless the Research Committee so desires). However, a prospective scholar's very prospect of doing PhD depends largely on the viability of the PhD proposal which reveals an aspiring scholar's (a) commitment and preparedness to undertake research, (b) possession of research skills, mainly writing skill, and (c) the potential value of the research plan. Many aspiring PhD scholars taste failure because of their lack of understanding the nature and function of the research proposal. An experienced research director, namely Paul T. P. Wong at Trinity Western University in Canada, laments: "Most students and beginning researchers do not fully understand what a research proposal means, nor do they understand its importance."[1] Many otherwise "very competent" researchers have often got rejected due to the simple fact that their PhD proposal was poorly written even while the proposed research project was really good. Ill-conceived ideas, hazy organization of facts, and poor writing are the chief causes of debilitating one's research proposal even when the research project seems admirable.

As one's admission into the PhD programme largely rests on the quality of the research proposal, which one should clearly and precisely plan and describe the nature and scope of the research programme. Hence it pays to know what goes into making a winning PhD research proposal that can give one an edge over other competitors. This includes knowing the features and functions of a research proposal, its advantages and possible failures, and how to and how not to write a PhD research proposal.

The Structure of a PhD Research Proposal

The structure or the ordering of the contents of a PhD proposal must be presented in the prescribed format, if any, by the institute concerned. In absence of any specific format, however, the aspiring research scholar is free to write the proposal to some extent, not fully because the essential structure is a logical presentation of the research blueprint: it must have a beginning, middle, and an end.

Before discussing the key elements in a research proposal, it is more important to know about its required length because one has to write within certain word limits. As stated earlier, the length of the proposal is usually specified by the university or research institute concerned. So it is vital that the research aspirant read and meet the requirements as outlined in the PhD Guidelines (Rules and Regulations) of the research organization concerned. For example, the Cambridge University, one of the oldest and also the best universities of the world, provides specifications as how an aspirant should write a research proposal for being considered for admission into its PhD (English)[2] programme:

Guidelines for PhD Research Proposal
Your research proposal should be 500 words long. It needs to give those assessing your application an impression of the strength and originality of your proposed research, and its potential to make a contribution to knowledge. It

should be written in clear, jargon-free, and unexceptionable prose. Grammatical mistakes and typographical errors give a very bad impression. You should make sure you cover the following areas (without explicitly dividing the proposal into headings):

- **the research topic**

briefly outline the area and topic of your research.

- **the research context**

relate your proposed research to other work in its field or related fields, and indicate in what ways your research will differ; you might mention monographs on the subject, as well as important theoretical models or methodological exemplars: this is a chance to show your understanding of the background against which your research will be defined.

- **the contribution you will make**

this is your chance to show how you have arrived at your position and recognised the need for your research, and what it is that makes it both new and important; you should indicate what areas and debates it will have an impact on, what methodological example it sets (if appropriate) – in short how it contributes to knowledge and to the practice of our subject. Give examples of the sort of evidence you might consider, and of the questions it might help you to raise. Show that you are already thinking about the area in detail and not only in outline.

- **your methods**

in some cases there will be little to say here, but if there is something striking about your methodology, you should explain it.

- **the sources and resources you will use**

you should delimit your field of enquiry, showing where the project begins and ends; in certain cases, Cambridge will have unique collections and resources of central relevance to your project, and you should mention these.

- **how the project will develop**

you might indicate some of the possible ways in which the project could develop, perhaps by giving a broader or narrower version depending on what materials and issues you uncover.

Requirements and specifications may vary, but every research institute worth the name judge the research proposal on its merit and with a view that "the end is in the beginning" (i.e. the research proposal is as good as research). Most organizations are jealous of their reputation and their watchword is 'quality'. There are organizations who consider the PhD research proposal as the test of the real strength of an aspirant on a 'no-nonsense' job. For example, the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani requires a detailed blueprint of research from a PhD aspirant. The outline of the PhD research proposal as given by BITS[3] is as follows:

Guidelines for PhD Research Proposal

1) **Proposed Topic of Research** (It specifies the area of the proposed research work and is not the exact title of the thesis. Title of the thesis emerges at a stage when the candidate is almost ready to submit his/her thesis.)

2) **Objective of the Proposed Research:** (It should be clearly indicating the perception of the research work and should not be a mere repetition of the topic of research. What is to be achieved as an outcome of the research has to be visualized while mentioning the objective of the research. Objective should be given point wise: 3-4 points)

3) **Background of the Proposed Research:** (This is normally prepared after the candidate has studied the contemporary literature and researches done in the same area as available from current research journals, published reports of the organizations, issues needing research and enquiry in any area of activity of the organization, etc. It is expected that a broad summary of the present status of work and unresolved academic issues in the area are highlighted while giving the background of the proposed research. To identify the research gap, the candidate should refer latest peer-reviewed journal articles.) The subsections are: Introduction (250-300 words), Literature Review of Research Topic (1500-2000 words), and Gaps in

existing Research. While the **Introduction** section allows you to write about the importance of subject area on of proposed topic of research, the **Literature Review of Research Topic** section helps you to discuss the present status of "Topic of Research" from existing literature, and the **Gaps in existing Research** section should deal with the unresolved issues on the topic of research and their importance of the proposed project in the context of current status. Furthermore, possible utilization of research outcome can also be suggested.

4) **Methodology:** [Methodology should be given phase-wise and brief explanation should be given under each phase (4-5 sentences under each phase). The candidate can identify suitable phases.]

5) **Work plan:** The work plan (activity schedule) and the time by which these are to be achieved are to be indicated.

6) **References:** The citation of literature should be done in a standard manner in the text of 'Background of Proposed Research'. … Reference list should identify references cited (eg. book, journal article, conference proceedings, dissertations, theses etc.) in sufficient detail so that others may locate and consult your references. … Minimum 12 to 20 references are needed. … 50-60 % references are needed are to be from reputed journal articles, that too from latest journals (possibly within a span of 5-6 years).

References are usually taken from:
- Books
- CD-Roms
- Conference proceedings
- Databases
- Journal articles
- Patents
- PhD dissertation/Thesis
- Research Monographs
- Scientific and Technical reports

(**Note:** Adapted and modified partly with good intent to suit readability within the context of presentation.)

Some research institutes ask for an "Abstract" to the research proposal (comes just after "Title" and contains 100-200 words generally). The "Abstract" is followed by "Key words" of proposed research. Again in place of "Literature Review," one may find another substitute "The State of the Art." One is supposed to include an "Overview of Chapters" or Chapter-plan.

Components of a PhD Research Proposal

The key elements of a PhD Research Proposal are most likely to contain:

❖ **THE TITLE OF RESEARCH:**
The title of one's Research Proposal should be concise and descriptive as well as informative and catchy as far as possible. It is at the title should attract the reader's interest to know more about the research project. The title is supposed to open a window on the entire proposal. It should truly reflect the very essence of the research proposal. It must reveal some aspects or at least one fundamental aspect of the research proposed to be undertaken: the objective of research/method/ approach/ context/variables studied, etc. The title must use some key words in the context of the study, and not meant to be a general, lengthy heading "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing", to quote William Shakespeare. *Read a list of hundreds of PhD dissertations in your area of research using your own key words. Try to question yourself regarding the suitability of the title vis-à-vis your proposed research, objective, method, etc. Generate a few titles and zero in on the best among them after self-evaluation. Your research title may undergo change over time and hence its name is 'working title'.*

❖ **THE ABSTRACT:**
The Abstract of the PhD research proposal (if required) should contain the most important ideas or a brief overview of the proposal presented for evaluation. It is a summary or condensed presentation of the important

elements of the proposal, such as the research problem, research objective, Background of the Study, Research Questions or Hypotheses, and Methods, tools and techniques to be used. An Abstract does not cite References though it may describe the source fully in the body of the Abstract. One should stick to the Guidelines prescribed by the research institute concerned — whether an Abstract is needed and, if yes, what is the length and manner of presentation. *While writing Abstract, critical thinking becomes inevitable. Put a condensed summary concisely, using keywords or precise information.*

❖ **KEYWORDS:**

A keyword is a word or phrase that holds the key to understanding a text or to search content online. Keywords are used to search literature on databases or on the net in general. They play a key role in tracking relevant abstracts, full text in Word, PDF or other formats and other web materials. If you want to identify and search references and text materials, you have to use relevant keywords so that you find what you want and others find your article, book, thesis, etc. *If you have doubts as to what should be your keywords, you can take the help of software which can help you create keywords for you. Free software to create keywords can be available on the internet.*

❖ **THE INTRODUCTION:**

The introduction gives an overview of the research project you propose to carry out. It explains the background of the project, focusing briefly on the major issues of its knowledge domain and clarifying why these issues are worthy of attention. It then proceeds with the concise presentation of the research statement, which can take the form of a hypothesis, a research question, a project statement, or a goal statement. The research statement should capture both the essence of the project and its delimiting boundaries, and should be followed by a clarification of the extent to which you expect its outcomes to represent an advance in the knowledge domain you have described. Long, Convey and Chwalek (28) advise: "First, you need to narrow or delimit your topic enough to make the purpose of your research clear to yourself and others. Sufficient delimitation helps you organize your literature search and produce a specific problem statement with accompanying theoretical rationale."[4]

❖ **RESEARCH PROBLEM / STATEMENT OF PROBLEM:**

Research problem is what necessitated your research or plainly what inspired you to undertake research. [It is not the problem you encounter in doing your research!] You are supposed to identify and highlight the gap that needs to be filled in the existing research in your topic area or at least attempt to solve the problem in your field of research. If there is no research question to be answered, no research problem to be solved, and if there is no possibility of creation of new knowledge, your research objective is then flat and pointless. The research problem needs to be stated clearly and convincingly. It can be presented in a paragraph or as a question, or as a hypothesis. While stating the research problem, write concisely about the significance of the research and the major approach(es) you will take (conceptual, theoretical, empirical or normative) as appropriate. You should write about:

> The questions or problems that the argument of your thesis will address; the methods you will adopt to answer those questions or explain those problems; and some explanation of why this particular methodology is the appropriate means of doing so. The problem could take many forms: a simple gap in the existing scholarship that you will fill; a misleading approach to the primary material that you will correct; or a difficulty in the relation of the existing scholarship to theoretical/philosophical, historiographical, or other disciplinary contexts, for example. But in any case, your thesis must engage critically with the scholarship of others … by mounting an original argument in relation to the existing work in your field or fields. In this way your project must go beyond the summarising of already-existing knowledge.[5]

❖ **OBJECTIVE(S) OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH / RESEARCH OBJECTIVE(S):**

You need to clearly state your research objective(s) — how your proposed research is going to add to or develop or challenge the existing literature in the field. It presupposes that you have read/examined the existing literature or on authority of a researcher's recent claim you are proceeding to undertake your

research. In other words, you have to state concisely and in unequivocal terms how you plan to handle the research problem and the methods and approaches you are going to adopt.

❖ **BACKGROUND OF STUDY:**

A brief introduction necessitating the present research should be provided to put your research in context. It may precede or succeed or be a part of Research objectives.

❖ **REVIEW OF LITERATURE:**

Don't confuse the word "literature" with poetry, novel, etc. Literature review means earlier writings on your research topic or area of research, the debates and discussions relevant to your subject of study. As you know, a PhD is known for its originality and new contribution to the field and literature review shows that your proposed area is new and you are not reinventing the wheel, i.e., it has not been studied before.

Literature Review or Review of Literature serves many useful functions:

- Ensures that you are not "reinventing the wheel".
- Gives credits to those who have laid the groundwork for your research.
- Demonstrates your knowledge of the research problem.
- Demonstrates your understanding of the theoretical and research issues related to your research question.
- Shows your ability to critically evaluate relevant literature information.
- Indicates your ability to integrate and synthesize the existing literature.
- Provides new theoretical insights or develops a new model as the conceptual framework for your research.
- Convinces your reader that your proposed research will make a significant and substantial contribution to the literature (i.e., resolving an important theoretical issue or filling a major gap in the literature)

Literature review provides the rationale for *your* research and must not:

- Lack organization and structure
- Lack focus, unity and coherence
- Be repetitive and verbose
- Fail to cite influential papers
- Fail to keep up with recent developments
- Fail to critically evaluate cited papers
- Cite irrelevant or trivial references
- Depend too much on secondary source[6]

The Literature Review, also known as the State of the Art, should convince your readers that you are familiar with your topic of research and you have approached it critically. It shows that you are capable of identifying gaps in knowledge and what kind of contribution you will make to the existing literature. Literature review highlights the uniqueness of your project and justifies the choice of research methodology.

❖ **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

As a matter of fact, research methodology part is a bit long as you need to justify what methods, tools and techniques you are going to use in your research. You must convince your reader that your methodology as well as approach is adequately suitable for your project. As a researcher puts it:

This section is very important as it informs the admissions committee how you plan to tackle your research problem. It is your work plan and describes the activities necessary for the completion of your project and should consist of a description of how you intend to go about the research. You could demonstrate your knowledge of alternative methods and make the case that your approach is

the most appropriate and most valid way to address your research question. Explain about the data you will collect; how you will collect it and how your will analyse it. Explain what skills you will need and whether you have them or how you will acquire them.[7]

You should be sure that the methodology you are planning to use is the best to tackle your research problem. You can simply make textual analysis or undertake field study, or use survey, questionnaire, or any other. You have to be clear about what you want to do and why you want to do the way you want to do.

❖ **CHAPTER PLAN / OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS:**

The chapter plan shows how you want to proceed in your research activity. You tell in which order you will proceed in principle. It is, however, subject to change. A look at a generic thesis structure given here may be helpful for you to plan your chapters for the purpose of your PhD research proposal.

A Generic PhD Thesis / Dissertation Structure

There is no hard and fast rule regarding what should be exactly the structure of a PhD in English thesis or dissertation as it is left to the discretion of the research scholar and supervisor. Here is proposed a structure format:

1. **Title page**
2. **Copyright page** (Certified by the PhD scholar, Guide, the thesis is plagiarism-free.)
3. **Abstract / Synopsis**
4. **Preface**
5. **Table of contents**
6. **List of tables** (if any in document)
7. **List of figures** (if any in document)
8. **List of illustrations** (if any in document)
9. **Lists of symbols, abbreviations, special characters** (if any in document)
10. **Glossary** (only if necessary)
11. **Acknowledgements** (optional)
12. **Dedication** (optional)
13. **Main Body of the Thesis:**
    i. *Introduction:*
       ➢ Background information
       ➢ Theoretical framework / Conceptual framework
       ➢ Statement of the problem or 'gap' in the research
       ➢ Research objectives
       ➢ Brief description of your methodology/ research
       ➢ Outline of chapters -- Thesis plan
    ii. *Research chapters:* The no. of chapters depends on the kind of study.
    iii. *Conclusion:* In addition to restating findings", "results," you should discuss the implications of your finding, limitations of the research, dimensions for future work, etc.
14. **References:**
15. **Appendix/ Appendices** (only if necessary)

Plan the chapters of your PhD research proposal in the light of the thesis structure and the nature and scope of your work. Take your supervisor's advice if you are overwhelmed with this task. And if you have not got your Supervisor yet, go ahead on your own. You can modify your chapter plan later.

❖ **WORK PLAN (AND IMPLICATIONS):**

You are supposed to give a rational time frame for your research and significant steps therein and how you propose to do that. You may mention the problems and opportunities you anticipate to face along the way.

❖ **REFERENCES:**

In this section you should list all the references you have made throughout the research proposal, making sure that you comply with the referencing conventions or citation styles that have been established for your specific field.

Why a PhD research proposal fails:

A research proposal fails for its inherent weaknesses and when the research committee comes to the conclusion that you are not serious about your research (that is your preparedness is zero) or you lack research skills. For example, the research proposal is itself a sample of the researcher's writing and organizing skill. Similarly, every component of the research proposal you write must be fact-oriented, applicable and convincing. The whole must justify the parts and the parts must contribute to the whole personality of your proposal.

Your research proposal is most likely to fail, if:

1. You fail to narrow down your research area into a researchable topic.
2. You fail to state/frame the right research problem/research question(s).
3. You fail to identify key research work in your Literature review.
4. You fail to critique other researchers' contribution even though you have mentioned them.
5. You fail to present your argument coherently and persuasively.
6. You fail to stay focused and lack a sense of direction.
7. You fail to achieve a sense of purpose — "too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues".
8. You fail to write clearly, coherently, and lucidly (i.e., your writing is sloppy, confused, and amorphous).
9. You fail to conform to the documentation style (i.e., the MLA format or the APA style, or any other as per the institute's guidelines)
10. You fail to present a potentially good project.

Techniques to Write an Unfailing Research Proposal

Discussions on the need and characteristics of a PhD research proposal reveals that the research proposal can be very helpful for both the prospective scholar and the research institute concerned; it shows the candidate's acquaintance with preliminary concepts of research, possession of relevant research skills, and genuine interest in research through demonstration. The proposal shows the candidate's position in his or her area of research and research conventions in the field. Above all, the research proposal provides the research institute with a specimen of writing to assess the candidate's ability to conceptualize, to organize ideas, to present ideas and arguments systematically, coherently, and convincingly in "the language of research". If a research institute does not ask for a sample of your written work, your research proposal itself fulfils this need. In this context, it is worthwhile to focus on the techniques the prospective researcher for PhD in English will find helpful in writing an unfailing research proposal whether the purpose is to receive a grant for research or to get admission into the PhD programme of a research institute (e.g., university/IIT/NIT).

If you are a prospective researcher, your PhD research proposal must not fail to satisfy your evaluators about your research competency and that you have a good grasp of the convention of research in general and the institute you are aspiring to study in particular. Your RP should:
▪ Demonstrate a deeper understanding of the area of research.
▪ Show adequate knowledge of the field of study and relevant literature;

- Differentiate between primary and secondary sources.
- Prove that you are well-acquainted with the past and present developments / trends in your field.
- Provide evidence that you can identify and use key literary research tools to locate research material and relevant information.
- Show that you have understood the concept and significance of peer-reviewed sources of information.
- Demonstrate your information literacy through Literature Review.
- Demonstrate that you can locate the research material, research problem, and identify gap in existing research.
- Prove you that you have the potential not only to examine scholarly interpretations of the text but also create new interpretations to add to a body of knowledge.
- Demonstrate that you are aware of the plague of plagiarism.
- Show that you can think critically and exercise of critical judgment with regard to the work of other scholars in your field.
- Demonstrate you can employ the MLA (or other appropriate) documentation style.

The techniques of writing a good research proposal can be summarized in a mnemonic: L3RJ (Locate, Read, Relate, Review, Justify). After finalizing your tentative topic of research in consultation with your supervisor/subject mentor, you must find relevant sources by internet search. Collect the materials, read and summarize them. You may take the help of a summarizing software (many are available free on the internet) in case you do not have sufficient time. The next step is to relate the findings of all the materials vis-à-vis your topic of research and identify the research question, gap in existing critical literature. Make a literature review in a systematic manner. Your research question/research problem will help you determine the methodology to use in your research. Justify the proposed method as well as the tools and techniques you are going to employ. Your ability to locate materials or sources indicates about a plethora of research skills such as ICT skills, library skills, communication skills, ability to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant sources. Your reading as evidenced in the research proposal shows the ability to concentrate, understand, reflect, and critically review texts or authors. Your justification of your proposed research reveals your ability for logical and persuasive academic writing, style of writing in the "language of research", the ability to integrate theory and method, and above all your control on the subject in hand. These are the techniques required to author an unfailing PhD research proposal.

Conclusion

It is evidenced that there exists a sizeable gap between the research proposal submitted during getting enrolled into the PhD programme on one hand and the final research output or the thesis/dissertation on the other. The title might have changed or partly modified, the statement of the problem intensified, the methodology has changed, and the review of literature has become more organized, more comprehensive, more resonance and the initial reviews have been out-dated! In short, the old world of research three-five years ago has dramatically changed. One who has yet to undertake research may be tempted to ask 'Why so much fuss over the PhD research proposal, eh?' The answer to this question is that your PhD proposal is the gateway to the PhD programme (to take off research). As a proposal facilitates a marriage, similarly a research proposal facilitates getting a PhD: the end is in the beginning.

ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

1. Visit *admissions/ graduate/research_prop.htm. Accessed on 7 August, 2015.*
2. Long, Convey and Chwalek on Web: moodle.une.edu.au/ pluginfile.php/ 191/.../examples-phd-proposals.pdf. *Accessed on 8 August, 2015.*
3. See *www.bits-pilani.ac.in/uploads/Guidelines%20for%20PhD%20Proposal.pdf. 7 August, 2015.*
4. Suggested by Paul T. P. Wong, Research Director at Trinity Western University, Canada.