PhD Research Proposal Guidance

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About This Framework: This guidance has been adapted from the "Key 15" framework used for UKRI research grant applications. While grant applications and PhD proposals serve different purposes, the Key 15's emphasis on clear articulation of research significance, theoretical grounding, and methodological rigour translates well to doctoral research proposals. We've modified the framework to include elements for PhD proposals, such as a detailed literature review and theory while maintaining the logical flow and systematic approach that makes the Key 15 effective for research planning. Each number with the framework represents a section within the proposal. The first 6 sections introduce the project, while sections 7-15 provide the details on how the project will be carried out.

1. Writing PhD Research Proposals in 15 parts

Introducing the project (1- 6)

1. Project Summary

Write ONE clear sentence that covers:

- What new knowledge your research will produce
- The important problem it addresses
- What's distinctive about your methods/approach
- Why you're the right person to do this research

Example: "This project will examine how social media platforms shape political polarization in the UK through innovative computational text analysis of Twitter data combined with qualitative interviews, building on my background in both data science and political sociology."

2. Evidence of Important Challenge

Write ONE compelling sentence that:

- Clearly states the problem/challenge
- Provides specific evidence of its importance
- Shows urgency or timeliness
- Demonstrates real-world significance

Examples: "Climate change-induced migration is expected to displace 216 million people by 2050, yet current international refugee frameworks provide no protection for climate refugees, leaving an urgent gap in global governance mechanisms."

Key elements:

- Use specific statistics/data where possible
- Cite authoritative sources
- Show why the problem needs attention now
- Make clear why this matters in real terms
- Demonstrate the scale of the problem

Common pitfalls to avoid:

- Vague or general statements
- Unsupported claims
- Focusing on academic interest alone
- Understating urgency/importance

3-5. Research Questions and Objectives

Write ONE to THREE sentences that:

- Present clear research questions embedded within objectives
- Build logically from descriptive to analytical to theoretical

- Lead to clear contributions to knowledge

Key elements:

- Each sentence combines an objective with a specific research question
- Main questions should start with how or why, requiring analytical answers
- If you have multiple Research Questions, they should build on each other logically
- Questions align with theoretical framework

6 Project Contribution and Distinctive Elements

Write ONE clear paragraph that:

- Summarises exactly what will be done
- Emphasizes what makes your approach distinctive
- Articulates your specific contribution to knowledge
- Shows how this advances the field
- Links to your research questions

Key elements:

- Clear statement of concrete activities
- Explicit identification of distinctive elements
- Specific contribution to knowledge
- Connection to research questions
- Demonstration of originality

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework (7-12)

7-9. Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

Write a focused review (about 3 paragraphs) that:

- Maps the key scholarly debates in your field
- Identifies specific gaps or limitations
- Shows how different research strands connect
- Positions your work within these conversations
- Leads to your theoretical framework

10-12. Theoretical Framework

Building from your literature review, develop your theoretical framework (about 3 paragraphs):

- Identify key theoretical approaches you'll use
- If you use different theories, show how they complement each other
- Explain how theory guides your answers to your research questions
- Demonstrate your theoretical contribution
- Connect theory to methodology

Key elements to cover:

- Critical assessment of existing theoretical approaches
- Clear articulation of your theoretical perspective
- Explicit links between theory and research questions
- Anticipated theoretical contribution
- Methodological implications of theoretical choices

Methods & Analysis (13 - 15)

13-15. Research Design

For each research question and objective, detail (about 3 paragraphs each objective):

- Specific methods and justification

- Data collection approach
- Analysis techniques
- Timeline and feasibility

2. Additional Guidance on this approach

Literature Review Integration

While the literature review is suggested for sections 7-9, it can also:

- Inform sections 2 (problem) and 6 (contribution)
- Ground theory and methods (10-15)

Theoretical Framework Development

Your theoretical framework should:

- Shape your research questions (3-5)
- Guide your methodology (13-15)
- Lead to clear contributions (6)

Methodological Considerations

Different approaches require different emphasis:

- Qualitative methods: Detail ethical considerations and access
- Quantitative methods: Demonstrate technical expertise
- Mixed methods: Explain integration strategy

Avoid AI Use in Writing

The use of AI tools (like ChatGPT) to write or generate any part of your proposal is discouraged, as this raises serious concerns about your ability to conduct independent research and may result in your application being rejected - your proposal must demonstrate your analytical and writing capabilities.

3. Note on Flexibility when Writing Proposals

The above framework provides general guidance for writing a PhD proposal, but specific requirements may vary depending on your supervisor, discipline, and methodological approach. For example:

- Projects using interviews or ethnographic methods need a more detailed discussion of ethical considerations and access

- Quantitative approaches require a demonstration of prior statistical experience or specific technical skills
- Interdisciplinary projects may need additional space to explain how different fields connect
- Some supervisors may have specific preferences for proposal organisation or content

While the exact structure can be adapted, the core elements remain crucial for any strong proposal:

- Clear demonstration of the problem's importance
- Well-developed theoretical argument
- Rigorous and feasible methodology

Always consult with your potential supervisor about their specific expectations while using this framework as a general guide.

4. Other Suggestions and Advice for Writing

Writing Order

1. Start with Evidence & Impact (#2)
2. Define Objectives (#3-5)
3. Develop Theoretical Framework (#7-12)
4. Plan Methods (#13-15)
5. Write Project Contribution (#6)
6. Write Project Summary (#1)

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

1. Weak Problem Statement
   - Lack of specific evidence
   - No clear urgency
   - Missing real-world significance
2. Poor Research Questions
   - Too broad or vague
   - Not logically connected
   - Misaligned with theory
3. Inadequate Methods
   - Insufficient detail
   - Poor connection to theory
   - Unrealistic timeline
4. Missing Integration
   - Disconnected sections

- Weak theory
- Poor flow

Tips for Strong Theory

Proposals often struggle to articulate an argument. Here are some additional suggestions on writing about your theory.

1. Show Understanding
   - Engage with key debates
   - Identify theoretical gaps
   - Position your contribution
2. Build Theoretical Links
   - Connect different theoretical strands
   - Show how theories inform methods
   - Explain theoretical implications
3. Demonstrate Originality
   - Identify limitations in current theory
   - Show how you extend theory
   - Explain theoretical significance
4. Maintain Coherence
   - Ensure theoretical framework aligns with objectives
   - Link theory to methods
   - Connect theory to expected findings
5. Be Specific
   - Use precise theoretical concepts
   - Define key terms
   - Show exact theoretical contributions

5. Key Questions for Self-Evaluating Your PhD Proposal

After using the above framework to develop your proposal, ask yourself these essential questions:

Problem Statement and Significance

- Have I clearly stated what problem my research addresses?
- Have I provided specific evidence (data, statistics, examples) that demonstrates why this problem matters?
- Is there a clear sense of urgency or timeliness to this research?

Research Questions and Objectives

- Are my research questions specific and answerable within a PhD timeframe?
- Do my questions progress logically from descriptive to analytical to theoretical?
- Can I clearly explain how each research question contributes to addressing the larger problem?

Literature and Theory

- Have I shown how my research builds on existing work in the field?
- Have I identified specific gaps or limitations in the current literature?
- Is my theoretical framework clearly connected to my research questions?
- Have I explained how my research will contribute to theory development?

Methodology

- Have I justified why my chosen methods are appropriate for my research questions?
- Is there a clear connection between my theoretical framework and methodological choices?
- Have I considered the practical aspects of data collection and analysis?

Overall Coherence

- Do all elements of my proposal connect logically?
- Is there a clear thread running from the problem statement through to methods?
- Have I maintained focus throughout, avoiding unnecessary tangents?

Before submitting your proposal, ensure you can confidently answer "yes" to these questions and provide specific examples from your proposal to support each answer.