

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE RESEARCH PROPOSAL



This guide provides key advice to help you craft a strong and competitive research proposal. It reflects the expectations of the NINE DTP Annual Studentship Committee and aims to help you stand out in a competitive funding environment.

Although the NINE DTP Studentship nomination form consists of many components that are evaluated as part of your application, a key element of the nomination form is the research proposal. The nomination form is submitted by the prospective supervisor, however the research proposal (which is pasted into the nomination form) is to be conceived and written by the prospective student, albeit with input and feedback from the prospective supervisor.

1. Adhere to the Word Limit

Your research proposal must not exceed 2,000 words, including footnotes but excluding references. Tables of data do not count towards the word count, so use them if they enhance your proposal. Be concise and ensure every word serves a purpose.

2. Address a Big Social Science Question

Your research should tackle a significant question with broad scholarly interest. Reviewers will come from across the social sciences, so your project should appeal to academics outside your immediate area of expertise. Highlight how your research contributes to a major issue, and why it matters for society. Many research proposals score poorly because, while they introduce the details of a case and establish a solid methodology for gaining further insights regarding that case, they fail to elaborate on how the findings could be of interest to scholars or communities with broader interests (e.g. by raising new conceptual questions).

3. Structure of the Proposal

A typical PhD research proposal should include the following sections:

TITLE	A clear and concise title that reflects the core focus of your research
INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION:	Introduce the key question your research aims to answer, or the hypothesis you aim to test. Explain why this question is important both academically and socially. Situate your research within current debates in your discipline.
LITERATURE REVIEW	Summarise the existing literature related to your research area, identifying gaps your research aims to fill. Focus on how your work will extend or challenge existing knowledge.

<p>METHODOLOGY</p>	<p>Clearly outline the methods you will use to conduct your research, ensuring that your approach is feasible. Provide evidence that you can successfully carry out your proposed methods, such as access to data, field sites, or interview subjects. If your research requires fieldwork, evidence that the travel is logistically feasible within the DTP’s maximum allowable budgets for different kinds of expenditures (e.g. the £7,500 maximum for overseas fieldwork, the £3,000 maximum for RTSG) and that it aligns with FCDO guidance. You must show that you have thought through potential challenges and how to overcome them.</p>
<p>TIMELINE</p>	<p>A clear timeline is crucial. You don’t need to include a Gantt chart, but they are an excellent way to visually map out your project over the three or four years. Make sure your timeline demonstrates that your project is doable within the funded period.</p>
<p>INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECTS</p>	<p>If your project crosses disciplinary boundaries, be clear about how you will balance the disciplines. What does each bring to your project? What is the intellectual significance of integrating these fields, and how will you manage them in terms of methods and theory?</p>
<p>CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE</p>	<p>Conclude with a section on the anticipated outcomes and intellectual significance of your work. How will your research advance the field? What are the broader implications for policy or practice? This is another chance to address the ‘big social science question(s)’ noted in point 2.</p>

4. Align Your Proposal with Evaluation Criteria

Ensure that your proposal aligns with the evaluation criteria available in the NINE DTP Annual Studentship Competition Guidelines on our website. Reviewers will assess your application based on these, so it’s crucial that you structure your proposal to meet them.

5. Ethical Considerations

Discuss any ethical concerns that may arise from your research and how you plan to address them, particularly if your research involves human subjects. How will you protect the rights and well-being of participants, especially if conducting sensitive or field-based research. Additionally, address any potential risks to yourself or others during fieldwork, and include how you will mitigate these, referencing relevant safety guidelines or protocols.

6. If your proposal aligns with an ESRC Steer

When developing your research proposal, it's important to clearly articulate if and how it aligns with ESRC Steer priorities, (Cross-Council initiatives, Data Skills, Advanced Quantitative Methods (AQM), or collaborative projects with non-academic partners). If your research fits within one of these areas, be explicit about how it addresses these priorities. For instance, if your project involves AQM, detail the specific quantitative methods you will use and their relevance to your research question. If you're engaging in a collaborative project, outline the role of your partner organisations and how their involvement enhances the impact of your research. Further information about each steer is provided on the NINE DTP website. Clearly demonstrating alignment with one or more of these strategic areas can strengthen your proposal and signal its broader value to reviewers.

7. Consider cost

Before submitting your proposal, it's essential to carefully cost your PhD project in collaboration with your supervisor. Ensure that any UK-based fieldwork and Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) expenses, typically around £3,000 per student over the course of the PhD, can be accommodated within the available funding. If your research requires Overseas Fieldwork or Difficult Language training, you should similarly confirm that these elements can be delivered within the financial limits of the grant, noting that the NINE DTP can contribute up to £7,500 for these activities. Properly budgeting these costs in advance will help ensure the feasibility and smooth progression of your research.

8. Intellectual Significance

Your proposal should clearly articulate the intellectual significance of your research. How will your research contribute to ongoing debates? Will it challenge existing theories, offer new frameworks, or introduce novel empirical data? Be explicit about the theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions your work will make, including for reviewers who are not familiar with the specific debates within your discipline or who are particularly concerned with the precise subject of your proposed empirical research.

9. Impact and knowledge exchange

What are the broader implications of your research for the social sciences and society at large? What opportunities for impact or knowledge exchange do you foresee arising from your research?

10. Review and Edit

Once your draft is complete, refer back to this guide and the official evaluation criteria to ensure you have addressed every point. Clarity is essential—ensure your writing is accessible to those outside your immediate research area. Seek feedback from your supervisors or peers before submission.

Good luck with your application, and remember: a clear, well-structured proposal that tackles a significant research question with feasible methods is the key to success!