Writing a Research Proposal for your PhD Application

Introduction
All applicants to the PhD programme in Trinity College Dublin must submit a research proposal as part of the application process. This proposal serves a number of functions:

- It is used by academic assessors to determine whether the applicant has identified a clear focus for their PhD;
- It should provide the assessors with confidence that the applicant has the necessary background understanding and competence to undertake the research;
- A research proposal is a very specific genre of academic writing and so is used by assessors to evaluate the academic writing skill set of the applicant;
- The research proposal is a required element of the application for scholarships offered in the School of Education and features centrally in the evaluation of scholarship applications

Your research proposal represents your thinking at this stage in the research process. It is not a binding commitment to a specific research question, and it is not at all unusual for PhD candidates to find that the thesis they ultimately submit has developed in a quite different direction to that outlined in their research proposal. However, the research proposal will be an important consideration for the School in finding a supervisor with the necessary expertise to support you in a successful PhD experience. The more specific you are about your research interest, the better the chances of finding a good match. Sometimes, even strong PhD applicants cannot be accepted into a School because there is no supervisor with the relevant domain expertise. Understanding this from the start makes it more likely you will not be disappointed later in the PhD process. Applicants to the School of Education are advised to identify and agree a supervisor *before* applying for a place on the programme.

Before you start consider the following:

- Have you discussed your ideas with your potential supervisor? Does the supervisor expect to review your proposal before you submit it?
- Are you confident that you have identified key background literature/evidence relevant to your proposal? You are not expected to have thoroughly explored all of the literature – that can happen once you are accepted into the PhD programme. You *are* expected to be aware of key publications or research within the domain you intend exploring. You may not be able to access all of these resources, but demonstrating your awareness of their existence is important;
- Have you identified a topic that genuinely interests you? Undertaking a four-year programme of research requires an equal mix of passion and persistence. It is very important that you are excited by the area you have chosen;
- Have you considered what kinds of research questions most interest you? Are you drawn to theoretical constructs or to empirical data? These issues will be especially important in deciding on what research methods are compatible with your research interest and your research skill set.

In **writing your research proposal** remember:

√ Be clear and concise in your writing. The proposal should not exceed 4,000 words;
√ Your proposal will be read by a number of assessors, and some may not have expertise specific to your topic. Write the proposal in a way that makes it easy for a non-expert reader to understand;

- √ Be aware of the importance of referencing conventions within your discipline. The bibliography is not included in the word count but is an important source of evidence that you are familiar with the foundational literature in your area of interest;
- √ Check for grammatical and typographical errors. These can distract the reader and detract from the essence of your proposal.

Key elements in a research proposal:

Any research proposal must address at least the following questions:

1. What is the question/puzzle/phenomenon you want to investigate?
2. Why is that question/puzzle/phenomenon important?
3. How are you going to explore/investigate it?

These questions are usually addressed through the following core sections:

Introduction (300–500 words)

This section should give a clear, concise description of your main research aim and objectives. If you already have a well-formulated research question, this section should set that out for the reader. Don't be fooled into thinking that this short section will be the easiest part – often it is much easier to write this section after you have completed a full draft of your proposal.

(Preliminary) **Literature Review** (1,500-2,000 words)

In this section, you are expected (i) to briefly summarise what is already known in the academic literature about the question/puzzle you described in your Introduction, (ii) to highlight important gaps in knowledge or disagreements within the field, (iii) to demonstrate how your area of interest relates to what is known and what remains unknown or disputed, and (iv) to showcase your critical analysis skills.

A literature review is *not* a summary of everything you have read. It is your opportunity to show *why* your research is important considering your critical review of existing knowledge and what the impact would be, if you successfully resolve the puzzle that you have described. Key points to consider include:

- What are the main relevant concepts within the area of interest? (Consider any specific terminology you may need to define).
- What are the key theories and questions within this area? (Consider selecting a sub-set of these to ensure you keep your focus tight).
- What empirical support exists for (or against) these theories?
- What are current key gaps in knowledge or areas of disagreement?
- How does your proposed focus of research address a current gap or area of disagreement?
- Why is addressing that gap/disagreement important? How will your research make a valuable contribution?

Proposed Methodology (1,000–1,500 words)

This section is where you explain *how* you intend answering the question you have outlined above and demonstrate your understanding of the research process. Important considerations here are the kinds of data you intend using in your research and whether in light of these decisions, quantitative,

qualitative, or mixed research methods will be most appropriate. It's also important to think about any specific resources that may be critical to your research. You may already have a clear vision of the sequence of steps that will form your research plan but that is not always the case. Research methods evolve as questions become clearer and more focused. What you are setting out is your plan at this point – a plan that is likely to go through many different iterations before it is implemented. In reviewing this section, make sure that you have clearly demonstrated your understanding of the research process.

Additional sections that are expected within your proposal, but that are not part of any word count are:

Title: This should be concise and give an idea of your area of study. It can (and will) change over the course of your studies, but a clear title helps to make sure your project is identifiable.

Bibliography

Consider the bibliography as your opportunity to demonstrate your awareness of the existing academic literature base as well as your competence in the conventions of citing existing sources. Ensure it includes all and only those sources you have cited in the proposal (including in the Methodology section) and that the references are sufficiently recent to indicate you are in touch with the latest developments in the field. Quantity is not the most important measure here – relevance, importance and accuracy are weighted much more heavily.

A draft template is enclosed overleaf. You are not required to use this template – it is intended as a guide only.

[Document ver. August 2026]

Applicant Name:	Applicant ID (if known):
Supervisor (if known):	
Research Title:	
Introduction: (200-300 words)	
Preliminary Literature Review: (1,500-2,000 words)	
Methodology: (800-1,000 words)	
Bibliography:	