Template and Guidance for Setting Out the Doctoral Research Proposal

The questions below are prompts for developing your proposal, not additional requirements. Give particular attention to those relevant to your topic and approach. Note that no attempt should be made to answer the prompt questions individually or in the order given.

Opening layout

Working title: [Insert a clear, concise title]

Applicant: [Name]

Proposed discipline: [For example, biblical studies or historical theology]

Mode of study: [Full time or part time]

Date and version: [Date of the draft and version number of the draft]

Potential supervisor: [A named supervisor should only be included if appropriate. Note, listing a potential supervisor does not imply that an appointment has been agreed.]

1 Research context and problem

Suggested allowance: 150 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- Identify the particular topic and the academic problem to be investigated. Explain what requires clarification, explanation or reassessment.
- Define the central terms and establish the narrow focus of the project.
- Explain the scholarly importance of the problem.

Questions to consider

- Why does this matter as an academic question?
- What led scholars to recognise this problem, and how has it been framed so far?
- Is the problem a disagreement about interpretation, an unexplained feature of the evidence, or an assumption that deserves reconsideration?
- Which terms could readers understand differently, and how will you use them?
- What specific example would help a reader see the problem clearly?
- What is at stake if the prevailing explanation is incomplete or mistaken?
- Can you distinguish the academic problem from a broader pastoral, ecclesial or personal concern that prompted your interest?

2 Research questions and objectives

Suggested allowance: 150 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- State one principal research question that the proposed evidence and methods can answer.

- Consider whether a small number of subsidiary questions would help clarify the principal question.
- If helpful, distinguish the overall aim from the actual tasks needed to answer the questions.
- Avoid a question that merely invites a descriptive survey or assumes the conclusion in advance.

Questions to consider

- What would count as an answer? Can the proposed evidence answer the question?
- Does the wording invite investigation, or does it already assume the conclusion you hope to reach?
- Are you asking what happened, how a text should be understood, why an interpretation developed, or how a theological claim should be evaluated?
- If you have subsidiary questions, how does answering each one help answer the principal question?
- Could any of the questions be combined or removed without weakening the project?
- Which part of the question is likely to require the most sustained investigation?
- What evidence might lead you to revise the question or qualify your initial expectations?

3 Literature review and scholarly conversation

Suggested allowance: 300 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- Identify the major scholars and works directly relevant to the question, including important recent books, articles, and doctoral theses.
- Consider organising the discussion around the most relevant debates or competing interpretations rather than simply a list of authors.
- Explain the arguments of the principal scholars. Compare their evidence, methods and conclusions.
- Show where your project enters the discussion. State precisely what remains unresolved or warrants a new interpretation.
- Remember, do not equate your not having found a study with proof that no such study exists.

Questions to consider

- Where do the scholars disagree, and why? What does your project add to that conversation?
- Which works have most shaped the discussion, and which recent studies have challenged or developed them?
- Are disagreements driven by different sources, methods, definitions or theological assumptions?
- Where is there substantial agreement, and what remains unsettled despite that agreement?

- Have relevant doctoral theses or studies in neighbouring fields addressed a similar question under different terminology?
- Which arguments do you find most persuasive, and what evidence makes them persuasive?
- Have you represented the strongest version of the position you intend to question?
- Is the proposed gap an absence of research, a weakness in an existing explanation, or an opportunity to reconsider familiar evidence?

A useful paragraph pattern

[Scholar A, date] argues [specific claim], drawing on [evidence]. [Scholar B, date] offers a different interpretation because [reason]. These approaches clarify [issue], but leave [specific question] unresolved. This project will address that question through [defined evidence and approach].

Replace these placeholders with verified publications and an accurate account of their arguments. A reader should be able to see what is already known, where the disagreement or limitation lies, and why the proposed research is worth undertaking.

4 Primary sources and evidence

Suggested allowance: 150 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- Name the actual primary materials: texts, editions, manuscripts, archival collections, sermons, interviews or other evidence.
- Define the corpus with sufficient precision: authors, dates, locations, languages, approximate size and selection criteria, where applicable.
- Explain why these materials can answer the research questions and how you will gain access to them.
- Distinguish primary evidence from the secondary scholarship used to interpret it. Identify any permissions or access arrangements still to be confirmed.

Questions to consider

- Which sources are indispensable? What will you do if an important source is unavailable?
- What makes these materials primary evidence for your particular question?
- Why have you selected these texts, authors, cases or collections rather than other available material?
- Which edition, translation or version will you use, and could that choice affect your interpretation?
- What do you know about the production, preservation and intended audience of the sources?
- Are the surviving or accessible materials likely to privilege certain voices or leave important perspectives unrecorded?
- How much material is available, and is the proposed selection manageable?
- What access, language or permission issues would be useful to clarify early?

5 Methodology and analytical procedure

Suggested allowance: 300 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- Identify the disciplinary approach and explain why it is suitable for the principal question.
- Describe what you will actually do, in sequence: assemble evidence, establish context, analyse particular features, compare findings and evaluate interpretations.
- Explain the theoretical or interpretative assumptions informing the work, including the relevant scholarly debates about method.
- Specify the criteria by which evidence or competing interpretations will be evaluated. Show how each stage contributes to answering the questions.
- Address the method's limitations and how you will avoid selective evidence or conclusions that exceed what the sources support.
- For empirical work, specify recruitment, sampling, data collection and analysis, rather than merely saying that interviews will be conducted.

Questions to consider

- What will you do with the evidence?
- Why is this approach better suited to your question than the alternatives?
- What would the analysis of one passage, document or interview involve in practice?
- Which features will you attend to, and how do they relate to the research question?
- What assumptions about interpretation, history or theology underpin your chosen approach?
- If you combine methods, what does each contribute, and how will their findings be brought together?
- If you compare texts or cases, what makes the comparison appropriate, and how will you respect differences of context?
- How will you engage with evidence that does not fit your preferred interpretation?
- How will you distinguish what a source explicitly says from an inference you draw from it?
- For an interview-based project, how would you move from individual accounts to an interpretation without treating a small sample as representative of everyone?

Avoid vague method statements

Explain what will be analysed, how it will be analysed, and why that procedure can answer the question.

6 Boundaries and limitations

Suggested allowance: 150 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- State what the project includes and expressly excludes: period, geographical area, tradition, authors, texts or participant group.
- Explain why those boundaries are academically justified and make the study manageable.
- Distinguish chosen boundaries from unavoidable limitations, such as incomplete records or restricted access.
- State which wider conclusions the project will not be able to draw.

Questions to consider

- What are you deliberately leaving out?
- What can your evidence not tell you?
- Why are your chosen dates, texts, locations or traditions appropriate boundaries for this question?
- Is any part of the proposed project large enough to become a separate thesis?
- Which contextual material is essential, and which would take the study too far from its central purpose?
- Could a narrower selection allow a more rigorous or substantial analysis?
- How might missing evidence, translation choices or restricted access limit what you can conclude?
- If your findings concern a particular case, how cautiously could they be applied beyond that case?

7 Anticipated original contribution

Suggested allowance: 250 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- State the new knowledge or original reinterpretation the research is expected to produce.
- Connect that contribution directly to the literature review, research questions and evidence.
- Explain how it could change understanding in the chosen field. Originality may lie in a new interpretation, a justified comparison, previously neglected evidence or a methodological contribution.
- Explain why the contribution would be significant and substantial enough for doctoral research.
- Use appropriately provisional language. A proposal should identify a defensible prospect of originality, not claim findings before the work has been done.

Questions to consider

- What recent doctoral dissertations are available on EThOS or Proquest?
- What might a specialist understand differently after this research?
- How does that follow from the gap you have identified?

- Is the novelty principally in the evidence, interpretation, comparison or approach, and can you state that clearly?
- How does the anticipated contribution differ from simply applying a familiar argument to another example?
- Why would the proposed contribution matter to the scholars whose work you discuss?
- Could the project still contribute something valuable if it confirms rather than overturns an existing interpretation?
- Which aspects of the contribution can you justify now, and which remain possibilities to be tested?
- Are any claims of wider theological or practical significance proportionate to the evidence you expect to examine?

Questions to test the claim

What would a specialist know or understand differently after reading the thesis? Which current interpretation would be extended, qualified or challenged? What evidence makes that contribution achievable?

Avoid unsupported claims such as "no one has studied this before", broad statements that the subject is important, or a promise that the research will transform church practice. State the specific intellectual contribution and justify it.

8 Feasibility skills and research support

Suggested allowance: 150 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- Identify the language, textual, archival, empirical or other skills required and the relevant preparation already completed.
- State any training still needed and when it will be undertaken.
- Explain how the necessary sources, library resources, specialist support or other facilities will be accessed.
- Explain the fit with the institution using verified information. Do not assume that a collection, resource or supervisor is available.
- Give a concise account of how the work is achievable within the intended study period. A brief sequence of stages may help; the guide does not require a separate detailed timetable.

Questions to consider

- Which skills will be needed at the outset, and which could be developed as the project progresses?
- What level of competence in a language or method would the proposed analysis actually require?
- Are the essential materials available locally, online or only through travel or special access?

- If you plan to study at a distance, how will you consult the sources and specialist resources you need?
- Which parts of the work depend on something being completed first, such as language preparation or gaining access to a collection?
- Are there foreseeable constraints on time, travel or resources that suggest adjusting the scope?
- What would be useful to discuss with a potential supervisor about the fit between the project and the support available?

9 Ethical considerations

Suggested allowance: 100 words

Suggestions for developing this section

- Identify whether the project involves participants, interviews, personal information, sensitive material or other ethical issues.
- Where relevant, explain consent, confidentiality, potential harm and how material will be handled.
- For interview research, state that Research Committee approval will be obtained before interviews begin, as required by the guide.

Questions to consider

- Who or what could be affected by the research?
- What needs to be discussed before the work begins?
- If people are involved, might your role as minister, teacher, colleague or church member affect their freedom to participate?
- Could individuals or congregations be recognised even if names are removed?
- Might the questions or materials touch on distressing experiences, contested beliefs or sensitive relationships?
- What would participants need to understand about how their contributions might be used?
- For archival or documentary research, could private correspondence or information about living people require particular care?
- How might your relationship to a community or tradition influence the way you interpret and present it?
- Which uncertainties would you want to raise with your supervisor or the Research Committee before proceeding?

10 Core bibliography

Excluded from the suggested proposal word count.

- List the primary sources and the most relevant secondary scholarship. Separate them where this aids clarity.

- Include important recent books and doctoral theses alongside foundational works where relevant. Prioritise relevance and quality; the guide sets no fixed number of entries.
- Use an academic referencing style consistently, preferably the Union Theological College style guide. Verify authors, titles, editions, publication details and any page references. Include all works cited in the proposal.

Questions to consider

- Does each listed work have a clear connection to the question, sources or method?
- Does the selection show awareness of both influential scholarship and relevant recent research?
- Are important positions represented, including those with which you disagree?
- Have you distinguished the primary materials from the scholarship about them where that would aid clarity?
- Have you checked the details of the editions and translations you intend to use?
- Do the citations in the proposal and entries in the bibliography correspond?
- Could less relevant entries be removed to make the intellectual focus of the project clearer?
- Questions for reviewing the draft

These review questions restate the guide's main concerns and help you assess your draft. They are not an additional application checklist to submit.

- The working title is clear and accurately reflects a narrowly focused project.
- Are the research questions precise, researchable and open to investigation?
- The review engages critically with important scholars, debates and recent research.
- The primary sources are specified and access is realistic.
- The methodology describes concrete analytical steps and explains their suitability.
- The boundaries are justified and the limitations are acknowledged.
- The anticipated original contribution is specific, significant and supported by the review.
- Have you considered the necessary skills, any preparation needed, and how the institution and available resources can support the research?
- Ethical implications and any approval requirements are identified.
- The bibliography is selective, accurate and consistently formatted.
- Is the draft within the guide's suggested range of approximately 1,500–2,000 words excluding the bibliography, and has it been proofread?
- The writing is objective; personal matters belong in the separate letter of intent.
- All instructional text, placeholders and illustrative examples have been removed or replaced.