



Writing a successful PhD Proposal

General notes

It is assumed that the proposal will be presented in typescript, with minimal typographical errors, and written in an appropriately mature and grammatical style. The following is a suggestion as to the information that will be required by CLS to make a decision on your proposal; you do not have to follow this exact format. Note that if applying for studentships or to other funding bodies, pay attention to the relevant rules and guidelines for submitting such an application, which take priority over these general guidelines.

When writing your proposal, bear in mind that the proposal is what we judge your application on, assuming your qualifications are appropriate. It therefore needs to identify the subject matter of the proposed research clearly. This enables us not only to judge the quality and originality of the proposed work but allows us to identify whether we have the resources to support you and whether an appropriate supervisor is available.

There is no set length for a proposal, but do remember that you need to give us enough information to judge your proposal, but without becoming unnecessarily wordy or repetitive. As a general guideline, a proposal will usually be at least 2,000 words long, plus references and bibliography.

When identifying a topic keep in mind the requirements for a PhD. You need to think about how your study will demonstrate originality; it is not enough simply to reproduce existing knowledge. There are many ways in which you can demonstrate originality. For example, you could:

- study something that has genuinely never been studied before (consider areas where technology is developing fast) or analyse new developments in the law, whether case law or new legislation;
- identify problems, such as inconsistencies or gaps in protection, with existing case law/legislation;
- bring together areas of work that have not been brought together before;
- compare the topic in the English legal system with the same topic in another specified legal system (comparative study);
- analyse legal issues from a new perspective, or work between disciplines e.g. by bringing philosophical or sociological ideas to legal issues;
- undertake an empirical case study to see if the law is achieving its objectives.

Each of these different projects could require different methodologies, or a mixture of methodologies (see below).

Note that PhD proposals are not fully binding. As your work progresses, your ideas will mature resulting in your research taking a slightly different form from that which you envisaged at the start. Nonetheless, you will be committed to the area, in broad terms, that you identify in your proposal.

Working Title

The title should describe the nature of your project. Do not give uninformative titles. Often students indicate the nature of their approach in the title – for example, indicating a comparative study, or if a particular theoretical framework is adopted. Being clear helps CLS identify appropriate supervisors.

Statement of Topic and Aims

Identify the general subject area and how your thesis fits in with this general field. Explain why it is a significant/important topic and state briefly what contribution your work will make. CLS will be looking for clear focus and a clearly identified problem.

This section may involve summarising events, legislation, case law or any legal source directly related to the problems to be considered. Whilst facts may well be important, it is essential to tie them into a legal framework. If you are considering issues relating to a country other than the UK, you should explain why studying them in England is useful: for example, the legal approach adopted in England and Wales on a given subject may help you in your analysis of the issue. If you are thinking about a comparative study, be clear about which legal systems you will be studying; comparative studies have implications for skills and resources (see below). Likewise, if you intend to undertake empirical work, be clear about this; it too will have implications for how you structure your research.

Review Literature

In order to show how your proposal adds to existing work, you need to show (briefly) what the existing state of the art is, and how your work fits in to that framework. This section of the proposal should illustrate that you have some knowledge of the field and that you know enough to spot where further work of value may be carried out. The section can be used to emphasise the relevance of your research questions. So, if you have not done so already, make it clear why your proposal is important. It is not enough to say that it has not been studied, you should explain why it should be studied. In one sense, the literature review can be used to define your 'problem'; the scope of your PhD.

Note that the literature review is not an undergraduate essay; there is no point in summarising all the law and literature in the field. You should instead be selective and refer to those aspects which are central to the subject matter you propose to investigate. In doing so, do not wilfully ignore work that is relevant to your proposed project. Indicate where existing literature has taken us: identify key trends, latest results, include a critical assessment, and a summary of the problem in the field you have identified. It may be that you identify a gap in the existing law/literature, or tackle a problem from a new perspective.

Outline Method/Approach

Having defined the problem and shown its relationship to the rest of the field in previous sections, you now need to state the way in which you are going to solve it, and the criteria for success such that you know when you have solved it.

There are many ways of approaching a PhD in law; you should explain the approach you have adopted and how this particular approach advances your thesis. So for example, if you are carrying out a comparative study, you should identify the countries to be studied (or the sectors) and explain why you have picked these case studies -why they, and not others, are the most relevant to your argument. Some theses adopt a particular theoretical position, inspired by particular thinkers/philosophers. It is also possible to adopt particular concepts from such writers and apply those concepts, rather than adopting a whole philosophy. These may be applied to a particular area of law – for example examining the jurisprudence of the courts from this particular perspective or using this particular analytical tool. Outline why this particular analytical approach is valuable.

Most legal research is library-based – relying on information that already exists in some form, such as journal articles, case reports, legislation, treaties, historical records. Identify particularly relevant sources. Make sure the sources you identify are up-to-date. Assuming you plan to rely on library-based research, you need to explain where your sources are located and how they will be accessed, for example via the library, internet, Lexis or Westlaw. If yours is a comparative or international study, you will need to explain how you will obtain the relevant international materials and whether or not this will involve travel. Bear in mind the financial and skills implications of such work for you, but also consider whether it is reasonable to expect an English law school to have the resources to supervise the other jurisdictions not just in terms of source materials but also the supervisor's knowledge.

Some studies, however, might require the use of fieldwork or empirical data – that is, gathering information through direct interaction with people and processes, such as interviews, questionnaires or court observation. If you plan to undertake fieldwork or collect empirical data, then you need to provide details about why this is an appropriate research method, who you plan to interview, how many interviews you will carry out, and so on. Just stating, for example, that you would want to interview stakeholders would be insufficient. Also bear in mind time-scales when considering fieldwork. Whilst tying yourself to specific milestones at this point is unrealistic (see below), you should have a broad idea (e.g. during second year of study) of when you would undertake this work; allow time for return of questionnaires, arranging interviews etc. Note that the university has a policy regarding empirical research and ethical behaviour, as does CLS: you should comply with these codes.

You might want to spell out the difficulties or limitations with your project (or perhaps challenges that you will need to overcome... improving language skills if you are envisaging a comparative study?). You might also want to raise any ethical issues connected with your research, if you think this is relevant (e.g. if you are thinking about interviewing).

Time Line

It is helpful if you give some indication of how you envisage your time being spent. Although not essential, you might try to identify milestones, or chapters and the stage at which you envisage such milestones being completed (end of first year etc), or even the order in which you will tackle particular tasks. Note that if you provide such a time line, it is possible to revise it. It is also particularly important to consider timing if you are planning on undertaking empirical research.

References and Bibliography

List all references in your proposal using a standard referencing system, such as OSCOLA (available for download at <http://denning.law.ox.ac.uk/published/oscola.shtml>); the bibliography should be fully referenced in the same manner.