Objectives:

- To consider the role of proposals in the research process
- To identify the key components of a UWA research proposal
- To identify the elements of an effective proposal
- To recognise what is involved in the review process
- To clarify your thoughts regarding your research proposal

Timetable:

9.00 – 9.30 Research proposals and the research process

9.30 – 10.15 Components of a UWA research proposal, using examples of successful proposals

10.15 – 10.30 Break

10.30 – 10.45 Components of a UWA research proposal, using examples of successful proposals (continued)

10.45 – 11.00 The review process

11.00 – 11.45 Starting on your research proposal

11.45 – 12.00 Evaluation and close
Research Proposals and the Research Process

Why write a research proposal?
There are two good reasons why students are obligated to undertake the task of writing an effective and comprehensively planned Research Proposal. Firstly, this is a document that presents the case for an idea, your idea, and, because a Masters or PhD research project requires a large investment of time, energy and resources – by
both you and the University - more experienced researchers must be persuaded that the idea (formulated as a research question) warrants this sort of investment. Why should this be the case? It is because each new project contains an element of risk or uncertainty. What you are proposing in this idea of yours has probably never been done before, indeed, this is what makes it significant and important. So it is logical that we should do everything possible to maximize your chances of success. The proposal approval system exists to ensure that you have made a realistic, well formulated judgement as to the significance and viability of your research question.

Second, the Research Proposal outlines a convincing plan to answer that question using the principles of academic enquiry relevant to your discipline. Each of the key elements within the proposal contributes, in an integrated fashion, to this overall plan of action. For instance, you will need to have a method in mind for collecting and interpreting the data, a budget which shows you have considered (and have access to) the funds needed to bring your project to fruition, and a realistic timeline identifying the various stages of the research and the dates by which these will be completed. You must also show that you will have adequate supervision over the course of the project, and that you have considered any pertinent ethical issues. Overall, what a successful thesis proposal demonstrates is that you understand the steps that are involved in turning a good idea into a thesis.

Whilst there are many rewards that come from innovative research, there are also many pitfalls that await the novice researcher. The Research Proposal process is a mechanism that can potentially obviate problems that might not emerge in a project until two or perhaps three years down the track. A well formulated Research Proposal provides a solid foundation for the research and sets the stage for successful and timely completion.

What do students say?

it makes you think more deeply about the details of how you’re going to tackle the problem,
it formalises commitments from all parties involved in the research project
it provides a structure for discussing the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the project
it helps you build a plan of work and set timelines
it forces you to think about the resources you will need to successfully complete the project
it makes you practice your academic writing skills
it provides you with an opportunity to obtain feedback on your ideas and your writing from supervisors and experienced researchers
it is an opportunity to start building your skills in writing proposals – these skills are essential for a career in research

The aim of the thesis proposal is to convince the Graduate Research School that:

i. There is a need for the research: it is significant and important

ii. You have an organized plan in place for collecting and interpreting the data you will need to solve your research problem/question
iii. The topic is feasible in terms of availability of funding, equipment, supervisors and data

iv. The research can be completed in the expected time period

v. Ethical issues have been considered and approval has been given

**To sum up:**

Your research proposal is a tool for managing risk associated with research and not a blueprint to be strictly followed for a guaranteed successful outcome. In a sense, it is your best guess of the way forward.

The act of preparing a well thought out research proposal makes you better prepared to deal with the uncertain and unpredictable elements of research.

**The cornerstones of the Research Proposal**

Most Research Proposals generally share a number of common elements including a title, aims of the research, literature review, methodology, resources, bibliography and so forth. Nevertheless, even before considering these elements (as we will do shortly) you should be aware that the Research Proposal is underpinned by three principal questions. These questions must be addressed in your Research Proposal; they are the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the research. The ‘what’ of your research refers to the particular problem which your thesis will address. The ‘why’ of your research sets forth the value or benefit your research will generate. (This is often expressed in terms of its contribution to existing knowledge). The ‘how’ of your research simply refers to the methods you will use to gather, analyze and interpret your data. If you do not address these fundamental questions, then it is unlikely your Research Proposal will be approved. The building blocks of the Research Proposal are:
These cornerstones must come together as a coherent whole in your research proposal: A research proposal brings together a research problem and a research design which has the potential to answer the problem, to refine an existing answer or to move the field closer to finding an answer to the problem. The proposal must also show that the resources required by the research design are available.

A Proposal then is a persuasive document that:

1. establishes that there is a research problem (“what”)
2. establishes that addressing this problem will contribute to knowledge (“why”)
3. outlines a plan for answering that question using the principles of academic inquiry relevant to your discipline (“how”)
4. is a plan to answer that question using available resources (“how”)
5. is a plan that YOU will implement using the skills you have and/or will acquire (“how”)
6. outlines expectations, commitments and obligations that the student and the University have to each other (“how”)
7. is a very early draft of your thesis abstract

Exercise:
What benefits are you likely to gain from preparing a research proposal?

Exercise:
How might you prepare yourself to write a useful research proposal?
Elements of a UWA Research Proposal

University General Rule 3.1.15 states that:

(1) A candidate for the degree of master by research (by thesis) must provide a research proposal to the Board for approval, through the head of school and supervisor(s) within four months from the date of first enrolment for the degree if the enrolment is full-time, or the equivalent as determined by the Board if the enrolment is part-time or a mixture of full- and part-time.

(2) A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, other than one upgrading from a master’s by research (by thesis) programme, must provide a research proposal to the Board for approval, through the appropriate head of school and supervisor(s) within six months from the date of first enrolment for the degree if enrolment is full-time or the equivalent as determined by the Board if the enrolment is part-time or a mixture of full- and part-time.

Research Proposal Differences (Masters & PhD)

The Question of Originality

It is important to recognise that regardless of whether you are writing a Masters or Doctorate Research Proposal, you will need to address the same questions, in the same format, as is outlined in the Graduate Research School’s Guidelines for Writing a Research Proposal. The only exception being that in section A. (Proposed Study) you will address either question 2 or 3, depending on whether you are a Doctoral or Masters candidate. If you are undertaking a PhD, for example, you are required to demonstrate how it is your proposed study will make a ‘substantial and original contribution to knowledge’. If you are enrolled in the Masters program, then you are expected to achieve, by the end of your project, a ‘sound knowledge of the subject of the research, evidence of the exercise of some independent thought and the ability of expression in clear and concise language’.

Reviewers’ Expectations

Clearly, however, the reviewers’ expectation in regards to the scope of the intended project will be different for a PhD project when compared to that of a Masters. A Masters by Research study for a fulltime student is expected to take 2 years. Therefore, the scale of the project should logically be less than for a PhD (which carries a maximum period of candidature of four years for fulltime students). This will be particularly evident in the sections where you are required to detail the aims and methods of the project, as well as the timeline and the budget.
Confirmation of Candidature

Another important difference is the requirement for PhD students to list a series of milestones that need to be completed in the first 12 months, for candidature in the PhD to be confirmed. The particular milestones are a matter for discussion between students and supervisors, taking account of guidelines and requirements set by the School in which the research is being supervised. There is no such requirement for students undertaking a Masters by Research.

The Review Process for a UWA Research Proposal

Your Research Proposal will be reviewed by a member of the Board of the Graduate Research School. This person will not be from your School but will normally be from a cognate discipline area.

The expectation is that your proposal has gone through an internal assessment process within your School before being submitted to the reviewer. However, approval by the Board is still considered to be a vital part of the University’s cycle of accountability, and represents a formal agreement between you as candidate, your supervisor, your School and the Board of the Graduate Research School. We might consider this to be a process of shared decision-making. Sharing the decision-making takes maximum advantage of the reviewer’s extensive research experience, and, because Board members are privy to all thesis examiners’ reports for Higher Degrees by Research at UWA they are in an ideal position to identify potential problems in the proposed research.

Once the reviewer has carefully read all aspects of the Research Proposal, they will indicate whether there are any problems or questions that need to be addressed before final approval is granted. If there are areas of significant concern, the candidate will be provided with written feedback to assist in revising the thesis. The response required may include a full revision of all or part of the Research Proposal before it is finally approved. If, on the other hand, there are no areas of concern, the Proposal will be approved in its present form.

Board members reviewing Research Proposals are expected to evaluate, and to comment if appropriate, on any or all aspects of the Research Proposal.

Some members of the Board of the Graduate Research School at UWA talk about what they look for when evaluating research proposals for Masters by Research or PhD:
• Is the scope of the research appropriate for the degree?
• Is the proposed research likely to meet the criteria for originality of contribution required for the degree?
• Does the budget match the likely costs of the research and is an appropriate level of funding assured?
• Is the writing an acceptable piece of academic writing at this level?
• Is referencing used appropriately?
• Is there any evidence of plagiarism?
• Have ethics and safety issues been addressed, and the appropriate approvals obtained?
• Do the proposed supervisors have expertise suitable for the study?
• Are there any perceivable shortcomings in data analysis skills?
• Is the research design appropriate to the research problem?
• Is there anything potentially problematic in the research design?
• Are there any conflicts of interest, for example, in the proposed arrangements for supervision?

The process of review will generally take about three to four weeks. When your Research Proposal has been formally approved, a letter will be sent to you – and to both your coordinating supervisor and Head of School – confirming this. Administrative staff in the Graduate Research School will also place an electronic copy of your Research Proposal on your student record.
Deciding on a central research question
The first principle of successful thesis writing is this:

*A thesis, at the highest level, represents the expression of a singular profound and embracive idea that permeates all aspects of the thesis production* (Cantwell, 2006, p.182).

A thesis is only a thesis if it poses a central research question and then sets about answering it. One of the first tasks that you will be faced with on your PhD journey is to consider the formative development of a guiding research question. It need not be fixed, for it will inevitably be transformed as you read and critique previous published work on your topic, and collect, analyze and interpret your own data. So it can be taken for granted that it will be constantly revised as you make new discoveries in your work.
An open-ended research question is different from a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a statement which asserts a causal relationship between concepts (or ideas). For instance if we look at the example below we have identified one of the possible factors which might determine why ‘some students get better marks than others’. We can diagram a simple hypothesis:

The arrow in this diagram indicates that one concept (amount of study) does something to the other concept (academic performance). The plus sign indicates that the relationship is a positive one, that is, the more of the one will lead to the more of the other. The concept that does the causing is called the independent concept – it is the thing that acts upon something else. Given this, we are in a position to write a hypothesis to guide our research, for example:

*The more a student studies, the better will be the student’s academic performance.*

On the other hand, an open-ended research question is ‘inductive’ in the sense that it does not pre-empt a causal agent. Rather, in this sort of research (more common in the social sciences) answers to a research question emerge from the data.
All Research Proposals should be divided into sections and formatted as set out in the following. No more than fifteen pages should provide sufficient detail.

A. Proposed study

1. Title

Your title should reflect the thesis and capture its content in one phrase! (The same can be said of chapter titles and chapter sub-headings). Titles, therefore, should reflect the research question or proposition. The title should identify the purpose of the study, which is defined by the research question. The research question has a ripple effect in this way. Take care when composing it, as this will have a great effect on the nature of the overall dissertation.

Good titles are those that reflect the thesis statement or question, for instance:

- The role of the bull in Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival into Greek religion.
- The importance of religion to psychiatric patients: do religious clients relapse more or less often than non religious clients?

Not so good titles include those that do not reflect the thesis statement or question:

- Encoding the National Imagination: Civil Religion in Turkey
- The impact of twelve hour shifts in the workplace
- Factors in the successful performance of strategic alliances
- Deep ecology: the ghost of Nazism?

Can you produce a working title for your thesis? What key words need to be included to accurately reflect your work?
2. Outline how the proposed study fulfils the requirement of originality (rule 3.3.3)

**For PhD:** Rule 3.3.3 specifies that a PhD study must make a "substantial and original contribution to scholarship, for example through the discovery of knowledge, the formulation of theories or the innovative reinterpretation of known data and established ideas". In what way is the proposed study expected to fulfil this requirement?

Unfortunately, there is often little or no discussion between students and their supervisors as to what constitutes originality in the PhD. However, Phillips (1992)\(^1\) has listed fourteen different definitions of originality from students, supervisors and thesis examiners which might be useful.

- Carrying out empirical work that hasn’t been done before.
- Making a synthesis that hasn’t been done before.
- Using already known material but with a new interpretation.
- Trying out something in this or another country that has only previous been undertaken in other places.
- Taking a particular technique and applying it to a new area.
- Bringing new evidence to bear on an old issue.
- Being cross-disciplinary and using different methodologies.
- Looking at areas that people in the discipline haven’t looked at before.
- Adding to knowledge in a way that hasn’t been done before.
- Setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time.
- Continuing (extending) a previously original piece of work.
- Providing a single original technique, observation, or result in an otherwise unoriginal but competent piece of research.

Make sure you are explicit in identifying how your research fulfils the requirements of university rule 3.3.3

e.g. “This study takes the next logical step in integrating…….”

“This study will extend…”

“Until now it has not been possible to….., however …..”

“Until now ……has not been understood, however…..”

“…..has been overlooked in previous studies of…”

“Previous work was limited by ……, we propose to…”

“It has been suggested by previous research that …..be investigated further”

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B. Research Direction

1) The specific aims of the project - the problem(s) it hopes to solve; or particular question(s) it will answer; issues it will explore; and the new knowledge it will create

2) The methods to be used or the approach to be taken. What similar projects have been undertaken here or elsewhere; have similar methods been used before?

3) What efforts have been made to ensure that the project does not duplicate work already done?

4) Students should show familiarity with the research topic by including a bibliography giving publication details for the most relevant literature in the field.

Identify the specific aims of the project

Steps in selecting a topic for research
i). Identify the broad area of study - This is the time to read in these areas to get a feel for what has been done and where gaps exist. Consult with your supervisor and draw on their expert knowledge or look at recently completed theses in the field to get an idea of cutting edge ideas. This is part of the ‘narrowing process’.

ii). Identify or list potential research questions - Look for an issue that you think is intriguing, that you are enthusiastic about, one that sparks your curiosity. Your reading can then become more focused: journal articles will become increasingly important at this stage. At some point you will become convinced that something is ‘problematic’ in your field and you will want to make it the focus of your research. Warning – don’t jump in just yet!

iii). Seriously consider the feasibility of the topic - Consult with your supervisor and consider these points:

• Availability and access to data and information.
• Is the study suitable for a research project such as the PhD?
• Will I, in choosing this topic, have adequate supervision?
• Will there be a problem with ethics clearance?

Try to articulate the objective(s) of your study by stating these to someone in your group. If you are unable to, construct a list of questions you would like to answer in your research and rank these in order of importance.
Methodology
Show that the methods you propose to use are appropriate and workable; and that you have (or have a strategy to acquire) the skills to enable you to apply these methods effectively.

By ‘methodology’ we mean a body of practices and a set of working methods used to engage in an enquiry (in particular for gathering, presenting and analysing data).

Can you identify the methods you will use in your particular research? Remember, you need to demonstrate how these are appropriate for your research (you can refer to methods used in similar research).
Avoiding duplication
Ph.D. students need to show how the work they are embarking upon will make an original contribution to scholarship in the field. To this end, you must provide evidence that your project will not duplicate any work previously done. A very concise (i.e. no more than two pages) literature review is probably the most effective way of showing that you have established for yourself a research niche by:

- Indicating gaps in previous research
- Raising questions about previous research
- Showing how previous knowledge needs to be extended

Bibliography
Candidates should be able to show familiarity with the literature in the field. In this section you should reference landmark studies and major authors. You should also include some of the most recent publications.

C. Candidature Plan

1. The supervisor should assist the student to prepare a framework for the research, with a general timeframe for completion of the various phases and a detailed timeframe for the next 12 months. Each Annual Progress Report will include an update of the general plan and a detailed plan for the next 12 months.

2. All new PhD students are required within a period of twelve months to complete designated tasks and meet agreed milestones in order for their ongoing candidature to be confirmed. If you are enrolled in a PhD please identify your Confirmation of Candidature tasks and indicate the date at which they will be completed.

3. In partnership with your supervisor(s), please undertake a skills audit to determine if you possess the generic skills required to bring your project to a timely completion. Please identify the special skills your project requires of you, and if you do not possess them map out a strategy for their achievement.

4. Regulation 9.1 (d.) of the Code of Good Practice for Graduate Research Supervision states that students are expected to devote at least 30 hours per week (or equivalent if the candidature is part-time) to research higher degree studies. If your normal working hours are going to be anything less than 30 hours Monday to Friday 9am-5pm then please outline what they will be.
Preparation of a research timetable

The most important consideration in timetabling is creating deadlines for each stage of your work. In so doing, you can construct a schedule so that you can work steadily towards the completion of your project. Remember the workload is extensive and must be structured. To do this, you must be aware of important dates (such as the submission date).

Some Important Tips

- Make sure you understand the sequence of tasks that is required by your school. Some of these have time requirements or are ‘dead-line driven tasks’, for instance, the research proposal will have a final date for submission.

### Working backwards, cont...

*An Example for a full-time PhD Student in the Social Sciences – Still to finish*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Completed By</th>
<th>Time to Complete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submission of Research Proposal to the GRS</td>
<td>5 September</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redraft Proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit Proposal for Internal Review</td>
<td>5 May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redraft Proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit draft Proposal to Supervisor</td>
<td>Early March</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit Lit. Review to Supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Lit Review</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform Lit. Search</td>
<td>6 Weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commencement Date</td>
<td>5 March</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
relatively early in the year. This is the same for ethics clearance if it is required. Chart these.

- Refer to your thesis structure and identify those components that can be tackled in the initial stages of the project – the literature review and methodology chapters are good examples. You can begin scheduling these into your timetable early.

- Research program timelines usually begin from the date you enrol until the date you expect to submit your thesis. The time-line can be formatted as a table or list.

**Skills Audit Template**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student name:</th>
<th>Personal rating</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Professional and research skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Competent</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Understanding and application of relevant data collection and analysis methods
- Identifying and accessing appropriate bibliographic resources
- Use of information technology relevant for the research (NVivo, SPSS, EndNote, spreadsheets and databases)
- Familiar with the principles and conventions of academic writing
- Ability to constructively defend research outcomes at seminars and conferences
- Demonstration of self discipline and motivation
- Familiar with the techniques of time and project management
C. Facilities

What is the School/University agreeing to provide? What access do you have to facilities outside your School? Do you have access to facilities that are essential to the successful completion of your project? Consider such things as:

- Special equipment – camera & film; mini-tape recorder; batteries; computer software; etc.
- Special skills or techniques -
- Special literature -
- Statistical advice -

Compile a list of facilities you will need during the course of your study. Sort these into the categories listed above.
D. Estimated Costs

This is very important. Consider incidental costs such as photocopying, computing, telephone, administrative as well as costs specific to the research project.

E. Fieldwork

Where are you planning to go? What are you planning to do? Do you need a specific set of skills to carry this out? What about safety? If going overseas, be aware of Department of Foreign Affairs’ travel warnings. Be aware of the University’s policies on Field Work and Insurance will apply to your fieldwork.

F. Supervisors

Provide details of your supervisors. You must have a Coordinating supervisor who is a UWA staff member. The Coordinating supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the administrative and reporting requirements of the supervisors are met.

If you are enrolled in joint Schools you need a coordinating supervisor from each School.

N.B. “Where a candidate has more than one supervisor, the supervisors and the candidate must discuss the relative roles of the supervisors, record this in writing and lodge the record with the Graduate Research School as part of the Research Proposal.”

Please provide a list of your supervisors and their role, including percentages, as indicated in the Research Proposal Cover Sheet.

I. Confidentiality & Intellectual Property

Particularly relevant where there is an industry partnership or potential commercialisation of the results of your research. Seek advice if necessary. (UWA has a legal office). For more details see:

J. Approvals

The Head of School is required to certify that all necessary approvals have been obtained from the appropriate UWA committees. Similarly all required safety and other training must be complete before the research commences. Approvals will be required prior to the use of animals, human subjects, genetic manipulation, potentially biohazardous procedures and situations, the use and disposal of potent teratogens and carcinogens, the use of ionising radiation or other hazardous materials.

Specify the approvals you may need and outline your plan for obtaining them.

K. Submission of the Research Proposal/details of proposed research

Enrolled candidates should complete a Research Proposal Coversheet and submit TWO copies of their proposal and coversheet through the supervisor and Graduate Research Coordinator/Head of School to the Graduate Research School.
Research Proposal Coversheet for Candidates in Research Higher Degrees

Research Fields, SEO Index and Government Type of Activity:
required by the Australian Government (DEST) and must be filled out.

Supervisor details: the percentage contribution of each supervisor to the project must be estimated.

Formal Confirmation of Candidature for PhD candidates:
Possible tasks/milestones that candidates could be required to complete in order for candidature to be confirmed include the following, as appropriate:

- having the Research Proposal approved;
- presenting work orally to the School;
- producing one or more piece/s of academic writing, additional to the Research Proposal, to an acceptable standard;
- applying for (and possibly obtaining) any ethics and other approvals required for the research;
- completing an annotated bibliography or review of literature if this is not included in the Proposal;
- passing appropriate safety courses such as Laser Safety, Radiation Safety, Chemical or Laboratory safety;
- completing a 1 or 2 day course in intellectual property;
- completing an introductory course in electronic literacy, eg using electronic data bases available at UWA;
- completing relevant, approved coursework units; and
- completing other relevant, approved development activities as cited specifically in the Research Proposal. These could include, for example, training in statistics, academic writing, project management, microscopy, and so on.

School-specific Confirmation of Candidature Requirements

Further information required
- research proposal that follows the guidelines above
- a detailed timeplan for timely completion
- an estimate of anticipated annual costs
- a statement of the amount of money the School will provide each year to support the research
- the source of extra funds (if necessary)
- an assurance that the student is aware of any possible financial obligations they may have, if the research costs exceed the support available from the School
- an assurance that appropriate statistical advice is available within the School or will be sought elsewhere (needs to be specified)?
- confirmation that the proposal has been adequately discussed with supervisors
- confirmation that the proposal can be carried out with the available funding, facilities or equipment or that the necessary funding, facilities and equipment will be made available during the candidature.
- confirmation that you have read the UWA Field Work Policy if relevant
- are there confidentiality or intellectual property issues that need to be considered (if so, more detail is required, and another questionnaire needs to be completed)
- a checklist that asks about aspects of your research that may require approvals. You are also asked to state whether approvals have been obtained or not.
- A statement as to whether or not you have completed training required before your research can commence.

**Signatures required:**
- the candidate,
- coordinating supervisor,
- Graduate Research Coordinator or Head of School
- Manager of Animal Facilities and Biosafety