GUIDE TO WRITING A PHD PROPOSAL

Although there is no exact prescribed format for a general research proposal (across all subjects), all of the following are deemed important to consider.

A research proposal should generally include six main sections, as detailed below:

1) A clear working title for your research project
   - What will you call your project?
   - What key words would describe your proposal?

2) A clear statement about what you want to work on and why it is important, interesting, relevant and realistic
   - Provide a statement of your research question/aim, ideally in the form of a central over-arching question/aim and two or three sub-questions/aims. Your research questions/aims can appear in any form, and certainly do not need to be expressed in the form of testable hypotheses. Do ensure however that they are sufficiently narrow for a PhD project.
   - What difference do you think your research will make? Indicate why your motivations for the research. How might your research ‘add value’ to the subject? What research ‘gaps’ will you be filling by undertaking your project? Does it have potential to impact on practice or policy? Consider whether your research Phd subject will have currency by the time it is completed.
   - This is the most important section of the proposal as it establishes your main purpose and represents the whole basis for completing the research programme. Therefore, the value of your proposed research is assessed in relation to your research aims and objectives.

3) Some background knowledge and context of the area in which you wish to work, including key literature, key people, key research findings
   - How does your work link to the work of others in the same or related fields?
   - Would your work support or contest the work of others?

4) Some consideration of the methods/approach you might use
   - You will need to explain how you will go about answering your question (or achieving your aim), and why you will use your intended approach to address the question / aim. How will you conduct your research?
   - You should identify the method or methods you propose to use, and justify these choices - i.e., explain why this method is being used in preference to others.
■ What sources / data will you use? Are there any potential problems / difficulties that you foresee (for example, delays in gaining access to data) that might affect your rate of progress?
■ Will you use existing theories, new methods/approaches or develop new methods/approaches?
■ Will you need to collaborate with other researchers / organisations?

5) Some indication of the strategy and timetable for your research project and any research challenges you may face
■ What would be the main stages of your project? A Gantt chart can be useful in setting this out, including milestones, outputs and work packages.
■ What would you be expecting to do in each year of your PhD?
■ What challenges might you encounter and how might you overcome these?

6) A list of the key references which support your research proposal
■ A list of all works referred to in your proposal. Quality is more important than quantity, demonstrating engagement with relevant literatures - both subject-specific and methodological - as appropriate.
■ Such references should be used throughout your research proposal to demonstrate that you have read and understood the work of others.
■ Other relevant material that you are aware of, but not actually used in writing your proposal, can also be added as a bibliography

A guide for the proposal length is 1,000-2,000 words. The research proposal is intended as an accurate overview, not a thesis, so you need to provide enough detail for the reader to understand it. It should not be too long, or too short.

It is important that you talk to others during the development of your research idea – useful advisors can include experts in the area, former lecturers, current PhD students, as well as stakeholders relevant to your research (e.g. industry associations, professionals in the area of the research, relevant stakeholders, etc.). Such inputs can be invaluable in shaping the relevance of your project and may identify new avenues for exploration during your studies.

Follow the ‘3 Cs’ rule: When you have written your research proposal, ask a friend to read it critically and provide you with feedback. Also, ask yourself whether it follows the ‘3Cs’ rule:
CLEAR: is what you have written intelligible and clearly articulated? Does it make sense, or is it vague and confusing?
CONCISE: have you written your proposal in a succinct and focused way?
COHERENT: does your proposal link together well so that it tells the reader a short story about what you want to do, why you want to do it and how you will do it?