Writing a research proposal in the Department of Archaeology

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Introduction
This guide is aimed at prospective and existing Honours, Masters by coursework, Masters by research and PhD research students who are required to complete a research proposal within the Department of Archaeology at Flinders University.

Completing a research thesis is a challenging undertaking that takes months or years to complete. Most academic departments require evidence that you have the capacity to do meet these challenges before you are accepted into a program. In most cases, this evidence takes the form of a research proposal. A research proposal is not the one page abstract that you wrote for official university admissions. The proposal is a significant piece of work that is formally presented to an audience of academic staff and your fellow postgraduate students.

What is a research proposal?
The purpose of a thesis proposal or research design is just as it sounds—to guide research. In it the purpose of the research is formally enunciated and the course the research will take is laid out. Writing a proposal clarifies thought by determining specifically what questions will be addressed and how they will best be answered. It therefore facilitates the collection of data by determining exactly what will be considered data for the purposes of answering the questions posed. It also facilitates analysis by establishing how the original data and the final conclusions will be related. Essentially, the research design or thesis proposal makes explicit the assumptions and informal plans of the researcher.

For these reasons the proposal must be written early in the research process. Its role as a plan or guide becomes irrelevant if it is written after the research is completed. It is an initial phase in the work and there are certain things that it cannot and is not expected to do. Firstly, it is not ‘written in stone’ and no-one expects that the final thesis will exactly reflect the plans laid out in the proposal. It is a plan of what you intend to do without actually doing it. To do otherwise would be both impossible and undesirable given the unexpected circumstances that inevitably arise during research and given the importance of remaining open to new or contradictory data. This being said, it is expected that the proposal will continue to hold some relevance to the project and the research will not digress too far from the original plan.
Secondly, it is not expected that the proposal will hold ‘answers’ to the questions posed. If it does, the project itself would be pointless. If ‘answers’ are known before the research is done, then the questions are probably too simplistic and more challenging ones need to be asked. Generally a proposal is derived from a theoretical question which builds on the expectation of a particular outcome. All research should aim to generate new knowledge about a particular issue or problem. Often, your research problem will have multiple dimensions. For instance, you might be addressing a local or regional gap in terms of knowledge but, through your case study, are developing an internationally relevant theoretical framework in interesting and important new ways. So, in this case, your project would be of local and international significance. You need to do your best to spell this out to the reader.

In order to pose reasonable questions and probable outcomes, it is necessary to have some idea of what you want to research and why. For this reason the thesis proposal is going to be the very first stage of the project. Before writing the formal proposal it is necessary to decide why the project is to be done and what areas are of interest. It is also necessary to do quite a lot of reading in the general area of interest. If the site to be studied has already been investigated, as is often the case, this will involve initial research into the history and background of the site, and any previous work done there. It can be difficult determining when the preliminary stage of research has been completed and academic research has begun. In fact, if constructed well, parts of your proposal will contribute to your initial literature review.

**Why is a proposal necessary?**
A research proposal is one of the most important parts of your research thesis and should be taken seriously. Ultimately, your proposal needs to convince a panel of experienced academics that you have the requisite knowledge, skills and experience to do the proposed work. It is an opportunity for you to obtain robust feedback on the feasibility and significance of the research being proposed. In doing this, the panel aims to be supportive and helpful, and will outline ways to improve the quality of your proposal rather than merely criticising it.

Some benefits related to the proposal process are:

- The prospect of having to perform in front of a critical audience does seem to galvanise most people into action. Hypotheses and research questions become sharper, the philosophy of methods is explored, and the probable validity and reliability of the study is considered.
- Many members of the audience have probably had some experience of what you are proposing, and will often come up with suggestions that will improve your proposal. Equally, the criticisms and comments that they make can be
noted and addressed in the thesis itself. It can be a valuable exercise to use the proposal process to vent a problem or issue that you are grappling with, and obtain the thoughts of your audience.

- The proposal helps you identify problems early in the research process and establish whether your project is feasible.

- The proposal document can be used as a basis for the final thesis. Some academics claim that a good proposal can form Chapter One of the final thesis. While this may not always be the case, it is an early down payment on getting those all-important background and methods chapters written. It also helps you to think through what your thesis will look like.

- The proposal gives the impetus to create timelines, milestones and contingencies, which will help to keep you on track. If you have not started fieldwork until August, and you planned to start it in January, then you know you have a problem.

**When is the proposal due?**

Proposals are due at different stages, depending on what type of thesis you are completing. These sometimes vary each year, though generally the following deadlines apply.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Due</th>
<th>Key Contact</th>
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<tr>
<td>Honours Degree</td>
<td>1st November of the year prior to your enrolment.</td>
<td>Research Higher Degrees Coordinator</td>
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| Coursework Masters Thesis     | *Semester 1 commencement*: 1st December of the year prior to enrolment in your first thesis units  
*Semester 2 commencement*: 1st April of the year prior to enrolment in your first thesis units. | Graduate Programs Coordinator      |
| PhD Thesis (application for candidature) | Late October of the year prior to your commencement. | Research Higher Degrees Coordinator |
| PhD Thesis—(confirmation of candidature) | Within 12 months of commencing your candidature. | Research Higher Degrees Coordinator |

It is also important that you check the Department of Archaeology website for the correct dates in any year. If you have difficulties with this, contact the relevant staff member as shown above.

Keep in mind that a proposal can take weeks of work, particularly if you are developing one for the first time or are looking at a topic with which you are unfamiliar. Make sure you schedule enough time to do a good job—a bad proposal leaves a poor impression of your abilities.

**Where should I send it?**

It is generally good practice to forward your completed proposal to the research thesis contacts shown in Table 1, as well as to your research supervisor.

**How long should the proposal document be?**

The length of the proposal varies depending on the degree and, in the case of a PhD proposal, the stage you are at. Word counts listed below exclude references and any tables, figures or appendices.

- Honours and Masters applicants: 2000 words;
- PhD applicants: 4000 words;
- PhD confirmation: 6000–8000 words.

A word of advice: Do not start off on the wrong foot with the academic panel by submitting a document that is too long or too short (i.e. > ±10%). The word limits are there for a reason—to help evaluate your writing ability.

**The review process**

An academic panel comprised of members of the Archaeology Department will review initial applications for Honours and PhD students. At minimum, comment and feedback will be sought from the potential supervisor, the Head of Department, and the Research Higher Degree Coordinator. Other staff members are also invited to comment on a case-by-case basis. Within one month feedback will be provided, along with an indication of whether your proposal has been accepted.

An academic panel consisting of the nominated supervisors and the Graduate Programs Coordinator will review students seeking to commence a thesis towards their Masters by coursework degrees. Other staff members are also invited to comment. As Masters by Coursework students are technically already enrolled, the focus on the application is to ensure that a feasible proposal has been developed and that appropriate supervision and resources are in place for the project. Where there are concerns raised, these will be discussed with the student during initial supervisory meetings.
For enrolled Doctoral candidates who need to complete the confirmation of candidature milestone, your supervisor will coordinate the composition of a panel of academics who will read the proposal document thoroughly and attend the presentation. This panel may include academics from outside your Department depending on your topic and methods of research. About two weeks before the presentation date, your proposal document will be sent to the panel and made publicly available to the postgraduate students and staff of the Department. You should also provide two copies of the proposal document at the presentation. After the proposal, the academic panel will meet and determine whether: a) you should do more work on your research design before commencing field work; b) you need to make a number of alterations as you conduct field work, or; c) you can proceed as outlined in your proposal.

What should be included?
A key point to remember when planning your proposal is why you are doing the research in the first place. A major requirement of a research degree is that the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Your proposal should explain a broad problem or gap in existing knowledge and then outline what you will do to address it: what will your contribution be?

The document should minimally include the following headings:

- Cover page. This should include a title, your name and the names of your nominated supervisors where these have been identified;
- Introduction. A broad synopsis of the proposal;
- The problem. This comprises a literature review that identifies a broad research problem (or series of research problems) that you will set out to address. The focus is largely to explain the literature. This should represent at least 30–50% of proposal, in terms of word counts;
- Research Design
  - Research question/s. Identify a central question or several questions that your thesis will investigate. This should be phrased as a question, not a statement.
  - Research aims. Your ‘to do’ list for the project. That is, what do you need ‘to do’ to answer the questions outlined. What do you need to achieve?
  - Methods. These should clearly explain what methods you will adopt to address your aims and answer your research question/s. These need to be detailed rather than brief or generic statements. Spell out the specifics of what you plan to do.
  - Collaboration, consultation and ethics. Most archaeological research has ethical requirements, both formal and informal. If you need to apply for ethics permission through the university you need to do this early. If there are other archaeologists or organisations that you are
collaborating with (e.g. to access datasets), this should also be outlined here.

- **Project significance.** A discussion of the key reasons that this project is significant in relation to the literature. E.g. are you applying a new theoretical framework or research method to a long-standing problem? Will you generate new data that provides a completely new perspective on the research problem?

- **Time line and resources.** Provide a summary of the major milestones in your research and an indication of what resources are required for each stage. Resourcing is particularly important for thesis projects involving fieldwork, travel or specialised analytical procedures. A Gantt Chart can be a helpful means of concisely communicating a project plan, and we encourage the use of these (see [http://www.ganttproject.biz/](http://www.ganttproject.biz/));

- **References.** This should be formatted consistently using the AA style as per Departmental requirements.

### Do I need to find a supervisor?

Yes. The role of an academic supervisor is broadly to support and guide the development of your thesis. Because the thesis research begins with your proposal, it follows that you should begin to think about an appropriate supervisor very early in the development of a proposal. This is to ensure that you develop a proposal that falls within an area of expertise of at least one staff member. If your proposal does not fit this broad prerequisite, then it is possible that we will reject your proposal outright—or at least suggest a major rewrite. The second reason to find a potential supervisor early is because they will be able to read your proposal and provide feedback to help improve it, but only if you give them enough time to comment.

A good proposal should be developed with a specific principal supervisor in mind. So, if you have an idea for a project, take some time to review the websites of Academic Staff in the Archaeology Department to identify individuals with broad expertise in your research area. You can also refer to the Flinders University ‘Find a Research Area’ page to assist with this. Once you find a potential supervisor, take the time to read any relevant publications they have authored while you are conducting your literature review. Look into the kinds of topics they teach and the research projects they are involved in. In some cases, staff members have very specific projects in mind for future students or will be more open to supervising projects within their direct research area. Whatever the case, it is advisable to make contact with a potential supervisor very early in the development of your proposal, ideally two months before your proposal is due. This provides ample opportunity to develop a proposal that is tightly integrated with the range of research being conducted within the Archaeology Department, and more importantly, that is of interest and relevance to your supervisor. This will help to ensure that the proposal you develop is a good match for the supervisor/s and will result in a stronger project and high quality outcomes.
If you are unsure what a supervisor does then take time to read the University’s detailed policy on the roles of supervisors. This applies specifically to Research Higher Degree students (primarily PhD students) but the guidelines are useful for other thesis students as well.

**Tips for writing your proposal**

The academic panel who will be reviewing your proposal will have collectively reviewed many hundreds of proposals throughout their careers. The following tips are intended to help you to avoid making mistakes that the panel have seen in the past, and that will improve the overall quality of your work:

- Take heed of word limits. They are there for a reason: to show that you can present a clear account of your proposed research in a concise way. Do not give the panel a reason to doubt you;
- Make sure your ‘research problem’ is backed up with a first class literature review and careful in text referencing. That is, try and impress the panel by showing evidence that you have worked hard to identify a problem that is of wide significance and that you have a scholarly approach to research. While your opinion and arguments do matter, we also need to see that you are aware of what other researchers have said about the topic at hand. It is usually the case that a weak proposal is weak because the author has limited knowledge of the extant literature (i.e. they haven’t read enough, or widely enough, to be able to say anything meaningful about their research question or its significance);
- Do not submit ‘surprise’ proposals. Instead, make sure that you have discussed what your thesis with a potential supervisor. If you are unsure who to approach, email the relevant contact person (Table 1). When you do approach a potential supervisor, provide a half page summary of your central ideas so that they can give you some broad advice before you do the work required for a fully formed proposal. This will help to ensure that your proposal is more likely to be accepted by the panel, and that it is a feasible proposal that is in line with the research expertise of the Department;
- Think very seriously about whether you can commit to a research thesis before you apply. An Honours or Coursework Masters thesis will take you at least six to eight months of sustained full-time research, if not longer. A PhD thesis will take you at least three years full time, and most students take closer to four years full time. Can you focus on a research project for this length of time? It can help to discuss this with research thesis contacts (Table 1), with existing or recently completed students, and with family or friends;
Additional resources
These sources will help you to develop a high quality research proposal. Please take the time to review these before submitting your proposal!


