Drafting Your MSc Dissertation Proposal

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- Purpose, structure and common mistakes
- How to convince your supervisor and committee that the project is feasible

Why the Proposal Matters

- The proposal is the roadmap for your dissertation
- Clarifies what you will do and why
- Demonstrates scientific relevance and feasibility
- Helps supervisors provide focused guidance
- Reduces the risk of project scope creep

Key message: A good proposal does not prove the answer. It demonstrates a credible plan to find the answer.

What is a Dissertation Proposal?

A proposal typically includes:

- Research topic
- Background and motivation
- Research question(s)
- Objectives
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Timeline
- References

Section 1: Introduction and Motivation

Answer:

- Why is this topic important?
- What problem does it address?
- Why should anyone care?

Avoid:

- Excessive background
- Generic statements
- Unsupported claims

Example:

Agrivoltaic systems have been proposed as a means of simultaneously producing renewable energy and food. However, their effects on biodiversity remain insufficiently understood.

Section 2: Research Questions and Objectives

Research Question

What knowledge gap will be addressed?

Objectives

What work will be performed to answer the question?

Section 3: Literature Review

Purpose:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the field
- Identify current understanding
- Show remaining knowledge gaps

A proposal literature review should:

- Synthesize, not summarize
- Identify agreements and disagreements
- Highlight research gaps
- Lead logically to the research question

Rule: The research question should emerge naturally from the literature review.

Section 4: Methodology

Students should describe (albeit “expected” only):

- Study design
- Data sources
- Tools and software
- Sampling strategy
- Analytical methods
- Validation approach

The reader should understand how the objectives will be achieved.

Linking the Proposal to SDGs

Every proposal should consider societal relevance.

Questions to ask:

- Which SDGs are directly addressed?
- Why are they relevant?
- What impacts could the research generate?

Using AI Responsibly

AI can help with:

- Refining research questions
- Generating search terms
- Summarising literature
- Improving structure and clarity
- Identifying research gaps

AI cannot replace:

- Reading the literature
- Scientific judgement
- Methodological decisions
- Critical evaluation

Example Proposal Structure

- Title
- Background and motivation
- SDGs
- Research question
- Objectives
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Timeline (Gantt chart)
- References

Proposal Self-Assessment Checklist

Before submission ask:

- ✓ Is the research question clear?
- ✓ Are objectives aligned with the question?
- ✓ Is the literature review sufficient?
- ✓ Is the methodology described clearly?
- ✓ Is the project feasible?
- ✓ Are relevant SDGs identified?
- ✓ Are AI tools used transparently?
- ✓ Is the proposal understandable to a non-specialist reader?

Final advice

- Start writing early
- Keep the scope realistic
- Discuss drafts with your supervisor frequently
- Revise the proposal several times
- Focus on clarity rather than complexity