



Guidance for Writing a Proposal for The Licentiate of The Institute of Heraldic And Genealogical Studies

Introduction

The dissertation proposal is the first formal stage in planning your dissertation. It demonstrates that you have identified a worthwhile research topic, understand the existing scholarship, and have considered how you will conduct your research.

Successful proposals combine historical enquiry with sound genealogical methodology and critical analysis of primary and secondary sources. They should demonstrate that the proposed research is original, manageable within the available time and word limit, and supported by accessible evidence.

Word count

C500-750 words

Purpose of the Proposal

Your proposal should demonstrate that:

- you have identified a clear research problem or question.
- your research will make a worthwhile contribution to knowledge or understanding.
- you understand the historical context and relevant literature.
- appropriate sources are available.
- you have selected suitable research methods.
- the project is achievable within the timescale of the programme.

Remember that a proposal is not a summary of everything you already know. Instead, it is a carefully reasoned plan explaining what you intend to investigate and how you will do so.

Suggested Structure

Although individual programmes may specify different formats, a proposal should normally contain the following sections.



Research Question and Working Title

Every dissertation should be built around one principal research question, and this would be reflected in your choice of title.

Choose a concise and informative title that reflects the central focus of your research and your research question.

Good research questions are:

- specific.
- researchable.
- capable of critical analysis.
- sufficiently narrow for a dissertation.

For example:

Challenges with Ancestral Research in North Yorkshire: a case study of Low Row and Feetham in Swaledale.

The Development of Extended Parish Registers during the half-century before Rose's Act.

Avoid questions that merely invite description and are broad. For example:

The history of the Smith family?

Your title may change as your research develops.

Research Background

Introduce the topic by explaining its historical context.

This section should answer questions such as:

- What is the subject?
- Why is it historically significant?
- Why is further research needed?
- What debates or uncertainties exist?

Avoid providing an extensive history. Instead, focus on establishing why your research matters.

Research Aims and Objectives

Distinguish between the overall aim and the individual objectives.

The aim is the broad purpose of the research.



Example: To investigate the relationship between heraldic practice and family identity among urban merchants in Tudor England.

Objectives explain how the aim will be achieved.

For example:

- examine surviving grants of arms.
- analyse heraldic visitations.
- compare documentary genealogies with heraldic pedigrees.
- evaluate evidence from wills and property records.
- assess changing patterns of social status.

Objectives should be practical and measurable.

Review of Relevant Literature

This will depend on the question you are researching. It demonstrates your understanding of existing scholarship. Rather than simply listing books, you should discuss:

- key theories and debates.
- differing interpretations.
- gaps that your dissertation will address.

Primary Sources

Identify the principal sources you intend to use. Explain why these sources are suitable and discuss any known limitations.

Methodology

This section explains how the research will be conducted.

Consider discussing as relevant:

- genealogical reconstruction.
- historical analysis.
- quantitative analysis.
- qualitative analysis.
- comparative case studies.
- archival research.
- digital databases.

You should justify your methodological choices rather than merely listing them.



Original Contribution

Your research should contribute something new. Originality does not necessarily require discovering entirely unknown evidence. Clearly explain how your work will extend current knowledge.

If basing your dissertation on previous research, you have undertaken this should clearly be stated. If your research was previously published or was submitted for a different organisation this should be cited. You should explain how the proposed research will build on what has gone before and how it will add new knowledge or analysis.

Practical Considerations

Demonstrate that the project is feasible.

Consider:

- availability of archives.
- digital access to records.
- travel requirements.
- language or palaeographical skills.
- expected timescale.
- data management.

If access to particular archives may be restricted, explain any alternative sources.

General advice

Avoid the following:

- topics that are too broad.
- vague research questions.
- insufficient engagement with existing scholarship.
- Over reliance on a single source.
- lack of methodological explanation.
- unrealistic research plans.
- unsupported claims of originality.

Before submitting your proposal, ensure that you have:

- identified a clear research question.
- explained the historical significance of the topic.
- reviewed the principal literature critically.
- identified suitable primary sources.
- justified your methodology.



- explained the originality of the project.
- demonstrated feasibility.
- considered ethical issues where necessary.
- included a preliminary bibliography.

A dissertation proposal is a working document rather than a contract. It is expected that your ideas, sources and even your research question may develop as your investigation progresses. Nevertheless, investing time in producing a clear, focused and well-researched proposal will provide a solid foundation for a successful dissertation.

The strongest proposals demonstrate intellectual curiosity, critical engagement with existing scholarship, methodological rigour and a realistic appreciation of what can be achieved within the scope of a postgraduate dissertation. By clearly articulating the significance of your research and presenting a coherent plan for its completion, you establish both the academic value and the practical feasibility of your proposed study.

Submission

Submit your proposal to education@ihgs.ac.uk. A decision on your proposal will normally be provided within four weeks.