Preparing your project proposal: A Guideline
Centre for Journalism
Dept. of Political Science, SDU

(A) General Qualifications

Applicants should have completed a Master's degree in journalism studies or a related field (for instance, political science, sociology, rhetoric, or linguistics). You can apply for admission and a scholarship before you have received your final grade, but no one is formally admitted to the programme before they have finished a degree at the master's level.

An Admission Committee evaluates your academic standing on the basis of the grades you have received in your previous education. Therefore, applicants should always submit a certified transcript of their post-secondary exams in English.

If you apply without having a Master's degree in journalism studies, the committee assesses whether you have a fundamental and broad knowledge of the theories and methods applied in journalism studies and the social sciences/the humanities more broadly.

Other relevant academic qualifications, including previous publications and academic positions, are also assessed.

The Committee not only focuses on general academic qualifications, but also on the extent to which the applicant seems to have the relevant qualifications for the proposed project.

An applicant with a background in media language but with little or no training in quantitative methods may not be considered qualified for a project setting out to analyze media effects on voting behaviour by way of content analysis and survey methods. The opposite situation may of course be considered equally problematic.

(B) Project Proposal

The project proposal is very important. The proposal must not exceed 5 pages. The Committee never admits an applicant solely on his or her general qualifications. The project proposal is, of course, preliminary and is often revised during the course of the PhD programme in collaboration with the supervisor. Still, the proposal must demonstrate the applicant's ability to think through the important steps and elements in a scholarly well-conceived PhD project.

All good project proposals should include a succinct description of Subject, Theory and Method/Research Design. The three aspects are closely related.

Subject:

What is the research theme and subject? What is the research problem? And what is the relevance of the project? Any specific research project is in dialogue with a broader scholarly literature, and the project should contribute to the knowledge in a particular research field.
One way of thinking about your project theme and research problem is to ask: What is my research project a case of? In relation to which broader set of phenomena does the project add new knowledge? How does my project advance or revise the knowledge within the field? What relevance does my research have to real world problems?

Theory:

All research subjects and problems can be approached and theorized in numerous ways. No research topic is self-defining, and all good research projects are aware that they focus only on some of the relevant aspects of a more general research problem. What relevant theoretical debates and positions in the research field does the project contribute to? Why is a particular approach and theoretical perspective chosen? What can be learned from approaching the issue in the way you have chosen compared to other ways of approaching the research question? Which theories and propositions are scrutinized, investigated, or tested?

To answer questions like these, any project proposal obviously needs to discuss the most relevant literature in the field of interest. Otherwise, it is impossible to know whether the project actually provides new knowledge.

Phrased in somewhat more ambitious terms, you may ask yourself which scholarly debate is never going to be the same after you have done your research and written your dissertation?

Method/Research Design:

The last element in a good project proposal is the research design and method. A research design is necessary to structure a project and to show how all the major elements of the research project work together in order to address the central research question. All research problems can be analyzed in a number of ways. Some are more practicable than others, and some are more ideal than others. Obviously, no single project can ever do it all, and often the project cannot even pretend to study a research problem in the best way one can think of. Scarce resources and other constraints may preclude the best methodological choices. But the choices about how to undertake your study should be carefully considered, and the inescapable biases and shortcomings involved in any case and data selection should be addressed. Why does the project choose a particular design (case-study, comparative method, statistical method, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, applied ethics, etc.)? And why are particular data chosen at the expense of others (interviews, news articles, archival studies, public documents, accessible data bases, surveys, etc.)?

If the proposed project aims at theoretical rather than empirical analysis, the relevant methodological questions may be: What analytical strategy is pursued (coherentist justification, conceptual history, etc.)? What are the shortcomings of existing interpretations and readings? What standards and meta-theoretical criteria for theoretical advancement does the project advocate?

The discussion of design, method, and data shall focus on the proposed project. General text-book discussions are uncalled-for.

The description of method should also include a brief outline of the project timetable.

If the completion of the project demands exceptionally large amounts of resources, an estimate of the necessary resources must be included in the application and project proposal.

A perfect project proposal is almost impossible to write. There will always be aspects that can be discussed in more detail. Of course, the Admission Committee has admitted applicants who have submitted less than perfect proposals.

All applicants should consider the above guidelines when drafting a project proposal. The guidelines are the general assessment criteria used by the Admission Committee when deciding whether an applicant is qualified for admission to our PhD programme and when deciding whom we will recommend for a full scholarship.