

# PURSuing A RESEARCH GRADUATE DEGREE IN LAW

Osgoode Hall Law School Research Graduate Program in Law (LLM & PhD)

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Whether you are coming straight from your JD, or back to school from practice, thinking about pursuing a degree in a research graduate program can feel dauntingly different to what you've been doing for the last little while.

This guide focuses on how to prepare for the most important part of an application – the research proposal. We also give you some information about Osgoode Hall Law School's research graduate programs (LLM and PhD). Finally, we provide insights into the funding avenues in the Canadian context, alerting you to possibilities and deadlines.

We hope you find our guide useful. Your comments, corrections, questions and suggestions are all welcome – please send them to [GRADLAW@osgoode.yorku.ca](mailto:GRADLAW@osgoode.yorku.ca).

## HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Your research proposal is often the most important part of your application. Interest in pursuing a particular issue is usually a key factor in the decision to attend graduate school and in choosing the right school. For the Program and Supervisor, the proposal is at least as important as the transcript and past record of achievement in terms of assessing suitability for graduate work. In this document, we work through preparing a relatively generic research proposal. Specific programs or funding applications may ask for answers to specific questions, specific formats, or other things. *Be sure to read these carefully.*

There are many ways to go about developing and writing up a research proposal, and we offer our suggestions in the hope that they help you. More detailed discussions of every stage that we describe below can be found in academic how-to books, particularly books about research. You might find these works more helpful in the revision and polishing stages rather than turning to them before they even have a topic in mind.

Part of preparing the proposal is thinking about what you want to do in your research graduate program, but another part of it is illustrating your ability to prepare such a document, which requires some research, careful writing, and attention to method and theory.

### STEP ONE: Topic & Supervisory Possibilities

Consider the *general* area in which you wish to pursue your research. Often this kind of general topic can be defined through a subject area, or the convergence of two subject areas ("Tort Law" or "Feminist Analysis of Tort Law"). Sometimes it is the theoretical approach that comes to mind first ("Law and Economics"). You may have encountered particular phenomenon in practice or in the news and want to explore it through academic research – it might not be immediately clear how you want to classify or categorize such a problem. Less often, a particular method (comparative law, interviews, etc.) has captured your attention. Aim to narrow the topic down. Doing this may involve doing a bit of research and reading in the area in order to identify what you are interested in and what you might rule out.

The research proposal that you submit with your application should resemble something that you want to do, as supervision may be assigned on the basis of the proposal. Despite this, almost all our students significantly refine and change their proposals after starting the program.

Review [Osgoode's full-time faculty profiles](#), available on our website, and similar material at other schools. Who is working in the area and what are they interested in supervising? Alignment between a supervisor's work and your own is important, and if you are not already attached to a particular topic, think about whose research connects to your existing interests. Some supervisors will be looking for students to work on particular funded projects or will be interested in supervising students working in a fairly narrow area. If potential supervisors are clearly interested in a particular narrow issue, they are far more likely to accept students who share that interest.

### **Osgoode does not require a supervisory commitment before application.**

Ensuring this alignment should not constrain a research plan you are deeply committed to. Many Professors are interested in supervising outside the narrow band of their own current research. Still, many applicants will benefit from knowing what kind of work is being done, and what potential supervisors are looking for. It might even be that you came to the topic after reading an academic article and are interested in working with the author. Check whether your top choice as supervisor would be willing to read an advanced draft of your proposal, or whether the supervisor invites people to get in touch even before that stage. Many do not, but some do.

### **STEP TWO: Research Question**

At this stage, start narrowing by developing your topic into a question that your work will answer. Identifying one or more "research questions" is often a significant part of the work of creating a research proposal. Here are some things to consider:

- Your project should not exactly duplicate work that has already been done.
- Avoid yes/no questions.
- The question needs to be a genuine question for you. It's common in law for people to take an advocacy approach – they know the answer, and they want to write something which convinces the audience. In a research program, you will be pushed to find, within that advocacy project, a genuine question. For instance, rather than a question like "should prisons be abolished?" leading to a thesis about why prison abolition is a good idea (which has been done), consider what you could do with an investigation of the existing literature on prison abolition to uncover and classify the nature of arguments in that field.
- The scope of the question needs to be such that you can produce a deeply researched, thoughtful and nuanced answer in the time frame for the program you are pursuing. Students are very often told that their question is too broad (the opposite is rare).

### **STEP THREE: Outlining the Proposal**

When setting up the initial document, be certain to leave enough space for the minimum requirements of the proposal itself. These usually include:

Research question

Discussion of academic work already in the area;

- What has been done?
- How will your work contribute?

Description of how you intend to answer the question;

- Method
- Theoretical orientation

Depending on the requirements for the specific proposal, you could also include a discussion of “research dissemination” – how you will get your research to the audience you want. Such a discussion, along with the forms your research output will take, is a common requirement for grant applications.

## **STEP FOUR: Writing and Editing Your Proposal**

Making your proposal clear and interesting is important. Faculty members who review applications often have to read a large number of proposals/applications. Offer a concise, unique, and short title to help assessors remember your work.

There are many possible stylistic rules which could contribute to a good proposal – we offer a few here:

- Make sure that you have checked and double-checked guidelines and deadlines
- Be clear, move quickly to your point
- Provide a structure, use headings
- Avoid long solid blocks of text, use smaller paragraphs and short sentences
- Read your proposal out loud to yourself or to others as this helps illustrate where sentences are too long, among other things
- Allow enough time - if you don't have much time, you can still apply, but a good proposal could take months to develop, so don't be afraid to write a draft and share it with others you trust

Finally, don't agonize over the proposal. It's just a proposal. You aren't completely committed to it. Schools and funders know that your project may change as you get underway. The important thing is to show that you have an idea, that you know something about the scholarship in that area, and that you are capable of carrying out research in the discipline area proposed given the resources available to you.

### **The First Paragraph**

Pay particular attention to your first paragraph. Get your reader's attention early. Do not waste space with obvious and general statements. One critical question to consider here would be, “How can I interest people who may not know that much about the topic?” You can get more detailed in the later paragraphs. Your main point in the short opening might be the importance of the question, the importance of the

answer, but one way or another you want your reader to get a picture of the question you are going to ask.

### Your Research Question

Ensure the reader can find it. State it with clarity, and attention to issues of scope. Avoid making over-ambitious claims about the intended research; what is proposed must be realistically achievable.

### The Field You Are Entering

Obviously, the research proposal requires research. You need to know what work has been done in your area of interest, and you should illustrate how your project will fit into that research landscape. This means doing research. Ensure that your research is of a high academic standard. Use scholarly publications (books and peer reviewed journal articles).

### Methodology

Be clear about how you will undertake the research. Explain why you think this is an appropriate way to approach the problem. What material do you plan to use to answer the question? What is the theoretical approach which explains why this method is a good one?

All methods have limits. Make sure you are alert to the assumptions and limits in your method of choice. In law, many people plan to use doctrinal methodology. This is fine, although assessors will expect you to be attentive to the implications of a purely doctrinal approach. What does it leave out? Why is it useful? If the method requires technical skills, equipment, or ethics approval (for work with human subjects, for instance) make sure that you illustrate you are aware of these things, because otherwise your plan may come across as naïve.

PhD students may wish to set out a brief timeline of their project, in 6-month chunks, with significant milestones noted. This is not necessary, but it could be useful in demonstrating to the File Assessor or prospective supervisor that you have really thought about how you will get this work done. Above all else, be realistic!

### Your Experience and Achievements

Your own experience and past achievements may also be important illustrations of your ability to successfully carry out the proposed research. Often, this kind of background information is best sprinkled throughout the proposal. For instance, if you've worked in the area before, as part of a class or as a Research Assistant, briefly indicate this experience using phrases such as, "I have written a paper on this topic, [title], for Professor X in [course name], [year]". These statements are best when they include some small specific details – the title of the paper, the name of the professor, the name of a project.

Try to take advantage of opportunities to point to evidence of your academic achievements, work experience and specific personal strengths (e.g. motivation, an inquiring mind, ability to carry out analytical work or work independently).

### Citations & Bibliographies

For your Osgoode application you are welcome to use any referencing style common in law. Some funding applications include space for a bibliography and have page limits on the body of your proposal. The

referencing system you use is usually not as important as ensuring that you apply it correctly and consistently.

## Conclusions

Finish strong. Well-written summaries and conclusions at the end of the proposal and/or at the end of each section can help a File Assessor identify the important information. Do not repeat everything – just re-state one or two important points that deserve highlighting.

## OSGOODE'S GRADUATE RESEARCH PROGRAMS IN LAW

The insights you gain during a research degree will pay dividends in future personal and professional endeavours. In addition to being exposed to cutting edge research, you will have the opportunity to make friends, meet professors, and be part of a growing research community. A research degree allows you to develop a variety of research and communication related skills that you can apply in many areas of life.

In choosing where to do your research degree, a long list of factors will come into play: academic reputation, possible supervisors, what the program offers, and location, among others. Consider these carefully using the information available to you from the program, from any trusted mentors, and from current students.

### Osgoode Hall Research Graduate Program Application At-A-Glance

There are two ways to consider how you construct your research proposal ("statement of interest") when applying to Osgoode Hall Law School's Research Graduate Programs.

1. You could be applying to an advertised, funded fellowship opportunity offered by a particular faculty member. Here, getting the fellowship requires aligning your research with funded research a particular supervisor is doing.
2. Most of our applicants set out a research proposal (statement of interest) and identify a relevant set of preferred supervisors (using our list [here](#)).

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In addition to the Research LLM and PhD Program, Osgoode Hall Law School also offers Professional LLM Programs through Osgoode Professional Development (including the Canadian Common Law and the International Business LLM programs).

Professional LLM options are course-based program for experienced professionals with part-time and full-time study options. They bring together theory and practice and have no thesis requirement. Contact Osgoode Professional Development [here](#) for information about how to apply to any of these programs.

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## Applications to Osgoode's Research Program

Applications to the Research Program, whether LLM or PhD, require the same application documents:

1. Statement of Interest (this the name York University uses for what is often called a "Research Proposal")
2. Transcripts
3. Writing Sample
4. Two Letters of Recommendation, preferably from academic sources
5. Resume or Curriculum vitae
6. Completed Supplemental Information Form (SIF)

We look at a variety of things in considering admission, including:

- Complete academic record, which includes grades (usually a B+ average or higher) and scholarly awards
- Merits of your research proposal ("statement of interest")
- Alignment of your proposed research with interest and capacity for supervision amongst our Faculty.
- Research capacities and potential as demonstrated by previous academic writing and experience
- Quality and strength of letters of reference

### Writing Sample

Applicants must submit a writing sample that is between 5,000 to 10,000 words (approximately 15 to 30 pages double-spaced). Choose any published work you have, or academic papers written for a university course or seminar. If your best work is much longer than the word limit, add a cover note suggesting what pages the assessor should read (within the word limit). Obviously, work prepared in the area of law or a closely related field that demonstrates analytic skill and writing ability is most suitable for this requirement.

### Two Letters of Recommendation

The application for admission requires the names and contact information for two referees. These people will be asked to provide a reference (letter of recommendation) for you. You should select people who are familiar with your academic achievements and strengths in law or a related discipline and are in a position to evaluate your potential for success in research-intensive academic work. It is rarely helpful to provide a professional, non-academic, reference. If you have been out of the Academy for more than five years, you should feel free to contact the Graduate Program Director to discuss best options ([GPDLaw@osgoode.yorku.ca](mailto:GPDLaw@osgoode.yorku.ca)).

### Statement of Interest (Research Proposal)

Please see the How to Write a Research Proposal, earlier in this document, for a detailed discussion of the Statement of Interest (Research Proposal) requirement.



## FUNDING A RESEARCH DEGREE

For many students, the availability of funding is a critical factor in decisions about whether and where to pursue graduate work. At Osgoode, students in the Research Program are eligible for a guaranteed minimum amount of funding (PhD students receive funding for six years, and are required to take on paid work as a teaching assistant; LLM students receive one year of funding). Funding minimums can be supplemented with Internal or External awards. Internal funding means awards and scholarships offered by the University. While some internal funding might require a separate application (for instance, at York, the prestigious Elia Scholarship) many do not. Students considering Osgoode Hall's Research Graduate Program should consider the awards listed at the links below, and note any that require separate applications. Most of our students receive some form of Internal award in their first year.

For York university-wide awards, please click [here](#). For awards specific to Osgoode Hall Law School, please click [here](#).

External funding bodies in Canada generally are government bodies, although there are other institutions offering awards in specific areas of study. External awards can be very competitive. Success will depend on qualifications, experience and research aspirations. Students applying to Osgoode Hall should carefully consult the current scholarships and awards section of the Faculty of Graduate Studies online materials [here](#) in addition to the short list below.

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**External awards often have deadlines in the Fall of the year prior to entry – even though Program applications are due in February.**

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### External Awards

Please note that these deadline dates are generally for students *not already at York*.

*CGS Masters (Bombardier)*, information [here](#). Deadline: early December of the academic year before program start.

*Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) Doctoral and Masters*, please click [here](#). Deadline December 1 of the academic year before program start.

*CGS & Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowships*, information [here](#). Deadline November of the academic year before program start.

*Trudeau Foundation Doctoral Scholarships*, more information [here](#).

For the *Vanier Canada Doctoral Graduate Scholarship*, information [here](#). The Preliminary Application to York University should be submitted in the summer months for awards to begin in the fall of the following year (e.g. Summer 2019 for Fall 2020).