The first thing to remember about a PhD proposal is that institutions are run by people, and people are susceptible to ‘blagging’. That is, there is a game that you are trying to play (being the lead runner in a competition for money and places) and you must, however much you dislike it, learn to play the game well to win. This is usually the same as when you write an essay: minimising the errors and potential criticisms pays dividends in the long run, even if it takes a lot of effort now.

There are, in my opinion, four main criteria to a PhD proposal, which reflect the final outcome of the qualification:

- Evidence of originality
- Evidence of a coherent, well-researched project
- Evidence of a suitable theme and topic
- Evidence of being able to complete on time/a solid work ethic

Whilst these are in many ways interwoven throughout the project and proposal, it is worth separating them to make sure that you show them in the proposal. It is also worth bearing in mind that there is often a gap between the proposal and the completed project; it is very rare that three or four years down the line the project is identical to the starting point.

Evidence of originality

One of the criteria for a PhD is that it is an original piece of research. This may be accomplished by seeing what is out there already and getting to grips with what is missing from them. LION or OCLC Firstsearch are both useful from this point of view as they indicate the key subject areas covered by books and articles. Get hold of these sources and make sure that you know the area reasonably well before you write the draft version of your proposal. If you are repeating what
somebody else has said, then the PhD is a ‘no-go’ before you even start. This would appear in your final proposal as a brief ‘literature review’, showing that a) you are aware of what has been written and b) you have placed your project in the gaps that these sources do not cover. For instance, if there have been articles written on the topic, but not many books, you could say something like this: ‘Whilst x and y have written articles upon this subject, the only monograph in the area, z’s Book Title focuses on a small section of this, which this project would expand upon’. A good PhD says (as I have been told) a lot about a little, not a little about a lot.

Evidence of a coherent, well-researched project

This is usually accomplished by means of a brief chapter summary and a strong thesis statement. The selection panel want to see that this is, in fact, a PhD proposal and not an extended undergraduate dissertation. This indicates not only that you know what you are talking about, but also that you have a solid plan for completion. The project has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it makes an argument; and it quite blatantly fits in with the department (for example, don’t waffle about law unless you expect to do an English/Law project). Furthermore, explicitly relate your theoretical backdrop to the literature, saying exactly how you plan to merge them together.

Although this is more part of a ‘personal statement’ that a ‘proposal’, it can also be useful if you say who in the department would be a good supervisor and that this is the reason for wanting to do the PhD at that institution. (There are two approaches here, both of which have pros and cons: 1. pick somebody who has published research in the field, not somebody who you like, or 2. pick somebody who you know you can work with, even if their interest in the field is tangential.) Knowing this, and being able to justify your choice, helps no end with the funding applications.

Evidence of a suitable theme and topic

Evidence of a suitable theme and topic takes three different forms. Firstly, it is part of the ‘originality’ criteria (you do not repeat what somebody else has written) and, secondly, it is
appropriate to the department (they have somebody who could supervise you and appropriate research resources, such as the National Library of Wales for Aberystwyth University). However, the third form ties into the ‘coherent project idea’ and ‘completion’ criteria. You have to show that this is a viable project that is not going to take fifteen years to write and that it all fits together nicely into a tight little bundle called a thesis. Assigning appropriate word counts to chapters (normally between five and eight, incidentally) is a useful way of doing this. This way, you are showing the panel that you are not only aware of how much work you have to do in each section, but that you have a coherent plan. Don’t say you can write about the entirety of Jung’s relation to literature in 2,000 words, and don’t say that it will take you 50,000 words either.

Evidence of being able to complete on time/a solid work ethic

Whilst most of the evidence of this will come from your referees, it is always helpful if you can allude to it in your proposal. If there is room, a brief timetable indicating the proposed completion of each chapter will help, showing that you know how much you can do, and how quickly.

Finally, get somebody to proofread the proposal carefully (I am happy to do this). Mistakes at this stage are pointless and are tantamount to giving the selection panel a reason to turn you down. Below is a mock version of a PhD proposal based on my thesis that has annotations to show you what I mean. Just hold the mouse over the highlighted text and my comment will pop up:

**Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature**

This project addresses the relationship between nihilism and postmodernism in relation to literature of the late twentieth century. Despite the fact that many critics, such as Christopher Norris and Anthony Harrigan, have already observed this, their arguments are predicated upon the idea that postmodernism and nihilism are equivalent. This is, in fact, inaccurate inasmuch as...
postmodernism is explicitly linked by Jean-François Lyotard to the sublime, rather than nihilism, in *The Postmodern Condition*. This project negotiates between these two seemingly opposed concepts in order to accomplish three objectives:

- It postulates a form of nihilism that is not fundamentally negative because nihilism and the sublime are linked within Enlightenment humanism.

- It addresses the claims and counter-claims of those for and against postmodernism in relation to nihilism, arguing that both nihilism and the sublime appear within postmodern theory.

- It explicitly relates postmodern theory to postmodern literature, demonstrating the relationship between nihilism and the sublime in relation to four key areas of postmodern literature: apocalypse, absurdity, absence, and space.

The project will achieve these objectives through eight 10,000-word chapters (with a projected timetable of three months for each), which develop the argument in three distinct sections. It begins with the history of nihilism and the sublime, to the relationship between the two in postmodernism, and finally on to the literary applications of this. The proposed structure is:

**Preface/Introduction (2,000 words)**

1. **History of Nihilism**

This chapter gives a brief history of nihilism in the early nineteenth century, looking particularly at the work of Johan Gouwsblom and Karen L. Carr. It offers two conceptions of the history of nihilism, one based upon a philosophical discourse (genealogical) and the other upon the historical developments within nihilism (chronological).

2. **History of the Sublime**

Moving from early conceptions of the sublime, such as Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry* (Oxford UP, 1998) and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (Clarendon Press, 1957), to the way
in which the concept was treated during the Romantic period, this chapter ‘grounds’ the reader in what the sublime meant. This history also means that the development of nihilism and the sublime can clearly and explicitly be linked together, demonstrating that the sublime was one of the main reasons that nihilism came to the fore in the nineteenth century.

3. Nihilism and the Postmodern Sublime

This chapter offers the reader a contemporary understanding of the concept of the sublime in relation to postmodern theory, demonstrating the way in which Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime is heavily influenced by Kantian theory, and yet is a completely different method of approaching it. This is the result of Lyotard’s somewhat artificial distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘aesthetics’, which were united in the Kantian sublime. This studies not only Lyotard’s works, such as ‘Complexity and the Sublime’ and The Postmodern Condition (Manchester UP, 1999), but also looks at Jean Baudrillard’s treatment of nihilism, seen in works such as Simulacra and Simulation (University of Michigan Press, 1997) and Fatal Strategies (Semiotext(e), 1990).

4. Postmodern Nihilism

This central part of the thesis proposes a new formulation of nihilism, based upon postmodern theory. Because chapter three makes the reader aware of the relationship between nihilism and the sublime within postmodernism, this chapter is able to look in detail at the way in which critics have linked nihilism with postmodernism. Focusing specifically on Derrida’s ‘nihilism’ and postmodernism’s alleged politically reactionary nature, this chapter looks at works such as Stuart Sim’s ‘Lyotard and the Politics of Antifoundationalism’, Derrida’s Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles (University of Chicago Press, 1979) and Writing and Difference (University of Chicago Press, 1997), David Harvey’s The Condition of Postmodernity (Blackwell, 1994), and Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Verso, 1991).
5. Apocalypse in Postmodern Literature

After all the theoretical material covered in the first half of the thesis, this chapter introduces the primary authors of the thesis: [Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, Steve Erickson, and Angela Carter]. It explores the ways in which the concept of the ‘apocalypse’ is central to postmodern fiction, whether it is in terms of history (the Holocaust, colonialism, and patriarchal society) or the future (impending ecological destruction and nuclear war). These authors will be read in conjunction with the theoretical argument presented in the preceding chapters, as well as contextual sources such as William Chaloupka’s *Knowing Nukes* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992) and Inga Clendinnen’s *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge UP, 1999).

6. Absurdity in Postmodern Literature

blah blah.

7. Absence in Postmodern Literature

blah blah.

8. Space in Postmodern Literature

blah blah.

**Conclusion** (2,000 words)