

## Advice from Members of the Admissions Committee for your application

### What makes for a successful application and what is the doctoral research proposal for?

At the Berlin School of Mind and Brain you will have to apply with your own proposal for a doctoral research project. This is the central building block of your application.

We know that this is a challenging feat for junior researchers. However, from these proposals we hope to glean the level of interest, methodological expertise, academic prowess and intellectual independence of the respective applicant. The proposal should have no more than five pages plus references and must relate to one of the six research areas of the school. All research proposals must have clear mind and brain relevance. And you should have developed the idea by yourself.

Furthermore, reviewers must perceive projects as a “good fit for the school”. There are no strict rules for what constitutes a “good fit” or what makes proposals exciting for reviewers, because a lot depends on the applicant’s background discipline(s), the general topic, and, most of all, the individual ideas for and the quality of the individual research project. However, we can offer the following advice which is based on our experience with previous applications:

#### (1) Before you apply

It is mandatory that you contact potential supervisor(s) of your project. Please pick these potential supervisors from our faculty list (<http://www.mind-and-brain.de/people/faculty>). If you do not know them you should

- attach your CV,
- explain who you are,
- explain that you intend to apply to the School’s doctoral program,
- explain what you plan to do.

You can ask potential supervisor(s) for advice on the application and interview procedure. As long as the main ideas presented in the application remain your own, it is definitely acceptable and recommended to send potential supervisor(s) a draft of your proposal beforehand and ask for feedback.

#### (2) Your research proposal (written application)

In your written proposal you need to demonstrate that you are very well informed about the topic of the project. You need to know about the relevant literature, controversies, research questions, and research techniques. That is not to say that you need to write an extensive literature review (mind the page limit!). However, presenting selected examples from the literature usually helps to demonstrate that you would be able to provide such a review or answer questions about the literature on demand. In short, the reviewers and the Admissions Committee must get the impression that you know what you are talking about.

##### (a) Your project

In the first round, your written proposal is reviewed by 3–5 reviewers. They must understand what exactly you are planning to do. This means that in addition to laying out the topic and theoretical background, you need to describe the plans for your own research work. For projects with a “brain emphasis” this means for example: Describe your hypotheses, how they will be tested, experimental paradigms, techniques, how the data will be analyzed, etc. That is not to say that you need to describe the project in every detail, e.g., stimulus duration in milliseconds or the exact number of experimental trials, but you should have a concrete idea of how to answer your research question.

*Rule of thumb:* You should be able to explain your idea to an interested scientist of any field within two minutes!

### **(b) Plans, adjustments, gaps**

We understand that your application is a proposal for a **future** project. It is not necessary that you have extensive prior experience with this topic, technique or paradigm. Moreover, we understand that your plans may become subject to modification, and it is, of course, possible to adjust your paradigm, analysis, etc. during the course of your project if it turns out to be necessary. However, you should assure your audience that you know what's missing and that (and how) you intend to acquire the required knowledge during your time at the School.

### **(3) Interdisciplinarity**

Successful applications will be interdisciplinary in the broadest sense. Typical doctoral projects will investigate research questions in relation to the problems of the human mind that are of relevance to more than one discipline. The main research topics of the School pay tribute to that approach (see under "Research" on our website). "Interdisciplinarity" in this sense does not require you to perform an empirical test of a philosophical theory or to perform a philosophical deconstruction of the empirical literature (of course, this would be acceptable, too).

Successful project proposals will draw on findings from the complementary side of mind and/or brain research. Results from the complementary field should play an essential role in achieving the objectives described in your research proposal such that "brain"-related research will also cover mental phenomena, and, conversely, "mind"-related projects incorporate findings from brain/neuroscience research. This requires sufficient grounding in the complementary field. Formal training or a degree in this field would be most welcome but is not mandatory. (See also <http://www.mind-and-brain.de/research/about-interdisciplinarity/>)

You should be aware that neither all the reviewers evaluating your proposal nor all members of the Admissions Committee will be experts in your particular field. Our faculty members have different scientific and disciplinary backgrounds. All of them should be able to understand the general relevance of your project and its contribution to a better understanding of the human mind. Thus, it may be helpful to explain the "big picture" of your project.

Please know also that your potential supervisor(s) are not allowed to review your application or to participate in the grading of your presentation during the interviews. This makes it even more important that you spark the interest of as many other faculty members as possible.

### **(4) The oral presentation**

If you are invited for an interview in Berlin, you will have to present your proposal in 10 minutes, and there will be max. 10 minutes for discussion. Be aware that all interviewees (about 25) present within one day. So, try to grab the attention and interest of the review panel right from the start. A clearly structured and easy-to-follow presentation will help to do so. Focus on your research idea, demonstrate how your experiments or theoretical work will be able to answer your research question and how the project might contribute to the field.

*Rule of thumb:* Don't try to be a genius, but be sound and solid. Practice your presentation several times in front of different audiences.

Read more advice for your presentation here: <http://www.mind-and-brain.de/doctoral-program/application/how-to-presentation/>

### **(5) Feasibility**

The project must be feasible! Try to ensure that your project and the required publication(s) can be completed within three years' time.