

Applications for PhD/MPhil in English Literature

Your research proposal

The two elements of an application that are most useful to us when we consider a candidate for the PhD or MPhil degrees are the **sample of written work** and the **research proposal**.

You will probably choose your sample of written work from an already-completed undergraduate or masters-level dissertation or term-paper. Your research proposal will be something new. It will describe the project that you want to complete for the award of the MPhil or PhD. Take your time in composing your research proposal, and consider carefully the requirements outlined below. Your research proposal should not be more than 2,000 words long.

Research degrees are awarded on the basis of a thesis of up to 100,000 words (PhD) or up to 60,000 words (MPhil). The 'Summary of roles and responsibilities' in the University's *Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students*

<http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Codes/CoPSupervisorsResearchStudents.pdf> stipulates that a research thesis must

- (i) show adequate knowledge of the field of study and relevant literature;
- (ii) show the exercise of critical judgement with regard to both the candidate's work and that of other scholars in the same general field;
- (iii) contain material which presents a unified body of work such as could reasonably be achieved on the basis of three years' [full-time PhD] or two years' [full-time MPhil] postgraduate study and research; and
- (iv) is satisfactory in its literary presentation, gives full and adequate references and has a coherent structure understandable to a scholar in the same general field.

And the completed thesis in its final form should

- (v) be an original work making a significant contribution to knowledge in or understanding of the field of study;
- (vi) contain material worthy of publication.

It is in the nature of research that, when you begin, you don't know what you'll find. This means that your project is bound to change over the two or three years that you spend on it. So in submitting your proposal you are not committing yourself absolutely to completing exactly the project it describes in the event that you are accepted. Nevertheless, with the above points (i) to (vi) in mind, your research proposal should include the following elements, though not necessarily in this order:

1. An account of the **body of primary texts** that your thesis will examine. This may be work by one author, or several, or many, depending on the nature of the project. It is very unlikely to consist of a single text, however, unless that text is unusually compendious (*The Canterbury Tales*) or unusually demanding (*Finnegans Wake*). Unless your range of texts consists in the complete *oeuvre* of a single writer, you should explain why *these* texts are the ones that need to be examined in order to make your particular argument.
2. An identification of the existing **field or fields of criticism and scholarship** of which you will need to gain an 'adequate knowledge' (point i above) in order to complete your thesis.

This must include work in existing literary criticism, broadly understood. Usually this will consist of criticism or scholarship on the works or author(s) in question. In the case of very recent writing, or writing marginal to the established literary canon, on which there may be little or no existing critical work, it might include literary criticism written on other works or authors in the same period, or related work in the same mode or genre, or some other exercise of literary criticism that can serve as a reference point for your engagement with this new material.

The areas of scholarship on which you draw are also likely to include work in other disciplines, however. Most usually, these will be arguments in philosophy or critical theory that have informed, or could inform, the critical debate around your primary texts, or may have informed the texts themselves; and/or the historiography of the period in which your texts were written or received. But we are ready to consider the possible relevance of any other body of knowledge to literary criticism, as long as it is one with which you are sufficiently familiar, or could become sufficiently familiar within the period of your degree, for it to serve a meaningful role in your argument.

3. The **questions or problems** that the argument of your thesis will address; the **methods** you will adopt to answer those questions or explain those problems; and some explanation of why this particular methodology is the appropriate means of doing so. The problem could take many forms: a simple gap in the existing scholarship that you will fill; a misleading approach to the primary material that you will correct; or a difficulty in the relation of the existing scholarship to theoretical/philosophical, historiographical, or other disciplinary contexts, for example. But in any case, your thesis must engage critically with the scholarship of others (point ii above) by mounting an original argument in relation to the existing work in your field or fields. In this way your project must go beyond the summarising of already-existing knowledge.
4. Finally, your proposal should include a **provisional timetable**, describing the stages through which you hope your research would move, over the two or three years of your degree. It is crucial that, on the one hand, your chosen topic should be substantial enough to require around 50,000 words (MPhil) or 80,000 words (PhD) for its full exploration; and, on the other hand, that it has clear limits which would allow it to be completed in two years (MPhil) or three (PhD) (point iii above).

When drawing up this timetable, keep in mind that these word limits, and these time constraints, will require you to complete 25–30,000 words of your thesis in each of the years of your degree. If either of these degrees are taken on a part-time basis, the amount of time available simply doubles.

In composing your research proposal you are already beginning the work that could lead, if you are accepted, to the award of a research degree. Regard it, then, as a chance to refine and focus your ideas, so that you can set immediately to work in an efficient manner on entry to the university. But it bears repeating that that your project is bound to evolve beyond the project described in your proposal in ways that you cannot at this stage predict. No-one can know, when they begin any research work, where exactly it will take them. That provides much of the pleasure of research, for the most distinguished professor as much as for the first-year research student. If you are accepted as a candidate for the MPhil or the PhD in this department, you will be joining a community of scholars still motivated by the thrill of finding and saying something new.