

Guidance on how to write a Research Degree proposal (Masters By Research/PhD)

The essentials of writing a proposal

As part of the application process, candidates are required to submit a research proposal with a maximum of 1000 words (Masters by Research) or 1000-2000 words (PhD). Assessors of research degree proposals pay a particular attention to their relevance and feasibility. Therefore, please make sure that these aspects of your proposal are explained well.

- Make sure your proposed topic falls into the research areas covered by staff working in the School of Creative Arts.
- Make sure the proposal is sufficiently narrow and has well specified boundaries. Broadly written proposals with vague research aims and fuzzy frameworks do not usually work well. Try to highlight the most recent secondary sources and other key material that have shaped your research. Think too about the research questions you are likely to pose; these should broadly relate to your secondary sources. We expect these to evolve as your research unfolds but it helps to be clear about the main thrust of your research early on.
- If your proposed research project includes an element of your practice, make sure you clearly outline what the practice is likely to be and its likely role in the research.
- PhD proposals should also outline the potential original contribution(s) of the proposed research to academic knowledge and its significance for non-academic parties (e.g. other practitioners, businesses, economy, society or public policy).

Finally, the style of presentation in the proposal should conform to the standards of academic writing. Where appropriate, provide appropriate citations in the text of the proposal and a bibliography of key texts at the end. Proof-read your proposal carefully before submitting it.

Structure of the proposal

You can structure and write your proposal in different ways. Here is a short guidance on what to consider and include in your research proposal. The crucial elements are:

- Working title
- Introduction/overview of the topic of proposal
- Research questions
- Literature review

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- Methodology

Working title

The title should be short and it should describe the gist of the proposal well.

Introduction/overview of the topic of proposal

This is where you describe the background and the motivation for your research proposal. Explain why the topic is interesting and important. You might discuss what the expected contributions of the proposed research could be; for example, to the existing body of relevant academic knowledge, public policy and welfare. If it is a practice-led proposal, then you need to state what you think the role of your creative practice will be within the project.

Research questions

It would be useful if you make your research questions explicit by listing them. Think about the feasibility of answering each of them. Is there sufficient data/information to answer them? If not, can you generate sufficiently adequate primary data within the time frame of the research degree programme for which you are applying?

PhD applicants should also think about whether the research questions signal your expected contribution to the literature and reflect the potential originality of your proposed work.

Literature review

This is where you demonstrate your knowledge and provide an integrated overview of the progress made by other scholars and practitioners on the topic of your proposal. This section should provide a conceptual framework for the reader so that your research questions and methodology can be better understood. Try to be selective and up-to-date in presenting the literature relevant to your thesis. In other words, do not just write about any old author or paper you come across but current landmark studies, major debates, controversies, contributions etc. Use keywords relating to your chosen area/theme to search Google Scholar for the latest relevant publications.

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You should provide a critical assessment of the existing literature on the topic from your reading so far. This means not only presenting the relevant literature accurately with reference to published sources but also comparing and contrasting different views and assessing, for example, the validity and consistency of various elements of the relevant literature.

One of the most common problems in research degree proposals is the disconnection between the literature review and the proposed research area. You must avoid this by, for example, considering the following questions:

- Where does the literature review lead you in terms of your own proposal? Try to relate your research questions to the literature review.
- Where does your proposal stand in relation to the literature?

There are additional questions that applicants should consider. For example:

- Have you identified a gap in the literature and are your research questions formulated to fill in those gaps?
Or
- Are the research questions designed to investigate the validity/invalidity of a paradigm or an established theory?
Or
- Are you proposing research in a new or unexploited territory?

Methodology

This is the section where you discuss the means through which you will answer your research questions and defend your thesis. The following are some of the issues you may want to consider and discuss in this section.

- **Frame your hypothesis:** What is your 'thesis' (a position that can be defended by substantiated argument) and how will you test it? Theses typically emerge from a careful interrogation of the secondary and primary literature, so your thesis may be sketchy at this early stage.
- **Design of your research:** How will you examine and/or critique and/or develop etc. the relevant conceptual/theoretical framework(s)? What processes and stages do you envisage in order to answer your research questions fully, and achieve your research objectives?
- **Data collection:** What data and information are needed? Qualitative or quantitative? What data collection method(s) will you use? Are the data and information you need available and accessible? If yes, describe them in detail. If not, how will you generate the necessary data? Do you envisage fieldwork for data collection? If you aim to collect primary data by interviews or

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questionnaires, consider the ethical implications of this as well as the time when you need to apply for ethics approval.

- Measurement and analysis: What techniques and tools will you use to measure key indicators and analyse data and information?

General point

A research degree proposal is just that – a proposal. If you are accepted to study for a Masters by Research or PhD, a number of aspects of the initial proposal are likely to change in relation to the progress of the research. This is a healthy and normal process relating to the expansion of your knowledge, understanding and skills through research and critical analysis.

Using this guidance to draft a proposal of how you see the project at the moment. A well considered proposal will increase the chances of your application being successful and will help you get off to a flying start on the exciting journey of discovery represented by research degree studies in the School of Creative Arts.