

Writing a Ph.D. Research Proposal for LiFTS:

Guidance for prospective Ph.D. applicants.

A proposal for a Ph.D. research project for LiFTS will probably be around 3- 4 sides of A4, double-spaced. It should offer a working title for the project and explain clearly what it is: describing the topic, subject or area, and what form the finished dissertation will take (see below, for discussion of the different outputs for a critical versus a creative Ph.D.).

The proposal should also articulate:

- a) **research questions** (what questions, themes or problems the project is investigating);
- b) **research context** (what the current research field looks like; what contribution your project will make; why you think your project is original)
- c) **research methods** (what activities and methods you will employ to carry out your research; and you may also include an indication of the time-table for your research to show how you would complete the project within three years).

It should also contain a bibliography of perhaps 10-20 entries, in which the key texts of this research area are listed. Some will be **primary texts** (books, films, plays, productions, works of art) that will be the focus of the project's critical attention; others will be **'secondary' works** of criticism, which are the existing landmark critical works in this particular research field or area.

A Critical or Creative Ph.D. ?

In our Department of LiFTS (Literature, Film and Theatre Studies), Ph.D. projects tend to fall into two main types:

- 1) A critical (sometimes called 'desk-based') dissertation of 60 - 80,000 words
- 2) a creative practice Ph.D. project consisting usually of two parts: a **creative component** (which might be, for example a novel or other piece of creative writing; theatre production, script or performance of some kind; a film, or screenplay; or a documentation of creative practice, such as filmed documentation of workshops, or a portfolio of different documents which evidence a creative process, or the creation of an artefact, event, performance, exhibition etc) **plus a written, critical component**

reflecting and commenting on the creative practice, which at Ph.D. level will be a maximum of 40,000 words.

In your **opening sentence or paragraph**, you should indicate clearly **which of the above two types of doctoral dissertation you are proposing**; and what you envisage the 'output' (or outputs) will be (e.g. a critical dissertation of 80,000 words; or in the case of a creative project, whether you will be creating a theatre production, screenplay, documentary film or other creative output plus a written critical component of max 40,000 words).

The Proposal

Whichever type of Ph.D. you envisage carrying out, whether critical or creative, your research proposal needs to cover the following key areas:

1. Research Questions (500 – 750 words)

What is your project is going to be **about**? So, firstly, what is the topic or field of study (e.g. the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez; sonnet form; magical realism; British novels of the 1980s; horror movies of the Cold War period; disability in literature etc . . .?) **The topic or subject of your project should be indicated in your working title, and also explained or described in the opening paragraph, along with the explanation of whether this is a critical or a creative dissertation(see above).**

Then, **what are your research questions?** In other words, what more specifically are you trying to find out?

To help you write this section, think about these questions: what has prompted you to embark on this study? What are you trying to find out? What is your angle on this material? Or, more specifically, what is the question or problem that you are going to explore in the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, magical realism or the portrayal of disability in literature?

It is natural that your 'research question at this early stage may be a little elusive, so don't worry if you are not entirely certain. Pursuing, honing and further defining your research question will continue as you work on your doctoral project; the question or questions may shift as you progress and for some people, they may not become entirely clear until they are quite far on in the process.

But, the very fact that you are at the point of writing a research proposal, means that there must be some initial itch that you want to scratch – something that interests or intrigues you, that perhaps other critics, writers or artists have touched upon, but not completely followed up or thoroughly investigated. Being interested in an idea or subject, but finding that either not much has been written on it, or that you disagree or see omissions in what has already been written, is a classic (and helpful) starting-point for a critical Ph.D. project. The first question you are likely to be asked at your viva, at the very end of the Ph.D. process, is ‘why did you write this study/embark on this project?’ There is always something a doctoral dissertation sets out to discover, or some gap in human knowledge thinking or theorizing that a Ph.D. seeks to fill - and here in your research proposal you are making the first attempt to articulate what that is.

And wanting to discover or explore something is also at the heart of a creative Ph.D. - although with a creative process the explication of the research questions may be a process that can only come after the completion (or near completion) of the creative work. So a research proposal for a creative project may require particular flexibility from you at this stage – nobody will necessarily expect you to know *precisely* what the research question is at this point, because a lot of your critical thinking will tend to emerge out of the creative work during or after doing it; however, you should still certainly have, and be able to convey, a strong sense of what your creative urge is leading you towards. Describing what you want to make, write or do creatively will necessarily bring into focus questions that can be researched and examined. If I know, for example, that I want to write a piece of Young Adult fiction where the protagonist is a mouse, then on reflection, even at this early stage, I can see, and articulate, that at least in part I will be exploring the portrayal of animals as protagonists in fiction, and how that may fit into (or challenge) the forms and generic conventions of YA fiction. Other themes may be clear to me depending on the kind of work or story I know I want to create. In this way research questions can arise naturally from the creative idea that I know I want to pursue.

On the other hand, you might have a burning question, or set of questions, that you don’t fully have the answer to (e.g. how has the digital world affected our relationship to words? How has it affected human relationships and sense of self? What resources or new ways of writing or storytelling or what new literary forms does the digital world offer the novelist?) If you are interested in pursuing a degree in Creative Writing, your exploration of these questions may be through writing a piece of fiction. In this case the fiction is inspired by or **comes out of these questions**; so in this situation, rather than the question emerging from (or after) a creative urge, the research question is *leading and inspiring* the creative practice. This is perhaps a less common way round, but it is an absolutely valid, and potentially very fruitful way of working. Either approach is fine; it will depend on you, the specifics of your project, and how your critical/creative juices work.

Defining your research questions involves you **defining (i.e. setting limits) to your project.** Every good creative or critical project needs boundaries, and the research proposal is your first attempt at setting them (again, the boundaries and the process of definition will probably be an ongoing process especially in your first year of study, but here is where you start). If you describe your project or research question as investigating the portrayal of love in literature, you have obviously set the boundaries too wide. If you articulate your research question as how does Shakespeare portray love in sonnet number 37, the boundaries are too narrow. If you articulate your research question as what linguistic strategies Shakespeare and other early modern poets employ in sonnets to evoke love, sexuality and transgender experience – you are probably getting closer to what a Ph.D. project should look like: a three-year project.

This is an important point – a Ph.D. has to be doable within three years, and yet also offer you something meaty to get your teeth into. It should also, by the end, make you an expert in something. If you are inclined to a literary critical Ph.D. this is likely to equate to a period in literature (post-1945 literature) and/or perhaps a genre of literature (poetry) and/or a region or tradition of literature (British poetry). It may make you an expert in documentary film, or the novel, or verbatim theatre or contemporary arts practice in whatever field you are in. Thinking about what you want your Ph.D. to do for you, perhaps in career terms, once you have completed it – what kind of expert do you want to end up being? - might be helpful, depending on where you are in your professional life. On the other hand, career goals may not be the priority for you; there are other important considerations. You want to spend three years on something that is a genuine passion and burning desire. This way you will maintain your motivation, and you will produce the very best work you are capable of. Otherwise you are spending three years of your precious time and money on something that you may lose faith with, get bored of, or just not like very much.

All the above will deal with the WHAT of your project – its topic/area; its form and outputs; its research questions; its boundaries and definition of its scope.

This then brings us to WHY? And this often relates to **research context.**

2. **Research Context (approx. 500 – 750 words)**

Why do you want to contribute to this area of knowledge? Why does your project offer something new to human knowledge, thinking and understanding in this field? Why is your idea original?

To answer the above, you will need to consider the **research context.** What critical (or perhaps creative or artistic) *conversation* are you joining, through your doctoral research? Who are the key practitioners or critics already working in this field, and how have they staked out the territory? What are the dominant theories and theorists who have created

this field as an area of intellectual enquiry, and how would you position yourself in relation to them? Are you proposing to bring a new theoretical lens to a subject (a feminist or eco-critical analysis of the works of Coleridge, or Shakespeare for example? A post-colonial view of the works of James Joyce, or Debbie Tucker Green? A Marxist analysis of Sarah Kane? A new poetics of documentary film, or an original deconstruction of the aesthetics and praxis of novel form . . .?)

Your proposal therefore should discuss the existing field, and briefly outline its key landmarks, and what major work already exists. You can then begin to indicate where your project offers something new, or answers a question that has not been posed before, or has not been fully answered before. What is the gap on the bookshelf, of all the books in the field that engage with topics/area closest to yours, that your book would occupy? (Imagining your Ph.D. as a book is motivating, but also helps you understand this idea of making an original contribution to a research context or conversation).

So, in this **WHY** section on research context, you should outline the current research field; and thereby show how your project fills a gap and offers a new and original contribution. Finally you can indicate why this matters: what's the significance of your project? Why is it important? What areas of human knowledge, thinking, insight and experience will be expanded and improved by this project?

Finally, the third part of the proposal is **HOW** – how are you going to do this project? What activities will you need to carry out, and how will you organise your three years to complete the task? This brings us to your methods.

3. **Research Methods (500 -750 words)**

Your **research methods** will vary hugely depending on your project. A literary critical Ph.D. may be fairly slender on research methods, but your project still may involve visiting archives or libraries, museums, galleries or special collections. It might involve interviewing writers or people involved in one way or another with the literature or themes you are studying.

Creative practice dissertations may involve all kinds of arts practices: from writing a script, or a set of poems, to filming, sound recording, devising a performance, and other 'making' of all kinds. You should describe the activities and processes as best you can that you envisage carrying out in order to complete and deliver the creative output, or the creative process that is part of your project.

As we have already mentioned, both creative and critical doctoral dissertations will engage with theory and theoretical perspectives of various kinds, to some degree (some more, some less, but all will do so to some extent). This may be the most daunting aspect of a

Ph.D. if your background in the subject hitherto has been more creative or professional rather than academic. However, it is an aspect of gaining a doctorate that you can't ignore. Your supervisor will be there to guide you. But you need to indicate some approximate sense of what kind of theoretical viewpoint or viewpoints you are likely to apply to your subject matter.

Your theoretical position may influence your methodology. So, for example, historicist approaches to (for example) the Jacobean playwrights will involve more research in archives and museums than a 'formalist' one, because historicism seeks to explore how the historical period and context relates to the artwork, whereas more formalist approaches will look at the artwork as a sealed system to be interpreted, distinct and separate from its historical context. Therefore your theoretical position is part of your project's **methodology** – the 'knowledge-shaping' system that will form the way in which you approach your topic, and the activities you will need to engage in, to answer your research questions.

HOW also includes your approximate time-table for completing your project within three years – for example:

Year One: broadly, what do you aim to achieve in term one? Term two? Term three? How will you time-table all your research activities? How much will you aim to have written/made and completed by the end of year one?

Year Two: what phases of research will you aim to do, and complete in year two? What re-drafting and polishing will you do this year?

Year Three: working backwards from your final submission deadline – when will you complete the entire dissertation? You must allow time for rewriting the draft thesis; for polishing; for checking all your footnotes and bibliography; for final pieces of work such as the abstract and acknowledgement, and contents page, and for a final (very important) proof-read.

4. **BIBLIOGRAPHY: (list of 10-15 major works, both primary and secondary)**

All academic work shows its sources and reference points.

Your Ph.D. research proposal should include a careful, accurate list of key works, arranged alphabetically by author surname, with full details of publisher, date, and place of publication.

CHECK-LIST:

1. Have you got **a title** for your project? (this is a working, or provisional, title; we know it may change – but attempting to articulate a clear title is a helpful way of defining what you are doing)

2. Have you said clearly **what kind of outputs** you will be producing?
3. Have you described **the topic** and area of your project- what it's about, and the works or area of study that you are exploring?
4. Have you **defined its boundaries and scope**, so that it looks doable in 3 years?
5. Have you articulated some **research questions or problems?**
6. Have you indicated **the theoretical viewpoint** or approach that you might employ?
7. Have you sketched in **the research context** and shown why your proposed idea promises to be an original contribution to knowledge?
8. Have you indicated **research activities and methods?**
9. Have you included a **brief and indicative time-table** for completion in three years?
10. Have you included **a concise but accurate bibliography** listing your key primary texts/resources, and also the major secondary or critical landmarks in your field?

Remember, this is a research *proposal* – it's a starting-point, not an absolute or finished document, and many aspects of your dissertation will evolve and change as you progress through your studies. But this will give you a firm foundation, and will allow the Department to make the best possible decision about whether your project is suitable for LiFTS.

We hope these notes are helpful. If you have further enquiries, please contact the Graduate Administrator.

Best of luck!

Dr Elizabeth Kuti

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