

The Open University, Department of English

Advice on Preparing a Research Proposal for a PhD Thesis in English

To be taken on as a PhD student, it is usually assumed that you will already have completed an MA in a relevant subject. This means that you will already have experience of writing a dissertation of between 10,000 and 20,000 words. The possession of an MA indicates (a) that you know how to use libraries effectively to locate relevant materials, (b) that you can prepare and write up a sustained and logically structured academic argument in clear prose, and (c) that you can present your work well, using appropriate scholarly conventions. In short, successful completion of an MA dissertation shows that you are capable of undertaking further independent work at postgraduate level. This is why it is usually expected that anyone taken on to do a PhD will have an MA.

A PhD is a much longer piece of work, usually running to between 70,000 and 100,000 words. As with an MA, it needs to be well-written and presented in an appropriately scholarly fashion, but it differs in that it must not only advance a coherent argument, but must represent an original and substantial contribution to knowledge in its field. Unlike an MA, a copy of a PhD will be placed in the library of the awarding institution, and made available on request to other scholars, who may cite its findings in the way a published book or article would be cited.

Deciding on a topic

One of the points to stress at the outset is that the range of possible research topics in literature is very wide indeed. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, students sometimes find it difficult to make up their minds what it is they want to investigate. If you feel, momentarily, that you can't decide what might interest you, you could try making a list of things that you would like to learn more about. Once you have a list of five or six things, you should take some time to read around each of them a bit, trying to think not only which seems most enticing and likely to hold your interest, but which of them your previous study has best equipped you to pursue. By 'reading around' I don't mean reading aimlessly, or in a desultory fashion. On the contrary, you should be reading quickly and purposively, with questions in your mind, scanning material that seems potentially relevant to your areas of interest and getting an overview of it. The questions you should be asking include:

- what are some of the key studies in this field?
- what kinds of approaches have been taken to the subject?
- what are the key issues and questions in this field?
- are there any possible gaps, or approaches yet to be explored?

Whatever your area of interest may be, it is likely that you can follow it up – providing only that the materials you need are available to you. This is a crucial early part of deciding on a topic. Indeed, if you discover that you can't obtain easy access to the necessary materials, you may need to switch to another topic. Thus, for example,

it is no use deciding to work on a little-known writer unless you are certain that you can borrow or buy copies of the key primary texts, or have easy access to electronic copies of them, or live close enough to a non-lending research library to be able to do intensive reading and note-taking there.

Some students want to explore some aspect of the work of a particular author, whether well known or not. Others are interested in an interdisciplinary theme or issue, or may want to address some historical or literary-historical problem, tracing it through the writings of selected authors. Others, again, want to test how a given theoretical approach may be applied to a particular text or group of texts, or may indeed want to focus on a theoretical issue itself.

In order to turn any one of these broad areas of interest into a viable research topic, it must be focused on a particular, manageable body of material. Nothing is more fatal than to attempt blanket coverage of a large field – let's say a topic such as 'Narrative Technique in the Eighteenth-Century Novel', or 'The Representation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Poetry'. The objection to such a topic is not merely that you could not hope to cover it effectively in the time and space at your disposal, but also that it would be difficult to achieve much that would be of interest (either in terms of original ideas or of factual discovery) in such a broad field.

A good general tip is: *choose a relatively narrow and sharply defined topic which nevertheless opens out into large and important issues*. Thus, for example, 'The Use of Parallel Narrations as a Narrative Technique in Richardson's Novels' or 'Tennyson and the Education of Women', would be more suitable topics than the larger ones just cited. Remember, too, that there are many lesser-known authors whose works would repay study. Indeed an out-of-the-way topic provided it offers serious interest and the materials are available to carry it through, has certain advantages over a well-worn or middle-of-the-road one.

Turning a topic into an argument

Having decided on your topic and limited its scope, the next step is to *give it a direction*. The way to do this is to develop out of your topic a set of *questions* you want to answer, or *problems* that you want to solve. Doing research is not about gathering information or data for its own sake: the information or data is presented in order to answer questions, in order to try to change what is thought about something. Every good thesis will take the form of an *argument*, of an attempt to prove or establish something by means of analysis and presentation of *evidence*.

There are many possible ways of turning a topic into an argument. To give some examples, your thesis might be one of the following:

- an argument for or against an existing critic (or critical position) in relation to the author or group of works you are studying;
- an argument about the importance of a particular influence on a writer, or influence exerted by him or her;
- an argument for the importance of some hitherto little-regarded piece of evidence to the discussion of the work of some author or group of authors;
- an argument about the value of a new theoretical approach to a text or set of texts;
- an argument turning upon the nature of the genre of a work or group of works;
- an argument about the significance of a little-known or undervalued author or work;

- an argument about some historical or literary-historical aspect of literature;
- an argument about the adequacy of existing scholarly texts of a particular work;
- an argument showing how a particular theme or concept may be related to a group of texts;
- an argument bringing together some aspect of a well-known literary text with a lesser-known text or with other media.

By framing your topic in some way such as this, you will find it easier to move on to the next stage, which is finding a way of structuring your thesis.

Working out a structure

The first principle here is related to one we have already discussed: choose a topic which is capable of being dealt with adequately within the allocated word limit. This may seem like a counsel of perfection; partly because it is hard to know at the outset what ‘being dealt with adequately’ means, but also because any work on any worthwhile research topic is liable to develop once it is under way. One way of dealing with this problem is to look for areas where you might need to be flexible, areas which might be cut back or even omitted altogether if other, more relevant, material needed to be included.

You may think that 80,000 words sounds like a lot, but you would be wrong. Of one thing you can be certain: any topic you choose will be subject to a version of Parkinson’s Law whereby it will expand to fill, and more than fill, your word-allowance.

Thinking carefully at the outset about the question of length is one of the best ways of helping you to structure your thesis. Any thesis will have, at least, an introduction, middle, and conclusion. Obviously an introduction is important: you need to tell your reader what you are intending to do, and why. A conclusion is equally important: it should briefly summarize the significance of what you have done and, if appropriate, suggest how the subject might be extended.

In between the introduction and the conclusion comes the body of work in which you *assemble* the evidence, *analyse* it, and put forward your *argument* based on that analysis. This middle section would need to be divided into chapters, each of which would represent a major step in the development of the argument, and each of which would be long enough to accommodate the amount of evidence and the detailed analysis required. For an eventual PhD of 80,000 words, you might plan to devote about 4,000 words each to an introduction and conclusion, with something like seven or eight chapters of 8,000-10,000 words each.

Preparing a research proposal

Assuming that you have an idea for a possible research project that is sufficiently tightly defined so that it is do-able in the time and space available, and further assuming that you have checked that you can get access to the necessary materials, you need to write a research proposal. This will be the key part of any application to do research at doctoral level.

A PhD research proposal should be a document of not more than about 2,000 or 3,000 words in length. The key thing about a PhD proposal – and in which it differs from a proposal for an MA dissertation – is that *it needs to indicate how the research findings or argument will add significantly to what is already known about the*

subject. To do this it needs to set out in some detail what relevant work already exists, and how what is proposed will add to, modify, or challenge the work of other scholars – in other words, how it will contribute to knowledge.

In very broad terms, there are two ways in which a thesis on a literary topic may be said to ‘contribute to knowledge’. One is by finding and analysing texts or documents that have not previously been known about or studied. Finding such material in literary studies is perhaps less common than it might be in a subject like history, where vast untapped archives remain to be explored, but it is certainly not unheard of. There is much to be done in the field of publishing history, for example, or in tracing the circulation of texts and their reception histories. Similarly, there are writers who for one reason or another have dropped from sight, or have not yet attracted scholarly interest, but whose works are well worth study.

The other, and more common way of contributing to knowledge in literary studies is by presenting a new argument about a given writer, or set of literary works, or about some historical or theoretical issue, or some theme that is relevant to literature. The argument needs to be ‘new’ in the sense that it has not been put forward in these terms previously. How you present it will demonstrate your ability to engage productively with the work of other scholars in the field, and your ability to exercise independent critical judgement. You will need to be able to marshal and explicate existing theoretical, literary-critical or historical arguments in a coherent way, but even more importantly to explore and analyse them from your own distinctive perspective. The concept of ‘independence’ is crucial to research at the level of a PhD. You will need to show how your work relates to and builds upon that of other scholars in your field, but without seeming derivative, or merely repeating the work of others. In short, by the time you have completed a PhD you will be able to convince a reader that your work changes (or has the potential to change) the way in which we think about the subject.

The purpose of your research proposal is to show that you have a promising line of research, one that is likely to contribute to knowledge in the way I’ve just described, and to indicate how you hope this line of research will develop. Think of it as an exercise in persuasion: you are trying to convince the reader of this document that you have evidence (although as yet unexploited) to support the argument you propose to advance. You should present the proposal in continuous prose, but arranged under a set of headings such as the following.

<i>Title</i>	Do not feel bound by this (it can be altered in the finished product).
<i>Argument</i>	State as concisely as possible what your subject is and what your argument will be.
<i>Materials</i>	Go into more detail about your materials, i.e. the chief primary and secondary sources you will use and discuss, giving some indication as to their aptness for your project, and how easy it will be to get hold of them.
<i>Chapters</i>	Show how you think your discussion of your topic may be organized, chapter by chapter, in the final product. This provisional chapter structure is very important, so make sure it is clear to the reader how many chapters there are going to be,

what is going to go into each, how they will connect with each other, and how long each is planned to be. If possible give provisional chapter titles.

You should be alluding throughout this section to the main secondary literature on your subject (historical, critical, theoretical, etc.), not just to demonstrate that you are aware of it, but to indicate how you might use it. So, for example, you might be planning to take issue with what some critic has said, or you may want to show how your work relates to, and perhaps extends or qualifies, some existing scholarship on your subject.

Conclusion Clearly this will be provisional at this stage. You have not yet argued your case, merely outlined the materials and likely directions of your argument. You might also like to indicate at this stage what problems you think you might encounter along the way.

Bibliography A list of the key primary and secondary texts you intend using should be appended to the proposal – though, again, this list will be provisional and will certainly expand once you begin serious work.

The advice given here has been adapted from the chapter by W. R. Owens on ‘Planning, writing and presenting a dissertation or thesis’, in *The Handbook to Literary Research*, second edition, edited by Delia da Sousa Correa and W. R. Owens (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 187–203. The whole book will be of help to anyone embarking on postgraduate research in literature.