PhD Application Guidelines

These informal guidelines will help you to draw up your proposal to conduct research towards a PhD in English Literature at Kingston. The purpose of your Research Proposal is to help us to evaluate your application and to help you to make a coherent case for undertaking research. It is the central document against which your application will be assessed, so it is important that you follow these guidelines carefully.

Most of the guidelines in this document also apply to applications to study towards an MA by Research. For details of the how the application to study towards an MA by research differs from a PhD application, see section 5 below. For more information, please contact the Postgraduate Research Coordinator for English Literature.

1. The English Literature PhD at Kingston

Wherever you choose to do it, a PhD is a substantial investment in time and effort, requiring a sustained period of intellectual and creative work. At Kingston, we aim to guide and support you through that process, which normally takes three years full time, or six years part time, in four main ways. These are supervision, research training, access to resources, and participation in events.

**Supervision** takes place on a regular basis throughout your period of study. You will be assigned to a supervision team made up of a Principal Supervisor, who is primarily responsible for your intellectual and creative development, as well as up to two secondary supervisors who will offer additional support and expertise.

**Research Training** is an important part of the Kingston PhD. You will get research training in practical and intellectual research methods through seminar series provided both at the university and subject level. You will also be encouraged to take part in training sessions being held elsewhere, such as at the British Library or the Institute of English Studies.

**Access to Resources:** Kingston PhD students have access to a wide range of locally, nationally, and internationally important research resources, ranging from the physical and electronic resources provided by our own library to the resources of the British Library.
Events take place regularly at Kingston University, ranging from poets and novelists reading from their work to leading academics from around the world presenting their research. You will also be encouraged to make use of the many cultural events taking place throughout London every day.

2. Getting Started on your Proposal

A doctoral thesis, when completed, should be a genuine contribution to scholarship. This means it should offer fresh insights into your chosen topic and should add to the body of knowledge in the field. Although within the proposal you can only intimate directions you hope your work will take, your knowledge, enthusiasm, and confidence that you can add to this body of knowledge should shine through.

We realise that writing a Research Proposal may seem difficult since at this stage you may well have only a vague idea concerning the area in which you want to work. It might seem unfair to expect you to produce a detailed plan of how you see your research developing when you have not yet actually embarked on it seriously. However, you do need to persuade the readers of your application that you merit serious consideration as a potential research student. This means that your proposal must be well-written and well-researched; it is not something that you can dash off in fifteen minutes. When you are asked for interview, your proposal will provide the basis for any discussion, so it should show evidence of solid knowledge and suggest serious reflection upon a topic. Certainly you will be asked to go through your project with us in some detail. You should, therefore, invest substantial time and effort into your proposal.

Some applicants start the process of writing a proposal with a very clear idea of what they what to research. Others know the approximate area, but have not yet formulated a precise research question or writing goal. In either case, you will need to read extensively in your field before starting to write your proposal to ensure that what you intend to research is original, substantial, and achievable. Sometimes, on further reading, even the clearest ideas turn out to be already well-established. Once you have a good sense of the field you want to study, and you are reasonably happy that the topic you want to work on will be original and can be completed within three years, you are ready to start writing your proposal.

The proposal is not intended to represent a final statement. Where appropriate, it might well undergo substantial revision during and after the application process. There are several useful guides to writing doctoral theses that you could consult before writing your proposal. These include, How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors, by Estelle M. Phillips and D.S. Pugh, 5th edition (Open University Press, 2010), The PhD Application Handbook: Revised Edition, by Peter J. Bentley (Open University Press, 2012) and Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation, by Patrick Dunleavy (Palgrave, 2003).

Your research proposal should be clearly written and impeccably presented, without errors of grammar, spelling, or punctuation. All references should be presented in accordance with a recognised academic style such as Chicago, Harvard, or MHRA. The length may vary somewhat depending on the
topic, but it is unlikely that a complete research proposal could be outlined in a document of less than 2,000 words. Proposals in excess of 5,000 words are almost certainly too long.

3. What your proposal should achieve

English Literature theses are 80,000 words in length, not counting notes, bibliography, or appendices, so your proposal should show that you are proposing a project of that length.

You proposal should focus on a specific topic, author, or theme and should show evidence of reading and thought beyond MA level. It should offer a fresh way of thinking about your chosen area. There are a number of ways of doing this. For example, you could focus on the less well-known texts of a particular author or put forward an original reading, perhaps from a theorised perspective, of that author’s works. Or you might seek to analyse certain works and/or authors within a particular cultural/historical framework so as to shed new light on them. Whichever angle you take in your argument, your proposal should show an up-to-date knowledge of both primary and secondary materials relevant to your topic.

Your proposal should also reveal knowledge of methodologies currently used within the field of literary and cultural studies. You may not, at this stage, wish to commit yourself to a particular approach—but you should at least flag up an indication of how the adoption of a particular theoretical perspective (e.g. feminist, postcolonial), or how the application of a particular theorist’s ideas (e.g. those of Bakhtin or Foucault), might bear fruit in your argument. If your research requires access to manuscripts or archives, you should make this clear in your proposal.

Your proposal should include the following:

- Title
- Introduction, which must include a clear thesis statement and/or research question
- Justification of choice of area/topic
- Explanation of the originality of your research proposal
- Your methodology/academic approach/theoretical perspective
- A review of existing literature in the field (to indicate your knowledge of the field)
- A chapter by chapter breakdown showing how you envisage your argument will develop (this is a provisional draft only, since we fully understand that further reading and thought will result in changes to the organisation and structure of your thesis).
- A bibliography

4. The Application Process

Before you submit your application, you are encouraged to informally discuss your proposal with members of academic staff working in your field. If you do not already have a potential supervisor in mind, you should read the staff profile pages to see if there is a suitable potential supervisor or
supervisors for your thesis—you should be someone who is a specialist in the broad area in which you wish to work. You can find out more about staff research interests at
http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/faculty/staff/

When you are ready, you should submit your full research proposal and a CV to the Research Administrator at the address below. Once this is received, it will be passed to appropriate members of academic staff in the Department of English Literature for their consideration. In some cases, it may be decided at that point that your thesis cannot be supervised at Kingston, in which case you will be informed of that decision at that point. If it is felt that your proposal could be supervised at Kingston, you will then, in most cases, be invited to attend an interview, after which a final decision will be made on whether to make you an offer of a place. If you are offered a place and you decide to accept, you will be asked to complete a formal application at that point.

Please note that research proposals are complex documents and may need to be read and discussed by several members of staff. This means that it may take several weeks to process your application.

5. The MA by Research

Sections 1 to 4 above also apply to the MA Research, with the following differences. An MA by Research typically takes one year of full-time study (or two years of part-time study) to complete, and leads to a dissertation of approximately 20,000 words in length, not counting notes, bibliography, or appendices. While there is no requirement comparable to a PhD thesis to make an original contribution to knowledge, your dissertation must demonstrate your mastery of your chosen subject, and will be based on extensive research, be carefully organised and argued, and will engage with current relevant scholarly debates. Your proposal should focus on a specific topic, author, or theme and should show evidence of reading and thought beyond degree level.

Your proposal should include the following:

- Title
- Introduction, which must include a clear thesis statement and/or research question
- Justification of choice of area/topic
- Your methodology/academic approach/theoretical perspective
- A review of existing literature in the field (to indicate your knowledge of the field)
- A chapter by chapter breakdown showing how you envisage your argument will develop (this is a provisional draft only, since we fully understand that further reading and thought will result in changes to the organisation and structure of your thesis).
- A bibliography

The length of your proposal may vary somewhat depending on the topic, but should fall within the range of 1,500-3,000 words.
6. Further Information

For any further information or to submit a proposal, please contact:

Research Administrator,
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
Kingston University,
Penrhyn Road,
Kingston upon Thames,
Surrey KT1 2EE
fassresearch-info@kingston.ac.uk
http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/degrees/