

How to Write an Arts PhD Proposal

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The first thing to remember about a PhD proposal is that institutions are run by people, and people are susceptible to 'blagging'. That is, there is a game that you are trying to play (being the lead runner in a competition for money and places) and you must, however much you dislike it, learn to play the game well to win. This is usually the same as when you write an essay: minimising the errors and potential criticisms pays dividends in the long run, even if it takes a lot of effort now.

There are, in my opinion, four main criteria to a PhD proposal, which reflect the final outcome of the qualification:

- Evidence of originality
- Evidence of a coherent, well-researched project
- Evidence of a suitable theme and topic
- Evidence of being able to complete on time/a solid work ethic

Whilst these are in many ways interwoven throughout the project and proposal, it is worth separating them to make sure that you show them in the proposal. It is also worth bearing in mind that there is often a gap between the proposal and the completed project; it is very rare that three or four years down the line the project is identical to the starting point.

Evidence of originality

One of the criteria for a PhD is that it is an original piece of research. This may be accomplished by seeing what is out there already and getting to grips with what is missing from them. LION or OCLC Firstsearch are both useful from this point of view as they indicate the key subject areas covered by books and articles. Get hold of these sources and make sure that you know the area reasonably well before you write the draft version of your proposal. If you are repeating what

somebody else has said, then the PhD is a 'no-go' before you even start. This would appear in your final proposal as a brief 'literature review', showing that a) you are aware of what has been written and b) you have placed your project in the gaps that these sources do not cover. For instance, if there have been articles written on the topic, but not many books, you could say something like this: 'Whilst x and y have written articles upon this subject, the only monograph in the area, z 's *Book Title* focuses on a small section of this, which this project would expand upon'. A good PhD says (as I have been told) a lot about a little, not a little about a lot.

Evidence of a coherent, well-researched project

This is usually accomplished by means of a brief chapter summary and a strong thesis statement. The selection panel want to see that this is, in fact, a PhD proposal and not an extended undergraduate dissertation. This indicates not only that you know what you are talking about, but also that you have a solid plan for completion. The project has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it makes an argument; and it quite blatantly fits in with the department (for example, don't waffle about law unless you expect to do an English/Law project). Furthermore, explicitly relate your theoretical backdrop to the literature, saying exactly how you plan to merge them together.

Although this is more part of a 'personal statement' than a 'proposal', it can also be useful if you say who in the department would be a good supervisor and that this is the reason for wanting to do the PhD at that institution. (There are two approaches here, both of which have pros and cons: 1. pick somebody who has published research in the field, not somebody who you like, or 2. pick somebody who you know you can work with, even if their interest in the field is tangential.) Knowing this, and being able to justify your choice, helps no end with the funding applications.

Evidence of a suitable theme and topic

Evidence of a suitable theme and topic takes three different forms. Firstly, it is part of the 'originality' criteria (you do not repeat what somebody else has written) and, secondly, it is

appropriate to the department (they have somebody who could supervise you and appropriate research resources, such as the National Library of Wales for Aberystwyth University). However, the third form ties into the 'coherent project idea' and 'completion' criteria. You have to show that this is a viable project that is not going to take fifteen years to write and that it all fits together nicely into a tight little bundle called a thesis. Assigning appropriate word counts to chapters (normally between five and eight, incidentally) is a useful way of doing this. This way, you are showing the panel that you are not only aware of how much work you have to do in each section, but that you have a coherent plan. Don't say you can write about the entirety of Jung's relation to literature in 2,000 words, and don't say that it will take you 50,000 words either.

Evidence of being able to complete on time/a solid work ethic

Whilst most of the evidence of this will come from your referees, it is always helpful if you can allude to it in your proposal. If there is room, a brief timetable indicating the proposed completion of each chapter will help, showing that you know how much you can do, and how quickly.

Finally, get somebody to proofread the proposal carefully (I am happy to do this). Mistakes at this stage are pointless and are tantamount to giving the selection panel a reason to turn you down. Below is a mock version of a PhD proposal based on my thesis that has annotations to show you what I mean. Just hold the mouse over the highlighted text and my comment will pop up:

'Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature'

This project addresses the relationship between nihilism and postmodernism in relation to literature of the late twentieth century. Despite the fact that many critics, such as Christopher Norris and Anthony Harrigan, have already observed this, their arguments are predicated upon the idea that postmodernism and nihilism are equivalent. This is, in fact, inaccurate inasmuch as

Comment [WS1]: This title is short, sweet and to the point: the project must match the title, which must neither be too short nor too long-winded.

Comment [WS2]: Note the use of continual present tense throughout – this makes the project seem more viable. Also, it avoids the use of the heavy-handed passive voice. It is different to saying 'will address' (future) and 'is addressed by this project' (passive).

Comment [WS3]: A strong opening sentence that tells the panel exactly what the project does.

Comment [WS4]: This shows evidence of contextual knowledge.

Comment [WS5]: This is always a good word to use!

postmodernism is explicitly linked by Jean-François Lyotard to the sublime, rather than nihilism, in *The Postmodern Condition*. This project negotiates between these two seemingly opposed concepts in order to accomplish three objectives:

- It postulates a form of nihilism that is not fundamentally negative because nihilism and the sublime are linked within Enlightenment humanism.
- It addresses the claims and counter-claims of those for and against postmodernism in relation to nihilism, arguing that both nihilism and the sublime appear within postmodern theory.
- It explicitly relates postmodern theory to postmodern literature, demonstrating the relationship between nihilism and the sublime in relation to four key areas of postmodern literature: apocalypse, absurdity, absence, and space.

The project will achieve these objectives through eight 10,000-word chapters (with a projected timetable of three months for each), which develop the argument in three distinct sections. It begins with the history of nihilism and the sublime, to the relationship between the two in postmodernism, and finally on to the literary applications of this. The proposed structure is:

Preface/Introduction (2,000 words)

1. History of Nihilism

This chapter gives a brief history of nihilism in the early nineteenth century, looking particularly at the work of Johan Goudbloom and Karen L. Carr. It offers two conceptions of the history of nihilism, one based upon a philosophical discourse (genealogical) and the other upon the historical developments within nihilism (chronological).

2. History of the Sublime

Moving from early conceptions of the sublime, such as Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* (Oxford UP, 1998) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (Clarendon Press, 1957), to the way

Comment [WS6]: This shows further evidence of contextual knowledge.

Comment [WS7]: This provides the theoretical backdrop to the proposal.

Comment [WS8]: This demonstrates knowledge of the critical arguments and ties them into the theoretical aspect of the project.

Comment [WS9]: Note that this is a staple of PhD theses: always relate the theory to the literature. Note that the way that this proposal does it (first theory, then literature) is not the only, or indeed the best, way, but that it is accomplished all the same.

Comment [WS10]: This accomplishes two goals: it tells the reader what literature will be used and indicates exactly how.

Comment [WS11]: This explicitly allows the reader to calculate how quickly you can complete the project.

Comment [WS12]: 'Developing' an argument shows an awareness that an argument is a central component to the thesis, and that it is achieved by the accumulation of an amount of different evidence.

Comment [WS13]: This shows the reader that there are two structures appended to the project: the overall development of the argument and the chapter structure that actually makes the arguments and provides the evidence. Such explicit signposts help the reader assess the viability of the project.

Comment [WS14]: The titles do not have to be the same as the ones that you may intend to use and should explicitly relate the content of the chapter at a glance.

Comment [WS15]: This shows knowledge of the primary critics in the field.

Comment [WS16]: The distinction between 'genealogical' and 'chronological' shows that you are not afraid to append your own structures to the material available.

Comment [WS17]: The distinction between 'genealogical' and 'chronological' shows that you are not afraid to append your own structures to the material available.

Comment [WS18]: Using bibliographic details enables the reader to see that you are aware of your sources and the fact that different versions may exist. If there are different versions, make sure to use the academically acceptable version, not the 'Penguin guide to X'.

in which the concept was treated during the Romantic period, this chapter 'grounds' the reader in what the sublime meant. This history also means that the development of nihilism and the sublime can clearly and explicitly be linked together, demonstrating that the sublime was one of the main reasons that nihilism came to the fore in the nineteenth century

Comment [WS19]: 'Grounding' the reader with clear examples demonstrates that you are aware that the final PhD must be a readable piece of work, and not so far up its own proverbial arse that no-one will want to read it.

3. Nihilism and the Postmodern Sublime

This chapter offers the reader a contemporary understanding of the concept of the sublime in relation to postmodern theory, demonstrating the way in which Lyotard's understanding of the sublime is heavily influenced by Kantian theory, and yet is a completely different method of approaching it. This is the result of Lyotard's somewhat artificial distinction between 'ethics' and 'aesthetics', which were united in the Kantian sublime. This studies not only Lyotard's works, such as 'Complexity and the Sublime' and *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester UP, 1999), but also looks at Jean Baudrillard's treatment of nihilism, seen in works such as *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997) and *Fatal Strategies* (Semiotext(e), 1990).

Comment [WS20]: This shows that you are aware that ideas develop over time and that there is always a significant amount of historical baggage carried by concepts. This is especially necessary to you inasmuch as Jung develops Freudian ideas, and you have to be aware of when one ends and the other begins.

Comment [WS21]: Bear in mind that you should use inverted comma and italics correctly: italics for books, plays, and very long poems, and inverted commas for articles and shorter poems.

Comment [WS22]: This sentence, whilst a little long and heavy, accomplishes two things: it tells the reader that you understand Lyotard and Baudrillard, but also that you keep the terms of the argument ('nihilism' and 'the sublime' here) in the front of the project all the time. If the argument is constant, the PhD has a coherent thread running throughout.

4. Postmodern Nihilism

This central part of the thesis proposes a new formulation of nihilism, based upon postmodern theory. Because chapter three makes the reader aware of the relationship between nihilism and the sublime within postmodernism, this chapter is able to look in detail at the way in which critics have linked nihilism with postmodernism. Focusing specifically on Derrida's 'nihilism' and postmodernism's alleged politically reactionary nature, this chapter looks at works such as Stuart Sim's 'Lyotard and the Politics of Antifoundationalism', Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (University of Chicago Press, 1979) and *Writing and Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, 1994), and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991).

Comment [WS23]: Identifying the important parts of the thesis differentiates these sections from those that merely provide contextual evidence (chapters 1 and 2, here). This allows the reader to instantly identify the significance of your ideas and assess the extent to which you are aware of its significance. Don't make insignificant things seem important and important things seem insignificant: say it like it is.

Comment [WS24]: This sentence demonstrates the fact that an argument is being put forward and that you know exactly how you are going to develop it. It basically tells the reader that you know that A must come before B, and that B must come before C.

5. Apocalypse in Postmodern Literature

After all the theoretical material covered in the first half of the thesis, this chapter introduces the primary authors of the thesis: Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, Steve Erickson, and Angela Carter. It explores the ways in which the concept of the 'apocalypse' is central to postmodern fiction, whether it is in terms of history (the Holocaust, colonialism, and patriarchal society) or the future (impending ecological destruction and nuclear war). These authors will be read in conjunction with the theoretical argument presented in the preceding chapters, as well as contextual sources such as William Chaloupka's *Knowing Nukes* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992) and Inga Clendinnen's *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge UP, 1999).

Comment [WS25]: This tells the reader exactly which authors you will be using and how. For your proposal, it is in many ways more important to say 'why' you are using particular authors of all those possible. Furthermore, as yours seems to be more author-based, it may be worthwhile to work out what the best order is for introducing them and doing author-based, rather than thematic, chapters.

Comment [WS26]: Throughout the proposal, you must be continually aware that the reader is looking for evidence of the ability to make an argument. Like the earlier comment about 'genealogical' and 'chronological' forms of nihilism, this chapter suggests that you are able to critically read the sources and provide defined readings that are also aware of their own limitations.

Comment [WS27]: Bear in mind that you not only need primary theoretical and literary authors, but also contextual works to provide close readings of the text.

6. Absurdity in Postmodern Literature

blah blah.

7. Absence in Postmodern Literature

blah blah.

8. Space in Postmodern Literature

blah blah.

Conclusion (2,000 words)