

A&D Writing a Research Proposal Guidelines

For PhD and Masters by Research applicants to UNSW Art & Design

PhD and Masters by Research applicants to UNSW Art & Design are required to submit a research proposal approved by their nominated supervisor and attached as a separate document to their Expression of Interest form.

You should discuss your proposal and work on drafts with a potential supervisor(s) who will be able to recommend relevant literature, thinkers or practitioners in your field. Your proposal should establish the area of your research project, your central research question and the methods you will employ, and it should be organized around the headings below.

Research projects can be radical, bold and unconventional. However, they must address a community of academics, professionals, artists or designers. While it is not necessary to conform to the models, methodologies or expectations of other fields, you must meet the academic conventions of Art or Design. It is important, especially for inter-and trans-disciplinary projects, that you contextualize your project within the field or Art and/or Design.

Word length:

PhD: approx. 2000–3000 words (excluding references)

Masters by Research: approx. 1000–2000 words (excluding references)

NB. Throughout this document the term thesis refers to both practical and written components of your PhD or Masters by Research.

PhD

The principal criterion for the award of a PhD degree is that your thesis constitutes an original contribution to knowledge.

To develop your project you first need to determine the field to which you intend to make this contribution. This may be a distinct area of practice or theory (e.g. installation art or contemporary design theory) or an interdisciplinary field (e.g. medical design). Once you have established your field of inquiry and what is already known about your topic, please explain how your thesis may add knowledge of significance and relevance to the field. New knowledge may take the forms below, among others:

- Address a gap or bias in existing literature, such as researching an under-recorded artistic figure or scene;
- Apply a new method to an existing field, for example, by exploring Deleuze's concept of the event in relation to a new artist;
- Employ a practice-based approach, such as exploring a concept through a practice.

Masters by Research

In a Masters by Research you will demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of your topic in the context of your nominated field of practice. You will demonstrate how to locate your research in relation to the work of other theorists or practitioners engaged in the topic. Your thesis will contribute to the field by updating or bringing together the most recent developments on the topic.

Structure and Headings

Working title

Provide a working title that describes the nature of your project (eg. 'Violence in contemporary Chinese art' or 'Utzon's interiors for the Sydney Opera House: the design development of the major and minor hall, 1958-1966')

Statement of topic and research rationale

This section identifies the general subject area of your topic and outlines how your research relates to the field. The rationale states why the proposed research is a significant topic and what contribution your work will make to the relevant field. For PhD applicants, this is where you state your potential or intended contribution to knowledge.

Research aims and objectives

Under 'research aims', please describe what the broad goals you intend to achieve in the designated time frame. Under objectives, please describe what are the steps you intend to take to achieve these goals. This section should articulate your anticipated thesis' central argument, and include what problems, questions or hypotheses your thesis will address. If relevant, please clarify how your current proposal expands on previous research achievements (e.g. previous Honours or Masters research you have undertaken on a similar topic).

Review of literature and relevant practice

Your research proposal needs to demonstrate that you are aware of the traditions and contemporary research or innovations in your chosen field. If relevant to your project, you should include discussion of creative practice in this section.

The purpose of a literature review is to firstly demonstrate your knowledge of your chosen field and then to assess the current state of your chosen field. In addition to surveying and summarizing key positions your writing should be focused, critical and evaluative. You should establish key authors and methodologies, note similarities and divergences between positions and indicate gaps, limitations or biases in current knowledge. In this section, please indicate what earlier works – theoretical and/or practical – have achieved and what remains to be done. Your literature review should assist you in establishing the parameters of your project. Do not willfully ignore works that relate to your own. In the course of your PhD or Masters by Research you become familiar with all significant work that intersects with your project.

In a PhD proposal, as well as reviewing literature from art and/or design you may review literature from a non-creative field (e.g. anthropology) and establish a contribution to knowledge by suggesting how art and/or design can interrogate an issue in a way that other approaches can not.

In a Masters by Research proposal, you need to demonstrate that you have identified relevant and up-to-date points of view on your topic, and selected one/s that most closely resonate with your aims.

Proposed research methodology

In this section, please discuss and give a rationale for the research method(s) you will adopt in your project, including proposed method(s) for data collection and analysis, and practice-led methods if applicable. There are many established research methodologies. At UNSW Art & Design students can take research methodology courses and workshops to assist in the formulation of an appropriate method. In your research proposal you need to provide a preliminary indication of how you will undertake your research.

Two key questions to consider are:

- How you will gather or generate data and/or information (e.g. archives, interviews, fieldwork, literature, experimentation, etc.)
- What conceptual lenses you will employ to assess this data and/or information (e.g. through the lenses of Formalism, Feminism, Post-structuralism, etc).

Practice-based research proposals must consider how these two questions will relate to and inform creative work made during your candidature. Your approach should reflect your undergraduate training and methods established in your field. For instance:

- If you are a practitioner addressing social/political/cultural/scientific or philosophical questions, articulate in detail how you do this through your practice;
- If you need to gather data, describe how you will go about this. This might involve archival research, interviews with stakeholders, or various other forms of fieldwork.

Some theses adopt a particular theoretical position inspired by key philosophers, thinkers or practitioners. Rather than adopting an entire philosophy, you may propose to develop and extend specific concepts from certain writers and apply them to a particular area or within a particular practice. If you are doing this, describe which concepts are useful and how you will apply them in order to achieve a particular result.

Projected timeline for completion of studies

Identify goals and milestones for each semester of study, including major activities like fieldwork. This should include an estimate of when research, writing and making (if applicable) will be drafted, sent to your supervisor for comment and completed.

Proposed chapter outline

Describe how you see your project written into chapters and outline its relationship to the overall thesis. You can include practice-based projects in the relevant chapters and identify works to be made and their relationship to the thesis.

References used in the proposal and related to the field

List all publications cited in the proposal and related to the field (in Chicago Author-Date style)

Information on any foreseeable research costs (e.g., fieldwork, transcriptions, translations) and required resources (e.g., studio space, access to maker space, equipment, software etc)

***Handy hints:** review existing UNSW theses (<https://www.library.unsw.edu.au/study/information-resources/theses>) to familiarize yourself with the aims, methods and scopes of similar projects.*

Think of your research proposal as an overview rather than an introduction to your project. Strong applications have a clear alignment between the research question, methodology and literature review. Similarly, if you submit visual support material, provide connections between this material and your written application (e.g. how does your application build on your previous/existing research and practice?).