

Writing a Research Proposal

A guide 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. Your proposal should establish the area of your research project, your central research question and the methods you will employ. You should discuss your proposal and work on drafts with potential supervisors. Your supervisors will be able to recommend relevant literature, thinkers and practitioners in your field.

PhD and Masters by 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.

PhD: approx. 2000–3000 words

Masters by Research: approx. 1000–2000 words

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 is that your submission constitutes an original contribution to knowledge.

To establish your project you first need to determine the field that you are contributing to. This may be a distinct area of practice or theory (ie installation art or contemporary design theory) or an interdisciplinary field (ie medical design).

Once you have established your field of inquiry and what is already known about your topic, you need to explain how your thesis will add knowledge of significance and relevance to the field. New knowledge may take the form of addressing a gap or bias in existing literature (such as researching an under-recorded artistic figure or scene) or by applying a new method to an existing field (for example exploring Deleuze's concept of the event in relation to a new artist; or employing a practice-based approach).

Masters by Research

A Masters by Research is required to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of your topic in the context of your nominated field of practice. You must demonstrate how you 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.

Research Proposal Structure

Working title

Provide a working title that describes the nature of your project.

You may use a poetic title in combination with a clear description of your project parameters or approach

eg. *Violence in contemporary Chinese art*

Utzon's interiors for the Sydney Opera House: the design development of the major and minor hall 1958-1966

Urban Detritus: a performance-based study of waste in the Sydney CBD

Statement of topic, rationale and aims

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 field of practice. The statement of aims describes what you intend to achieve in the designated timeframe. This section should articulate your central argument.

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 practice, in addition to theory, in this section.

The purpose of a literature review is to firstly demonstrate your knowledge of your chosen field – its traditions and contemporary research or innovations - and secondly 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 voices and methodologies, note similarities and divergences between positions and indicate gaps, limitations or biases. Indicate where earlier work – both theoretical and practical – has taken us and what remains to be done.

Your literature review should assist in establishing the parameters of your project. Do not willfully ignore work that relates to your own. In the course of your PhD and Masters by Research you will need to familiarize yourself with all significant work that intersects with your project.

In a PhD proposal you may review literature from a non-art field and establish a contribution to knowledge by suggesting how art can interrogate an issue in a way that other approaches can not.

In a Masters by Research proposal you will need to demonstrate that you have identified relevant and up-to-date points of view on the topic and selected one that most closely resonates with the research aims outlined in your proposal.

Method/Approach

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 questions to consider are: how will you gather information (via archives, interviews, fieldwork, literature etc) and what conceptual lenses will you employ to assess this information (ie formalism, feminism, poststructuralism, etc). Practice-based research proposals should also consider how these two questions will relate to and inform work made during your candidature.

Your approach should reflect your undergraduate training and methods established in your field.

Examples:

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 are a holographic artist experimenting with the construction of darkness, explain how the work you plan to make will test specific ideas or hypotheses or uncover the best way of solving a complex problem.

If you need to gather data, describe how you will go about this. If you are an artist designing a commemorative sculpture you may need to research the subject/s being commemorated. This might involve archival research, interviews with stakeholders, or various forms of fieldwork.

Some theses take up 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.

Timeline

Identify goals and milestones for each semester of study. This should include an estimate of when research, writing and making will be completed and sent to your supervisor for comment.

Chapter outline

Describe each chapter and outline its relationship to the overall thesis.

Include practice-based projects in the relevant chapters and identify works to be made and their relationship to the thesis.

References

Provide a list of all publications cited in your research proposal according to your chosen style guide (such as MLA or Chicago).

Further examples

We recommend you visit <https://library.unsw.edu.au/HowDoI/theses.html> to browse abstracts and introductions of completed theses. Through these you may familiarise yourself with the aims, methods and scopes of similar projects.