

Writing a PhD Proposal or synopsis

To enter a PhD program at COFA you are required to submit a research **proposal** (of approximately 1000-2000 words). You may submit an APA or course application form before your proposal is ready, but you will be required to submit a developed proposal before a place is formally offered. You are encouraged to discuss your proposal and to work on drafts with members of staff (such as a proposed supervisor or the school postgraduate coordinator).

The proposal should establish the area of the research project, the central "research question", and the methods to be employed. During the course of study, your initial ideas will be refined. You may even change the direction of your research. For this reason, we ask you to present a revised **synopsis** each year at an annual review. The synopsis is organised in the same way as a proposal, although it will also include a summary of work already completed. Current Masters students seeking to upgrade to PhD are asked to submit a PhD proposal, incorporating a summary of work completed/underway for the Masters and a clear indication of how this is to be developed.

The following guidelines may be followed in the preparation of:

- a proposal for entry to a PhD;
- a proposal for upgrade to a PhD;
- a synopsis for a PhD review

General points:

NB. The term 'thesis' refers to the total PhD submission, including practical and written components.

It is important to remember that the principal criterion for the award of a PhD is that the submission constitutes *an original contribution to knowledge*. To establish your project in these terms you need to determine the field into which you are contributing. This may be a distinct area of practice or theory (eg. 'installation art', or 'contemporary design theory'), but it may also be an interdisciplinary field (for example, if your project is a video-based investigation of comedy, it may intersect with areas such as film theory; if your project touches on social or political issues, it may intersect with areas of humanities and social sciences).

Having established the field of inquiry and what is 'known' about your topic already, you then need to demonstrate how your thesis will add

something original and significant to the field. It may do this in a variety of ways - for example, by redressing a bias or oversight in the existing literature, or by applying a new method (such as a practice-based approach) to yield new insights to an established field, or by simply being the first to systematically study an important phenomenon.

There is no need to make research in art/ design conform to a rigid 'scientific' model. Think about how and why your work is innovative and important (eg. culturally, socially, environmentally, historically, or in terms of a technical breakthrough or an aesthetic or conceptual development within a field of practice) and try to articulate this clearly, making reference to other significant research.

Structure of the proposal / synopsis

Working title:

Give a working title that describes the nature of your project. You may use a 'poetic' title, but it is useful to indicate, after a colon, the nature of the study or your approach.

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

Statement of topic and aims:

Identify the general subject area and outline how your topic relates to the field. Establish why it is a significant topic and what contribution your work will make.

(for example: *This project investigates the self-perception of teenage girls in relation to the phenomenon of eating disorders. Through a form of 'interactive performance art' it will explore the ways in which bodies are experienced and 'misrecognised'. It will draw on and contribute to the current literature in psychology and women's studies....*)

Review of literature and relevant practice:

The 'literature review' is a major part of a proposal. In order to demonstrate that your project makes a significant contribution to the field, you need to show that you are aware of the traditions and 'state of the art' research in that field. At COFA, the term 'literature review' should be understood in the broadest sense. You should cite examples of relevant practice if these are what establish the context of your own

research (for example, if you are proposing work that constitutes a technical breakthrough in interactive cinema, outline the achievements and limitations of precursors).

The best approach is to start from your project and work out. For example, if you were planning to develop a commemorative sculpture, you would review the best examples of similar work, identifying key international trends, and the theoretical arguments currently influencing the design of monuments. You might also evaluate literature relating to the content of the work (ie. the subject(s) being commemorated).

The literature review should not be approached like an undergraduate essay, surveying a broad field. Its purpose is to set-up your particular research project, and it should therefore be focused and evaluative, rather than general. For example, if you are researching a topic such as 'body image', do not give a general account the work of Foucault, Freud, feminist theory etc. Try to focus on key concepts from earlier work and be aware of the way in which these have already been applied in your area (eg. You might note that certain feminists in the 1980s and 1990s took up Foucault's notions of 'bio-power' or the 'docile body' to account for women's compliance with dieting regimes). Indicate where earlier work – both theoretical and practical - has taken us and what remains to be done.

Do not provide a reading list (though it may be useful to do this with your supervisor at some point). The proposal should demonstrate that you have a grasp of existing work – and that you know enough about the field to determine an area of inquiry or a starting point for research. (NB. The literature/area review will become more detailed and sophisticated in the synopses that you develop in the course of a PhD, and may form the basis of an introductory chapter.)

Often you will need to draw on literature from several fields in order to establish the niche in which your project sits. Many art-based projects establish their 'contribution to knowledge' by reviewing the literature in a non-art field and showing how art can interrogate something that the other literature has missed (for example, clinical studies of eating disorders might miss an aspect of experience that art can uncover).

Bear in mind that the purpose of a review of the field is to establish not just innovation but significance. PhD research can be radical, bold and unconventional but it must address a community of academics, professionals or artists. There is no need make your work conform to

the models and expectations of areas outside your own. Use the literature review to define the parameters of your field. Do not, however, willfully ignore work that relates to your own. You must know your own field. In the course of PhD study you will need to familiarize yourself with any [significant] work that intersects with your project.

Method/ Approach

Outline how you will approach your topic. Your aim should be to demonstrate that your chosen method or approach will serve to advance your thesis or argument. For example, 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. For example, an artist designing a commemorative sculpture may need to research the subjects being commemorated. This might involve archival research, interviews with stakeholders, or various forms of fieldwork.

There are many established research 'methodologies'. At COFA students can take research methodology courses and workshops to assist in the formulation of an appropriate method. However, in an initial proposal you need to give some indication of how your project will be realized. If your approach is experimental or comparative, outline how this approach will yield results (what do you expect to discover; why have you selected particular case studies?)

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 borrow specific concepts from certain writers and apply them to a particular area or within a particular practice. If you are doing this, identify which concepts are useful and how you will apply them in order to achieve a particular result.

Although you will doubtless draw on material from various disciplines, your own approach/method should generally reflect your training or 'home' discipline/practice. If you are a practitioner addressing social/political/cultural/scientific/philosophical questions (or, indeed, issues intrinsic to art/design practice), articulate in detail how you do this *through* your practice. You do not need to write like an art historian or a sociologist or something you are not. Research *through*

practice is just that – although you do need to focus on articulating method.

Remember, however, that for many arts PhDs the questions of method are complex conceptual issues that continue to be considered throughout the candidature and beyond. The proposal provides a brief indication. It is the beginning of the process.

Research time-line (required for PhD review synopsis or upgrade proposal; optional for first proposal):

Identify goals and milestones and estimate time required to complete each chapter/component of practical work /aspect of fieldwork, etc.

Chapter outline and thesis breakdown (required for PhD review synopsis or upgrade proposal; optional for first proposal):

Identify each chapter and practical component, clearly defining its relationship to the overall thesis. In a PhD review synopsis/ upgrade proposal, identify which parts are complete/in-progress/yet to be done.

References

List all publications cited in your proposal. It is best to get into the habit of using a standard referencing system (such as MLA or Chicago – for which there are style guides) so that material can be transferred into your thesis. Do not cite from memory without referencing.

Remember...

The brief examples given in the text above reflect *some* of the types of research undertaken at COFA. You will receive more precise and discipline-specific advice from your prospective supervisor and school coordinator. Supervisors should also advise on further reading. You are not expected to know everything already. The proposal is about identifying a viable topic and plan of attack...

These notes have been prepared by the Director of Postgraduate Research, COFA [May 2005]. The UNSW Learning Centre provides additional information on proposal writing:

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/thesis1.html>