

Writing a Thesis in the Research MA Comparative Literary Studies: Guidelines and Procedures.

Last updated: November 2022, Susanne C. Knittel

1. Aims:

An RMA thesis is a scholarly text in which you are expected to contribute, on the basis of independent research, to a debate within your discipline. It should be structured around a central research question (set out in the introductory sections) to which it provides an answer (set out in the conclusion).

The central research question should be clearly formulated at the beginning and its relevance to scholarly discussions within the discipline set out. The body of the text should show how you went about trying to answer this question, why you proceeded the way you did, and what your findings were. In your conclusion you should analyze your findings in the light of your original question and explain the broader implications of your conclusions.

The thesis should be written in correct and clear English; it should be max. 30.000 words long (including notes and bibliography).

You must hand in your thesis at the end of your two years of study in the RMA programme; this means by the end of block 4. Failure to meet the deadline will adversely affect your final grade.

2. Assessment and assessment criteria:

Your thesis will be assessed and graded by your supervisor and by a second assessor who has approved the thesis proposal, but has not been otherwise involved in the supervision. The second assessor is appointed by the programme coordinator. Your supervisor will communicate the outcome of the assessment of your finished thesis within 10 days of having handed it in, including readers' reports on the strengths and weaknesses of your thesis.

In judging your thesis, the supervisor and second assessor will pay attention to the following:

1. Sharpness of focus (is the central research question well conceived?)
2. Knowledge of field (is it clearly situated in a scholarly debate? Have you shown that you know the relevant literature and discussions? Do you show a critical awareness of the limitations of different positions?)
3. Quality of research (do you provide adequate coverage of the relevant primary and secondary sources?)
4. Methodological strengths and weaknesses (have you clarified your methodological choices? have you been consistent in the way you went to work?)
5. Coherence of the argument (is your argument consistent? Does your evidence justify your conclusions?)

6. Quality of the writing and professionalism of the presentation (Is your writing correct, clear? Does it show a sense of style and composition? Are all your source references presented according to academic norms?)
7. Originality (does it show evidence of scholarly creativity? Of independent critical thought?)

1. Procedures and Planning:

- Semester 1-2: In making your work plan you should plan to write your thesis in the final (i.e., 4th) semester of your programme;
- Semester 3: By the end of the third semester you should have identified your research topic and found a member of staff who is available to supervise your thesis. If you have a particular supervisor in mind, you should approach him/her at the earliest possible date and ask if he/she is available and willing.
N.B.: You should look for a supervisor among the permanent staff members of CLS and the Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication.
- *Once you have found a supervisor, you should let the programme coordinator know.* If you are having difficulty in finding a supervisor, then the coordinator can help you.
- The coordinator will then appoint a second assessor in consultation with the supervisor (this is the task of the coordinator, not of the student).
- Semester 4: In this period you prepare and write your thesis. You will do so in stages: In order to facilitate the planning of your research and the writing a four-part series of *thesis labs* will be organized from February onwards. You are expected to participate actively in the thesis lab. Information about dates will be sent through email.
 - i. The first step in developing your thesis is to write a **thesis proposal**. Below you will find guidelines regarding the content of this proposal (please refer also the guidelines from the Research Lab). Your thesis proposal must be submitted to your supervisor and second assessor by **March 1 at the latest**; your supervisor and second assessor should then jointly approve your proposal (with or without recommendation) by 7 March; before giving approval they may first invite you to a talk in which you elaborate further on your plans.
 - ii. A recommended resource for working on your thesis proposal; is K. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 8th edition (Chicago UP, 2013).
 - iii. **Graduation Conference**: the thesis lab will culminate in a Graduation Conference in the last week of June, at which you will be expected to present your final results.
 - iv. You can expect regular feedback from your supervisor; deadlines for submitting chapters are established on a case-by-case basis.
 - v. The final date for submitting the final version of your thesis is 10 days before the end of block 4.
- Handing in: the thesis is to be submitted via OSIRIS CASE. Additional hard copies/digital copies can be sent to your supervisor and second reader upon request.

Research MA Comparative Literary Studies: Thesis Proposal

The thesis proposal should include the following:

Name:

Student number:

Thesis Supervisor:

Second Assessor:

1. Title

What is your working title? Try at this point to be as descriptive as possible so that the central topic is clear.

2. [Main] Research Question

(1) Describe briefly the phenomenon you intend to study. Try and be as specific and concrete as possible.

(2) Set out the *question* you want to ask with respect to this phenomenon. Make sure that you do have a question: something (as specific as possible) you don't *yet know* but that you think would be interesting to find out. (You can have sub-questions).

(3) Indicate to what more general *scholarly debate* you want to contribute: What are the broader implications of your particular case? And how will your particular study advance this debate?

3. **Status Quaestionis (scholarly context):** here you need to position your project in its scholarly field and a scholarly debate. How has your specific topic been treated before? And how is your approach different? You should show that (a) you are going to do something new and (b) that you are building it on earlier work in the field both *at the level of your specific topic* and *at the level of the broader scholarly debate* to which you wish to contribute (e.g. the aesthetic uses of multilingualism, cosmopolitanism in contemporary literature, the influence of cinema on modern literature, the role of fiction in remembering conflict etc). In the initial phase it is important to establish what has already been said on your topic in order to know how you are going to advance scholarship.

Status quaestionis with regard to your particular topic: if you are treating an individual writer or set of writers, or a particular genre: what has been said about these before?

Status quaestionis with regard to the scholarly debate: what has been said on the general issue that you are interested in (e.g. the history of human-animal relations; the nature of fictionality; cultural trauma etc). N.B: It is very important to identify the scholars who have come closest to your approach (i.e.: who are your main interlocutors?): this will also help you to position yourself and also to define how your approach will be (a bit) different.

Sketch the basic contours of this debate; what are the main positions or the dominant theory that provides your starting point? i.e. Who or with what particular general theory will you be in discussion with? Who are your sparring partners? The people you will disagree with? It is vital to establish what has already been said about your general topic in order to be able to show how you will be advancing the debate. Thinking about who you partially agree with, but also on some points disagree, is always helpful.

4. Working Hypothesis (if possible)

What do you think might be your answer? And how do you think you will be adding to/changing the way scholars have looked at your specific topic and the more general issue.

5. Research design and methods

How do you actually intend to go about getting your answer to your main question? i.e what method or methods (of close reading, distant reading, stylistic analysis, reception studies...) will you use? If you are going to make a selection of texts or concentrate on a particular period, what will be your criteria for selection? If you plan to analyse a selection of works, think about why you need to have 2 rather than 3, 3 rather than 4 etc. (i.e the selection of your primary corpus in relation to your main question should be legitimised in terms of your question and not for example because '3 seems like a neat number.'

6. Planning

How do you plan to go about your work? Indicate the different blocks of work and the time you intend to devote to each phase.

7. Bibliography of primary and secondary sources.