

How to write a research proposal

This document provides guidance on writing a research proposal for a research degree at University of Arts London.

Research proposal

Your research proposal is the most critical component of your research degree application. It will form the basis for discussion at your interview, and if your application is successful your proposal will also be used as the starting point for the Registration process. Please provide an outline of your proposed research project. This should be typed in a legible font using at least 11 point type and you should not exceed 1,000 words, including the title.

Please use the following headings as a guide to the themes that should be addressed in your research proposal:

Title

This should express the main area of investigation, implying its questions and potential argument or standpoint. While being a working title, which will inevitably change over time, it is important that you are as specific and precise as possible. The title should be brief and reflect the main question or issue of the project.

Subject area, aims and objectives

You should briefly define your subject and the main concerns of the investigation, including a set of aims and objectives which will guide your research. If the proposal is primarily practice based, this section should also be used to describe your vision of your practice and the way in which you work in your practice on your preoccupations and concerns. It's worth thinking hard about this section, as it will form the basis of study for the next few years (though it will inevitably evolve as you make progress). After defining your subject, you might find it helpful to think about the main concerns of the project as questions you are asking yourself to which you hope to find answers. The aims and objectives are important because they declare, in a sense, the criteria for investigation, against which the success or failure of the project can be assessed. If you find it difficult to articulate your aims and objectives, you might find it helpful to think of the aim as the most significant questions or problems which you hope to tackle. The objectives are the steps by which you will meet this aim. The proposal should normally have one or two aims, followed by a series of around 6 objectives. The idea is that by the time all the objectives are met, the aim should be achieved.

If you are intending to complete a PhD, you should indicate in your proposal what your original contribution to knowledge will be.

Historical context

There is no single history which suits all investigations, but you should identify the various strands of history which relate to your particular research. It may be a history of ideas and concepts that have influenced the development of a particular area of art and design, the history of the medium or technology in which you work, or a particular part of the history of art or design.

Contemporary context

As far you're able, you should define the contemporary work that relates to your field of investigation. You must do this so as to:

- Demonstrate awareness of the field in which you are working
- Demonstrate that the proposed research will have distinct features which will make it potentially original
- Form the basis of links with other research work to which you will contribute or on which your research will build

Theoretical context

There is a great choice of options in this area; none of them exclusive. An element of theoretical context is important for every kind of project, though the degree of theoretical content will vary; particularly for practice based work. You should be able to demonstrate the ways in which you evaluate their own work and that of others, and the sources that you use to inform your evaluation. A theoretical context will help avoid simply asserting a position and support you in the reflective approach that is needed for a research degree.

3 different kinds of theoretical context are outlined below (but these are not exhaustive and you may prefer a different model). They're defined with a bias towards a practice based proposal. If a proposal is entirely theoretical and critical, only the first and possibly the second might apply:

1. **Critical Theory:** definition of the critical concept and terms used in order to evaluate or critique experimental work;
2. **Parallel Theory:** definition of theoretical fields which may share concepts with your experimental work but there is no simple, direct relationship. This acknowledges that practice and theory are seen as distinct discourses;
3. **Projective or Generative Theory:** theory which is used to define intention and guide the experimental work that you will do.

Methodology

It's important to make a distinction between 'methodology' and research 'methods'. Methodology is concerned with the theoretical framing of the methods (techniques) used in a field of study: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods or techniques, which are sometimes described as research 'tools'. Methodology provides a theoretical underpinning for understanding which methods can be used in a particular project. Your methodological approach and the research tools which will be deployed will need to be addressed in all cases but in practice-based areas of study, methodologies are less well established, so you may like to think about the following:

- Try to describe the rationale for using particular methods and procedures you will adopt in discovering and recording research information.
- If it's a practice based proposal, how does the theory relate to the practical experimentation?
- What is the theory for?
- What process of experimentation will be used?
- How you will record what you do and keep track of what you have done.

Prediction of the form of the final presentation of your thesis

Think about the form of the final presentation of your thesis. For example:

- Will it be a text-only thesis?
- Will it also include images?
- Will you include links to online resources or audio-visual pieces?
- Will evidence of your practice be included? If so, what format will this be in?
- Will it include evidence of an exhibition of your work? Will this include a catalogue of the exhibition?
- You can find examples of previously submitted theses in the college libraries

Ethical dimensions of the research

If there are any ethical considerations that need to be taken into account when planning your research project then you should address them briefly now. There is a comprehensive ethical approval process at UAL which is intended to safeguard researchers, participants and others on whom the proposed research might impact, directly or indirectly. If you are offered a place at UAL then you will address any ethical issues formally when you apply to register your research proposal in your first year. In broad terms, the University expects all research to respect participants' rights (commercial, intellectual and civil, dignity (including privacy and confidentiality), safety and wellbeing.

Read more in UAL's [Code of Practice on Research Ethics](#).

Indicative bibliography

In addition to your research proposal, you should provide an indicative bibliography which details some of the books, journal articles, newspaper articles, or any other resources, that intend to draw on for your research. Citations must be consistent and adopt a recognised standard system, for example Harvard or numeric. List the main reference works which you will use for your research. These may be films, paintings, TV programmes, curated collections or websites, as well as books or journal articles. Your indicative bibliography must be no longer than one side of A4.

Visual evidence

You can use this space to insert visual evidence of your practice, or of works of art that are directly relevant to your research proposal.

If you include images here, please provide a legible caption which includes the artist, the title of the work, the year of creation, the physical size of the object, and the medium in which it has been created.

If you would like to include any audio or moving image pieces, please include URL(s). Please be as specific as possible about the resource that you are providing a link to by, for example, mentioning the title of the specific piece on a particular webpage, rather than simply linking to a general website which might contain many other non-relevant resources. Please also note that any such audio or moving image pieces that you provide a link to must be no longer than five minutes in length.

Academic qualifications

A master's degree in an appropriate subject is considered to be a particularly valuable preparation for a research degree, although the normal minimum entry requirement for a research degree is an upper second class honours degree of a British University or recognised institution of higher education.

Please make sure that you outline clearly your previous and current academic qualifications and upload copies of certificates or transcripts wherever possible. If you do not know the result of a course you are currently taking, please also indicate when you expect to know and what result you are expecting. If your course was undertaken overseas then please state clearly the name of the course (in the original language) and provide as much information as possible about the institution (including the country where the qualification was undertaken). Wherever possible UAL will endeavour to compare your overseas qualification in relation to the UK academic requirements to study a higher degree however there may be instances where we will require your qualifications and transcripts to be formally translated.

Employment history

Please provide details of your relevant employment history, listing the most recent ones first. The University will consider all relevant information provided here when assessing applications, but it is particularly important to provide as much information here as possible if you do not meet the minimum academic qualifications as outlined above.

If you are currently employed by University of the Arts London in any capacity please add details of this when you complete the online form

Other relevant experience

Please provide details relevant experience which you have not already included in your application in the personal statement section of the online application form. If you do not meet the minimum academic qualification requirements outlined above then the University will also take into account any other relevant experience that you have when assessing your application. You may provide here details of any publications, exhibitions, teaching, research or other professional experience that you consider to be directly relevant to your application.