



SEP GÖTTINGEN
ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE
AND CULTURE

Writing a Master's Thesis on Anglophone Literature and Culture

A Brief Guide

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OVERVIEW

How do I start?

This chapter gives an insight into the pre-planning stages for a Master's thesis project.

While-writing points

Turn here for three key points while you write your thesis.

Which modules do I take?

Writing a Master's thesis is part of your study programme. We offer modules for planning and writing the thesis.

What are the requirements?

This section addresses thesis must-have information.

More skills needed?

If you need to brush up your writing skills, your expertise with research tools or other knowledge, turn here.

Frequently asked questions

Some further student questions on thesis writing are answered here.



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HOW DO I START?

First: give yourself time!

The first thing to know about planning a Master's thesis is that you need time, lots of it. Planning a thesis project takes most students around 5 to 6 months in thinking, reading, checking in with others, planning, rereading, rethinking, So start your planning process early enough.

What's the big deal?

A Master's thesis differs from a normal academic paper for a seminar class in that it is longer and more complex, but more importantly, in that it has no seminar context. It is not that difficult to find a paper topic if you have an overarching course theme (e.g. "Writing the Past") and a set corpus of texts (e.g. Well's *Time Machine*, Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*). Discussions in class help you.

For a Master's thesis you need to define the context for yourself. This has advantages – you are not stuck with texts that you are not that interested in – but poses considerable challenges.

Brainstorming

Defining texts, topics and contexts needs time and feedback. A good place to start is a seminar class that you took in the past where you really liked the texts or came up against questions that you would have liked to research more deeply. If you have experienced anything like this, go back to the course notes and reread the texts. Consider if you still find them fascinating, and if so, why – this will help you find a topic.

HOW DO I START?



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If it is not the texts that drew you but questions or niggles (“this is strange ... I need to look into it!”), do likewise: go back to your course notes and find the point/s where the questions came up. Identify texts that could go with them. Do not hesitate to read around the original selection of texts! Histories of literature – or specialised histories of genres – will help you identify texts.

Fix the corpus ...

Draft a text corpus: note which texts you want to work with. As a rule of thumb, if you look at a small element (e.g. the function of clothes – most narrators do not pay very much attention to them, so you will not have very many text passages per text) you need more primary literature than if you go for larger elements (e.g. the interlocking of illustrations and descriptions, at least when you have a primary text that contains a good number of illustrations). For each primary text, take brief notes about contents, structure and, most importantly, about your own point of interest.

... and the research interest

Drafting your corpus of texts means that you have already decided what you want to look for – now you need to fix just what you want to find out. In academic parlance, this is your research interest: “I want to find out ...”. Be precise. Choose a research interest that makes sense. “I want to find out why women did not protest against the impossibility of getting a divorce in Victorian England” is not a sensible research interest for a Master’s thesis.



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HOW DO I START?

It is huge, it presupposes doing archival work, and more importantly, you would have to look into the minds of Victorian women – how ever would you do that as part of your studies? This is not a PhD project. By contrast, “I want to find out if women authors present suffragette protests different from male authors” is a much more compact and more precise research interest.

Decide on your approach

Once you have your text corpus and your research interest, consider the background: what are your premises for research? How (in the sense of ‘using what means’) can you find out what you want to find out? This defines your theoretical framework. You do not write an impressionist essay but an academic paper. Part and parcel of this is defining your approach or methodology. Decide what kind of ‘glasses’ you want to, or have to, make use of in order to come to an informed discussion of your findings.

For my protest example you would have to consider what you mean by ‘protest’: demonstrations in the street, with placards and chanting? Do you mean outright civil disobedience? Do you mean expressing a different opinion from the husband’s? Depending on how you define protest, your selection of text passages differs, but also the theoretical premises. If you want to analyse civil disobedience, you have to choose a political and/or sociological concept of how societies work and what function laws have (and in what cases it is legitimate to go against them).

HOW DO I START?



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If your definition of protest is restricted to the private lives of husband and wife, your sociological model of disobedience or opinion-making must be a different one.

So your research interest defines what it is you want to find out, but in addition to that you have to consider the rules and meaning-making processes that are the background.

Do your research

At this moment you will find that you need additional information. (Maybe you have already found out about that earlier.) Additional information relates to all the areas you have already covered: your primary texts, your research interest and your approach.

Academic writing does not happen in a sound-proof bubble. Others have read and discussed the primary texts you work with. What you find interesting, others may have found interesting, too. Your approach has a theoretical basis that was formulated and discussed by yet others. If you do not know what they have already found out (all three groups!), your own thesis will not stand on very sound feet.

Researching secondary literature means going to the library and making use of databases. It means reading books and articles. Stay away from websites unless you are an expert in assessing their validity. Many, many websites do not keep the promises they make – they are opinionated, contain wrong information or are downright un-academic.



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HOW DO I START?

Find a supervisor

Once you have arrived at this point your project has enough heft so that you can discuss it with possible supervisors. You now can explain to them what you want to find out, based on which theoretical assumptions and focusing on which texts.

Who can act as supervisor?

As a rule of thumb, all long-term members of staff can act as supervisors: professors and junior professors (i.e. those with a professor's title) and regular staff members (i.e. staff who have a PhD or doctor's title).

Not every staff member will accept every thesis project. A first reader – or first supervisor – is expected to help candidates with difficulties and to guide them when they encounter questions and problems. Some topics may be outside the individual staff member's research interests. If you wish to analyse Australian fiction, it makes no sense for a staff member with no experience of Australian fiction to act as supervisor.

HOW DO I START?



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THINGS TO REMEMBER WHILE WRITING

REMEMBER WHILE WRITING THE THESIS

Plan.

Writing a Master's thesis is a project. Once you have registered in the Prüfungsamt you have six months. It makes sense to plan your project.

- Based on your experiences from earlier papers, draft a schedule with milestones.
- Leave enough time for thinking and discussing your progress.
- Revise your project plan if you notice that your first draft does not quite work out.

Talk. Question. Discuss.

Projects get better when you discuss them and question yourself: with peers, with your supervisor/s, with Writing Lab staff. Getting feedback helps you see your own strengths and weaknesses more clearly – a problem you know is a problem you can work on.

Revise.

No serious text is perfect in its first draft. Once you have completed a first draft you feel okay about, let it settle before getting back to it with fresh eyes.

Even better, give it to someone else and ask specific questions ("can you follow the arguments?" asks for a clear focus; "what do you say?" is very difficult to answer). Find a peer-reviewer. In turn, offer yourself as peer-reviewer to others.



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WHICH MODULES DO I TAKE?

The module for planning the project

Once you have agreed on a topic with your first reader, you can start reading, analysing, planning in more detail. The module that accompanies this planning process is the research module M.EP.09a.

The module has two parts:

- participation in a colloquium – where you get a good insight into how to approach the actual writing, as the focus of the colloquium is on those students who are in the process of writing their thesis;
- regular meetings with your supervisor to discuss your progress, questions, difficulties and options.

The exam for the module is a portfolio which grows out of the individual meetings. It is worth 12 credits.

This means that the module expects you to put in some 360 hours of work. Please plan for completing this module in one semester.

The module while writing the thesis

Students who have finished the planning stage and have begun to write their thesis take the completion module M.EP.06a. This module, too, expects students to take part in a colloquium. Here they present their project as work-in-progress, discuss their findings and, in the resulting discussion, both have to defend their choices and receive valuable feedback on their project.

M.EP.06a ends with an oral exam in which you defend your thesis in a meeting with your supervisors. This means that the exam is not directly connected to the colloquium.

WHICH MODULES
DO I TAKE?



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WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

REQUIREMENTS

Knowledge requirements

If you are planning to write your Master's thesis in our division you need a sound knowledge of English (UK) literature. You should be familiar with the development of literature through the ages, and you should also be broadly familiar with authors and texts. It will manifestly help you in fixing your project outline. More importantly, when you defend your project in the completion module exam you will be asked to contextualise your findings and compare them across the periods. It goes without saying that you should also be familiar with the dos and don'ts of academic writing.

Formal requirements

- around 80 pages of text (+/- 10%) excluding the table of contents, bibliography, appendix;
- sufficient secondary literature - a complete survey of research is not necessary, but you are expected to read and make use of literature on the background of your primary texts, on the texts themselves, on your research interest and on your theoretical premises;
- correct use of division style sheet;
- academically adequate and correct use of English.

Content requirements

As for all other academic papers, your supervisors expect a clear structure, an appropriate choice of methodology, a sound line of argumentation, a convincing analysis of text passages that fit in with your premises and research interest and a supporting use of secondary literature.



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WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

“Impossible!”

No ... yes, we expect a lot, but this is doable. On the division website you will find the assessment form used in the division. Once you have a first draft of your thesis, download it and go through the questions yourself. Assess your own text based on what we look for.

You can also reassure yourself of the doability of this by turning towards theses that were rated very good or excellent.

The Göttinger Schriften series

The English Department has a publication series for BA, Master's and doctoral theses, the Göttinger Schriften zur Englischen Philologie. All of them were rated 'very good' or even 'excellent' by their supervisors. Published with minimal editing, you can access the theses and study them to aid you in your own academic writing.

All volumes are available in print in the SEP library. They can also be called up in open access from the SEP website and through the website of the Universitätsverlag Göttingen.

Links:

<https://www.englischesseminar.uni-goettingen.de> > About us > Göttinger Schriften zur Englischen Philologie

<https://univerlag.uni-goettingen.de> > Series > Göttinger Schriften zur Englischen Philologie

REQUIREMENTS



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NEED TO IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS?

WHERE TO GO FOR IMPROVING SKILLS

The International Writing Lab

Göttingen University has a large number of help and advice centres (and improve-your-skills courses). One of the institutions directly addresses all aspects of academic writing: how to sort your literature, how to structure arguments, how to choose the right register, what to do when you are scared of the white page (screen) in front of you ... The International Writing Lab staff are not concerned with contents. Instead they offer workshops on different areas of writing expertise as well as one-on-one counselling meetings.

Doing research on literature

The English Department has a library of its own, did you know? Have you ever visited it? The big advantage is that books are grouped by topic, so you can find what books we own on, say, Virginia Woolf's writings all on one shelf (or probably more than one shelf). Come and visit us! Our librarians are more than happy to assist you.

The Central University Library is by far the bigger resource to access for finding literature, both for printed matter and for databases. Please use both types of literature! Restricting yourself to digital-only publications means that you miss out on a huge amount of knowledge.



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NEED TO IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS?

Understand your catalogue

In the area that the courses in the Anglophone Literature and Culture division cover, the University Library has a surprising number of different catalogues and databases. Some are more relevant than others ... but how do you know? It makes sense to spend time on learning what your catalogue or database of choice contains and how it works. Use the how-to or search tips sections to understand how to find what you are looking for. This will also help you understand what the catalogue or database contains.

Links:

Zentrale Einrichtung für Sprachen und Schlüssel-kompetenzen
<https://zess.uni-goettingen.de/>

International Writing Lab
<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/536462.html>

SEP Library website
<https://uni-goettingen.de/en/136054.html>

University Library website
<https://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de>

University Library website on researching workshops, tools and techniques
<https://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de> > Learning and Teaching

WHERE TO GO FOR
IMPROVING SKILLS



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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQS

Can I take M.EP.09a and M.EP.06a together?

No. For one, both modules expect you to take part in a colloquium, and only one colloquium is on offer per semester. For another reason, the modules build up on one another. It makes no sense, therefore, to complete both modules at the same time. Finally, for M.EP.06a you are expected to be working on writing a thesis – this is plainly impossible if you are just now working towards your project as you do in M.EP.09a.

Can I choose a supervisor from another division or department?

Yes, but not as first reader. Please raise this question with your supervisor. You will need a good reason for selecting supervisors across disciplines.

What happens if I fail ?

As with all exams in your study programme, you can repeat writing the thesis (or defending it) two more times. Before you start on another thesis project, though, make sure that you read your supervisors' assessments (ask the Prüfungsamt) and discuss your previous performance with them.

I do not think my grade is justified. What do I do?

As with all exams in your study programme, you can object to the grading within four weeks of having been notified of the grade. Contact staff at the Prüfungsamt for assistance.



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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Where can I find the division style sheet?

The division for Anglophone Literature and Culture has a website with comprehensive information on aspects of academic writing. You can access it here:

<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/199044.html>

This is so much information ... Do you have an info sheet?

Of course: see

<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/675640.html>

for basic information on writing a thesis with us.

FAQS



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Find the division website on
academic writing at
<https://uni-goettingen.de/en/199044.html>

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Marcel from Unsplash.com.*

