

A Brief Guide for Students making an application to the PhD Creative Writing

Introduction

A PhD in Creative Writing at Cardiff University consists of two components, creative and critical. The first of these may comprise a work of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, a stage play or screenplay, while the second component will be a piece of formal, evaluative academic writing that establishes the project's status as a work of research. While the creative component will demonstrate originality and imagination, in order to gain an academic degree at doctoral level the student must make an original contribution to knowledge, and the critical commentary will indicate that such a contribution has been made.

The status of the PhD's critical component as research differentiates the PhD degree from the kinds of commentary submitted alongside portfolios on an MA in Creative Writing. A PhD is a research degree rather than a taught degree, and consequently the demands on the student are different. A PhD commentary is a more sustained piece of critical writing, its preparation requires greater contextual reading and a deeper knowledge of the subject, and it will contain an extended bibliography.

The critical component of a Creative Writing PhD places the project in a critical context, typically using self-reflection as a means of illuminating the creative process, and by examining what contribution one's creative writing makes to a chosen genre and its tradition, and how it engages with, and contributes to, broader conceptual or theoretical issues.

Creative Process

The writing of a creative work inevitably awakens some degree of curiosity about one's own creative process. This curiosity breeds insights, some of which may be of a technical nature: in prose fiction these might include issues such as characterisation, point of view, framing devices and the handling of time; in poetry they will include choices regarding form and metre, metaphor, imagery, voice etc. Other insights may relate to influences, methodology, or even the practical aspects of organising one's writing life; still others may concern the ways in which your work intervenes in the context of a tradition of writing and of thought. The manner in which a creative writer approaches a chosen genre will probably differ significantly from the way a literary scholar regards the same material. We might call this a writerly approach: the creative writer approaches the work of literature in the guise of a 'maker' rather than (or in addition to) that of an 'analyst', and the single most significant difference of approach between creative writer and literary scholar is the element of self-reflection. Self-reflection, in the context of the Creative Writing PhD, enables you to illuminate some of the insights you gained during the creative process, by examining them in the critical commentary of your thesis. At the same time, as a piece of evaluative writing, the critical element of the thesis will be subject to the same stringent expectations as a work of literary scholarship as far as conceptual nuance, knowledge of a particular field, and scrupulousness of referencing are concerned.

The Critical Commentary

(a) Purpose

The purpose of the critical component of the PhD is to place the creative work within a literary and cultural context, and to serve as an independent, scrupulously researched and persuasive piece of writing that displays the qualities of originality, significance and coherence. The call for originality does not mean that your findings need to be entirely new: it may be sufficient to add further support to a case that has already been made, or to offer a new, original perspective on an existing topic. To originality should be added significance. A well-informed and curious reader should come away from reading your work feeling they have learned something of value as well as something original. Thirdly, the critical component of your thesis must display coherence: it should have a unified and intellectually justified structure.

As a creative writer working within a university you will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of your field of practice. If you are writing in the genre of crime fiction, for example, you will be expected to have read a good number of other novels or short fiction in the genre, especially ones that share common themes or techniques with your own work. Similarly, lyric poets should be familiar with the work of other lyric poets, memoirists with other memoirs, and so on. Such familiarity will normally include those works that are well-known and considered by commentators and critics to be important examples of their kind, but you will also be encouraged to look at works by lesser-known contemporaries, especially those that are pertinent to your own work. In addition, you should have some understanding of the historical evolution of the selected genre (or sub-genre) of work you have written, and to have read its landmark texts. You need not be limited to work originally produced in the English language. It may be that a wider scope is more appropriate: it would, for example, be difficult to discuss magic realism without having read works by Gabriel García Márquez or Carlos Fuentes. In addition, you will also be expected to demonstrate in the critical component a familiarity with the critical debate in your chosen field – that is, the secondary literature that actively creates and dismantles literary ‘canons’ over time.

(b) Creative and Critical – A Common Project

It is always provident to frame your critical commentary alongside the writing of your creative work, since the critical commentary will involve you in tracking your own critical decisions regarding your writing. A critical commentary written at the very end of your PhD, and which seeks a merely retrospective purchase on your work runs the risk not only of eliding those crucial moments of self-reflection and revision that have made the creative work what it is, but also of artificially inventing an argument, as it were, as to how your work fits into the wider literary, critical and conceptual/theoretical context.

(c) Contextualisation

In general terms, your critical commentary will be expected to locate your creative work in an identifiable critical and cultural context, specifically by examining the conceptual/theoretical contribution the creative work represents. Though the balance between self-reflective analysis of the creative element on the one hand and the wider disciplinary and intellectual context on the other will vary according to the contours of each project, the commentary should comprise a rigorous evaluation of the territory in which the creative work intervenes, and of the ways in which that intervention is accomplished. This does not mean that the critical essay must subject the creative work to a blow-by-blow commentary, nor even, necessarily, that the creative work be the central focus for the critical component's analysis: it may well be, for example, that a novel that is concerned with the use and abuse of power will be accompanied by a critical essay that discusses the theories of Michel Foucault without explaining precisely where each individual filament of theory 'fits' within the creative text. In other words, a degree of intelligent discretion should be allowed in 'applying theories to text' rather than following an explicitly interpretative approach.

(d) Knowing the Field – and Intervening in It

Your critical commentary will involve you in the process of reading a selection of works by critics and theorists who have written on topics and themes related to those you are treating in your creative component. Your supervisors will be able to help you identify some of these leads, but it is your responsibility, in the pursuit of original research, to identify writers and theorists whose work has a bearing on your own writing. It is neither sufficient nor desirable to compose a reading list at the outset and stick to it. During the course of your writing and research, new and previously unknown writers will come under your radar – sometimes hiding in footnotes, or mentioned parenthetically in other texts – and it is not unusual for such finds to take your research into new and fruitful directions, and to inflect your creative work and your purchase on it. It is always worth reading around the edges of your subject. You will occasionally encounter dead-ends, but unless you explore the unknown tracks, follow the path less travelled, you are unlikely to discover whether a particular line of investigation is of significance to you or not. Also, do not be limited by the discipline of literature. The ideas and theories that bear most closely on your own work might be literary, but equally may concern wider themes, such as history, anthropology, psychology or philosophy. It could be that your creative component contains a discussion of a scientific or medical nature. Do not be afraid to examine interdisciplinary themes and to ask for advice, if it is needed.

(e) Developing An Argument

Your critical commentary will need to drive an argument. When developing such an argument, it is usual to move from a position of doubt to a position of relative conviction: for example you may have posed a hypothetical question (e.g. 'Must poetry have political relevance?'; 'Is detective fiction an allegory for self-discovery?'; 'Is social realism stylistically moribund?') and during the course of your argument encountered various supportive as well as contrary attitudes. In this way you might move through the stages of your argument, one step at a time, towards a possible conclusion (or refutation of the original question). To advance your argument, you will need to be aware of what other writers, critics, scholars and theorists have written on the subject, so that you can either concur with, contradict, or disprove their opinions and theories. In other words, you can support your argument by rallying the ideas of other commentators, and you can contest the ideas of others.

In all cases, however, you must give credit to the ideas of those sources you have used in your argument. And of course, your own writing in the creative component will be drawn on to illustrate and define your argument.

(f) Alternative Synergies

It is also possible that the creative and critical components of your project are so intimately interwoven that it suits your purposes better to incorporate them into a single entity. One might call such an entity a 'creative-critical' work. This kind of project may involve a commentary embedded within or in parallel to the creative text, or a meta-commentary presented in some form. A project of this kind will be challenging, and requires a considerable awareness of your own technical strengths and weaknesses from the outset. As with any other doctoral project, you would need to consult precedents in the field, as well as discussing with your supervisor your reasons for working in this way. Such decisions must always have robust intellectual justifications.

(g) Structure

Whatever direction your critical commentary takes, you will need to maintain coherence of structure as well as clarity of argument and. A well-organized commentary will be much easier for readers to follow, and will make a fair assessment of the quality of your work easier for examiners (which is to your advantage). There are no clear rules as to the format of a commentary, but a division into chapters is usual, and giving the chapters titles can help readers find their way. It may be useful for you to list these chapters in your introduction, with a brief summary of each. Pay attention to your use of paragraphs, allocating each one a purpose towards your argument. In this way you can maintain a clear mental map of your own work and refer the reader elsewhere in your commentary without unnecessarily repeating yourself. Read successful theses in your field, and see how those candidates approached the matter of structure. Formal evaluative writing is key.

(h) Style, Referencing and Bibliography

Throughout the commentary, you should make direct reference to texts you have consulted. Traditionally, in the academic context, there are two types of texts: primary and secondary. In a Creative Writing PhD, primary, creative texts – your own included – are the more significant, and it is from your interaction with these that your argument will most likely evolve. Secondary texts (which may include journal articles, book reviews, biographies etc.) also need to be referenced, and are of value in providing substance and academic credibility to your argument. Both kinds of reference need to be listed in your bibliography.

As might be expected, the bibliography is a crucial element of your thesis (not merely an adjunct), and your examiners will inspect it closely. During the Viva, you may be questioned on any text included in your bibliography, and the omission of a well-known or important text may well require explanation, if not justification.

Academic prose is written in a formal register, and it is advisable to respect this during the writing of your commentary. Pay particular attention to punctuation and spelling, and avoid colloquialisms and slang. Adopt a degree of impersonality, but use the first person where appropriate (especially if the alternative is the use of the passive voice, which can sound pompous or awkward). Assume the reader is a literary academic. Avoid generalisations of the kind 'critics are agreed that'; 'most readers would concur with'; 'majority opinion would suggest' in favour of specific references to specific texts and individuals. If the opinions expressed are your own – and are non-trivial – you must demonstrate some basis for expressing them and flag up the fact that they are your interventions and are being marshalled in the service of your argument. If they belong to others, you must ascribe them precisely and explicitly to the sources where they can be found.