

Guidelines on the assessment of written work on the MPhils in European, Latin American, and Comparative Literatures and Cultures; and Film and Screen Studies 2019/20

Three 4,500-word essays and a 14-15,000-word dissertation are all assessed as examples of postgraduate writing and as such we expect them to combine scholarly research and critical analysis. What we mean by these terms is explained below.

General information

The dissertation must conform to the criteria for all Cambridge MPhil dissertations prescribed by the Board of Graduate Studies, which require that 'the dissertation is clearly written, that it takes account of previously published work on the subject, and that it represents a contribution to learning'. The contribution to learning may consist in developing new angles on familiar material or in uncovering and analysing unknown or little known texts.

By 'scholarly research', we mean that the work should show detailed knowledge and careful analysis of primary texts (whether these are medieval manuscripts, nineteenth-century novels or contemporary films). It is not sufficient merely to 'tell the story' of a novel (however complex) or to paraphrase a theory (however difficult). Students writing on film and other screen media are reminded that they should pay attention where appropriate to the visual organization, sound and music as well as dialogue and/or titles. Research also requires awareness of the relevant secondary literature (critical monographs, theoretical analyses of the genre, surveys of the field, etc.), and an ability to assess, assimilate and master such material. It is not good practice either to paraphrase one or two critics, or to 'drop' the names of dozens. Proper acknowledgement should be given when drawing on other scholars' work.

By 'critical analysis', we mean that the work should develop an argument (as indeed the term 'dissertation' itself suggests). This may be more or less polemical, but should in any case be a lucid, coherent and carefully substantiated exposition of a critical viewpoint in its own right. It is not acceptable to produce an unstructured meditation, an unmotivated appreciation or an unexplained critique, nor even to string together a series of divergent comments, however apt these might be if taken separately.

An essay or dissertation is subject to all such normal requirements of publishable academic writing as to relevance, clarity, and correctness.

It is important to plan ahead and submit for approval a title which corresponds with the argument you intend to make, since work which is irrelevant or digressive will be penalised. Writing must be in clear, grammatically correct, continuous prose, and must function as a single, comprehensible, persuasive, cumulative demonstration, not as a series of disconnected insights. The quality of the argument and the debate are at least as important to the examiners as the flash of insight that inspired the piece of work in the first place. The organisation of the argument of the essay or dissertation, and its prose style, are of crucial importance in giving cogency and credibility to your research and critical position.

Approval of topics

Students should seek approval of essay/dissertation topics and titles from their module convenor/(s). Module convenors will not normally reject any topic which may reasonably be deemed to fall within the remit of the module's general subject area. The MPhil Course Director will have the final overall approval and will be responsible for resolving any cases of conflict that may arise.

Word limits

All word limits are strict maxima and must not be exceeded. A word count must be included for each essay and for the dissertation. In the case of the essays, a word count of 4,500 should never be exceeded. In the case of the dissertation, a word count of 15,000 words should never be exceeded. The length includes notes but excludes the bibliography. The word count must be stated clearly at the end of each essay and at the end of the dissertation. The word count (which must include footnotes) of the electronic copy will be checked. The examiners can and do deduct marks for even minor infractions.

Up to 5 marks per 500 words may be deducted for work which is over the word limit. Although marks will not be deducted for work which is under the word limit, it must be remembered that the quality of a piece of work which is severely under the limit may well suffer adversely when compared to work which is nearer the word limit.

Standard of English

The quality and comprehensibility of English in essays and dissertations will be taken into account by assessors. If you are not a native English speaker you should pay particular attention to this and perhaps ask a non-specialist friend to read through your work before submission. Your Supervisor will be concentrating on content and will not have time to correct all grammatical and stylistic mistakes.

Quotations

Where examples are cited in a language other than English, only the examples themselves will be taken into account for the purposes of the word limit: any associated glosses and/or translations will be exempt. In cases where this results in a total which exceeds the word limit, the total number of words (including the exempt material) should still be declared, together with the number of words comprised by the exempt material.

For the MPhil in European, Latin American, and Comparative Literatures and Cultures, quotation in the original language will be expected to be the norm, whereas for the MPhil in Film and Screen Studies, the norm will be quotation in English. Students wishing to depart from these norms, or who have other questions relating to the language of quotations should contact the relevant Course Director.

Appendices

Permission to attach an appendix must be sought from the Course Director. An appendix submitted with an essay or dissertation, for which permission has not been given, will be deemed to be part of the wordcount, and penalties (outlined above) applied.

Images

Including images in coursework, if desired, is permitted.

Palaeography coursework

Students following the core course seminars in palaeography and editorial techniques may submit an essay of 4,500 words, of which around 1,500 words will be a text from a local collection, edited or transcribed, and around 3000 words will be an introductory study and relevant critical apparatus. This exercise is intended to demonstrate critical awareness of the issues around transcription and editing of early texts that have been explored in the seminars, and the ability to apply them to a specific example, making rational and defensible decisions in relation to the problems presented. The introductory study should foreground the approach adopted and justify it.

Exercises can vary, though they should usually include a palaeographic transcription of a source and/or a collation with other sources. This analysis should lead to the configuration of a critical apparatus. Annotation of early modern and medieval texts can also play an important part in this exercise. The introductory study should foreground the approach adopted and justify it demonstrating a good knowledge of relevant theories.

Extensions

Extensions to deadlines for the submission of work will be granted only exceptionally, and in the case of illness or other serious cause. Any student who feels they may have a case for an extension must contact the Course Director, their supervisor and their College Tutor as soon as the circumstance arises. Only in the most severe cases will an extension be granted for more than seven days.

When an extension is granted, it should not be assumed that future deadlines will be extended. For example, if a student has been granted an extension on the module essay round, there is no automatic extension given to the dissertation deadline. If felt required, permission for an extension on the dissertation deadline would need to be sought separately, and further justification given.

The University makes special arrangements for students with a disability, including those with a long-term ongoing condition. If this affects you, you should speak to your College Tutor, and where appropriate with the Disability Resource Centre, in order to establish what appropriate adjustments should be made to your MPhil studies.

Out of fairness to the great majority of students who do meet deadlines, the examiners reserve the right to penalise work which is submitted late if no extension has been granted. Standardly three marks will be deducted from the examiners' agreed mark for work submitted after the deadline but within three days of the deadline, and one further mark for each further day or part thereof.

Penalties

Substantive duplication of work in different assignments will be penalised, as will any form of plagiarism.

Marking standard and scale

The Faculty uses a criterion marking reference system. The marking scale used is numerical, nominally from 0 to 100, but, in line with widespread practice in arts subjects in British universities, marks are not awarded above a particular threshold, in this case 90. The use of the mark scale can be glossed as follows, although officially the MPhil is a 'distinction/pass/fail' degree only:

Distinction marks	
85-90: high distinction	Outstanding work that excels in all three criteria required for a distinction, and is of publishable or near-publishable quality. Disagreements or objections that the work may provoke will be of the kind that stimulates academic debate.
75-84: distinction	Work in this range will engage critically with and develop an independent perspective on existing scholarship on the subject. It will display rigorous handling of theoretical, critical, conceptual or contextual issues. Work at the upper end of this category will display particular sophistication in relation to these criteria.
A final grade of at least 75 is the requirement to progress to PhD study at MML	
Pass marks	
65-74: high pass	Work that shows at least three of the following: Good knowledge and understanding of the material studied. Competence in theoretical and conceptual issues Capacity for critical analysis. Argument supported by detailed reference to the relevant materials. Argument well structured and relevant to the topic.
60-64: pass	Work shows competence and knowledge, with satisfactory presentation and documentation, but is characterized by one or more of the following: Inaccurate or insufficient detailed reference to materials studied. Limited understanding of theoretical or conceptual issues. Limited critical analysis. Argument not always well constructed or presented or relevant to the topic.
Fail marks	
58-59: marginal fail	Work showing any one of the following (in practice, these shortcomings tend to co-occur and are not easily separated): Lack of knowledge or understanding of the material studied. Lack of knowledge or understanding of relevant theoretical or conceptual issues. Incompetence in methods of analysis and procedures that are routinely applied to the kind of material under discussion. Inability to construct and present an argument.
Less than 58: fail	Work which reveals serious confusion and/or which is significantly unscholarly in its method, argument, or presentation.

The essays and dissertations are all marked independently by two assessors, and a number will additionally be marked by the External Examiner (see guidelines below). A viva voce examination following submission of the dissertation, but not of the essays, may be held at the discretion of the examiners. The purpose of this viva is to give the examiners additional information where a candidate's mark is borderline. A viva must also be held if plagiarism is suspected.

Role of the External Examiner

The usual role of the External Examiner will be that of acting as moderator and (in some cases) adjudicator; only in exceptional circumstances will the External be called to act as a regular assessor.

Marking of Essays

Each essay will be marked independently by two assessors, who will then, after consultation, submit their separate marks, an agreed mark and a joint report to the Graduate Office. Where the two assessors have been unable to agree, or where their marks diverge by 8 or more points, they will be asked to submit separate reports.

In cases in which the assessors have been unable to agree, or where their marks diverge by 8 or more points, a third assessor, normally the External Examiner, will be asked to adjudicate. The mark allotted by the adjudicator will be regarded as the agreed mark, subject to the approval of the examiners' meeting. This will normally be expected to fall within the boundaries of the original two assessors' marks.

When the marks for each essay have been agreed by the individual assessors, in consultation with the adjudicator if necessary, essays falling into the following categories will be sent to the External Examiner for moderation: all failed essays (57 and under), and borderline essays (those given marks within the following bands: 58-60, 74-75, 84-85), and dissertations with high distinctions (85 and over). Normal practice would be for the External either to confirm borderline marks, or to raise or lower them by up to three points. Samples from the middle of the pass and distinction range may also be sent to the External. He or she may also request to see any other essay.

All agreed marks, along with the External Examiner's suggested revisions, will be put to a meeting of examiners (one to be held after each round of marking). The examiners are: the module and core course convenors, the Senior Examiner and the Course Director. In the case of the meetings concerning module essays, the convenor of each module (or a deputy) must be present. In each case, the meeting's decision will be final. Marks agreed in the examiners' meetings are normally not alterable at any later stage of the examining process.

When each round of the process is complete, students and their supervisors will receive a copy of the assessors' joint report on their work. Where an essay has been referred for adjudication, the assessors will take account of the adjudicator's comments when compiling their joint report.

Examiners' reports should not only clarify how the mark was arrived at, but additionally the reports serve as feedback: it is helpful for students to know how they might improve their coursework in future. For this reason, feedback should not be too general; Examiners should refer to specific portions of the essay in their feedback whenever possible.

Marking of Dissertation

Each dissertation will be marked independently by two assessors, who will each submit a mark separately to the Graduate Office, along with an independent report.

Where the marks of the individual assessors diverge by 8 or more points, a third examiner (normally the External) will be asked to adjudicate. The adjudicator's mark will normally be expected to fall within the boundaries of the original two assessors' marks. Where there is no adjudication, the agreed mark should not be lower than the lower of the two individual marks submitted by the assessors.

Where assessors decide to hold a viva as part of the assessment process, the decision on an agreed mark will be deferred until after the candidate's viva has taken place. Students who are asked to

attend a viva should note that vivas provide an opportunity for students to respond to any questions that assessors may have. They should prepare to discuss the content of their dissertations in detail.

Any viva is chaired by either the Director of the MPhil or a substitute appointed by him or her. The Chair does not normally ask questions during the examination. In addition to chairing the meeting, his/her role is to ensure that the examination process conforms to the regulations. The External Examiner may choose to attend any viva and ask questions.

When the marks for each dissertation have been agreed, a selection will be sent to the External Examiner for moderation, normally falling into the following categories: all failed dissertations (57 and under), and borderline dissertations (those allotted marks within the following bands: 58-60, 74-75, 84-85), and dissertations with high distinctions (85 and over). Normal practice would be for the External either to confirm borderline marks, or to raise or lower them by up to three points. Samples from the middle of the pass and distinction range may also be sent to the External. He or she may also request to see any other dissertation.

All agreed marks for dissertations, along with the External Examiner's suggested revisions, will be submitted to a final examiners' meeting, which will consider them alongside the marks for coursework established at the earlier examiners' meetings. The External Examiner will be present at this meeting. The recommendations will be submitted to a meeting of the Degree Committee for approval.

Outcome

The coursework mark carries 50% of the final MPhil mark and the dissertation carries the remaining 50%.

Coursework Mark: This figure is the sum of twice the two highest essay marks, plus the lowest mark, divided by 5. It is calculated to 2 decimal points. No rounding up is done.

The overall MPhil mark is the average of the Coursework Mark and the dissertation mark. This mark will be averaged to two decimal places and rounded up or down at the final Examiners' meeting. Marks are rounded down from .40, and up from .50 (e.g 71.30 = 71, and 67.60 = 68).

Successful candidates will be expected to achieve a pass in both coursework and dissertation elements of the course, except that candidates whose overall mark for the coursework (essays) is equivalent to a marginal fail (58-59) will be considered eligible for the award of MPhil if their dissertation achieves at least a high pass mark (65-74), and vice versa.

After results are approved by the Degree Committee, students and their supervisors will receive a copy of the examiners' reports on their work.

NB: These guidelines are intended to lay down normal practice and do not have any legal status.

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