

Guide to Dissertation Proposal

Choosing a topic: The word-limit for the dissertation is 10,000 words, and you should aim at 8,000. That's only the equivalent of two standard end-of-module essays. It is common for students to get in trouble by having unrealistic expectations about how much can be achieved in the dissertation, which is really just a long essay. It's generally better to think of an essay-sized topic and scale it up (engaging with three or four positions rather than one or two; suggesting how positions might be repaired rather than only offering objections to them; etc.) than to think of a PhD-sized topic (e.g. a new theory of vagueness, a comprehensive comparison of Aristotle versus Rawls on political philosophy) and scale it down. You might wonder how to fill so much time for 8,000 words, when you had so little for the essays. The idea is that you will have time to *research your topic in depth*: to read a wide range of literature and find out what is and isn't relevant, to think carefully through possible objections and reshape your argument in response – basically, this is your chance to present us with your best focussed work, whereas the essays aimed at showing us what you could do under serious time-constraints. It is also common for the topic to evolve over the course of the project, so don't feel that this form locks you into a firm commitment. Do check with your supervisor before changing your topic significantly, however.

Timeline: You probably won't want to start writing the dissertation until after all the essays are in (early May), unless you feel inspired and want to get some ideas down straight away. Make sure to plan breaks and holidays as well: working on a larger project is a lot of fun, but it can be draining, and you'll need time to recharge. This is very much up to you, but by way of guidance, taking a holiday until early-to-mid-June would still leave you with two solid months in which to work.

Supervision: As stated in the handbook, the standard workload for an MLitt dissertation supervisor is 3 hours total over the course of the whole dissertation: this is contact time and doesn't include time spent reading drafts. Your supervisor will be assigned in late April. You should get in touch with your supervisor early on, to plan a schedule of supervisions. Different students and supervisors have different working practices, so you should find something that works for both of you. You might want longer, less frequent meetings or shorter, more frequent ones. You will probably want one early meeting to discuss the topic and make sure you have a viable plan and one meeting towards the end to discuss a written draft. Beyond this is up to you and your supervisor. You have to be realistic about the amount of guidance your supervisor will be able to provide. A lot of the time you'll be working on your own, so, in addition to planning holidays, try to find opportunities to engage with your colleagues and friends. Feel free to get in touch if you're feeling isolated and want help connecting with others.

Filling in the form:

General subject: This is just here to help me find a supervisor who works in the right research area. Don't be too specific – something like “aesthetics”, “philosophy of mind”, or “ancient philosophy” will do.

Preferred supervisor: If you haven't thought of a preferred supervisor you may just leave this blank. You don't need to have contacted the supervisor in advance, though you are invited to discuss the choice of preferred supervisor with your academic mentor. You aren't guaranteed to get your choice of supervisor.

Dissertation proposal: This should read like the abstract of the essay you will write. Don't worry if you haven't finally decided on your conclusions – just say as much as you can about the question you will investigate and your approach. For example:

I will examine three different versions of the 'Tracking' account of knowledge, comparing how they stand up to the objection that they make the conditions for knowledge too weak. The three accounts I will examine are: I will draw upon ... to formulate a potential objection to all three versions. I will determine whether one version performs better than the others in the face of this objection, or whether they all stand up to it, or whether they are all refuted by it. Perhaps the objection will need to be adapted in order to apply to the different versions.

Relevant literature: This doesn't need to be a full bibliography – just a representative list of the sorts of sources you are likely to be looking at. These should be peer-reviewed academic sources – journal articles, book chapters, etc. – rather than encyclopaedia articles and introductory texts, though the latter are very useful for finding material relevant to your topic. The texts should be grouped around an identifiable theme and be things you can realistically read and respond to in the time given.

Please complete the online form, <https://forms.office.com/e/WyRHBCtSfL>, by 31 March