

## Writing the final thesis – How to find a topic (Self-questionnaire)

**REMEMBER:** Your supervisor is there to help you with all your questions and problems pertaining to the BA/MA thesis. However, your supervisor will also evaluate your work and grade it in the end. It is therefore recommendable that you should come prepared to every meeting and prove that your problems and questions have arisen from the work you have already done, instead of from the fact that you have not actually started doing your research. Here are some ideas on how to get started.

### 1) Choosing my **literary corpus**

There are several ways to choose your literary corpus. These are merely some suggestions for how you could proceed. You may, of course, follow a different path.

#### A. By literary **GENRE** and/or **EPOCH**

- a) What is my favourite genre (poetry, drama, fictional prose, essayistic prose, etc.)?
- b) What are my favourite texts from this genre?
- c) Are these texts connected in any way? What do my favourite texts have in common? From what points of views could I establish connections between these texts?
- d) ...

Some possible connective points:

- a. Do these texts belong to the same literary movement or epoch (e.g., Romanticism)?
- b. Do they use similar imagery? (e.g., the sea as a metaphor)
- c. Do they deal with the same topic? (e.g., coming of age, Victorian social reform)
- d. ...

#### B. By **AUTHOR**

- a) Who is my favourite author?
- b) Which of his/her works have I read already?
- c) Is there any common topic of these works on which I could concentrate? (e.g., Bath as a location for Jane Austen's novels)
- d) Is there a kind of development that I can detect in these works and on which I could concentrate?
- e) ...

### C. BY TOPIC

- a) Same topic in the works of several writers (who wrote at the same time)
- b) Same topic in the works of several writers who were not contemporaries, but are in some way connected: e.g., Romantics and neo-Romantics;
- c) Rewritings: 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century writers who re-write older classics (e.g., Jean Rhys rewrote Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; or Jasper Fforde rewrote the same novel in very post-modernist fashion in *The Eyre Affair*)
- d) Same topic over the centuries: WWI poetry and war poetry in late 20<sup>th</sup> century
- e) ...

## 2) Choosing my topic

### A. Individual preferences and interests

- i. What am I interested in most? (e.g., theory, narrative, concept-related analysis)
- ii. What can I do best? (e.g., comparative analysis, close reading, etc.)
- iii. What do I know most about? (e.g., topics I have worked on during my studies; things I learned about in a VL; texts I have read in previous classes; critical or theoretical texts I read for my classes)

### B. Research-related questions

#### 1. Current state of research ("Stand der Forschung")

- a) Who has already written what on the texts of my choice? (see also session on literary resources)
  - i. Finding my **sources** / compiling a **preliminary bibliography**
    - Where do I look for sources?  
MLA, JSTOR, SUB catalogue, the Internet (Google Books...)
    - Which sources do I choose?
      - a. limit the area of research: keywords
      - b. snowball method: using others' bibliographies, indexes, tables of contents...
      - c. start with newest sources, working my way back if necessary
  - ii. What are the "classics" in my field? (easily identifiable as the most often quoted and referenced secondary texts)
- b) What are the fashionable topics of the day in connection with my texts? (e.g., immigration, the global city)
- c) What are the current theoretical practices that I could relate to my texts? (e.g., gender / multiculturalism in contemporary Black British writing)

## 2. What is my own critical standing?

- d) Do I find that there is something missing in secondary literature, i.e., a critical gap that I could fill?
- e) Do I disagree with the current critical standing on a text and do I think that I could write my paper to contradict the research that has been done so far?
- f) What did we discuss in class about the text/s of my choice?
- g) Did I agree with what we said? Did I find the discussing interesting and worth pursuing in a longer paper?
- h) What questions did I ask myself when we read the text/s of my choice?
- i) What did I highlight in my copy? What did I note down in the margins of the text?

### 3) Formulating the **thesis** or thesis statement of your final... thesis

The thesis statement contains **your own critical position**. Answering (some of) the questions listed under 2) should actually suffice to help you to formulate this statement. Your topic is the main subject of your research, whereas the thesis situates you in the academic discourse by placing your own critical evaluation of a text / several texts in relation to other critics'.

**(Topic)** This paper concentrates on gender relations in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. **(Thesis statement)** Whereas most critics insist on describing the disadvantaged position of women in Woolf's novels, arguing that Woolf wrote her novels and essays as a form of protest against Victorian patriarchy, I suggest that her representations of male characters constitute a much stronger form of social criticism as they attack patriarchy at its very roots, namely its so-called male figures of authority. This thesis will show that...

**Note:** A strong thesis statement is one that allows for a counter-thesis.

**Arguments:** In order to support your thesis, you will have to formulate **arguments**. These can be based on secondary literature, theoretical texts, and, very importantly, the texts that you are currently analyzing in your paper. Mention your arguments briefly in your Introduction and elaborate on them fully in the main part of your paper.

Note that your own critical position has to be

- a) anchored in already extant critical / theoretical discourses (i.e., you must use secondary and theoretical sources)
- b) individual, but not personal (e.g., \*I truly dislike Mrs Dalloway because she is so superficial and self-centred.)
- c) original, but not necessarily revolutionary, in particular in a BA thesis. However, a stronger innovative approach (i.e., a more strongly individualized critical position) to secondary literature is required at the Master's level.

- 4) Choosing **my method** (examples below are **not** mutually exclusive)
- a) Compare two or more texts?
  - b) Consider the text/s in terms of literary history? (e.g., realism in contemporary fiction)
  - c) Use literary / cultural theory (e.g., representations of gender in *Brick Lane*)?
  - d) Compare work with adaptations in other media or genres? (e.g., film, drama, etc.)
  - e) Compare classical work with contemporary rewritings?
  - f) Reception history? (e.g., the marketing of contemporary Black British Writing)
  - g) Analysis of genre (e.g., *In the Skin of a Lion* as a postmodernist novel; *What We All Long For* as urban fiction)?
  - h) Analysis of certain metaphors, leitmotifs, or recurring images in order to substantiate my thesis?
  - i) Arguing for / against extant a specific critical reading (e.g., reading *Brick Lane* against Marx's argument in "The Feminization of Globalization")?
  - j) Concept-based reading: immigration in *The Inheritance of Loss*; the global job market in *The Inheritance of Loss*; the dark side of multiculturalism in *The Inheritance of Loss*
  - k) ...

### Checklist 1:

Do I have a clearly formulated...

- ✓ TOPIC?
- ✓ THESIS?
- ✓ RESEARCH QUESTION?
- ✓ ARGUMENT/S?
- ✓ METHOD?