

Preparing a PhD Application

In addition to the university requirements (<https://www.ceu.edu/admissions/apply>) and a summary of his/her Master's thesis (in English) of no more than 1,000 words, the Department of Medieval Studies asks any applicant to the doctoral program to submit (in the English language):

- a detailed **PhD dissertation proposal** of no more than 3,000 words
- a concise **project outline and schedule** ('feasibility study') of no more than 1,000 words.

A PhD dissertation is the genre of academic writing in which a doctoral candidate will demonstrate that s/he is capable of independently designing and carrying out original, problem-oriented research based on primary sources. It is also a comprehensive, critical assessment of previous scholarship, and displays the candidates ability to present their results in an appropriate, scholarly manner.

When designing your application keep in mind that at the Central European University, no PhD dissertation should exceed 80,000 words (excluding the bibliography and appendices). The proposed project should be conceived for four academic years, of which the first will be largely dedicated to coursework and the production and defense of a detailed dissertation prospectus, and the second, third and fourth to writing the actual dissertation.

1. PhD Dissertation Proposal (maximum 3,000 words)

Your PhD dissertation proposal submitted as part of the application to the doctoral program in Medieval Studies should contain the following information:

- the topic (title) of your proposed PhD dissertation
- a detailed historical contextualization of your topic, providing the background to the specific problem or set of problems your dissertation aims to investigate
- a survey of the previous research on which your research will be based (you may endorse or criticize these previous approaches)
- the specific goal of your dissertation formulated as a research statement or question, or a set of research questions
- a brief summary of the sources (written, material, visual, ...) you intend to draw on in order to expound your research statement(s) or answer your research question(s)
- a discussion of the methodology/ies you will, or expect to, employ in your analysis, highlighting their advantages and potential pitfalls
- any anticipated results of your proposed research, if possible
- a conclusion pointing out the value of your proposed research to the field of interdisciplinary medieval studies (c.300–c.1600) as promoted by CEU's Department of Medieval Studies, answering the following questions:

What will your project tell us that we did not know before?

Why is it worth knowing?

Topic

State the topic of your proposed PhD dissertation in no more than a few sentences – ideally in the form of a provisional title that catches the reader's attention and arouses interest – and what or which aspects of it fascinate you.

You will increase your chance of a successful application if the topic falls within the competence of a faculty member of the Department of Medieval Studies available for PhD dissertation supervision.

Background

Next, situate your topic in its wider historical context by providing a short narrative of how you perceive your specific topic to relate to wider discussions, e.g., the history of the mendicant orders, the archaeology of (Crusader) castles, the manuscript tradition of a specific genre of text, (female) testamentary bequests, Byzantine imperial ideology, conversion policies in the early Ottoman Empire. These are all descriptive key words that give a great deal of information and help situate your topic in a sub-discipline of medieval studies: political and institutional history, textual analysis, art history, manuscript studies, philosophy, archaeology, numismatics, sigillography, and so on.

Previous scholarship

You might summarize the ideas prevailing in current scholarship, or point out the absence of research on some aspects of your proposed topic. This discussion provides a transition to your specific research statement or question. A bibliography of essential secondary studies may be appended to the proposal (no more than fifteen titles).

The research statement or question

With which question in mind will you approach your sources? A research question or problem statement is an idea that will help you to decide exactly what should and should not be included in your research.

At PhD level it is insufficient to merely summarize what other people have said or done, nor will you merely describe new material – you will conduct original research arriving at new knowledge. To do that, you need to assemble data to answer your research question in a way that somehow extends and builds on what you have learned from the sources and previous research. A workable research question, however interesting, must relate to source(s) of some sort(s). An interesting question for which no sources are available will not sustain a PhD dissertation.

When preparing your guiding questions or statements try to write them so that they frame your own research and put it into perspective in the wider field. These questions should have one main idea and must serve to establish the link between your research and previous work by other scholars. Don't get carried away at this point or make your questions too narrow. You should start with broad relational questions. A strong proposal shows that two ideas are related.

Examples of pertinent research statements or questions:

- Urban development in Kievan Rus' was a result of the interaction of trade and immigration. (This statement posits a relationship between three variables: urban development, trade and immigration. Each of these can now be defined and their relationships explored.)
- Late medieval images of dress communicate information about social status and evaluations of their positive and negative impacts on society. (This statement suggests a relationship between images, their makers, and various messages they conveyed to a medieval audience.)
- Byzantine court rhetoric, while celebrating the imperial office, subtly promoted subversive ideas. (You draw on a large body of written sources produced in a complex social context, implying your awareness of performance culture, while suggesting an innovative reading of these texts.)
- Did female monasteries have scriptoria? (You don't have to know the answer yet, although you probably have some expectations of what it might be. Formulating the research question gives you guidance on developing the idea further and looking for relevant connections and sources.)

The following examples are too broad:

- History is full of interesting events. (This is a generality.)

- What was the role of Germans in the Hussite movement? (It would take a lifetime to research this topic.)

Or too narrow:

- Scribe N. N. and his influence on the chancellery of King N. N. (This is a topic for a short study but not for an entire PhD dissertation.)

Finally, an example of a research question impossible to answer:

- How/what did Hungarian peasants in the twelfth century feel about their conditions of life? (This is a fascinating question, but there is no source material for investigating it.)

Sources

Briefly describe your sources, whether they be written (published/unpublished), material, visual, etc. to demonstrate your familiarity with the specific research context and how these sources will help you to answer the research question you are posing. This section should convince the reviewer that you have identified appropriate and sufficient source material for your topic. If possible, try to create a hierarchy among your sources, with the core material upon which your project will primarily be based, and more secondary material that may be used to advance further evidence. Indicate also the quantity and quality of these sources. Keep in mind that these combining various types of sources tend to be more promising and interesting than dissertations based on a single text or genre.

Analytical approach & methodologies

Describe and discuss how you plan to analyze your sources in order to be able to answer the research question you have posed. Will you compare and contrast different styles or representations of, say, a motif in a text or image? Will you trace the chronological occurrence of a certain phenomenon as the basis for discussing the history of, for example, an idea or a social practice? Will you collect the frequency with which a certain feature occurs, e.g., a certain item or certain items in testaments? What will these frequencies indicate? Will you prepare a catalogue or database as the basis for further questions? After you have this catalogue, what will you do with it?

Will you base your methodologies on more or less recent trends in historical studies, e.g., discourse analysis, the 'cultural turn', semiotics, performance studies, insights gained from post-colonial studies, sociology, etc.? It is not enough to say, 'I will compare the texts' or 'I will conduct a close reading of ...'. You must be more specific. How you organize your data will influence (or limit) the kinds of conclusions that you can draw.

Writing this section will also provide you with the opportunity to reflect on how the validity of your conclusions can be ascertained. In your research statement or question, you will propose a relationship between variables, or a relationship such as cause and effect (there are other kinds, too). You also need to tackle the question of how your analysis will be able to demonstrate that the link between these variables is indeed as you predicted in your research statement. Thus, if you arrange a series of events chronologically and argue that each one caused the next, you must discuss how you will establish the difference between causation and mere chronology.

Anticipated results

Tell us what you hope to discover or, if possible (e.g., if your proposed topic is an extension of research conducted for a Master's thesis), suggest what you might find out in your research. Of course, you cannot present the results of a study you have not done yet.

The implications or relevance of the proposed research project

Discuss the new knowledge that your research will produce. How will your project affect the field of medieval studies? Will you elucidate a body of previously unpublished documents or archaeological objects? Will you provide a new perspective on an established topic or issue?

2. Project Outline and Schedule (maximum 1,000 words)

The **project outline and schedule** is a concise document that supports your PhD dissertation proposal with data and facts showing that what you intend to do is, in fact, possible within the framework of CEU's doctoral program in Medieval Studies. Thus, before assembling it, make sure that you have thoroughly familiarized yourself with the requirements of the program you are applying to, available at <https://medievalstudies.ceu.edu/doctor-philosophy-medieval-studies>.

In the project outline and schedule discuss what you will do or have to do, specifically, to achieve your research goals.

- First of all, this is the place to establish that CEU's doctoral program in Medieval Studies is the proper place for this research; make sure that CEU has a faculty member who can supervise your work.
- Secondly, indicate whether you have already acquired some preliminary experience with the material necessary to write your dissertation or whether you have already worked on parts of it. How much of your proposed source material has been edited, published, or inventoried? How much will come in manuscript format, or will have to be collected through fieldwork (e.g., archaeology, art history). If you have to leave Vienna in order to access your sources, when and how will you do it?
- Thirdly, indicate where your source material is located. How much of it can you access in the CEU libraries and databases or in the libraries, archives, and/or museums of Vienna? What do you know about accessibility – is the material some other scholar's intellectual property? How many study centers would you need to visit to see all your sources? If your sources are, e.g., in the Vatican collections, how will you be able to access them? – Familiarize yourself with the opportunities of research funding available to CEU doctoral students (<https://www.ceu.edu/financialaid>).
- Fourthly, is your research topic already part of a larger study or research project, for instance, a series of regional investigations by different scholars? How do you plan to interact with this larger project? By sharing databases? By using the larger project's methodology? By using other project data for comparative cases?
- Finally, how will you collect your data (note-taking, photocopying, recording of objects or scanning, for instance)?

The project outline and schedule must include a rough schedule demonstrating that your proposed project can be accomplished within the four years of funding CEU currently provides. Take into account the fact that during your first year of studies you will be busy with coursework and preparations for your comprehensive examination as well as with writing and defending a detailed dissertation prospectus. A CEU doctoral thesis must not exceed 80,000 words.

Good luck!