

21st May 2009

University of Birmingham
Exemption from Regulations

Purpose of the Paper

1. APRC is invited to **consider** the following request for an Exemption for effect in 2009/10 from Regulations for the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies, which would replace the dissertation (with a maximum of 15 000 words) with an essay (with a maximum of 6 000 words) and a script for a play (with no word limit).

Proposal

2. That Regulation 7.4.2 (d), which states that the thesis for a one-year MPhil B within the College of Arts and Law should contain a maximum of 20 000 words, should not apply to the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies.
3. That instead of a thesis, the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies should be assessed on the basis of the script for an original play, defined not by word limit but by being practicable to perform, supported by an essay defending the play containing a maximum of 6 000 words.
4. That this exemption shall continue unless there is regular adverse comment about excessive length of play from External Examiners or, if that situation should not occur, as long as the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies is offered.

Background

5. The MPhil B in Playwriting Studies was the first programme of its type, and has been established for nineteen years. It aims to train students in the art of writing plays of a very high technical standard. Final assessment has always been by means of the script of a play, which should be performable (a judgement made by the expert examiners), and a long essay defending the play. The assessment criteria are attached as Appendix A.
6. Since its inception the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies has not sought to limit the length of plays produced, feeling that this was a bureaucratic burden of a nature that was inimical to writing good plays. The accompanying essay is restricted to 6 000 words, which is regarded as well within the word limit.
7. In recent years increasing adherence to regulations has meant that in cases where the cumulative total of words in the play script and the supporting essay were greater than 20 000 individual exemptions have been sought and granted from the Progress and Awards Board. However, in 2007-08 there were over a dozen such exemptions sought and awarded, which presents a heavy burden on the programme director and the Research sub-panel of Progress and Awards Board.

Arguments to Support Proposal

8. Playwriting cannot be successfully assessed within certain word limits, as there is no necessary connection between number of words and length of play, due to differential usage of dialogue, direction and timing. To put a particular emphasis on the number of words, rather than the suitability of the play for performance, risks undermining the purpose and ethos of the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies. The assessment criteria (Appendix A) state that the play must be of “feature length or amount to a theatrical experience that would sustain an evening in the theatre.” It does not seem reasonable to expect a student writing a piece of art to these criteria to have to work to the artificial criteria of word-limit in addition to a clear criterion establishing the limits in which the play must fit.
9. The criteria for assessing a play are based around whether it works as a dramatic piece. The play will create its own aesthetic validation, and if a piece is too long it will not be judged suitable as a play. Therefore, the major academic purpose of word limits, to impose discipline on the writer, is unnecessary in this case, as the nature of playwriting imposes its own discipline.
10. The academic aspect of the programme is partially manifest in the production of an original work of theatre, but is recorded in the essay defending the play. This essay, which is to be of maximum length 6,000 words, will set out the thought processes and methodologies used and justify the choices made. This fulfils the requirements of research in a practice-based field as established in the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*.

Allan McKinley
Policy Officer
Academic and Student Administration

Appendix A: Assessment Criteria for the MPhil B in Playwriting Studies

Play/thesis:

A play deemed worthy of a pass and above for the MPhil in playwriting will display most if not all of the qualities below; a play deemed to fail will be deficient in a majority of the specified areas.

- The play will be feature length or amount to a theatrical experience that would sustain an evening in the theatre.
- The play will display a strong grasp of theatrical story-telling; even if it resists linear modes of narrative, there will be evidence of change and movement within the action.
- The play will demonstrate the candidate's grasp of theatrical characterisation and will create roles which move beyond mere functionality unless such a mode of characterisation is intrinsic to the play's meaning.
- The play will exploit theatrical convention and demonstrate a grasp of the possibility of theatrical form rather than televisual/literary/cinematic models.
- The play will deploy structure to coherent and potent theatrical effect.
- The play will deploy space and time to full dramatic effect.
- Dialogue in the play will exhibit a keen sense of character, idiom or milieu and create rhythmic and emotional effects.
- The play will create a world with its own internal coherence, stylistically and where relevant, socially.
- The play will work within the terms of the genre it engages with or defy genre to create its own emotional and narrative effects.
- The play will have a visual as well as a verbal life.
- The play will avoid derivativeness and constitute an original work, although it may draw inter-textually on previous stories or forms.
- The play will conform to general conventions of playwriting, i.e. actions italicised, lines sufficiently spaced, characters and settings identified at the opening of the play or if the writer wishes to depart from such conventions an appropriate alternative offered.
- The play must be fully proof-read; standard English of course will often be deviated from but not, for instance, in stage directions.

The accompanying essay:

It is up to the discretion of the examiners whether the accompanying essay will serve to fail the candidate in circumstances where the play is clearly a pass given that the play is evidently the major component of the examination; nevertheless if the essay fails to conform to the specifications below it will surely endanger that pass. However where the play is problematic in its identity and worth, the essay may well enable it to pass, by clarifying the writer's intentions and making a case for the play's current condition.

- Whilst intended to be a personal and reflective piece of writing the essay will avoid extended anecdote and seek to achieve a level of objectivity.
- Secondary reading is not central to the essay but the candidate is expected to illuminate their discussion through reference to theoretical, aesthetic or critical materials.

- The form of the essay should follow the interests of the writer; nevertheless the essay should be coherent and offer a structure that shows evidence of sustained reflection.
- The essay should offer a precise and referenced discussion of the development of the candidate's play and in all areas offer substantiation for its claims.
- The essay should move beyond narration to analysis and be suitably structured to enable such a movement.
- The essay will indicate the candidate's assimilation of the ideas and concerns of the MPhil(B) in Playwriting and should refer to the seminars and ideas arising from that course.

The essay will be written in clear, elegant and precise English; it will reference appropriately and be accompanied with a full bibliography.