



Creative Writing

Research Benchmark Statement

nawe

national association of
writers in education

Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement

**Published by
The NAWE Higher Education Committee, March 2018**

Contributors

Editor and author: Derek Neale

Contributing authors: Susan Greenberg, Simon Holloway, Andrew Melrose

Reader: Lily Dunn

© NAWE 2018

National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)

Subject Association for Creative Writing

PO Box 1, Sheriff Hutton, York YO60 7YU

Introduction

This statement provides guidelines and directions for what constitutes research in the discipline of Creative Writing. It offers a reference point for those who assess research proposals and research outputs in the subject area, and for those developing research degrees in Creative Writing. It is an update of the research element from the previous combined (teaching and research) NAWE benchmark statement (2008).

The undergraduate teaching QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Creative Writing (2016) states that 'Creative Writing is a diverse and still developing subject. It is underpinned by a growing body of research and pedagogical thinking, but it is also necessarily responsive to the changing world of print publication and other media.' (p.6). Such a claim is echoed in this Research Benchmark, which describes existing Creative Writing research principles while signalling the inherent experimental route to knowledge explored by much Creative Writing research.

Creative Writing research, like teaching and learning in the subject area, primarily 'focuses on the production of new writing and critical reflection on that practice' (QAA 2016: 7). Creative Writing research assumes that process, practice, product and critical reflection each generate knowledge, separately but also in combination.

1. Defining Principles

1.1 The most common mode of Creative Writing research is creative practice. Creative practice research can include a range of methods, approaches and styles, including those variously labelled as practice-led research, research-led practice, practice-based research and practice-as-research. The commonality in all types of creative practice research is that the researcher produces a creative work. The process of artistic practice and its resulting output are perceived as contributions to knowledge.

1.2 In most higher education institutions in the UK, but not all, creative practice research also involves the production of a critical investigation and often a critical, reflective or analytical output. Such outputs can relate to any aspect of the creative work or process.

1.3 Creative practice research entails research into the process of artistic production, often called the ‘creative process’, though it may embrace multiple processes. In this sense, the making of the work itself forms research into the way that it is composed, and the way it is presented, its content, form, craft, and technique.

1.4 Research is also manifest in investigation into contexts related to the creative practice. This contextual investigation might be historical, cultural or literary or involve various interdisciplinary investigations. In this way creative practice research – the artistic process and/or the critical reflection – can engage with a range of theoretical positions and disciplinary areas.

1.5 Though varieties of critical research might also be undertaken, creative practice research primarily uses the act of writing to explore, articulate and investigate new branches of knowledge and understanding.

1.6 Creative practice research can result in critical works, and these can be connected to, combined with, embedded within, or stand relatively free from, the practice that informs them. However, there is usually at least a symbiotic link between the two; they are often in dialogue with one another and in effect pose questions which are reciprocally addressed.

1.7 Creative Writing research may also include or specifically focus on the teaching and learning of the subject, and its specific theories and pedagogies. This may relate to areas of knowledge, for instance, concerning the way language, form, genre, media and technique stimulate and produce content. The environments of workshop learning and the growing investigations into the creative process and reflective learning may also prompt branches of research.

2. Nature and Scope of Creative Writing Research

2.1 Creative Writing research is investigative and exploratory. Of the various approaches adopted, some may be called ‘situated’ or action research; some reflexive; some responsive; some may result from an engagement with ‘poetics’; some may adapt or adopt the investigative procedures and methodologies of other disciplines, where useful.

2.2 Creative Writing research may include integral performative elements; the

research is often fluid and responsive, the creative writer utilizing emotional, intellectual or psychological stimuli to shape their work in mutative ways that may be difficult to plan for or predict.

2.3 Creative writers may draw upon the full range of knowledge of human experience and writing forms. They have the essential liberty to create an aesthetic whole, both creatively and critically.

2.4 Creative Writing is not primarily a vehicle for what may be termed 'factual' knowledge, but a synthesizing process that brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative interpretation and representation of experience.

2.5 Creative Writing research can be tacitly or explicitly concerned with the theory of creativity in a way that can involve interdisciplinary research and/or interactions with other disciplines.

3. Research Methodologies

3.1 The actions of Creative Writing research inherently include investigations and explorations both in and of creative practice, whereby experience is transmuted into language; some of that experience may concern language itself.

3.2 The acts and actions of Creative Writing generate critical and theoretical understandings alongside (and often integral to) understandings concerned with practice and the problem-solving associated with writing.

3.3 Research may involve creative practice with critical and/or theoretical evaluation. It is common for the creative results of research to be accompanied by a more formal critical element; it is also possible that the outcomes and knowledge gained are presented within the creative work itself, with or without a separate evaluation, and the hybrid nature of such presentations is itself often integral to knowledge production.

3.4 Research may include experiential learning, whereby creative writers put themselves in particular situations or undergo experiences in order to generate writing. Researchers may also use source-based methods, relying upon the use of documentary evidence, interviews, case studies and artefacts in the support of

imaginative writing. These may be seen broadly to correspond to field work and archival research in other subjects.

3.5 The results of Creative Writing research can be presented in many forms and styles, and need not be limited by conventions of media or genre. These include but are not limited to fiction, poetry, script, creative non-fiction, memoirs, graphic novels, critical writing and responses or any combination thereof. Experimentation in genre, form, content and/or presentation is often a vital aspect of the research. All writing can be seen as both creative and critical, in that it involves both creative and critical decision-making.

3.6 Knowledge which is gained through utilizing Creative Writing methodologies and engaging in appropriate fields of aesthetic practice can be presented in whichever manner the student chooses to be the most effective way to exemplify and articulate that knowledge; this need not necessarily be driven by artefacts and/or textual products.

4. Research Degrees in Creative Writing

4.1 The primary research degrees in the United Kingdom are MPhil, PhD and DPhil (Doctor of Philosophy). However, other degrees are also offered, including ArtsD, DFA (Doctor of Fine Arts), DCA (Doctor of Creative Arts), and professional doctorates in which Creative Writing may play a part (all of these qualifications are subsequently referred to as 'PhD level' or 'doctoral level' in this statement).

4.2 A primary qualification for admission on Creative Writing research programmes at PhD level is usually a Master of Arts (MA) in Creative Writing, or an equivalent qualification that includes substantial amounts of prior practice-based study and/or professional practice as a writer. On occasions a candidate's publications and prior writing experience can be sufficient without the MA qualification. The research status of MA study itself is often ambiguous, as with other disciplines. Creative Writing MAs are taught but with substantial scope for independent research and practice; some MA student work is substantial in terms of length, content and level and can be viewed as practice-based research. Workshops, the ongoing exchange of work-in-progress, students' evolving critical awareness and editorial self-sufficiency are key features of MA study.

4.3 A relatively new but burgeoning postgraduate qualification programme is the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing. This has long been the major Creative Writing qualification in the US; UK versions tend to follow the American model, though there is a degree of variation in content. Often MFAs contain MA-type workshop modules as part of their taught elements. They involve more study time than MA-level study (usually 120 more credits, or one full time study year), and may involve one or more of the following: the production of a book-length creative work; Creative Writing teacher training; academic literary study; student interactions or placements with the publishing industry or external bodies; extended periods of independent or supervised practice-study. Some UK universities narrate their Creative Writing MFAs as an alternative to PhD study while others narrate them as an ideal preparation for doctoral study.

4.4 Creative Writing research degrees at PhD level involve the study of how a work of literature can be made when working with specific artistic aims and research ambitions. Such study demonstrates how particular challenges are solved; in so doing the project contributes to contextual research fields and to the poetics of a particular genre, but without inferring standardized modes of practice or recommending specific ways of writing. The individual nature of the work and its particular exegetic focus are the elements that offer key contributions to knowledge.

4.5 Research is intended to broaden the platform of investigation into creative practice at postgraduate level in a wide variety of creative settings.

4.6 Where a critical or reflective commentary in combination with the creative submission is required, this should demonstrate consideration of, and or response to, the various contexts in which the work was generated. These contexts can be, for instance, historical, theoretical, cultural, formal or aesthetic, and such considerations should be viewed as part (but not all) of the project's contribution to knowledge.

4.7 Research training should reflect the challenge of creative activity and the theories and frameworks that underpin creative purpose, by being focused on artistic practice. Training can also draw upon a range of formal, possibly interdisciplinary investigative methods, related to ethics and interviewing, for instance; it can also focus on writing technologies, and theories of criticism,

creativity and literary production.

4.8 Critical and reflective commentaries may draw upon and reference a range of extant writing on the creative process, from theoretical, critical and creative practitioner standpoints. Reflection and critical insight may also be presented through inherently creative strategies that illuminate the main body of creative work or that are integrated within it.

4.9 Suggested approaches for good practice in Creative Writing PhD programmes and supervision can be found in Appendix 1.

5. Assessment of Creative Writing Research

5.1 Those undertaking Creative Writing research invest knowledge and understanding in their creative practice, and use existing knowledge to inform innovation and to help evolve their own work, and the broader field. The articulated results of this research demonstrate and develop existing subject knowledge.

5.2 The following description of aims and criteria can be used in the assessment of two related but distinct levels of Creative Writing research:

1. National and institutional evaluation, grant applications, and other adjudication of academic research in the field.
2. Postgraduate student research, in particular the PhD and similar degrees (see 4.1).

At doctoral level and above, assessment of Creative Writing research involves evaluation of the work's contribution to the field in key assessment terms such as rigour, significance, and originality – the latter defined in various categories such as form, genre, content, subject matter, methodology and process (this being an example not a comprehensive list; such categories can be applied individually or in combination). The scope of assessment also includes the production of new knowledge through the re-combination of existing knowledge into new perspectives. In addition, some or all of the following criteria may be relevant:

- The fitness of specific research strategies and methodologies;

- The extent to which the creative output succeeds in achieving its stated goals, for example as outlined in a critical commentary, or how the output has engaged with artistic challenges involved;
- The degree of awareness shown about how the work relates to other contemporary and historical works in the same genre or written for the same medium, along with critical, scholarly, research and practice-led literature in the field;
- The degree of competence shown in the execution of textual and/or inter-textual strategies;
- The extent to which the output(s) show awareness of audience/reader reception and/or the performative aspect of creative work;
- The writer's engagement with experimentation and innovation.

5.3 Creative Writing research is inherently interdisciplinary, and fosters diversity in its approaches to research methods and theoretical contexts. Process, collaboration, the generation of ideas and new writing are highly valued credentials of such research. Creative process and practice can be evaluated through discrete outputs and through exegetic writing that refers to process; the latter can be seen as part of or integrated within the output or presented separately.

5.4 A significant aspect of Creative Writing research is the potential for hybridity in the use of genres, the creation of new genres, and/or variation in the way genres are combined, including the relations between creative work and critical commentary.

5.5 Outputs representing creative practice are often proportionally more substantial, in comparison to reflective outputs. The length of such creative outputs will naturally conform to the conventions of genre. For a doctoral work, in particular, this can have implications for the overall length of a thesis. The creative element will often be of greater length compared to any accompanying exegetic work. The overall length of a thesis can be of greater length than theses for other disciplines, but this isn't always necessarily the case.

5.6 Creative writers work across the Arts and with many non-HE organizations,

with consistently high recognition for the effect of their work on cultural life. At the level of research, national research assessment criteria recognize public engagement (including teaching that influences research) under such assessment headings as ‘impact’. Creative Writing research outputs – publications, performances, broadcasts, readings and dissemination – can contribute greatly to such assessment narratives.

5.7 Outputs and dissemination, including the contribution and activities of postgraduate writing students, contribute vibrant internal and external expressions of HE institutions’ ‘research environments’ (a category of national assessment). Creative Writing research often involves innovative and wide-ranging forms of dissemination and large scale publication/performance features. This can contribute substantially to assessment narratives about impact and research environment.

5.8 Open access mandates are increasingly a factor in institutional assessment. As of 2018, universities are asked to make doctoral theses and periodical staff research outputs available on open access repositories and the mandate is set to be extended to some book formats. Open access publishing models offer opportunities for some creative writers, but may pose difficulties for others, for example in cases where outputs are published by non-academic publishers who decline to accept a work if it is already freely available under open access rules. For this reason, it is important for universities to enable Creative Writing academics and PhD students to embargo or redact outputs in order to protect the writer’s intellectual property.

Even if an entire PhD thesis is embargoed or redacted, the researcher should note: it should still be lodged electronically with metadata so that it is recorded. In order to improve the general visibility of Creative Writing PhD theses, researchers should use keywords such as ‘creative writing’ and ‘creative-critical’, as well as topic-relevant words, and include an abstract that spells out at the start what the submission contains, defining both the creative and critical elements. Guidance on this, and embargo and redaction policies, is provided in a leaflet published by NAWA in collaboration with the British Library (see Appendix 2).

5.9 Creative writing research can potentially pose ethical challenges in the context of standardized institutional approval procedures, because it may not fit

the default model.

A key difference concerns the legal and moral rights for creative practitioners to 'own' their material and control its use. This arises particularly where the work involves encounters with living subjects, not only but especially in Life Writing and other creative non-fiction genres.

In such cases, researchers are advised to get in touch with their university's ethics committee as soon as possible to establish the parameters of the work. Universities typically require that ethical approval is granted before any relevant research begins. The application can be amended if necessary as the project develops.

Types of divergence may include:

- In non-fiction work in particular, sources may not be anonymized, and so the default may need to be set to opt-in rather than opt-out;
- There may be reporting conditions in which formal approval in advance is not appropriate;
- There may be situations when it is appropriate to challenge a subject rather than collaborate with them (for instance, when there is a public interest cause);
- Storage of recordings and notes may need to remain with the researcher, rather than be placed in an institutional repository, and encryption might be required.

5.10 A note on using interview material as part of the research

Concerning interviews: best practice for formal interviews generally requires a consent form, and may be recorded. The use of informal encounters without a form is by and large acceptable, in most circumstances. The case for keeping exchanges informal should be properly considered and explained, as necessary to the institution's ethics committee. The priority is to show consent overall, for example by paper/email trail. In some situations, overall consent from an institution, rather than each individual, may also be sufficient. Even where formal consent is not required, it may be worth building it in, as the process of

discussing research intentions with subjects can help cover the student in case of complaints or future risk. In most cases when dealing with living interviewees, students will have to go through the procedures of their institution's ethics committee.

6. Resources

6.1 In the UK, the subject association for creative writing is the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE). Information and resources related to research can be accessed on its website: www.nawe.co.uk. In the USA, evidence of the level of research engagement in the discipline can be found at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) site: www.awpwriter.org. In Australasia, this can be found at the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP): www.aawp.org.au. In Europe, there is the European Association of Creative Writing Programmes (EACWP): <http://www.eacwp.org>.

6.2 Some of the associations named above also have research journals and magazines connected with them: *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research* and also *Writing in Education* (NAWE); *The Writer's Chronicle* (AWP); and *TEXT* (AAWP). Other research journals from universities and academic publishers are listed alongside the above and other texts in an indicative further resources listing in Appendix 2.

6.3 Regular national and international conferences and symposiums occur, with each of the associations above having an annual conference or symposium. There are also a number of other conferences occurring worldwide independent of the above associations (some annual or biennial and some more occasional).

6.4 Some further resources are listed in Appendix 2.

Appendix 1

Guidance notes for Creative Writing PhD programmes and supervision

Creative Writing PhD level study is relatively young, the first ever candidate only completing their studies in 1990. A consequence of this is that some perceive there to be wide variation in PhD programmes and supervisory attitudes to PhD study in the subject area. The nature of Creative Writing doctoral work is wide-ranging and has rich variety in terms of genre, subject matter, approach and focus. The following brief notes do not try to define what a Creative Writing research degree should be, but offer some broad suggestions of good practice that will be generally applicable. This guidance is not intended to restrict approaches to Creative Writing PhD study but to help enrich and secure student experience on such programmes and to further develop Creative Writing research endeavours. It has been informed by supervisor, examiner and student testimony.

Composition and proportions

- The Creative Writing part of the PhD thesis can be in any genre, including fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, scriptwriting and writing for other media.
- The writing can be experimental but this is not a necessary or defining feature of the creative work.
- In many institutions a critical commentary or accompanying exegesis forms part of the thesis. This can be a separate component or may even be an integral part of the creative work.
- Where the commentary is a separate text, in most cases the creative component will be substantially larger than the commentary in terms of word count, though this might vary with some genres. For instance, the word count proportions for poetry PhD theses may differ. The creative element will usually conform to the natural length of work in its genre. This may result in the overall word count for a thesis exceeding 100,000. This is common for Creative Writing PhDs (especially with prose genres). But Creative Writing doctorates do not by necessity have to be of this

length. The overall size of thesis has to be gauged carefully so as not to overburden examiners.

- Ratios of content, creative-to-commentary, will differ in accord with programme requirements but will often be 70-80% creative to 20-30% commentary. This may vary with certain genres.

Supervision, process and examination

- It is good practice for students to have a supervisory team – for instance, two supervisors. Feedback to the student from that team should wherever possible be concerted and not contradictory.
- In some cases both supervisors will be practitioners and concentrate on both aspects of the work, the creative and the critical commentary. It is best practice for at least one of the supervisors to be a practitioner, preferably writing in the genre in which the student is working.
- The creative work should be appropriately supervised throughout and the student offered regular and full feedback on its development. Supervisors should not just feedback on the commentary. Similarly supervisors should not just feedback on the creative work and must give ample guidance on the critical reflection component. It is good practice to give an idea of the written and spoken feedback regime at the start of the programme.
- When there are two supervisors with different specialisms it is still best practice for both to have read and fed back on, or at least to be aware of, all aspects of the work, creative and critical, in order to be able to comment on the symbiotic relationship between the two.
- It is important for students to submit work regularly and for supervisors to offer regular feedback on submitted work, and for this to happen within a reasonable timescale. Standard timescales for this and the number of meetings and contacts per year are often set by the awarding institution. Allowance has to be made for supervisors sometimes reading large drafts but it is better to establish at the outset what the norm might be in terms of feedback, meetings and submissions of work in progress.

- It is good practice for students and supervisors to agree a record of each meeting and especially the action points, including the next submission and meeting dates.
- It is common and permissible for students not to work on the critical commentary component until the final stages of their study on a Creative Writing PhD programme. In this way it is permissible, and usual, for the critical element to feature only as 'planned work' in any probationary viva or (MPhil) stage gate point of the doctoral programme. It should not be expected that the student starts work on the commentary before working on the creative component, though there will, of course, be some parallel reading and evolution of ideas. There should be a way in which critical reflection feeds into practice and vice versa, and there should be some form of reflective work and writing throughout.
- With training and taught courses within PhD programmes it is important that these are appropriate for a student's area of study and not just generic or, for instance, science-based courses that are compulsory for all PhD students across the university. Some interdisciplinary courses may be useful. For instance, for the historical novelist, training in using archives could be of assistance; for the creative non-fiction writer training in interviewing skills and ethical approaches to writing about living characters may be relevant. Where possible it is preferable to allow students to assess and identify their own skills deficits and to match their individual needs to available training within or outside of their institutions. Most Creative Writing PhD students would welcome training in writing practice and related professional practice skills, alongside community-building events such as writing-research seminars, opportunities for readings and similar practice-focused activities, but the potential for such activities may be limited by the size and level of Creative Writing postgraduate activity within particular universities.
- With regard to examiners, a Creative Writing PhD thesis should be examined by at least one practitioner, an academic who preferably writes in the same genre as the work being examined. It is preferable if possible for all examiners to be practitioners.

- It is important that the examining panel understand that the PhD is focused on Creative Writing and that a big component, often the largest part of the thesis, will consist of creative work. This in itself should not be a matter for critical challenge in the viva examination, though usual considerations of omissions from either section of the thesis might be critically assessed, as is usual in such examinations.
- It is good practice to give the student the option of having a supervisor present as observer at their viva examination.
- It is good practice to give the student access to an independent mentor throughout their study, usually a member of academic staff who stands free from the supervisory team. This person acts as a safeguard in case the supervision hits difficulties, and may well not be called upon.
- Doctoral regulation within an institution should allow students to embargo or redact work so that it is not automatically made available on open access sites. This ensures the student is able to retain commercial rights for the creative work.

Appendix 2

Resource suggestions

The following is an indicative list of texts, journals and websites that may be of use to Creative Writing researchers.

Peer reviewed journals

Axon: Creative Explorations <http://www.axonjournal.com.au>

College English (National Council of Teachers in English)
<http://www.ncte.org/journals/ce>

Creative Writing: Teaching Theory and Practice <http://www.cwteaching.com>

Journal of Writing in Creative Practice (Intellect)
<http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=154/>

Life Writing (Taylor and Francis) <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlwr20#>

Literature Compass (Wiley-Blackwell)
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/loi/17414113>

New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing (Taylor and Francis) <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmnw20>

Scriptum <http://www.scriptum.jyu.fi/CreativeWritingStudies.htm>

Short Fiction in Theory and Practice (Intellect)
<https://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=196/>

TEXT (AAWP) <http://www.textjournal.com>

Wasafiri: International Contemporary Writing (Taylor and Francis)
<http://www.wasafiri.org/>

The Writer's Chronicle (AWP)
https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_chronicle_overview

Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research (NAWE)
<http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-practice.html>

Online documents and links

AWP: the (US) Association of Writers and Writing Programs www.awpwriter.org

AAWP: the Australasian Association of Writing Programs www.aawp.org.au

Beyond the Benchmark (HEA/NAWE, 2013) <https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/beyond-the-benchmark.html>

EACWP: the European Association of Creative Writing Programmes
<http://www.eacwp.org>

IABA: the International Association of Biography and Autobiography
<http://iaba-europe.eu/>

NAWE: the (UK) National Association of Writers in Education www.nawe.co.uk

NAWE Creative Writing Benchmark Statement 2008
<https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/phd-network.html>

NAWE Guide to Writing Residencies <https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-and-community.html>

NAWE PhD Network <https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/phd-network.html>

PhD guidance on embargos and redaction (NAWE/British Library)
<https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/research/lodging-theses.html>

QAA Creative Writing Benchmark Statement 2016
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-Creative-Writing-16.pdf>

Books and chapters

Borgdorff, H. (2011) 'The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research', in M. Biggs and H. Karlsson (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. London, Routledge

Cook, J. (2005) 'Creative Writing as a Research Method,' in G. Griffin (ed.) *Research Methods for English Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp.195-21

Dawson, P. (2004) *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*. London: Routledge

Dean, R, and Smith, H. (eds) (2009) *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Harper, G. and Kroll, J. (eds) (2012) *Research Methods in Creative Writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Harper, G. (ed.) (2013) *A Companion to Creative Writing*. London: Wiley-Blackwell

McGurl, M. (2009) *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press

Myers, D.G. (1996) *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Peary, A. and Hunley, T.C. (2015) *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press

Webb, J. (2015) *Researching Creative Writing*. Newmarket: Frontinus Ltd (Creative Writing Studies)

