2026-27 Examining Conventions for the degrees of MSt and MPhil in Modern Languages

1 Introduction

This document sets out the examination conventions applying to the MSt and MPhil in Modern Languages for the academic year 2026-27. The supervisory body for these courses is the Graduate Studies Committee in the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages.

Examination conventions are the formal record of the specific assessment standards for the course or courses to which they apply. They set out how examined work will be marked and how the resulting marks will be used to arrive at a final result and classification of an award.

2 Rubrics for individual papers

The courses are assessed as follows:

MSt students are assessed on two special subjects, a method option course, and a dissertation over the course of one year:

<table>
<tr><th>Michaelmas Term</th><th>Hilary Term</th><th>Trinity Term</th></tr>
<tr><td>Special Subject 1
Assessment submission
MT Week 10</td><td>Special Subject 2
Assessment submission
HT Week 10</td><td rowspan="2">MSt Dissertation
Assessment submission
TT Week 7</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Method Option
Assessment submission HT Week 10</td></tr>
</table>

MPhil students are assessed on two special subjects and a method option course in the first year, and a further special subject and a thesis in the second year:

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Michaelmas Term (MT)</th><th>Hilary Term (HT)</th><th>Trinity Term (TT)</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Year 1</td><td>Special Subject 1
Assessment submission
MT Week 10</td><td>Special Subject 2
Assessment submission
HT Week 10</td><td rowspan="2">Dissertation/thesis workshops</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Method Option
Assessment submission HT Week 10</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Year 2</td><td>Either Special Subject 3
Assessment submission
MT Week 10</td><td>Or Special Subject 3
Assessment submission
HT Week 10</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">MPhil Thesis
Assessment submission TT Week 7</td></tr>
</table>

The papers to be examined for these courses are:

i. Special Subject* portfolio essays
For each special subject, candidates submit either a portfolio of two essays to total 5,000-7000 words, or, they may submit a single long essay, provided that the total word count of the essay is 5,000-7000 words (the word count includes footnotes, but

excludes bibliography). The essays must be typed; they need not be presented in the full scholarly form expected of a dissertation, but they should be followed by a list of primary and secondary literature used. An electronic copy of the essay should be submitted via Inspera. Students must clearly state the word count on the first page of their submission. Each page should be numbered, preferably at the top right-hand corner, where numbers are most easily seen.

ii. Method Option* papers
Candidates are expected to attend the relevant lectures in Michaelmas and Hilary Terms and to participate in the relevant seminars. The essay submitted should be between 5,000 and 7,000 words (the word count includes footnotes, but excludes bibliography). It should be typed, and include a bibliography of works consulted. An electronic copy of the essay should be submitted via Inspera. Students must clearly state the word count on the first page of their submission. Each page should be numbered, preferably at the top right-hand corner, where numbers are most easily seen.

iii. Dissertations
MSt dissertations and MPhil theses should be submitted in a scholarly form, acknowledging primary and secondary sources and with an appropriate critical apparatus. For the MSt, the length of the dissertation is 10,000-12,000 words and for the MPhil the word count should be 20,000-25,000 words. The approach which a candidate adopts will depend upon the subject that has been chosen. An electronic copy of the dissertation should be submitted via Inspera. Students must clearly state the word count on the first page of their submission. Each page should be numbered, preferably at the top right-hand corner, where numbers are most easily seen.

**Special Subject and Method Option courses available in 2026-27 are set out in the course guide which accompanies the student handbook.*

3 Marking conventions

3.1 University scale for standardised expression of agreed final marks [EAF 11.1]

Individual course papers will be marked according to the following scale:

70 - 100	Distinction
65 – 69	Merit
50 - 64	Pass
0 - 49	Fail

3.2 Qualitative marking criteria for different types of assessment

Descriptors of the qualities that are expected in the assessed work for each category of paper (see also the descriptors for work in each of the standard marking bands, in section 4.1):

i. Special Subject portfolio essays
The essay submitted as part of the portfolio will have been written in the course of the student's work on the Special Subject, but may also be revised in the light of the supervisor's comments. A general norm might be for the supervisor to comment on a piece of work and for the student to incorporate the revisions into the finished essay without further input. Whereas for the dissertation examiners will normally expect a combination of intellectual and scholarly skills, the portfolio essays may be more restricted in focus and scope; for example, a close reading of an important text or texts, or a lucid account of historical, theoretical or critical context may be sufficient for any one essay, though a range of skills should normally be displayed across the work submitted. A passable essay will show evidence of appropriate background reading and

of the deployment of some analytical skills; an essay given a Merit mark will show evidence of independent critical thought and research beyond the reproduction of the relevant material; an essay given a Distinction mark will show clear evidence of an ability to analyse complex material, or interpret difficult texts in astute and insightful ways, in a manner that gives signs of potential for doctoral research. When assessing portfolio essays, examiners shall take account of the stage at which each essay was completed.

ii. Method Option papers

Key Questions in Critical Thought

To be of passable standard, the essay should show an ability to understand and explicate complex theoretical issues and, where relevant, to compare different theories. To attain a Merit standard, an essay will show a greater control of ideas and their implications. To attain a Distinction standard, candidates will be expected also to draw upon wide independent reading and to adopt distinctive analytical and critical positions in respect of the topics they are discussing. This might entail a detailed reading and critique of the work of one theorist, a well-informed survey of different positions adopted in respect of a given theoretical issue, or a comparison of the work of two or more theorists working in related fields which lucidly accounts for the strengths and weaknesses of their respective views.

Spaces of Comparison

To be of passable standard, the essay should show an ability to understand and explicate complex theoretical issues that are relevant to an area of comparative criticism discussed during the course. To attain a Merit standard, an essay will show a greater control of ideas and their implications. To attain a Distinction standard, candidates will be expected also to draw upon wide independent reading and to adopt distinctive analytical and critical positions in respect of the topics they are discussing. This might entail a detailed reading and critique of the work of one theorist, a well-informed survey of different positions adopted in respect of a given theoretical issue, or a discussion of approaches which lucidly accounts for their strengths and weaknesses. Candidates may include reference to practical comparative criticism on one or more works, or discuss approaches with reference to specific works of e.g. literature, film or music, but such works should not form the focus of the essay. Quotations in foreign languages should be given in the text in the original language. Translations into English should be provided in footnotes for all quotations in foreign languages. Such translations of quotations provided in footnotes should not be included in the word count of this essay

German Cultural Theory: The critical tradition from Schiller to Arendt and Jaeggi

To be of passable standard, the essay should demonstrate independent reading beyond the texts and authors discussed in the seminars, and it should show an ability to explicate complex theoretical texts and place them in the appropriate historical and intellectual context. To attain a Merit standard, an essay will show a greater control of ideas and their implications. To attain a Distinction standard, candidates are expected also to adopt distinctive analytical and critical positions in relation to the texts they are discussing. This might entail a detailed reading and critique of the text or texts; a well-informed study of the reception or transmission of one or more works in relation to the history of ideas and/or critical practices; an account of how a particular text fits into a long-running critical debate; or a comparison of two or more texts which gives a lucid and critical account of their historical and intellectual framework.

Palaeography, History of the Book and Digital Humanities

The essays presented may be restricted in scope, and account should be taken of the fact that the history of the book, for most candidates, will be a new venture. To obtain a pass in the examination, candidates should demonstrate that they have studied several aspects of the subject in some detail, and that they are able to apply some powers of

analysis to the relevant material. To obtain a Merit, candidates will show more command of the material, a growing ability to contextualise insights in a larger context. To obtain a Distinction standard, they must show clear evidence of an ability to analyse complex material, to understand individual bibliographical questions in a broader context, and to discuss issues relating to the history of the book in astute and insightful ways, in a manner which gives signs of research potential

iii. Dissertation/Thesis
A dissertation/thesis judged worthy of a Distinction will be expected to display a high level of proficiency in intellectual and scholarly skills which might include some of the following: nuanced close reading of complex literary texts; lucid, detailed accounts of historical and theoretical contexts for the object of enquiry; a readiness to analyse and engage with the views of earlier scholars and critics; a sound grasp of the linguistic, methodological or scholarly tools required for the successful completion of the dissertation. A dissertation judged worthy of Merit will show elements of distinction standard work, but strong individual insights might not be followed through or connected; the implications of insights might not be fully grasped or elaborated, suggesting the candidate does not yet demonstrate potential for doctoral research. A dissertation will normally be of passable standard if, despite showing little aptitude for advanced independent research, it nevertheless represents in the examiners' judgement a suitable level of attainment for a diligent and able student within one year (or with the MPhil two years) of graduation. An electronic copy of the dissertation should be submitted via Inspera. Students must clearly state the word count on the first page of their submission.

3.3 Verification and reconciliation of marks [EAF 11.2]

All submitted work is marked independently by two appropriately qualified members of staff ('double-blind' marked): first markers will be specialist assessors appointed in the subject area and second markers will be a member of the board of examiners from the relevant language sub-faculty (unless they were the first marker, in which case an alternative examiner will be appointed).

Each marker will complete a marksheet with their comments on the work and an individual mark, before meeting to agree on a final mark for the work. The marksheet should subsequently be completed to include: an explanation of how the final mark was arrived at, and how any discrepancies between the initial marks were resolved; and agreed feedback to the student.

Should there be disagreement of 10 marks or more between the two markers that cannot be resolved, a third marker will be appointed (with the approval of the Chair of Examiners), and an explanation of how marks have been reconciled included at paper level. In exceptional circumstances the Chair of Examiners will adjudicate.

3.4 Scaling [EAF 11.9]

Scaling is not used in the assessment of this course.

3.5 Short-weight convention and departure from rubric in examinations

There are no direct penalties for submitting work of less than the minimum stated word count. However, work that is significantly under-length is likely to be inadequate in its coverage and content, in the context of the marking criteria described in section 4.1, and will be so marked. As a rough guideline, less than three-quarters of the maximum word limit is likely to be inadequate.

There are also no specific penalties for deficiencies in the written academic English (or any other language in which candidates have the permission to write their work) although any deficiency in accuracy or clarity of expression is likely to compromise the effectiveness of the essay in line with the criteria described in 4.1.

3.6 Penalties for late or non-submission of submitted work [EAF 8.2; ER 14]

The scale of penalties agreed by the Board of Examiners in relation to late submission of assessed items is set out below. Details of the circumstances in which such penalties might apply can be found in the Examination Regulations (Regulations for the Conduct of University Examinations, Part 14).

Lateness	**Cumulative mark penalty**
After the deadline but submitted on the same day	-5 marks
Each additional calendar day	-1 mark
Max. deducted marks up to 14 days late	-18 marks
More than 14 calendar days after the deadline	Fail

Failure to submit a required element of assessment within 14 days of an approved deadline without permission will result in the failure of the assessment. Students are entitled to one resit attempt for each failed assessment, and the mark for a resit of an assessment will be capped at the pass mark.

3.7 Penalties for over-length work [ER 16]

The Board has agreed the following tariff of marks which will be deducted for over-length work:

Percentage by which the maximum word count is exceeded:	**Cumulative mark penalty** (up to a maximum of –10)
Up to 5% over word limit	-1 mark
Up to 10% over	-2 marks
Up to 15% over	-3 marks
Each further 1% - 5% over	-1 further mark

Students are required to state the word count on the first page of all submissions.

3.8. Penalties for poor academic practice [EAF 8.4.3]

Candidates are not permitted to use AI-generated content or AI tools in work submitted for assessment. Candidates are advised to consult the University guidelines on plagiarism and the Faculty's Guidance on AI.

If examiners suspect plagiarism and the material concerned accounts for no more than 10% of the whole piece of work, it is likely that this can be dealt with by the examiners as an instance of poor academic practice (e.g. web sources with no clear authors; incomplete or shoddy referencing). Markers will grade the work on its merits. The board of examiners will then use its judgement to deduct up to a maximum of ten points depending on the gravity and extent of the poor academic practice reported to the Chair of Examiners by the markers in question. If the consequence of the deduction would result in an overall Fail, the case will be referred to the Proctors.

If the material affected concerns more than 10% of the whole piece of work or more than poor academic practice, or where a candidate has previously had marks deducted for poor academic practice or has been referred to the Proctors for suspected plagiarism, the Chair will refer the case to the Proctors.

4 Progression rules and classification conventions

4.1 Qualitative descriptors of Distinction, Merit, Pass, Fail

85 and over: very high distinction
Work which displays unusual originality, engages decisively and imaginatively with the problem identified, demonstrates strong analytical and conceptual power, sustains a coherent argument, and deploys evidence skilfully and effectively. Such work should be critically adventurous, clearly and engagingly written and presented in an impeccably lucid, correct and scholarly manner. The assessors should feel confident that work of this level might be published, with only minor revisions, in a good scholarly journal.

80-84: high distinction
Work which demonstrates all the qualities stipulated above, but which contains some relative weakness in one of the areas of coverage, originality, deployment of evidence, presentation or style. Work at this level should be highly professional and show unequivocal potential for doctoral research.

75-79: distinction
Work which demonstrates outstanding qualities of intellectual engagement with the material, coherence and control of argument, and impressive scope, but may show some relative weakness in coverage, originality, deployment of evidence, presentation or style. Work should suggest strong potential for doctoral research.

70-74: low distinction
Work which shows clear evidence of independent thought and research, and a firm command of the subject, with coherence of argument and clarity of presentation, such as to suggest that the candidate has potential for doctoral research.

65-69: merit
Work which shows evidence of independent critical thought and research beyond the reproduction of relevant material, a firm command of the subject. Some local deficiencies in knowledge, coverage, coherence or form may be overlooked if the essay as a whole presents a convincing, informed and broadly coherent argument.

60-64: high pass
Work which shows clear evidence of independent thought and research, a firm command of the subject. Some local deficiencies in argument or research may be overlooked if the essay as a whole presents a coherent argument and/or individual insights.

50-59: pass
Work which shows basic competence in understanding the subject, mounting a broadly coherent argument, and adequate style and presentation, but only slight evidence of independent thought and research.

49 or under: fail

Work which shows inadequate knowledge of primary texts; offers an analysis that is seriously flawed, or excessively derivative; shows a meagre knowledge and/or poor understanding of secondary literature; fails to present a coherent argument; or is notably poor in its style and/or presentation.

4.2 Final outcome rules

For both degrees an average of 50% or over is required to pass. An average of at least 65% is required for a merit; and an average of at least 70% is required for a distinction.

The overall weightings for dissertation and coursework within the MSt and MPhil programmes are as follows. For the MSt, the dissertation counts for 50% and coursework for 50% of the overall grade – hence, the dissertation mark is double-weighted for the purpose of calculating the final mark. For the MPhil, the dissertation counts for 55% and coursework for 45% of the overall grade.

For the MSt of the marks for the two Special Subjects and the Method essay, two will be carried forward to contribute to the total mark. Assuming all three pieces of work achieve a mark of at least 50 (the pass mark for the MSt), the two highest marks will go forward. No candidate who has failed any of the components will be awarded the degree. Candidates who have initially failed any element of the examination, but who have passed them at resit will not be eligible for the award of a Distinction or Merit.

For the MPhil, of the marks for the three Special Subjects and the Method essay, three will be carried forward to contribute to the total mark. Assuming all four pieces of work achieve a mark of at least 50 (the pass mark for the MPhil), the three highest marks will go forward. No candidate who has failed any of the components will be awarded the degree. Candidates who have initially failed any element of the examination, but who have passed them at resit will not be eligible for the award of a Distinction or Merit.

A candidate who fails the MPhil may instead be awarded an MSt by the examiners at their final meeting. The mechanism for considering an award for the MSt is as follows: all scripts will be re-read by internal examiners, grading them as either ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ for the MSt. The decision of the internal examiners will need to be ratified by the External Examiner.

Final marks of 0.5 or higher will be rounded up, and final marks of 0.4 or lower will be rounded down.

4.3 Progression rules

Not applicable to this course.

4.4 Use of vivas [EAF 10]

Vivas are not used on these courses.

5 Resits [EAF 13]

Should a candidate fail any element of the examination, that element may be re-submitted once, and once only. Candidates may resubmit that element by noon on the final Monday of September following their first examination. The highest mark that may be awarded for resubmitted work is 50% (i.e. it is capped at the pass mark).

Resubmitted work may be a reworked version of the original submission or a completely new submission.

6 Consideration of mitigating circumstances [EAF Annex E]

A candidate's final outcome will first be considered using the classification rules/final outcome rules as described above in section 4. The exam board will then consider any further information they have on individual circumstances.

Where a candidate or candidates have made a submission under Part 13 of the Regulations for Conduct of University Examinations, that unforeseen circumstances may have had an impact on their performance in an examination, a subset of the board (the 'Mitigating Circumstances Panel') will meet to discuss the individual applications. The Panel will evaluate, on the basis of the information provided to it, the relevance of the circumstances to examinations and assessment, the strength of the evidence provided in support, and the extent of the impact. The Panel will also note whether all or a subset of papers were affected, being aware that it is possible for circumstances to have different levels of impact on different papers.

The board of examiners will separately consider whether and how to adjust a candidate's results as a result of the mitigating circumstances, taking into account both the Panel's considerations of the notice(s) and the submissions and marks. Further information on the procedure is provided in the Examination and Assessment Framework (Annex E), and information for students is available on the problems completing your assessment web pages.

7 Details of examiners and rules on communicating with examiners

The Examination Board for 2026-27 is:

Chair of Examiners	Kate Tunstall
French	Kate Tunstall Jack Nunn Seth Whidden
German	Joanna Neilly Ian Ellison
Italian	Emma Bond
Portuguese	Marcelo Lachat (MT26) Claire Williams (HT & TT27)
Russian	Polly Jones
Spanish	Laura Lonsdale
External	Dr Ita Mac Carthy, Durham University

Candidates should not under any circumstances seek to make contact with individual internal or external examiners.