History

in the School of Arts & Humanities

Dissertation and Long Essay Guidelines
for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students
Preface

This booklet is intended to help you in writing a dissertation, long essay or thesis as part of an undergraduate or master’s level degree programme (for the remainder of this handbook, we will adopt the term ‘dissertation’, but the advice holds good for any such exercise). Regardless of the level at which an extended research-based dissertation is required, certain basic advice remains constant – even up to and including a PhD thesis!

This booklet is intended to supplement the very important specific advice given by your dissertation supervisor and any classroom guidance on dissertation work provided by individual programmes. Writing a long essay or dissertation, even with the very best supervision, can feel a lonely enterprise; this booklet should help provide an additional source of reference when your supervisor is not immediately to hand, and so help ensure that the overall support you receive in writing your dissertation is in line with what you receive in your other, taught courses.

Acknowledgement

This handbook is based on, and draws extensively from, one used very successfully in the Department of War Studies for a number of years. We are immensely grateful to the Department for permission to reproduce much of its content, adapted where necessary to reflect the specific requirements of the History Department.
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Introduction

In some ways writing a dissertation or long essay may simply seem a matter of doing at greater length something with which almost any History degree programme will have given you considerable experience of as a matter of course: writing an essay! There is no doubt (and this should be a reassuring thought) that a key element in succeeding with your dissertation will be to build on the skills and techniques you have learned when researching and writing other History essays.

However there are four things you should note in tackling a dissertation rather than an essay:

- **Careful Planning** – This is vital to ensure that you tackle issues in an appropriate order and allocate appropriate space to each aspect of your topic. This is particularly the case with dissertations since they will be anything from four to eight times longer than a normal essay.

- **Extra Time to Research** – This is needed since there are no classes, essays or exams covering your dissertation you will need more research for a dissertation than an essay. Your dissertation is expected to be the product of thorough and in-depth research and its success rests on it containing ideas or insights which make an original contribution to scholarship, rather than simply summarising established wisdom.

- **Freedom and Self-reliance** – This is more significant to your dissertation than in to essays since no question is set for you and no reading list provided. This freedom is an advantage, in that you can follow your own interests and select for yourself (albeit in discussion with your supervisor) the topic you wish to pursue.

- **Primary Sources** – Although there are opportunities for working with primary sources throughout your degree, your dissertation provides a unique opportunity for close and sustained engagement with them.

This handbook aims to address these distinctive features of dissertation work by discussing four areas of consideration:

- Choosing a Topic
- Conducting Research
- Planning the Dissertation
- Writing the Dissertation.

This document is intended to be read in conjunction with the Department of History style guide, which also contains essential information on the presentation of your dissertation.

Finally the booklet will set out the regulations that apply to our dissertations in the History department, including word counts, footnotes, and publication information.

1. Choosing your Topic

The topic you choose should be one for which you have energy and enthusiasm, one which stems from your intellectual interests and priorities. If you are not sure of your topic it is fine to accept advice from your tutor, another member of academic staff, a friend or even the internet, but the final decision should be yours. It should be a topic that you are happy to live with for several months!!

But **avoid being over-ambitious**. You should beware of using this opportunity to tackle a massive question that has been preoccupying you intellectually. The topic must be do-able. In composing your question consider the following things;

- **Express your topic as a question**
  Don't ask ‘Why was there an 1832 Reform Act?’ – this has too many possible answers. Instead you could ask ‘What did the passage of the 1832 Reform Act owe to ...?’ Instead of ‘What was the nature of medieval sexuality?’ you could ask ‘What was the place of ‘x’ in medieval sexuality?’

  By doing this you narrow the focus of your work making it more manageable and making your dissertation more concise and targeted. (The technical term for this is ‘adding a second (or third) variable’ which narrows down the focus of the first.)

- **Is the question actually researchable?**
  What are the primary sources? Have they survived? And where are they? Are there too many or not enough? Are there printed versions available in libraries, are they posted on the internet, or will you depend on manuscript originals in archives? What language will they be in, and if manuscript, will you be able to read the hand? Which potential supervisor has the necessary expertise? Will you need to conduct interviews? Is travel involved? Does it require sampling or numeracy skills that are readily to hand?

  Do not give up too soon, but **never** be afraid to drop or amend a topic where the research resource base is thin or to focus more narrowly within a broad topic, if you find that there is much more primary or secondary literature than you first thought.

  **IMPORTANT:** If you are going to conduct interviews as part of your research you must have prior ethical approval. Please see section D. Research Ethics, page 12.
1. Choosing your Topic

• Where does your question fit within the literature on the subject?
Almost any topic you choose to write about will already have a body of scholarship surrounding it. The issue you have to determine is whether you are contributing something new to that body of scholarship. This contribution can either say something original about the topic using well known sources or discussing unfamiliar material to offer new perspectives on familiar debates.
This will be more important for a doctorate than an undergraduate essay but originality is always an element in work of this kind.

• How will you tackle the topic?
Do you have a method of approach which really suits the subject? Can it be broken down into workable parts? Is there a part on which everything depends but that needs more work before deciding and proceeding further?
This set of issues does not need to be fully resolved right at the start, but these are questions worth considering before you begin you research.

• How do you make the task as manageable as possible?
Planning. Having a good methodology for your research makes you more organised and disciplined and helps inform your historical approach. Choosing the right method of approach is therefore every bit as important as developing your basic question. Consider what you feel comfortable with:
• are you at your best as a political historian or a social historian?
• can you handle statistics or literature as a source?
• do visual sources appeal to you more than other kinds of evidence?
• is the topic question actually suited to the approach you adopt?
• what approach does the possible or intended supervisor favour?
• If your approach is different to those which have already been done, what are its strengths or what does it add to the existing scholarship on the topic, i.e. new approaches to old problems can be welcome!
Don't be afraid to ask people and to discuss you plan at length with your supervisor before beginning. Be sure that the topic suits the methodology and vice versa and that both the methodology and the topic suit your own academic strengths.
As you conduct your research there are likely to be a number of interesting avenues of research that you might follow, all taking you in very different directions historically. Having both a working question and a method of analysis to which you return again and again will help keep you focused on the essentials.

2. Conducting Research

• What are your sources?
As well as secondary sources on your subject you will need to consult a significant amount of primary sources in order to ensure that your dissertation includes ‘new’ research, approaches or conclusions. Do not limit yourself in thinking about what these sources might be – as well as traditional sources such as manuscripts, diaries and newspapers you might also consider, where appropriate, private archives of societies, companies and universities, people or even works of art. If you still are not sure what your sources might be, consider some of the following:
• Search library catalogues for books and journal articles that cover the general subject area that you’ve chosen.
• Read the footnotes and bibliographies of works on the topic to see which sources other historians have used.

• Where are your sources?
• Begin with the King’s library. Even if they do not have the sources you require they may have collections of relevant documents or newspaper archives on microfiche or CD-ROM, or may have an electronic subscription to newspapers or journals which allows you to access them on-line. The library will also have specialist databases and search engines which will help you in tracking down relevant source material. (Do not be afraid to ask the library staff for assistance.)
• Try the numerous other libraries within London including the British Library and various specialist libraries such as the German Historical Institute.
• Utilise other sources of documents such as the National Archives or any of London’s countless archival repositories, including art galleries, public institutions such as St Paul’s Cathedral, or Hoare’s Bank.
• The National Register of Archives is fantastic for finding the location of manuscripts and historical papers relating to any individual or organisation in British History, and discovering where relevant collections are housed, and how to gain access to them.
2. **Conducting Research**

- Most universities have archival collections. King’s houses the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA) which contains personal papers of former members of the armed services and military commentators and The Foyle Special Collections Library, which houses over 150,000 printed works, as well as maps, slides, sound recordings and manuscript material.
- The London region is exceptionally rich in archival collections: a useful resource is AIM25 (www.aim25.ac.uk/index.stm), which gives electronic access to lists of material held in repositories across the capital.
- If your subject is more contemporary you may even need to conduct interviews to generate your sources. If this is the case, remember that you will need to apply for ethical clearance for your project. Please see section **D. Research Ethics**, page 12.
- DO NOT be afraid of using the internet to help you locate sources and even to read scanned primary sources online. But do take care using information from unknown sources. Also remember how transient the web is as a medium, with websites frequently changing and disappearing. When you find key material, save or print it straight away for future reference.

Read around that subject so that you can frame the terms of reference for your research question. Look in the literature for clues from the experts who write on the subject for issues or aspects that have not been explored in any depth before. Another approach is to deal with a subject from an angle it hasn’t been examined from previously. Make sure that you become aware of the different debates on subjects, and start to formulate your own opinions – but be prepared to change those opinions as you do more research. While you’re doing this reading, take detailed notes, and begin to compile a bibliography.

As far as possible, stick to your plan, but note that this plan, or even your research question itself, can change as you do more research. It may be that you find that some information cannot be obtained, or that there is some material that needs to be incorporated at the expense of other information. This is part of the research process.

One of the key difficulties related to primary documents is that you might discover the ones that you require are difficult to find. In some cases, the documents will be impossible to locate, since they have been destroyed (for example, a large number of official documents that ought to be in the National Archives and historic books previously held at the British Library are not there because they were destroyed in German bombing raids); or the key documents have been ‘weeded’, either for reasons of security, or, more frequently, because the person responsible for sending the files to the archives removed items that he or she thought were of little importance, but which turn out to be of interest to you. It is, therefore, important that you do some research into the primary documents available to you before you finalise your project. It is quite possible that you will find some documents which slightly shift the direction of your research, so you should not be surprised if this happens!

Research methodology is a huge subject, and we cannot hope to do more than scratch the surface. Your supervisor will be a vital guide as to the specific sources and techniques appropriate for your particular project, but remember that investigative activity of this kind is a key personal challenge which you must overcome as part of the dissertation process.

3. **Planning the Dissertation**

**Missing a deadline can mean a straight Fail**, so it is imperative that you plan your dissertation clearly before beginning to avoid rushing towards the end. You may also be working on other modules/essays/exam revision during this time, which makes careful planning all the more important. Remember that part of the test in the dissertation is precisely to see whether you have the self-discipline and planning skills to make the project fit properly within the time available.

**Initially:**
- Block off time in your diary on a weekly basis for work on your dissertation. This will prevent you from putting it off due to a lack of urgency until it is too late.
- Divide your total time between ‘research’ and ‘writing-up’. Do not underestimate the time required for the latter. Also, remember that there is some overlap between the two: you should try to get ideas down on paper whilst they are still fresh in your mind.
- Begin with a survey of the literature: this will help you to define the areas you wish to study in more detail.
3. **Planning the Dissertation**

**After initial research:**
- Break down your research, and time allowance, by topic. This way you can avoid devoting so much time to one aspect of the topic that you cannot give others the attention they deserve. Try not to make these divisions on obvious categories such as ‘chronology’ or ‘geography’. Instead, wait until you have some handle on your ideas/arguments and then use them to structure the work more thematically (this structure can be changed later on if required). This may involve answering distinct sub-questions or developing distinct sub-arguments which work together in a logical fashion to build the overall argument you wish to make.
- Try to leave yourself plenty of flexibility in your timetable, especially towards the end, to cope with unexpected emergencies and also to allow you to follow interesting and important angles which become apparent during your research and writing.

**Before writing:**
- Divide your word count into the sections of your dissertation to avoid an overly long part one and a two-paragraph conclusion.
- Once your research is done but before you begin writing, consider developing two levels of structure within your dissertation. For example, you might write sections on different themes but within each section have chronologically ordered paragraphs, or, conversely, you might have sections devoted to successive chronological periods which have thematically defined paragraphs. It is impossible to prescribe in generic terms the best way to structure your particular dissertation, since each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses, and the critical determinant is what is most appropriate for your own specific case. The main thing is to continue to revisit and develop your outline dissertation structure throughout your project. This will serve to focus your thinking throughout upon the final product, and will provide a very useful vehicle for discussing your evolving ideas with your supervisor at each stage of the process.

4. **Writing the Dissertation**

Of the four areas which this booklet covers, the process of writing the dissertation is the one which differs least from the techniques with which you should already be familiar from writing shorter essays. Whereas your supervisor will be able to discuss with you at some length your choice of topic, your research methodology, and the structuring of your dissertation, he or she can only give you limited feedback on drafts of your final submission. This means that more, not less, effort should go into this side of the project since you will necessarily have less support available. Be careful – an apparently well-conceived dissertation can often be let down by poor expression, clumsy and unclear phrasing, or careless proof-reading.

**Timing:** the most important thing to remember when writing your dissertation is to ensure you leave enough time to do your research justice. DO NOT leave the writing to the last minute.

**Drafting:** Writing your dissertation should be a process of trial and improvement, working through several drafts and gradually refining your work until you reach a satisfactory finished product.

**Electronic backing-up:** you MUST take care to regularly save and back up what you have written. Hours of irreplaceable hard work can be lost very quickly.

**Proof-Reading:** The examiner does not know what you meant to say, only what you actually say! Ensure that you leave enough time to read and check your work for mistakes, overlap and compliance with the word limit! You may find it easier to proofread from a printed copy and then type up your corrections.

**Style** – during your dissertation research you will have read numerous scholarly articles. As well as providing you with interesting arguments and details these can also be used as style guides. It is worth considering the way in which they construct their arguments and situate them within the existing scholarly debate, what techniques they use to convince readers of the power of their own ideas and how they use evidence without incorporating lengthy slabs of narrative. Although academic articles are by no means perfect in stylistic terms, and some are undoubtedly better than others, they provide a very good model to aim for, since the marking system awards highest credit for dissertations which approach such a ‘publishable’ standard. It is certainly better to use published articles as a model rather than looking at other people’s dissertations, since the latter are much more variable in quality and may therefore be misleading as examples.
4. Writing the Dissertation

What to include – You will almost certainly, during your research, amass much more material than you can possibly fit into the dissertation itself. It is important, therefore, to be selective when writing the final piece. It is here where the question which you are addressing becomes at least as important as your overall subject area in helping you determine what is relevant and what is not. You should ask of each sentence you write the question, ‘so what?’ If that sentence does not in some way advance your argument, it probably should not be there. Even in relevant areas, you should find that you know more than you have space to write, and that you are in effect summarising your own knowledge – this is a good thing, since such well-informed summaries are less likely to be flawed than are passages where you are writing at the limits of what you know. In other cases, there will be fascinating stories or ideas which you have come across, and which you will be tempted to include because of their intrinsic interest, regardless of their relevance to the argument at hand. You should try your best to resist such temptations, since such interpolations, however worthy, merely serve to disrupt and confuse your overall message. Your dissertation is not your only chance to include these ideas, and you should aim to find some other more suitable outlet for them elsewhere.

Writing – Good academic writing is largely a matter of moderation. Avoid extremes of either assertion or narrative. Do not simply assert your points, instead ensure that each successive point is backed up with supporting evidence. You should similarly avoid slabs of narrative which lack a clear sense of what point you are trying to make. Another pair of opposing dangers to be avoided are advocacy and equivocation. Do not ignore contrary evidence and ideas, since it actually strengthens your argument to consider opinions opposed to your own and demonstrate why you have discounted them. On the other hand, you should not be so concerned to sit on the fence that your writing consists of a string of opposing points each prefaced by ‘However...’ – an approach which soon leaves the reader with no idea of which side you are really taking. When making an argument, try and avoid over using non-committal phrases (e.g. ‘seems like’, ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’) as it comes across as if you are unsure of your argument and can weaken the tone of your dissertation. If you haven’t convinced yourself of your argument, should you be using it, what is your evidence?

Layout – paragraphs are an important way of breaking down your work into manageable thoughts/arguments. In the first sentence of each paragraph, you can set out the general argument you wish to advance at that point. The remaining sentences can then either:

- introduce any necessary qualifications to your broad statement, and say why they do not undermine your overall argument.

Hence, a generic paragraph might run as follows:

‘Hypothesis X is the most persuasive explanation for phenomenon A. This is shown by examples P and Q. Although hypothesis Y might seem equally persuasive in light of example R, this was clearly an exceptional case, as illustrated by characteristics F and G.’

The result is to make it clear exactly where you stand and why. Focusing the first sentence of each paragraph on developing successive stages of your argument also has the advantage that you or the reader can quickly survey your developing case by reading just these first sentences – a useful way of checking on the logical flow, and making sure it is not disrupted by the detail. This generic paragraph structure is obviously just one possible way of organising your writing, and you should not feel concerned about deviating from it, but do try to carry across the general principles of clarity and balance into your own more developed writing style.

Evidence and references – you should use evidence in the same way as in your other essays – as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself, and always with an eye to how a sceptic might challenge your case. Remember that footnotes alone do not ‘prove’ an assertion, nor does a quote from however eminent an authority in itself prove anything more than that the person said it. If you want to back up an argument properly, you must include some actual evidence, and it is this which you should footnote, to give the reader an authoritative source to check the data concerned. Footnotes are also the place to refer to the works of other scholars whose ideas you discuss. You should keep your footnotes as short as possible, and put as much as you can in the main text. The only real occasion when extended text belongs in a footnote is when it constitutes an ‘aside’ which would disrupt the main flow of your argument (and since footnotes count equally towards your word limit, such asides should be kept to a bare minimum). See page 9 for guidance about the format of footnotes and bibliography.

Plagiarism – although your dissertation should include some degree of original though (as discussed above) you should not shy away from any reference to the work of others; quite the opposite. You must situate your argument within the broader scholarly debate, thereby demonstrating your familiarity with the secondary literature as a basis for your further research. Do ensure, however, that you are correctly referencing this literature to avoid the accusation of plagiarism. A typical dissertation might therefore run as follows:
'Issue A has sparked significant academic debate. Scholars such as P and Q argue that the explanation lies in hypothesis X, while scholars R and S instead champion hypothesis Y. I argue that the evidence C and D can be better understood in light of my new findings E and F, and that this points to a hybrid hypothesis XY as the best way of understanding issue A.'

Introduction and Conclusion – these need not be overly long, perhaps only taking a few paragraphs each. These sections should serve the same purpose as in your shorter essays.

• The Introduction defines the scope of the issue you will address, explains the order in which you will do so, indicates your evidential base, surveys existing writing on the topic, and perhaps prefigures the argument you will advance.

• The Conclusion reminds the reader of the key points you have made, draws together and inter-relates ideas you have covered in separate sections, and sets out any broader implications, conclusions, or agendas for further research.

Again, published articles are the best guide as to how to tackle these two key elements of your dissertation.

Sub-headings – in an essay of this length, sub-headings are very useful to clarify for the reader the stage you have reached, and you should be ready to tailor these headings according to what is most appropriate for your argument – a division into two or three ‘Parts’, each with a few sub-sections may often be more appropriate than just a single level of section headings.

5. Submission

• All work is to be typed
• Typing should be double-spaced and in 12 point font
• Two securely-held together copies of the dissertation are to be handed in. Dissertations can be bound by FedEx Kinko’s or Ryman’s on the Strand (we do not expect doctoral thesis binding quality!). A pdf of the dissertation must also be submitted on KEATS.
• Dissertations should have a cover sheet, which should include the dissertation title, word count and your candidate number (available from online Student Records).

• Your name must not appear anywhere on the document – please use your candidate number instead (available from online Student Records).

The word count includes the main text, footnotes and appendices (except where this is an illustrative reference) but NOT the bibliography. An appendix included for illustrative reference only is to be understood as a text, or set of texts, or other material or visual data, which does not form part of the main argument of the essay/dissertation, and for which you do not expect to receive credit: for instance, the full text of a passage or inscription on which you are offering a commentary, or tabulated information concerning sources discussed in the main text. If in doubt, please consult with your supervisor.'

Notes in Closing

This handbook cannot cover everything that goes into writing a good dissertation – some of what is written here may not be relevant to all projects. Our aim is to offer some general hints, which you can take or leave as you see fit. Remember that as well as this handbook you should be consulting your programme-specific handbook for detailed requirements. Above all, as you know, your individual relationship with your dissertation supervisor remains by far the most important component of our support, and you should take full advantage of your supervisor’s help and advice as you tackle this challenging but fulfilling endeavour.
For Reference

A. Footnotes, referencing and presentation
For guidance on footnoting and referencing, and presentation of copy, please see the Department of History Style guide.

B. Online Research Resources
www.kcl.ac.uk/iss/ir/subject/humanities/history.html
King’s History Resources webpage: information and links to a range of resources held at King’s, including Early English Books Online, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Medieval Sources Online, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and Times Digital Archive

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk
National Archives

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/
National Register of Archives

www.bl.uk
The British Library

www.aim25.ac.uk/index.stm
AIM25: search engine for archives in London and the M25 area

www.a2a.org.uk/
Access to Archives: a search engine for catalogues describing archives held locally in England and Wales and dating from the eighth century to the present day – an excellent resource

www.royalhistoricalsociety.org/
Royal Historical Society: searchable bibliographies and useful links

www.history.ac.uk/
Institute of Historical Research homepage

www.history.ac.uk/resources
Resources in History

C. Plagiarism – College Guidelines
Appendix to the Regulations Concerning Students

Plagiarism is the taking of another person’s thoughts, words, results, judgements, ideas, etc, and presenting them as your own.

Plagiarism is a form of cheating and a serious academic offence. All allegations of plagiarism will be investigated and may result in action being taken under the College’s Misconduct regulations. A substantiated charge of plagiarism will result in a penalty being ordered ranging from a mark of zero for the assessed work to expulsion from the College.

Collusion is another form of cheating and is the unacknowledged use of material prepared by several persons working together.

Students are reminded that all work that they submit as part of the requirements for any examination or assessments of the College or of the University of London must be expressed in their own words and incorporate their own ideas and judgments. Direct quotations from the published or unpublished works of others, including that of other students, must always be identified as such by being placed inside quotation marks with a full reference to the source provided in the proper form. Paraphrasing – using other words to express another person’s ideas or judgments – must also be acknowledged (in a footnote or bracket following the paraphrasing) and referenced. In the same way, the authors of images and audiovisual presentations must be acknowledged.

Students should take particular care to avoid plagiarism and collusion in coursework, essays and reports, especially when using electronic sources or when working in a group. Students should also take care in the use of their own work. Credit can only be given once for a particular piece of work (or a significant part thereof) twice for assessment will be regarded as cheating.

Unacknowledged collaboration may result in a charge of plagiarism or in a charge of collusion.

Students are advised to consult School and departmental guidance on the proper presentation of work and the most appropriate way to reference sources; they are required to sign and attach a statement to each piece of work submitted for assessment indicating that they have read and understood the College regulations on plagiarism.

Students should be aware that academic staff have considerable expertise in identifying plagiarism and have access to electronic detection services to assist them.

Approved by the Academic Board June 2005 and endorsed by the Council July 2005.
D. Research Ethics
Who should apply and what research is covered?
Any King’s staff member or student doing research involving healthy human participants. The term research should be taken in its broadest possible sense and includes questionnaires, observations and the use of materials derived from human participants as well as invasive or intrusive procedures. The re-use of personal data may also require ethical approval due to its sensitive nature or if individuals can be identified from it. Research raising any ethical issues with potential social or environmental implications may also require approval.

Where should I apply?
There is a risk based process which divides applications into low, moderate/uncertain and high risk so that the application process can be as efficient as possible.

High risk
All applicants should check that their project is not high risk first. This is identified through the high risk checklist: www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/applicants/sshl/riskcheck.html. If you answer ‘YES’ to any of the questions on the checklist follow the procedure for high risk applications to the Social Science, Humanities and Law Research Ethics Subcommittee.

Moderate or uncertain risk
Staff and research students should apply directly to their department’s Research Ethics Panel if the project is not high risk. Undergraduate and taught masters students should ascertain whether they can use the ‘low risk’ process below in the first instance.

Low risk
This process is only available to undergraduate and taught masters students.

These application procedures are explained fully online. Application deadlines, forms and guidelines are also available: www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/applicants/sshl/about.html

Further Information
Submitting using the wrong application process can result in delays to your application. If you are in doubt contact the Research Ethics Office or your local panel administrator as soon as possible.

Contact details and further information (including advice and Frequently Asked Questions) are available online www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics