

University of Warwick  
Department of History

# Dissertation Handbook

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## Introduction

The final-year dissertation in history will allow you to carry out a substantive piece of historical research and produce an article-length piece of work at the end of it. It gives you the opportunity to work in a way similar to an academic historian: identifying a suitable research topic, mastering the relevant historiography, immersing yourself in a wide variety of primary sources, and being able to sustain a coherent and logical argument. Although it builds on your previous study and writing at Warwick, you will now be doing something new; namely, creating your own historical argument on the basis of your personal reading of primary sources. While in your earlier essay writing you have been expected to have an opinion of your own, you will until now have relied largely, if not entirely, on secondary reading that comes with its own arguments. This will have probably influenced your own essay conclusions. Now you have a chance to develop your own individual voice to a much greater degree. Though a challenge, we hope that you will in the end find that it is one of the most rewarding pieces of work that you carry out on your degree course.

Your work will be guided by a supervisor, who will be the tutor of the module to which you attach your dissertation. In working with your supervisor, you will get a chance to develop new skills in dialogue with an expert in your chosen field. If you go on to do postgraduate work in a history department, it will provide a taste of the sort of work that you will be doing at that level.

The dissertation is compulsory for all History single-honours students and an option for all joint-degree students. The dissertation is weighted at 30 CATS and must be based on a final-year History or CAS module that the student is enrolled on, a Special Subject, an Advanced Option, or Historiography. It is expected that you will attach your dissertation to your Special Subject, as this is the module in which you engage most with primary sources.

The dissertation length is up to 9,000 words, not including footnotes or bibliography (for further details on this: see section on length and word-count).

In preparing for a final-year History dissertation you need to bear in mind that this is a 9,000 word essay and therefore a substantial piece of work (it is after all, a quarter of your assessed work for the year), and that to do it justice you need to give adequate time to think about your topic, the approach you intend to adopt, the sources you might use, and the way in which the dissertation is going to be structured.

Please ensure that you read this handbook carefully as soon as possible. The

Dissertation Director will give an initial presentation on the dissertation in the first week of term. For the day, time and venue, see the dissertation website on:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/undergraduate/modules/dissertation>.

You can ask questions at this session, so come prepared with any queries you may have. There will be further sessions on different aspects of research and writing dissertations during the first term. These are set out on the website, and will be also announced at the first session. In general, when you have any other specific query, approach your supervisor for initial advice, either in person or by email.

## Supervision

You will receive regular personal guidance from a supervisor throughout the dissertation process, which will include bibliographical advice and comments on one-page dissertation outlines. In addition, the Dissertations Director will be available for general guidance and queries. As an exception, students on the Renaissance stream of single-honours History who spend their first term of their final year in Venice will have one of the Venice Tutors designated as their Dissertations Director.

Supervisors will discuss your topic with you and provide advice on how to go about researching and writing it. You should ask for an appointment with her/him as soon as possible to discuss your ideas and invite comments and advice. The supervisor will be able to steer you towards suitable primary sources and help to choose something that is manageable in the time that you have available. The supervisor will then look at and, in further arranged meetings, comment on any plans or outlines that you produce. Make sure that you make good use of your supervisor, who will – you can be sure – be an enthusiast for his or her particular area of historical expertise, and very willing to share this with you. You should bear in mind, however, that supervisors are not permitted to read and comment on full-length drafts of the dissertation, as this would almost certainly prove an unfair advantage for some students over others. They can however answer specific enquiries about technical aspects of the writing and presentation up until you submit the dissertation in the summer term.

## Your topic

One of the important aims of a dissertation is originality. What can you say that is new about a given topic? Originality really signifies one or two things – or both. First, it can mean opening up a new line of enquiry that no one else seems to have thought of or

going back to the existing historiography and giving it a new twist. In this case it is likely to be your ability to reinterpret the existing material, to point out its flaws and limitations, and present logically and clearly a new case that is important. Secondly, it may involve identifying a new source – a collection of letters, say, or a first-hand account of some kind – that adds a new dimension to an existing field of scholarship or which tackles a topic that no-one seems to have looked at before or thought to be of much importance.

The topic of your dissertation is a very personal one. You need to choose something that speaks to you and your interests. Without enthusiasm, you will find it hard to motivate yourself to give it your best. You may decide on a topic – and even identify a suitable set of primary sources – by yourself, and then go to your supervisor with a ready-made project. More normally, however, you will find that yourself working out your topic in dialogue with your supervisor. She or he will take a broad interest that you have, suggest ways of approaching it, point out potential pitfalls, and guide you towards a set of primary sources.

In all this, it is important to identify a topic that is manageable. Many students begin with an unmanageably large topic, and have to narrow it down as they go along. You should remember that working on primary sources is time-consuming process, and that you will only be able to handle a limited amount of material in the time that you have available to you in your final year. You should not therefore be over-ambitious, but choose a topic that is appropriate in terms of the source material that you can handle.

A few – but only a very few – who have the confidence to do so attach their dissertation to Historiography and produce a piece of historiographical writing. This will normally entail an investigation of one particular historical thinker or historical field or genre, and it will require a lot of reading in and around that particular area. Here, the ‘primary’ source will be the original writings of that thinker or a wide range of histories produced in that specific field or genre. Your aim will be to develop an original historiographical argument of your own. The supervisor in this case will be your historiography tutor.

There are some points to be born in mind in making such a choice. It is best to start with a question that is as specific as possible. For example, rather than something like ‘What was the role of religion in the English revolution?’, ask something like ‘How did the religious beliefs of Gerrard Winstanley determine his politics?’. You can then read the original sources around this particular figure – which is a manageable and more concise topic.

It is good practice to come up with a working title as soon as possible. This does not

have to be posed as a question, though it will be informed by your basic question. For example, it may be something like: ‘Religion in the Politics of the English Revolution as revealed in the writing of Gerrard Winstanley’. You may have a broad initial title with a sub-title that defines the scope of the dissertation more clearly, such as ‘Chartist Insurrections: A Study of South Wales in 1839’. The earlier you identify your topic the better – so make an appointment with your supervisor as soon as possible.

## Researching a Dissertation

You need to bear in mind that you will almost certainly need to read both secondary and primary materials. Secondary sources can be defined as published (essentially academic) works, such as articles in journals, essays in edited collections, research monographs and so on. You will need to use these to give context to your topic, to aid you in framing your research questions, your introduction and conclusion. The historiography of your topic is likely to be a significant part of the dissertation and this will come from the secondary literature. You are expected to be able to demonstrate that you have a grasp of this literature, and you are likely to be marked down if this is lacking.

Primary source materials are far more varied. Some of you will be looking at a set of them in connection with your Special Subject; you may also have encountered examples elsewhere in your history modules. Primary sources might include newspapers, memoirs, correspondence (published and unpublished), Parliamentary Papers, archival records relating to organizations and institutions (the Modern Records Centre on campus has examples of these which you can access via the University of Warwick Library website), literary texts (such as novels and plays), early modern political and religious tracts, contemporary medical texts, or oral and visual source materials (interviews, photographs, paintings etc.).

When working on primary sources, you need to be clear about what sources you are going to use. Because working in a records office is so time consuming, and will also most certainly require that you travel to the place where it is housed and stay there for some time, you may find it more manageable to identify and work on either a set of printed original sources that relate to the topic of your choice or an online collection of sources (such as the back issues of a newspaper) that you can read at your own desk. The Modern Records Centre has the advantage of housing both original records and being located at Warwick – but it will only have material for certain modern historical subjects. You will need to get an idea of either how much or how little material there is in whatever archival resource you choose fairly early on. If it is either too thin – or alternatively extremely profuse – you may have to amend your research, either

broadening it or narrowing it down. Don't be afraid to be decisive and firm in your choices in this respect – it is something that all historians have to do. What you need to aim for is a question that can be answered appropriately from the archival source that you have identified.

Some of you will carry out interviews, and thus engage in oral history. A recorded or transcribed interview can be considered as a primary resource – in this case you are creating your own archive. Before starting an interview, you should get permission from the person involved, see whether he or she minds being recorded or notes being taken, and ask whether he/she has any objection to being named in your dissertation. You should be very scrupulous in this respect. In a few cases, such work involves dealing with sensitive issues. If this is the case, there is an issue of what is known as the ethics of research. You should not do anything that will have a detrimental impact on anyone whom you are interviewing. If you feel that your work is going to be sensitive in this sort of way, you must discuss it with your supervisor beforehand and get appropriate advice. If it is decided that this is the case, you should fill out an Undergraduate Research Ethics Form. You should make recordings of your interviews if possible, or take detailed notes, and reference these in your dissertation as you would any primary source.

When you come to draw up the bibliography at the end of your dissertation you should divide your entries between primary and secondary sources (most academic books do this, so look at how a selection of historians have done it). It helps if you can give the location for any archives you have used (e.g. Nottingham County Record Office), and the name given to a particular collection of papers. The time period may also be significant. For example, you may have looked at copies of *The London Illustrated News* but only for the period 1854-63: this is worth stating.

You should be able to locate a fair number of secondary sources (and some primary ones) in hard copy form in the Warwick University Library. Probably many more can be accessed electronically. The Library also has an inter-library loans facility (now known as 'Document Supply'): for information how to use this, see the Library website, but it would be unrealistic to try to obtain more than a few items by this route.

You may also want to see what other libraries (especially university libraries) have to offer: many of these have on-line catalogues. You might also want to visit a university library elsewhere and for this you can obtain a SCONUL card from the Warwick University Library that will give you free admission (again see the Library's webpage for information on this). You can also make use of the British Library reading rooms, on Euston Road in London, the National Archives at Kew in London, or local archives, such as county record offices. This can be very rewarding but, as already mentioned, it is

time-consuming and – in terms of travel and somewhere to stay – can be expensive.

There are some online resources that can help you to locate primary material.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/> is a database that contains catalogues describing archives held locally in England and Wales and dating from the eighth century to the present day. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/> provides contact details for record repositories in the United Kingdom and also for institutions elsewhere in the world which have substantial collections of manuscripts noted under the indexes to the National Register of [Archives](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/). [www.a2a.org.uk](http://www.a2a.org.uk) provides information about local [archives](http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk). [www.archiveshub.ac.uk](http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk) is for archives held in universities and college in the UK. [www.aim25.ac.uk](http://www.aim25.ac.uk) is for archives in the London area (e.g, within the M25). <http://sasspace.sas.ac.uk/4684/> for manuscript sources for British History.

Some guidebooks are available to help you in all this, e.g.:

- Brundage, Anthony, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2013 (Library: D16.B89).
- Higgins, Robin, *Approaches to Research: A Handbook for those Writing a Dissertation*, Jessica Kingsley, London 1996 (Library: PN 146.H4 )

## Writing a dissertation

Writing a 9,000-word dissertation requires not just researching a topic but organising your work effectively. Once you have identified your topic and areas for research, you make a plan that timetables your research schedule and time for writing up. Do not make the mistake of underestimating the writing time you are likely to need, as you may have to write more than one draft, and discover that you have gaps in the research that need some extra research. You will probably need to write a couple of drafts, or substantially revise parts of the work, before it is ready for submission.

You will find it helpful is to structure your dissertation into different sections, each consisting of a number of paragraphs. You will need to start with an introduction, which sets out the topic and identifies where the main lines of historiographical debate and division lie. You should also clarify at this point the aspects of the topic that you are (or are not) going to address. The introduction can be only a couple of paragraphs in length, but it is important to try to get the tone right and to interest your reader in what follows.

You can then set out the body of your dissertation in a number of parts or sections, each covering a particular aspect of the wider topic and hopefully progressing logically from one to the other. In a dissertation of 9,000 words you might have 3 or 4 or 5 of these,

each with its own (brief) title, or merely numbered. You may also have further sub-sections. You can, if you wish, call the main sections ‘chapters’, but this is not really necessary in a piece of work of this length. Having such sections should help you and your readers to think more clearly about the natural divisions of the topic, the stages in your argument and the balance between different strands of interpretation and documentation. When you set out your argument, you should try to show that you are aware of counter-arguments, and be able to justify your reason for discounting them. Make sure that your arguments are backed by supporting evidence. You should aim to build up a case that becomes more and more compelling as the dissertation progresses.

You will end with a conclusion that is more than a mere summary. It will draw everything together, showing how it all contributes to your main argument. By relating the different sections to each other, you may also at this point extend your argument further. You can also show here the ways that you have, in your view, added to the knowledge on your chosen topic. You may at this point set out any broader implications of your work, and can point the way forward for further research. It is good to end with a strong final sentence.

If you have a lot of abbreviations, you should have a list of them either at the beginning or end of the dissertation.

You can have one or more appendices, and they are not counted in the word count. You should, however use these sparingly and for a good reason, for example in providing access to data that you collected in the course of your research that you would like putting on the record. You will not gain any extra marks, as such, for an appendix, and it should not be used to advance the argument put forward in the main body of the dissertation. You should discuss with your supervisor about whether or not an appendix or appendices are really necessary.

You will end with a bibliography that distinguishes between the primary and secondary sources that you have used. You may have further sub-headings. You may want to distinguish between manuscript primary sources and printed primary sources. Or, between published secondary sources (such as books and articles), and unpublished secondary sources (such as doctoral theses). Web pages and audio-visual material can be set out under another head. You may also list the interviews you have conducted in oral history research. Your subheadings will be determined by the particular sources that you have used.

After writing a first draft, you will probably find that it exceeds the 9,000-word limit. You will then have to cut it down. You may be able to do this by rewriting some passages more concisely, or summarising certain sections. You will, however, almost



certainly have to cut out some material or even whole paragraphs and sub-topics. Although, understandably, you will be reluctant to lose some of your hard work in this way, you will have to be ruthless at this point. Knowing how to edit your work in this way is a real skill. You need to bear in mind the question that frames your dissertation, and ensure that what remains after editing will convince the reader that you have adequately addressed and answered it. Anything that does not contribute fully to the argument can be considered surplus to requirement, and can be omitted at no great loss. The end result, if done well, is normally a tighter and better piece of work.

## Style

In writing your dissertation, you should conform to the History Undergraduate Style Guide:

[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/undergraduate/finalyear/undergraduate\\_style\\_guide.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/undergraduate/finalyear/undergraduate_style_guide.pdf)

Although by now you should be familiar with this, please consult it again before starting to write up, in case there are details that you have forgotten.

You should aim to write in clear and fluent English and to set out your arguments in a lucid and logical fashion. You can get an idea how to do this from your history-reading – you will have an idea of which historians write in the most engaging and comprehensible manner – and you should try to develop a similar sort of style, but in your own way. You should also ensure that the final piece of work has been read through for spelling and other stylistic errors. Your examiners will not be impressed if your spelling is incorrect or inconsistent or you have clearly not bothered to check dates or obvious facts. You could (and probably will) lose marks if you don't pay attention to this kind of detail.

## Footnotes

You are expected to reference your material (quotations, statements of scholarly opinion etc.) through footnotes: you can check on how to do this, if you don't already know, in the Undergraduate Style Guide:

[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/undergraduate/finalyear/undergraduate\\_style\\_guide.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/undergraduate/finalyear/undergraduate_style_guide.pdf)

But also note what other historians footnote and how they do it. Proper citation is necessary to avoid any impression of plagiarism (see next section). In general, do not include too many footnotes or make them too long, or use the footnotes to go off on a tangent (see more under 'length and word-count'). It is also worthwhile to keep

quotations in the text relatively short so as to leave adequate room for your analysis and interpretation. Or, if you think a long passage is warranted, make sure that you analyse it: don't assume that it's meaning and significance is self-evident. Have footnotes and not endnotes (e.g. the notes should be at the bottom of each page).

In general avoid putting large amounts of text in footnotes. This is considered to be bad practice in a piece of historiography, and you may be marked down for it. The general rule is that it will be considered bad practice to have footnotes that take up a third of the page consistently (the occasional exception is permitted). In general, use footnotes for source citations, rather than give information. Try to put information in the text. However, if the information would break the flow of the text, and is brief, then it is acceptable to put it in a footnote. Look at writing by established historians to get a feel for how they do this.

## **Plagiarism**

By now, you should be well aware of how seriously plagiarism is taken in any written work that you produce. It will almost certainly lead to a mark of 0. Therefore, be careful to give full footnote references for any direct quotations (which must be in inverted commas), as well as for ideas and arguments that you have obtained from a particular source.

## **Length and word-count**

You may write up to 9,000 words in your dissertation. This is a strict upper limit, and marks will be deducted if the dissertation is over-length. The rule is that 1 mark is deducted for each 100 words, or part thereof, over the limit. Footnotes, bibliography, and possible list of abbreviations and appendices are not included in this word-count. The title page is not included in the word-count, but titles and subtitles in the text are. You do not need an abstract or content-list, but if you do include these, they are counted in the word-count. Although footnotes are not included in the word limit, you can be marked down for having over-long footnotes that contain material that could be in the main text.

While there is no penalty for work that is substantially below 9,000 words, it is unlikely that such a piece of work will demonstrate the qualities required for a high mark.

When submitting the dissertation, state the word count on the title page. Remember, as usual, to make it anonymous, with only your student number. You do not need to bind the dissertation, just present it in a neat form.

## Timetable and submission procedure

The schedule for determining and communicating your dissertation topic and the module upon which it is based is as follows:

Students will be asked by the end of the Autumn Term (Term One) to complete a preliminary online statement of:

1. the current History module in connection with which they intend to research and write their dissertation.
2. their intended dissertation topic and supervisor. Any title you give will be considered a preliminary one – you can modify it later as your research and writing progresses.

Renaissance stream students will be asked to make their dissertation choices (module, topic, supervisor) online by the end of week 3 of the Spring term (term two).

The online form is accessed at:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/undergraduate/modules/dissertation/topic/>

Dissertations are to be submitted in word-processed form both online and in hard copy to the undergraduate secretary by 12 noon on the Thursday of week 1 of the Summer Term (term three). They should be anonymised, with only your student number on the title page. They should be presented in a neat fashion. They do not need to be bound – there is no advantage in doing this – and the norm is to staple the pages together with one staple in the top left-hand corner. The copies that you submit will be retained for examination purposes and will not be returned to you. If you want to keep a bound copy for yourself, you should do this separately.

You should remember that late submission will be penalised. The rule is as follows: ‘Where an extension has not been granted, or where an extension request did not reach the Director of Undergraduate Studies before the deadline for the assessed work, such assessed essays handed in late will be subject to a penalty of 5 percentage marks per working day’.

## Funding

The Department of History and its research centres do not provide funding for final-year dissertation research. Departmental funding is limited, and if only a few students

were given grants, the History Department would be open to the charge that it is favouring some over and above others. This ruling has thus been made on the basis of equity.

### **Concluding remarks**

Writing a dissertation should be fun. It should give you a real chance to work and think like an academic historian, to experience the pleasure of finding something out for yourself, and to have the satisfaction of presenting a well-researched, thoughtfully written and convincingly argued piece of work.

If in doubt about any of this, speak to your supervisor: she/he is there to help you, though not to write the final version for you – that is entirely your responsibility.