



DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

**DISSERTATION  
HANDBOOK  
2018/19**

## **The Dissertation – An Introduction**

In the final year of your History degree you will be asked to complete a dissertation – a ten-thousand-word piece of independent work based on original and sustained primary source research. This may sound a little daunting – but the dissertation is the culmination of the research skills that you have learned over the course of your degree and is a great opportunity to pursue independent research and write about a subject you feel passionate about. It's your chance to make a real contribution to history...

The dissertation is different to other projects that you will have worked on before – although the Independent Essay should have given you some practice in this area. You need to factor in a long planning cycle for the whole project – from the summer of the second year to the delivery of the project at the beginning of term three in the third year. You need to work out how to plan your research time over that year, and how to manage your project. The dissertation is about independent, self-directed work. It should be based on a close and in-depth engagement with primary material and formulate a new and convincing argument based on those sources. It will be more challenging than other pieces of work, but ideally also more fun and fulfilling.

This short guide is intended to be a supplement to the advice offered to you by your Special Subject tutor – but please be aware that your tutor will be able to offer much more specific and detailed advice on your individual project. Special subjects vary considerably across the department and there is no single model for a successful dissertation.

## Support for the Dissertation

Dissertations are attached to Special Subjects – the knowledge and skills that you acquire from these courses should feed into the dissertation. Your main source of support for the dissertation will be your Special Subject tutor who will also be your Dissertation supervisor and it is important to work closely with her or him on your project. Your supervisor should be the first person you ask about any queries related to your dissertation, but if they are not available you can also contact the Third Year Tutor Team – Professor Jane Hamlett and Dr Becky Jinks – who will be able to help with general queries.

### Professor Jane Hamlett – Third Year Tutor

McCrea 309 [jane.hamlett@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:jane.hamlett@rhul.ac.uk)

Feedback and Consultation Hours: 10-11 Monday, 2-3 Thursday

### Dr Becky Jinks – Deputy Third Year Tutor

McCrea 324 [rebecca.jinks@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.jinks@rhul.ac.uk)

Feedback and Consultation Hours: 3-4 Monday, 3-4 Tuesday

## Dissertation Supervision

Your Special Subject tutor will be teaching on a subject that lies directly within their research area – meaning that you have direct access to real expertise from a practising historian at the cutting edge of their historical field, so be sure to take full advantage of this.

It is very important to meet regularly with your Dissertation supervisor to discuss the development of your project. In Term One, the department requires students to meet with their tutors on at least **two** separate occasions in addition to weekly seminars. Responsibility for attending these meetings lies entirely with the student. Meetings can take place in regular 'Consultation and Feedback' Hours or in specially arranged class sessions. All Special Subject tutors will run an extra Feedback and Consultation Hour in addition to their usual hours so please make sure you find out when your tutor is available. Both student and supervisor should keep a record of these meetings, and the supervisor may also request a written report from the student after each meeting, detailing what was discussed.

During Term Two, students should expect to meet with tutors during their weekly scheduled 'Consultation and Feedback' hours to discuss their progress on at least **two** further separate occasions. Supervisors may read and comment on **one** draft of **one** section of the dissertation (of absolutely **no more than 2,500** words), provided this is submitted before the end of Term Two. Supervisors do **not** read a full draft of the dissertation, and nor do they engage in detailed proof-reading or make corrections for students. Neither do supervisors give any suggestion of an indicative mark for the work submitted, under any circumstances. Supervisors may voluntarily agree to

comment on a draft section handed in to them after the end of Term Two, but there should be no expectation that they will do so.

In most cases students are happy with the supervisory relationship. However, there are occasions where for some reason the supervisory relationship does not work and breaks down. If this happens, you should speak as soon as possible with the Academic Coordinator/ Director of Undergraduate Studies or your personal tutor to see whether the problem can be resolved informally, e.g. through mediation or changing supervisor. You should not wait until after you have received your final degree results to raise the matter as it is very difficult for the College to resolve such matters or take remedial action at that point.

*It should be stressed that the dissertation is the work of the student, and should represent his or her original work; it is not that of the student and the supervisor. Students should not seek excessive guidance or supervision.*

## **Choosing your Dissertation Topic**

The topic for each dissertation is selected by the student, in dialogue with their Special Subject tutor. It is crucial that the topic chosen offers the opportunity for independent research and requires close analysis of primary source evidence. This is a chance for the student to be actively involved in the production of knowledge, rather than passively consuming it through formal lectures and seminars, and to make a significant contribution to our understanding of their subject. It's important to do it in dialogue with your supervisor so they can make sure that you have chosen a good subject and that you will be able to see the project through. There are a few general issues that it is worth bearing in mind:

### **Points to consider:**

- What is the range and scope of the project? Once you have an area of interest you will probably want to narrow it down further, perhaps by period or geographical location, or by focusing on a particular group, individual or organisation.
- A strong primary source base is essential for the dissertation – so you need to think about the kind of sources available (manuscript, print, text, visual, objects etc) and to how you will use them.
- What secondary literature has been written on your subject? How will the dissertation connect to this – have historians written about it before? If so how does your work fit into this and is there something new to say?
- It is also essential to pick a topic that you feel enthusiastic about and find engaging – as you will need to be able to stay interested in it for quite a long time.

## **Developing your Dissertation**

Once you have chosen your topic and agreed it with your dissertation supervisor the next stage is to plan and develop your project – to decide on a title, and to write a dissertation proposal. The department asks all students to do this by late January in term two – but you may well want to do this sooner, and some supervisors will ask students to do this earlier if they think it's appropriate. Again, your supervisor will be able to help you here but there are some general issues to think about.

### **Points to think about:**

- Secondary reading – who has written about your specific topic before? Do you want to challenge or develop their arguments? How will you add to historical knowledge with your project?
- What are the broad concepts and themes that your project will engage with – how will you connect with a larger secondary literature on these themes?
- What are the main research questions for your project?
- What is the evidence base for your project? Where is it, and how will you access it? How will you show how you selected the best evidence to answer your questions?
- Overall what is your timetable? How will you project manage the research? How can you plan to make sure you get the most out of the feedback offered by supervisors?

## Planning and Deadlines

### Suggested timeline:

- **Year Two summer break** – identify areas of interest and carry out general reading and research
- **Year Three first weeks of term one** – develop and finalise dissertation idea and agree idea with tutor
- **Year Three term one and reading week** – carry out secondary reading and identify primary material for research
- **Year Three Christmas break** – carry out primary research for the dissertation
- **Year Three first weeks of term two** – analyse initial primary evidence and identify areas that need to be strengthened.
- **Year Three reading week term two** – draft and develop detailed plan
- **Year Three final weeks of term two** – draft a section of dissertation and seek feedback from dissertation tutor
- **Year Three Easter break** – complete final dissertation

The above time line offers a suggested timetable but please be aware that projects and sources vary and you may want to plan differently according to the needs of your individual project – especially if you need to go to a particular location to collect sources. The department also sets deadlines for finalising the dissertation title and handing in the dissertation proposal – but some tutors may ask for proposals at an earlier stage if it is appropriate.

### Deadlines – Proposal and Title and Final Project

At the beginning of Term Two, students are required to submit an outline dissertation proposal, which should be submitted directly to the supervisor. This proposal must be **no more than 1,000 words**, and should provide an outline of the main research questions and an indication of primary, and possibly secondary, sources. Students will receive detailed feedback on the proposal, but should note that it is a non-assessed piece of work, and that no marks or credit can be awarded for it.

Students are then required to submit a provisional title proposal (date to be confirmed by the Director of Undergraduate Studies) on the approved departmental form. This form should contain the student's name, course code and title, supervisor's name, and the agreed title, and must be signed by **both the student and the supervisor**. These forms must be returned by the supervisor to the departmental office **by the specified deadline**. Failure to submit a form may result in the student being ineligible to submit a dissertation.

Group 3 dissertations titles	17.00 hrs	Friday 25 January 2019
Group 3 dissertation proposal	17.00 hrs	<b>BY</b> Friday 25 January 2019
Group 3 dissertations ( <b>TWO copies</b> )	12 noon	Tuesday 30 April 2019

## Writing the Dissertation

After you have gathered together your primary evidence and begun to analyse it, you should assemble a detailed plan for writing the dissertation. Your feedback on your dissertation proposal should help here, and Special Subject tutors can discuss plans with you in 'Feedback and Consultation' hours. Planning should allow you to think about the nature of your evidence and its relationship to the argument. Most students will find at this point that they have too much evidence and detail to include in their projects and need to make some strategic decisions about which evidence will help them make their argument most clearly. Once you are happy with your plan you can start to draft the dissertation. As detailed above your Dissertation supervisor can comment on a partial draft to give you feedback and help you develop your argument.

The dissertation should follow standard departmental guidelines on essay layout, formatting and referencing – please see the Undergraduate Handbook for details. The referencing system used should be MHRA. If you are unsure about how to correctly cite archival documentation, seek advice from your Special Subject tutor.

It should include a title page, and if you have divided the dissertation into chapters or sections you may want to include a contents page.

The dissertation should be no longer than **10,000 words**, including footnotes. The title, contents page, bibliography and appendices are not included in the word count.

There is no penalty for dissertations that fall under that word count but do bear in mind that if your dissertation is substantially under 10,000 words this may indicate that you have not done enough substantive analysis of the primary material.

Illustrations may be interspersed in the text or placed in an appendix and should be clearly labelled. You may also want to include other supplementary material in appendices.

Please submit your dissertation to Turnitin through Moodle (submission boxes will be available on dissertation course Moodle pages shortly before the deadline). Please also remove any illustrations from the version submitted to Turnitin as they can overload the system. Dissertations should be bound – a simple spiral binding, as available in EWD Library, is quite sufficient. There are some spiral binders in the department.

**Finally – enjoy your dissertation as much as possible!**

Jane Hamlett and Becky Jinks

September 2018