

HANDBOOK FOR HISTORY DISSERTATIONS 2025-26

HIU44001

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Thomas T. Hammond, Reading room in Moscow State University (1964), Wiki Commons,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hammond_Slides_MGU.jpg, accessed 31 March 2025

Contents

What is a dissertation?	2
A dissertation.....	2
An editorial project.....	2
Your supervisor.....	2
Finding a topic	3
Completing the dissertation proposal form	4
Timetable to completion	5
Hilary Term (Junior Sophister)	5
Proposal	5
Summer:	5
Research (primary sources) and reading (secondary sources)	5
Michaelmas Term (Senior Sophister).....	5
Review essay, outline and bibliography	5
Draft chapter, table of contents, bibliography	6
Hilary Term (Senior Sophister)	6
Final deadline.....	6
Structuring a dissertation	7
Ethical considerations	8
Guide to Length, Format and Presentation	9
Submission instructions	11

What is a dissertation?

All senior sophisters taking single honours History or majoring in History are required to write a dissertation (or editorial project), carrying considerable weight towards your overall degree grade. This 'capstone project' enables you to experience the excitements and frustrations associated with original research.

The dissertation is an opportunity for you to show your capacity for independent critical analysis. This involves forming clear **research questions** or hypotheses, exploring or testing these systematically with a body of relevant primary source evidence, and justifying your conclusions by reference to that evidence.

A dissertation is an 8,000-10,000-word piece of writing (excluding footnotes and bibliography), based on independent research and the critical study of primary sources. It allows you to apply the techniques taught in your list 1 and list 2 modules to the sustained investigation of a topic of your choosing, free from the constraints imposed by your normal class schedule. **It is not simply a long essay.** Whereas an essay should usually draw on primary sources, the dissertation will be based on them, and they will be explored through independent research, often in archives (whether physical or online archives).

An editorial project is an alternative capstone project. If you have an appropriate body of primary source material, you may wish to undertake an editorial project instead of a dissertation. This involves the transcription and annotation of an original document, and the preparation of an extended introduction placing the document in historical context. The transcribed document or documents can be up to 10,000 words long, with a 3,000-5,000-word introduction.

The dissertation (or introduction, transcription and annotations on an editorial project) must be your **own work**, in that you must do your own research, construct your own arguments, and write it yourself.

Note that the **marking criteria** set out in the Sophister Handbook are applied to dissertations, so it is worth looking at the expectations for First class and Upper Second (2:i) marks and doing your best to meet them in terms of your Structure and Focus, Quality of Argument and Expression, and Range of Knowledge.

Your supervisor is the key advisor for your research. Depending on your topic, they may be an expert in the field or simply an experienced historical researcher who can advise how to design your project, undertake research and write up your findings. You should be proactive in making the most of your supervisor, contacting them in the first instance to arrange a meeting, keeping in touch as you progress with your research, allowing plenty of time for them to comment on chapter drafts, and responding to their comments on your written work. Remember that supervisors are busy, so do not expect instant replies to emails or lots of meetings; allow up to a week for a reply and expect three meetings per term

Supervisors provide guidance, but your work on a dissertation should be independent. Your supervisor should not normally comment on more than one draft of each chapter and will not

provide an editing or proofreading service for final drafts. You should not expect your supervisor to comment on your text in the last two weeks prior to the final deadline.

Finding a topic

Be realistic: one of the most common difficulties with dissertation proposals is that the suggested topic is simply too big. Although you will be able to devote a lot of time to the dissertation, you won't have time to write a book! Remember you have an 8,000-10,000-word limit. If your subject is too broad there is a danger that it could result in a superficial dissertation - more like a long essay than a piece of genuine research. Think about how narrow most journal articles are and aim for something similarly specific. The more focused the topic, the more depth you can go into and the better your dissertation will be.

Think about what you know: while your dissertation can be in an entirely new field of study, if you draw a dissertation from the general area of a module you have studied this will mean that you will have saved yourself a lot of 'background' study. You will also be aware of the kinds of primary sources available in that field. However, you must be careful that you do not simply duplicate what you have worked on in class. A dissertation is about *your* research.

Be led by your sources: if the materials don't exist, you won't be able to produce a dissertation! And remember that some subjects will require reading sources in languages other than English, so if you are thinking of writing a dissertation on French, German or Italian history, you may need to be able to engage with primary sources and the scholarship in those languages. Otherwise, it may be possible to select a topic carefully to enable research with the sources and literature available in languages you do have, perhaps in translation. Similarly, if your research materials are all outside Ireland you will need to be able to set time aside to be on the spot in the archives (e.g., in the summer before your SS year) - a quick 'raid' of a couple of days will not work if these materials are central to your research. It is worth shaping a proposal around the wonderful collections of primary sources available in the Trinity College Library or in other Dublin libraries and archives, as well as the growing number of online primary sources in a wide variety of fields. The Library subscribes to many digital archives in a wide range of fields and geographical areas, so you are definitely not confined to working on Irish history. Any field on which a staff member teaches will have accessible primary sources. You don't need a full bibliography for the proposal, but you **must be confident** that adequate materials both exist and are accessible.

Remember, sources take all forms. You are not slaves to the written word. Consider visual sources, artefacts, oral interviews, etc. With these, as, indeed, with any source, be aware of the challenges of interpretation and consider if you will need any special skills or techniques to engage with them.

Do what you like: You will invest a lot of your time into your dissertation. It can be enormously rewarding, but it is also hard work. Ensuring that the subject you study is one in which you have a genuine interest will help a lot on some of the tougher days.

Completing the dissertation proposal form (for Junior Sophister Students only during Hilary Term)

- Be specific: the more precise your proposal is now the easier it will be to move ahead with your research.
- Think about a realistic working title. This will reflect the scope of the project you are trying to address. Remember you are not trying to write a book; you are trying to address a topic that can be handled in 8,000-10,000 words.
- Let the title reflect your curiosity about the topic - don't just state a general period or area. A subject like 'The English government under Henry VIII' is not a dissertation topic. The study of an individual or institution that was part of that government could be more appropriate, if the sources permit, or an aspect of that government that can be analysed and assessed.
- Be sure to include an appropriate list of 'Major Primary Sources'. Listing the names of archives is not enough. You are not expected to have exact file numbers, but to show an awareness of the relevant collections of papers within your chosen archives. Suggest familiarity with the types of records those archives contain that might be relevant to your research. Just stating 'The National Archives' or 'The New York Public Library' is too vague. The 'Department of an Taoiseach Files, National Archives' or 'The papers of X or Y, New York Public Library', is far more useful, as it is already helping you to begin the research process.
- Your proposal will help inform which supervisor you are allocated, subject to staff availability.
- Copies of the proposal form are available on Blackboard.

The proposal form must be submitted via Blackboard before 11.00am on **the last Friday of Hilary Term**.

Timetable to completion

The pieces of work set out below will be due by deadlines specified in the Sophister Handbook. As for all deadlines set out in the Sophister handbook, these are formal deadlines and any requests for extensions (appropriate only on medical or other strong grounds) should be made via the Sophister Coordinator, keeping your dissertation supervisor informed and ideally seeking their support for the request.

Only the final dissertation is awarded a mark; supervisors provide feedback on the work submitted prior to the finished dissertation to help you improve your work, but these submissions do not contribute to your final mark for the dissertation. They are, however, required for earning credit for this module.

Hilary Term (Junior Sophister)

Proposal – last Friday of term before 11.00 am - Deadline for the submission of two proposed dissertation topics, using the relevant form, available from Blackboard, to be submitted via Blackboard.

Summer:

Notification by e-mail of the allocation of supervisors. Contact your supervisor and arrange to meet them as soon as you know who they are so you can get going over the summer with your research.

Research (primary sources) and reading (secondary sources). In late summer, begin drafting your review essay and outline and compiling your bibliography.

Michaelmas Term (Senior Sophister)

Review essay, outline and bibliography - a **review essay** of about 2,000 words, outlining your research questions or hypotheses and offering a critique of secondary sources relevant to your topic, accompanied by a detailed outline and a working bibliography of major primary and secondary sources.

If you took the dissertation preparation module as a Junior Sophister, your proposal will probably form a foundation for your review essay, and self-plagiarism rules do not apply here as both pieces of work are intended to help towards writing your dissertation. **Your review essay, however, should be significantly more developed than the proposal**, reflecting the work you have done over the summer and meeting the criteria above.

You should expect to continue making amendments, and sometimes quite radical changes, to the outline as your work develops. Your bibliography will also change and grow as you continue to work on your thesis.

This exercise is compulsory and is an essential element in the preparation of a successful dissertation. The intention is to get you thinking systematically about your topic, and to give your supervisor a good idea of what you are researching, the challenges you may be encountering, and the stage you are at – all this will ensure that your supervisor can offer you the best guidance possible. The review essay can often form a partial draft of the introduction to your dissertation.

Please consult in advance with your dissertation supervisor, who may wish you to focus on particular aspects of your topic in your review essay.

Submit via Turnitin through Blackboard.

Draft chapter, table of contents, bibliography - a **draft chapter** of up to 2,500 words, with a **table of contents** and a **bibliography** for the entire dissertation. The draft should be submitted in accordance with the conventions for the dissertation itself (this is good practice!) – see Guide to Format and Presentation below.

This exercise is compulsory and is an essential element in the preparation of a successful dissertation.

Submit via Turnitin through Blackboard.

During Michaelmas Term you should arrange at least **three meetings** with your supervisor, undertake most of your research, and prepare your draft chapter.

Supervisors will give detailed feedback and comments on the review essay and draft chapter. You should discuss a timeline with them for the submission of and feedback on your subsequent chapters.

Hilary Term (Senior Sophister)

During Hilary Term you should arrange at least three meetings with your supervisor, complete your research, and prepare your final draft. Supervisors will comment on each draft chapter once, provided you submit your work with sufficient time for them to do so. Discuss a timeline with your supervisor to allow for this. Supervisors will not normally provide feedback on multiple drafts of the same chapter or comment on any text in the two weeks prior to the final deadline.

Final deadline for the submission of the dissertation via Turnitin on Blackboard (See 'Submission Instructions' below).

Structuring a dissertation

Your dissertation will have an Introduction, substantive chapters (typically 2-4), a conclusion and a bibliography. There should be one bibliography only, at the end of the final dissertation, not separate bibliographies for each chapter, although when you submit chapters to your supervisor, these should each be accompanied by a working bibliography. (An editorial project will follow a different format: an introduction, the text or texts being transcribed and annotated, and a bibliography. Your supervisor will advise.)

The **Introduction** to the dissertation sets out the research questions that drive your research, your core argument, the historical context for your topic, a review of the existing scholarly literature on the topic, an overview of your key primary sources, and an outline of the dissertation.

- Your **research questions** should be discussed with your supervisor. They should be focused, require research to answer, and prompt an analytical (not descriptive or narrative) answer. The answer to these questions will constitute your argument.
- The **argument** should be clear throughout the dissertation, not be a surprise that you keep back until the conclusion. An argument is an interpretation or contention that could be argued against. It should be based on sound historical evidence.
- The **literature review** shows that you know the relevant work done by historians and relates it to your research, showing how you build on and depart from the current state of the field.
- Your **overview of key primary sources** demonstrates that your research is based on original research and that you use your sources carefully, weighing their perspective and context.
- The **outline** of your dissertation briefly sets out what each chapter focuses on.

The introduction is vital in terms of framing your dissertation, and establishing what your dissertation is trying to do. It is also important in terms of establishing how your research relates to wider scholarly debates in your field. The introduction will set the tone for the work and is, therefore, key to explaining the rationale behind the work and approach. It can do a considerable amount in terms of convincing the examiner about the value of your approach. Usually, the introduction needs editing after the substantive chapters are written to ensure it matches the rest of the dissertation.

Your **chapters** will be manageable sections, each devoted to a different aspect of your research with a clear title. The number of chapters will depend on the topic and your supervisor can help you work out what will be most suitable for your project, but two to four chapters is typical. Have a plan, but be adaptable: it is normal for the structure and argument to change as the project develops, in response to what you find.

Chapters can be divided chronologically or thematically, however best presents your research findings and provides a logical framework for you as you write and for your readers. As you gather material and read for your dissertation, it can be helpful to arrange your notes by chapter. As you write the dissertation chapter by chapter, it is not as daunting as if you were trying to write the whole dissertation in one go.

Your **conclusion** reiterates what you have found out and reinforces your argument. Conclusions often become summaries - you don't want this to happen. The examiner has read the dissertation; they do not want a mere summary of it now. The conclusion is a chance to drive home your central

arguments, to draw together what your chapters have done, and to leave the examiner with the key points and, perhaps, the key questions that still remain: further research that could be picked up by another historian. Sometimes, where appropriate, it can include a nod to how the topic developed after the period on which you focus or its contemporary relevance, as an epilogue would do.

The **Bibliography** provides all sources you have read and drawn on for your dissertation, with Primary sources listed first, then Secondary sources.

Some dissertations may have an **Appendix** or a few Appendices at the end of the dissertation, providing data used in the dissertation that it will be helpful for the reader to see. This is not, however, required.

Ethical considerations

Some historical projects have ethical implications, particularly if you are undertaking research on contemporary history (within the last thirty years or so) and/or are conducting **oral history interviews**. If this might be the case, talk to your supervisor and apply for ethical approval. See the School's ethics policy and how to apply for ethical approval here: <https://histories-humanities.tcd.ie/research/>.

Ethical considerations include, but are not confined to, observing the following principles: the confidentiality of oral history participants and those they talk about must be protected; data must be stored securely; fully informed consent must be obtained to store and use information derived from interviews; extra care must be taken if sensitive topics are to be broached or vulnerable people interviewed. Some of these issues are not just ethical but legal, as Data Protection legislation must be followed. See the practical guidelines provided by the Oral History Network of Ireland <https://oralhistorynetworkireland.ie/practical-guidelines> and the information and templates provided by Trinity's School of Social Work and Social Policy <https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/research/apply-ethics.php>. Above all, talk to your supervisor for further guidance. If you will conduct oral history interviews, you should undertake training beforehand: talk to your supervisor about this.

Guide to Length, Format and Presentation

Length

- The dissertation must be **not less than 8,000 words** and **not more than 10,000 words** in length. Some students believe there is a +/- 10% policy on word counts but this is not the case in History: the word limit is exactly what is stated here.
- Some students may wish to undertake an editorial project comprising a transcribed text of up to 10,000 words, fully annotated, and accompanied by an introduction of 3,000-5,000 words. Again, these word limits are absolute.
- Grades may be lowered if dissertations are shorter or longer than these prescribed limits.
- The **word count does not include footnotes, any appendices, or the bibliography.**

Format

- The dissertation **must** include, in this order:
 - a title page, providing the title of the dissertation, the student ID number, the supervisor, the date, the total word count, and what it is: Undergraduate Dissertation, Department of History, Trinity College Dublin.
 - a table of contents
 - a declaration confirming that the dissertation is all your own work, 'signed' with your student ID number. The declaration is the same one submitted with all assessments and can be downloaded from the History Department Course Handbooks/Essay Cover Sheets webpage.
 - and, after the main text of the dissertation, a bibliography.
- It must also include systematic referencing of sources by footnotes throughout.
- You may, if you wish, include an optional Acknowledgements section after the declaration.
- Text must be 1.5 or double-spaced.
- Text must be in a clear font like Calibri or Times New Roman and size 12 point (main text; footnotes size 10 point).
- Begin each chapter, any appendices, and the bibliography on a new page. The best way to do this is to use Word's **Insert Page Break** function, to avoid formatting issues. You may submit a PDF to also avoid formatting issues arising in Word.
- Number the pages correctly:
 - the title page should not have a number.
 - preliminary pages - table of contents, list of abbreviations, list of illustrations, list of appendices etc., depending on the nature of your dissertation, should be numbered in Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv, etc.)
 - the first page of the introduction should be your page 1. Numbers then run continuously for the rest of the dissertation (i.e., new chapters do **not** begin with another page 1).
- Begin the footnotes in each chapter at number 1. In other words, the numbering of footnotes should not continue on from chapter to chapter.
- To avoid the suspicion of plagiarism, you must use your own words and refrain from paraphrasing extended passages from any single work. All quotations must be clearly indicated with quotation marks (or left-hand indentation for long quotations) and accurate and specific citations (including page numbers). All points drawn from your reading, even when provided in your own words, must also be accompanied by accurate and specific

citations, including page numbers.

- Longer extracts from primary sources may be included to support a detailed textual commentary. All quotations must follow the original precisely in wording, spelling, and capitalisation.
- Quotations longer than three lines should be separated from the text and indented on the left, but not put in quotation marks: the indentation and reference shows that these are quotations.
- Depending on the nature of your dissertation, you may include appendices, images, graphs, maps, etc. Include them to add to the argument, not just for illustration, and always refers to them in the main text. If you do include any of these items, you should provide a list of figures and/or maps, etc., after the title page. Images should be labelled Figure 1, Figure 2, etc., and accompanied by a caption and full reference. You will refer to them in your main text as Figure 1, Figure 2, etc.
- If you have a considerable number of abbreviations or acronyms in your text or footnotes, you might include a list of abbreviations at the start of the dissertation, after the title page. Whether or not you provide such a list, you should include the abbreviation in parentheses after the first mention of the abbreviated words in the text or footnote. For example: '...entry to the European Economic Community (E.E.C.) ...'.
- Paragraphs should be limited to less than a page in length and to the development of a single point; single sentence paragraphs should be avoided.
- Follow the other rules and tips in the Sophister Handbook's Format and Prose section.

Footnoting

- For a guide to footnoting, see the Sophister Handbook. For further tips and advice on footnoting, particularly footnoting primary sources, see the '[Rules for Contributors to Irish Historical Studies](#)' or the '[Instructions for Contributors to The Historical Journal](#)'.
- If some of your primary sources are not covered in any of the footnote schemes, and if there does not seem to be an appropriate example to adapt to guide how to cite them, then seek guidance from your supervisor. The governing principle for all footnotes is that someone reading your text should be able to find the exact source you have consulted. Clarity and consistency are the key things to remember when footnoting.
- If citing sources viewed on the Internet, always give the full provenance of the document, as if read in a library or archive, i.e. author, title, date, etc. In addition, include the full web address and the date on which you consulted online-only publications (but not for journals available in print, even if you read them online).
- Poor citation will lead to lower grades.

Bibliography

- Your dissertation must include a single bibliography listing all sources used (not separate bibliographies for each chapter).
- Divide the bibliography into **primary sources** and **secondary sources, in that order**.
- Primary sources, depending on your field, might include:
 - Manuscript sources (list by archive)
 - Official publications

- Newspapers and periodicals
- Contemporary printed texts & modern editions of contemporary sources
- Images
- Oral history interviews, conducted by yourself or by another researcher and made available to researchers
- As everyone's range of primary sources will differ, consult with your supervisor as to the most appropriate method of arranging your bibliography.
- Books, articles and book chapters in edited volumes should be listed as secondary sources.
- For books, give the author's full name, the complete book title, and the city and date of publication.
- For articles, include the author's full name, the title of the article, the full title of the journal, the volume and/or number, the date, and the page numbers.
- For book chapters in edited volumes (i.e. collections of work by multiple authors), give the author's full name, the chapter title, as well as the editors' names, the book title, and the city and date of publication.

Some issues of formatting, footnoting, etc., will arise because of the individual nature of your own research. Consult your supervisor if you are in doubt about any issues of presentation or citation.

Submission instructions

Dissertations must be submitted electronically via **Turnitin** (through Blackboard) by the deadline.

Your student number (but not your name) should appear on the title page of the dissertation.

A declaration should also be submitted stating that the dissertation is all your own work. You can find a copy of the declaration on Blackboard in the Dissertation module. To maintain anonymity, we recommend you 'sign' the declaration with your student ID number.