School of History  
Undergraduate Dissertation Handbook  

Introduction  
Writing a dissertation is a huge challenge, but many if not most students also find it the most satisfying part of their History degree. It is something overwhelmingly conceptualised and driven by you. Whilst tutors will help with reading and research suggestions, the intellectual content and research energy either comes from individual students or does not come at all.  

Formal guidelines for dissertations – including the School schedule – can be found at:  

http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/infoug/dissertationguidelines.html  

Assessment criteria can be found at:  

http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/infoug/assessdiss.htm  

Good presentation of work is even more important in a piece of work as long as the dissertation as it is for other coursework. A reminder of the School Style Guide is at:  

http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/infoug/stylesheet.html  

Overall dissertations are a huge opportunity. They can be really exciting historical exercises and allow you to showcase the skills and commitment that can garner extremely high grades. But tutors’ expectations are also high and you need to be aware that weak work will attract very low marks.  

Defining a Topic  
Start thinking about this early, preferably early in the second semester of Junior Honours. Leaving it late will not help your ideas and puts unnecessary pressure on both you and your tutors. Think about what sort of history you have most enjoyed and wish to pursue – political, religious, social, intellectual – and which periods of time have captured your imagination. In the first instance, you should not be shy about talking to more than one tutor: most will be happy to talk about their broad areas of interest.  

The most important single thing to realise about defining a topic is that you need to identify a body of primary sources. A dissertation is not normally an extended historiographical review, rather it is more commonly a work of research based on original sources. These do not need to be manuscripts, indeed most dissertations will be based on printed sources. These may be letters, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, ballads, poems, newspapers, visual satires, prints, portraits, or other forms of evidence, but they must date from and illustrate the period and topic you are interested in.
A problem faced by many students is that of being too ambitious. Ideas covering huge sweeps of time, or which are dependant on big assumptions or themes – e.g. the ‘rise of the House of Commons’; the origins of European towns – will simply not fit within the boundaries of a dissertation. Although 10-12,000 words sounds like a lot, in reality most students ultimately find themselves cutting things out and slimming down early drafts to meet the word limit.

Always try to be realistic. Although tutors have high expectations of students writing dissertations, we cannot reasonably expect you to change the scholarly world. Aim to make a contribution to a specific issue within a broader field.

**Researching a Topic**

To begin with a platitude, researching a dissertation is a huge amount of work. A dissertation counts for the same number of credits as an Honours Option. So you should be planning to do at least as much work for it as you would for an eleven week course: the dissertation is not something to fit into odd moments, or sporadic bursts of activity.

Aim to identify key secondary literature for your topic. Use the ‘Seeker’ search on the library website to build up a bibliography. As well as reading carefully to see what has attracted a lot of attention, and what remains relatively untouched, take care to comb through footnotes and bibliographies for promising primary sources. Most good historians will set out a wealth of useful original material, especially in monographs.

Try to collect photocopies and electronic versions of sources to take away with you to read during the long vacation. Laying serious groundwork over the summer is absolutely vital. All Special Subjects are extremely hard work and require real focus. It is naïve to think that you can do all the required preparation for a dissertation within semester one of the fourth year when you are also adjusting to an unprecedented burden of coursework.

Keep good, detailed notes. Too many students persist in relying on good memories: this will not be adequate for a lengthy piece of work based on a large number of sources. Over the course of researching the dissertation, you should ensure that your notes are sufficiently detailed that your final quotations are accurate, and that you can cite page numbers of texts. Ensure that you have the full titles of the works you have read, and keep a running bibliography as you go – this will save you a lot of effort at the end of the process.

**Writing a Dissertation**

Start writing early. Drafts commit you to nothing, but do allow you to get a sense of where you need to undertake more research before a final version can come together. Think hard about the structure of the dissertation. In 10-12,000 words you can probably expect to write 3 or 4 chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. Many
more chapters than this and the dissertation will feel too ‘bitty’; many fewer than this and the reader may be overwhelmed by vast slabs of text.

Take care over the scholarly apparatus: sloppy footnotes and bibliography stand out for any intelligent reader to see. If the apparatus looks slap-dash, markers may reasonably come to doubt the overall quality of the research underpinning the essay. This also extends to the main text: leave enough time thoroughly to proof-read the finished dissertation. You will have worked hard for a number of months: aim to hand in the best possible reflection of that work. It should be something you can be proud of.

Look to set up the intellectual problem you are addressing in the introduction. Readers need to be ‘taken by the hand’, and will be reassured by you explaining to them why what you are doing is significant. Sketch in the existing historiography and suggest how you think you are going to add to it. Then proceed through a series of well-defined themes, chapter by chapter, until in your conclusion you can emphasise the specific contribution you feel you have made. Try to avoid simply summarising the dissertation: end on a reflective and thought-provoking note that looks outwards from your particular research to the wider field. How might your work suggest research agendas for other scholars?

**Resources within St Andrews**

The University Library’s holdings are substantial and impressive across a number of fields. Researching a dissertation will require you to move beyond the short loan collections and multiple copies of textbooks and other core literature that you will already be familiar with. Three areas of the library’s resources may be particularly helpful: finding aids; Special Collections and Inter-Library Loans; and electronic sources.

**Electronic Finding Aids**

Your first port of call is the ‘Seeker’ search option on the library website. This will allow you to search for relevant material, using keywords, subject terms or authors. Take some time to familiarise yourself with this powerful tool, which can help you build a working bibliography in relatively little time. The librarians will be happy to show you how it works if you’re not sure. Be aware that most of the results you receive will be references to articles in academic journals, and that the database will not only return results from journals to which our library subscribes. You may, therefore, need to use inter-library loan or, if you are able to get to another university library or the British Library in London during the summer vacation, consult some items elsewhere. To find out if another library has an item you are interested in, use the collective UK catalogue at [www.copac.ac.uk](http://www.copac.ac.uk). Your supervisor will, of course, be able to give you further advice on which resources will be most useful for your subject.

**Access to Archives (A2A)** is hosted by The National Archives and offers access to a huge number of catalogues of manuscripts held in local British archives:

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/)
ARCHON offers contact details of UK repositories of manuscripts:

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/

Further details on UK manuscripts can be found at

http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/manuscript-sources

Old Finding Aids

Good though SAULCAT is, it does not list all of the library’s holdings. Older material – especially dating from before 1972 – is often not listed on the electronic catalogue. Nevertheless, the University Library was a copyright library from 1710 to 1837, which meant it was entitled to a copy of all books printed within the UK. Although not all books did in practice find their way into the University Library, this copyright status does mean that we have a wealth of material dating from that century and a quarter. If you cannot find something listed on SAULCAT it is worth checking in the green guard books (the large paper catalogues) in the library.

Special Collections and Inter-library Loans

The library’s oldest and rarest books, as well as all its manuscripts, are to be found in the Special Collections reading room, temporarily located at the North Haugh where you need to make an appointment to consult their material. Staff there are invariably helpful, but do not have the time to do your research for you, and will not thank you for abrupt, extensive, or last minute queries. A lot of information about Special Collections can be found at:

http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/specialcollections/

The Inter-Library Loan (ILL) desk can help you to order to material that is not held by the University Library. Please be aware that although this does not cost you much, it comes at considerable cost to the university: you should not order things speculatively or in large numbers, but only look to gain access to material that you have a strong expectation of making a significant contribution to your work. For further details about ILL, see

http://www-library.st-andrews.ac.uk/Services/ill.html

E-versions of Sources

The library subscribes to a large number of resources offering digitised versions of printed texts; rather than attempting to list them all here, the best advice is to ask your supervisor what we have in St Andrews.

As a matter of policy, the University Library has increasingly invested in e-copies of scholarly books, especially in order to avoid storing multiple copies of popular works.
Most journals are now also available online through SAULCAT, and/or JSTOR. The latter is particularly useful for searching for reviews of secondary books that you may be interested in.

Google Scholar and Google Books are digitising things at a prodigious rate, though in an apparently haphazard and incomplete way – beware of the illusion of comprehensive coverage!

At a fairly superficial level, Amazon can also be a handy research tool thanks to the ‘Look Inside’ function for many recent books. This usually allows you to see the contents page(s) and all or part of the index – this can save time in terms of seeing what may and may not be useful to you.