

FACULTY OF HISTORY, OXFORD THESES CONVENTIONS FOR GRADUATES



The purpose of this document is to give some general guidance to candidates about the writing of a thesis for the degrees of M.Litt. and D.Phil. under the aegis of the History Faculty. Candidates who are writing essays or dissertations as part of an M.Phil., M.Sc. or M.St. degree should also refer to these notes for guidance on the presentation of their examination submissions

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Style

Style is a personal matter, while the precise structure of an essay, dissertation, or thesis (henceforth referred to collectively as 'thesis') will depend on your subject and the kinds of material you use. So any rules given here can only be of the most general kind. You should of course work closely with your supervisor when writing up your thesis, and take his or her advice to arrive at a satisfactory structure for your thesis and to improve style and clarity of expression. These matters are important. Just because you are writing in the first instance only for two examiners, who will have to read through your work at any cost, does not mean that their needs as readers can be ignored. On the contrary, examiners will not be able to evaluate your ideas properly unless they are clearly and logically expressed. Style is as important to a good thesis as it is to a well written book.

In general, you should aim for a plain and succinct style that expresses your ideas clearly and economically. Develop your ideas in a logical sequence – in the thesis as a whole, in individual chapters, and within the sections and paragraphs of each chapter. The introduction is very important, as the starting point from which your argument develops. The precise form of the introduction will vary from thesis to thesis, but almost certainly it and/or the immediately succeeding chapter will discuss problems and sources and relate your work to the existing literature in the field. Thereafter you should make sure you signpost the various parts of your argument clearly, when necessary referring forward and back to later and earlier parts of the thesis. Avoid laboured and pedantic expression, and do not overload your text with redundant detail or excessive qualification. Use your judgement in developing arguments and deploying evidence. A novel assertion or new line of argument will need to be well supported; a truism or accepted conclusion will not. Do not be too defensive. Candidates should assume that examiners will be critical, but they will not be hypercritical or purely destructive.

Format is obviously a less central problem but is nonetheless important in presenting your work 'in a lucid and scholarly manner'. Tidy and rational presentation makes for easy reading, while references that are incorrectly or unsystematically cited can be very irritating if not actually misleading. Even if your thesis is excellent in every other respect, the examiners may require you to correct imperfections in the presentation before they recommend that you be awarded your degree. You should therefore take great care over format and presentation, and allow yourself sufficient time to proof-read your work carefully before submission. The following suggestions are what the Faculty Board recommends as clear and acceptable referencing.

General

Candidates should consult the current [Examination Regulations](#) for the regulations on presentation and submission of theses.

Three books are invaluable for the authors of scholarly works, including theses. They are *New Hart's Rules. The Handbook of Style for Writers and Editors* (Oxford, 2005), *New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors. The Essential A-Z Guide to the Written Word* (Oxford, 2005), and *New Oxford Style Manual* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2012). Together they form a mine of information on such matters as format for references, expressing dates and numbers, abbreviations, foreign words and phrases, transliterations,

abbreviations, common spelling difficulties, and rules of capitalization and punctuation.

Pagination

Pagination should run consecutively from beginning to end, excluding the abstracts but including the bibliography and any appendices, etc. Cross-references should include page-numbers.

Order of contents

After the title-page should normally follow in sequence:

- (a) **Preface**, if any. This should be kept as short as possible and should be used to call the reader's attention to any new discoveries and important points about sources, treatment, and obligations to other works. Acknowledgements may also be included.
- (b) **Acknowledgements** (if not included in a preface).
- (c) **Table of Contents**. This should show in sequence, with page-numbers, all the subdivisions of the thesis, including the titles of chapters, appendices, etc.
- (d) **List of abbreviations**, cue-titles, symbols, etc. (see below, para. 6 and 12).
- (e) The thesis divided into numbered **chapters**. Each chapter should have a clear descriptive title. The introduction may form the first chapter, or may stand separate.
- (f) **Conclusion**. The exact form of the conclusion will vary, but it need not be very elaborate. A few hundred words to summarise your conclusions and their implications will often suffice.
- (g) **Appendices**, if any, also with descriptive titles.
- (h) **Bibliography** (see below, para. 14).

Italics/underlining

Italics (or underlining if your printer does not have an italic font) should be used:

- For the titles of books, plays and periodicals (see also para. 12).
- For technical terms or phrases in languages other than English (but not for quotations or complete sentences).
- For certain abbreviations and expressions, notably *a. (anno)*, *c. (circa)*, *et al.*, *passim*, *sic*. Technically the abbreviations *ante*, *etseq.*, *infra*, *post*, *supra*, *v. (vide)* should be italicized, but they are better not used. Avoid also *loc. cit.* and *op. cit.*, which can be in either italic or roman type but are confusing for the reader in either case. — Use ordinary roman type rather than italics for the following abbreviations: *c.* (chapter of statute, as in 1 Edw. VI, c. 14), *ch.* (chapter of book), e.g., *ibid.* (*ibidem* = in the same place), *idem* (the same [author]), i.e., *q.v.* (*quod vide* = which see), *r (recto)*, *s.v.* (*sub verbo* = under a word or heading, as in a dictionary), *v. (versus)*, *v (verso)*, *viz.* (*videlicet* = namely).
- Occasionally for emphasis: frequent use of italics for this purpose is out of place in academic writing.

Inverted commas/quotation marks

These are used to denote the titles of articles and named manuscripts (see also para. 12) and for quotations. It is normal to use single inverted commas, except for quotations within quotations, which are distinguished by double inverted commas. Remember always to check that inverted commas are closed as well as opened

Abbreviations

Though admissible in footnotes, abbreviations should be used as little as possible in the body of the text. When used, they should follow some simple standard system and be consistent in form. It is wise to keep a list of your abbreviated forms. In particular, you should make a card, slip or computer entry for each book, article, or volume of documents the first time it is consulted, and include the abbreviated form of reference that is to be used. These entries will also serve as the raw material for the bibliography (see para. 12).

For the common abbreviations used in footnotes, etc., see para. 4(c) above.

Capitals

Capitals should be used sparingly in the text of your thesis. They should be used for (a) proper names; (b) institutions and corporate bodies when the term used is the official title or part of the official title: e.g. 'King's Bench', 'House of Commons'; and (c) 'the Crown', 'the Church', 'the House' (referring to the House of Commons), and similar usages. Use them for titles and dignities of individuals only when these are followed by the person's name: thus 'Duke William of Normandy', but 'William, duke of Normandy' or 'the duke'.

Capitals should also be used for the principal words in the titles of books and articles (see para. 11).

Note: Different rules may apply in foreign languages. As a general rule, only the first word is capitalized in titles in European languages other than English, German (which of course capitalizes all nouns), and Welsh (which follows English usage). However, there are various complications. Some of these are detailed in Hart's Rules, but if after consulting this work you still find yourself in doubt you should take advice from your supervisor.

Quotations

Quotations in verse, if of more than one line, should be indented and in single spacing. Quotations from prose should run on in the text if they do not exceed two or three lines, otherwise they too should be indented and in single spacing.

You should retain the spelling used in the original documents. Punctuation and capitalization may need to be modernized, but in some contexts, this may be a sensitive issue. You should therefore

consult your supervisor on this matter, and your policy should be set out in your list of conventions and abbreviations. When quotations include contracted forms, the contractions should normally be extended and the extension indicated by italics or by square brackets.

Quotations from foreign languages

Quotations from foreign languages present special difficulties. These vary from case to case, so it is impossible to give absolutely clear-cut advice. You should discuss the issues with your supervisor and take his or her advice. If doubts remain, consult the Director of Graduate Studies. Do this well before you plan to submit your thesis, because it may be necessary to refer the matter to the Graduate Studies Committee. However, the following offers some general points of guidance.

Remember first of all that direct quotation should be used *sparingly*. Often an English paraphrase or even a brief summary will suffice, thus eliminating the problem of presenting foreign language material. Of course, you must make sure that your summaries or paraphrases are accurate and you must, as always, give precise references to the original material.

That said, there will undoubtedly be many occasions when direct quotations of reasonable length are either desirable or essential. Sometimes it is appropriate to present foreign language sources in the original, particularly when people to whom the thesis will be of interest (including the examiners) may be reasonably expected to be familiar with the language in question, and/or the quotations are very brief. When quotations are extensive or in a variety of different languages it is often better to present them in English translation. It will not normally be necessary to include the original version in the footnotes or appendices, except if you are laying special emphasis on particular phrases or passages (so that the exact form of the original is important), or the original text is in some other way integral to your argument. The argument for full reproduction is obviously stronger in the case of quotations from manuscript sources. If you do include translations, you will need to make allowance for them in your word limit, or in appropriate cases make a special application to the Graduate Studies Committee for an extension of the word limit (if you are working towards an M.St., M.Sc., or M.Phil. such an application is addressed to the Chairman of Examiners for the relevant degree); you can apply for an extension (also for appendices) using the form on OHH here: <https://ohh.web.ox.ac.uk/thesis-presentation-advice>.

Languages which do not use the Roman alphabet present another range of difficulties. Some basic information, including the British Standard system for the transliteration of Russian, is given in *Hart's Rules*. You should also seek the advice of your supervisor.

Illustrations and tables

Illustrations and tables should be labelled sequentially as Figure 1, Figure 2, etc., or Table 1, Table 2, etc., respectively. Each illustration or table should be accompanied by a caption that lists such information as is appropriate to identify the object illustrated. In the case of an artwork or graphs, for example, the caption might list artist, title of the work, date, medium, and current location as well as copyright information as appropriate. The candidate will be expected to provide such information in a logical and

coherent way: the captions should be consistent throughout the thesis.

It is usually easier if the illustrations are bound together at the end of the text, though candidates may, if they feel it beneficial, embed illustrations within their text. Tables will most likely be embedded in the text of a thesis, but large tables may sometimes more appropriately be placed in an appendix. A list of illustrations and/or tables should be included in the thesis at the end of the text and before the bibliography. As well as repeating the information given in each caption, the list of illustrations should identify the source (and copyright declaration) of the illustration itself where appropriate.

You must ensure that the visual material included in your submission is pertinent to the argument of the thesis, dissertation, or essay (i.e., of substantive rather than predominantly illustrative character), and consider any potential copyright issues, especially ensuring that full records of the source of a picture or graph and of copyright ownerships are kept and appropriate acknowledgements made in the submitted work. It is your responsibility to ensure that any such material is intrinsically relevant to the case(s) you intend to demonstrate.

Dates

Dates should be given in the form: 12 October 1925. Unless the contrary is indicated it is to be assumed that the date refers to the year beginning on 1 January. Double dates in Old and New Style should be given in the form: 11/22 July 1705. Periods of years should be given thus: 1732–54, 1743–9, and 1760–1820. In footnotes or similar matter, names of the first four and the last five months of the year may be abbreviated thus: Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., Aug. Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.

Other complications of dating and chronology may require special conventions: these should be clearly stated in the list of abbreviations, etc., at the beginning of the thesis.

References

References should be in single spacing and should normally be placed at the foot of the page. When a reference is given for a statement or quotation, it must be precise. The purpose of a reference is to enable readers to turn up the evidence for any quotation or statement that they may wish to question or pursue. For this reason, it should be absolutely clear, but it need not be long. Lengthy titles of books or manuscripts can be abbreviated, provided that no confusion is thereby caused. The titles of standard works may also be shortened, but not unduly; the abbreviations must be used with consistency, and should be included in the list at the beginning of the thesis. It is more economical and hence preferable to use initials – generally the full set, not just the first initial – rather than to spell out the forenames of authors, but some latitude is possible here, depending on individual taste. Whatever system you adopt, however, you should use it *consistently* throughout the thesis. Your supervisor will give you further advice if necessary.

There may be occasions when it is appropriate to quote a manuscript or archival source from a citation in a printed book or article. In such a case it is your duty to make quite clear that you have not yourself

consulted and transcribed the original, and to give as your reference the relevant printed text and not the call mark of the document.

For full information on how to cite books, articles, manuscripts and other sources, see the Faculty's ['Guide to Referencing and Citations.'](#)

Footnotes

Footnotes should normally be placed at the bottom of each page. Where they are given at the end of each chapter or at the end of the thesis, two separate unbound copies of footnotes should also be presented, for the convenience of the examiners.

Bibliography

The bibliography should include all the sources and secondary works cited in the thesis. It should normally consist of plain lists of items, without comment, and it is on this basis that the bibliography is excluded from the word limit. If you need to include substantial annotations, they will be counted as part of your thesis proper.

The bibliography should be divided into (1) Manuscript and archival sources, (2) Printed primary sources, (3) Printed secondary works [i.e., modern or relatively modern materials in the form of books, articles, etc.], and (4) Unpublished theses. In practice, it is not always easy to draw the line between printed primary sources and secondary works: doubtful cases should be discussed, if necessary, with your supervisor.

For further details on constructing a bibliography, see the Faculty's ['Guide to Referencing and Citations'](#) on OHH.