**Guidance on Essays for the Core Courses   
MSt/MPhil in History**

**The Formative essays**

The formative essay gives you the opportunity to explore some of the ideas and material from the core courses (Sources & Historiography and Theory & Methods) and to receive feedback on your approach and writing. This will help you prepare for writing the assessed Methodology Essay due in noughth week of Hilary Term. In preparing the formative essay, you should:

1. Choose a subject covered by the course in question (Theory & Methods, Sources & Historiography). It is advisable to choose a topic that you have covered in your classes.
2. Use the bibliography for that week as the initial basis for your essay.
3. Decide on your own question/theme. This might be an opportunity to explore a topic unrelated to your own research, OR a chance to critically examine scholarship that is pertinent to your thesis. In the latter case, you should not duplicate work you are doing for your dissertation.\*

**\*It is acceptable for the essays to be used to explore some themes/issues which relate to the dissertation but that work cannot be re-used for the latter**

**Word limit & references:** 3,000 words. References should be in accordance with the Faculty guidelines. <https://ohh.web.ox.ac.uk/thesis-presentation-advice>

**Deadlines (email essays to your tutors)**

**Theory & Methods**: The formative essay is due on Friday (noon) of 5th week. Qualitative feedback (but no numeric mark) will be returned by the end of 7th week.

**Sources & Historiography**: The Formative essay is due on Friday (noon) of 7th week. Qualitative feedback (but no numeric mark) will be returned by the end of 9th week.

**The Two Papers**

**Sources and Historiography**

The Sources & Historiography course is designed to introduce you to the major themes in the historical study of a period or subject. A key aim is to obtain a broad working knowledge of the development of your field of study. You may choose to write a critique of how historians have addressed major historical questions, or you might wish to compare how historians have grappled with the challenges and limitations of certain types of sources. In looking at the literature as a whole, you might pick up on how and why historiographical questions have changed, or how certain historiographical debates relate to a particular subject (gender, for instance). *In a nutshell: what’s the big picture in historical writing in my field of study?*

**Theory and Methods**

The Theory & Methods course is designed to introduce current debates about methodological and theoretical approaches in history, many of which will be influenced by intellectual developments outside of history. The thematic reading lists highlight new or cutting-edge approaches, provocative theoretical debates, and innovations in method. The classes, and your essays, will consider how the writing of history has been shaped by particular methodological and intellectual commitments and the ways in which these reflect changing ideas and assumptions within society more broadly. The writing of history is never neutral, and Theory and Methods is an opportunity to reflect upon the choices made by historians: in their choice of topic and sources, in their analyses, and in their presentation of their research. A good Theories and Methods essay will take as its starting point one of the theories or methods discussed in class, engage critically with this theory or method, and consider the impact which it has had or could have upon the study of a historical issue.

**The two courses are thus clearly differentiated, but at the same time there is no need to consider them as entirely distinct. As first term introductions to the larger framework of scholarly knowledge, they share a lot of ground in practice.** In both, you will be looking at historiography; in both, you will be dealing with theoretical and conceptual matters. As a result, the approach to writing a formative essay for both courses will have much in common.

**General Essay Writing Tips and Good Practice**

There is no one ‘formula’ for writing your essays, and these suggestions are not meant to create one. But here are some points to keep in mind that will apply to essay writing in general

1. Try not to be too descriptive on the one hand (merely summarizing the literature) or too intent on telling us merely what you do or do not like on the other. Instead, focus on producing a piece that is driven by a coherent analysis.
2. Pay attention to structure. Does your essay have a beginning, a middle, and an end (introduction, argument, conclusion)? Does your introduction outline the key sub-questions and conceptual issues? Does the argument proceed in a clear and coherent way? Make sure that each part of the essay has a function in serving the larger point.
3. Reference appropriately. See above for faculty guidelines.

**The Methodology Essay**

You may wish to use the formative essay as the basis for the summative Methodology Essay (3000 – 5000 words), or you may choose to follow the themes of one of the core courses but submit an essay on a new topic. The summative essay is due in Week 0 of Hilary Term, but you will receive no further feedback on it. *The title of the Methodology Essay must be submitted to the Graduate Office by Friday, Week 10 of Michaelmas Term.*

Remember that the Methodology essay is not showcase of first-hand research, but an opportunity to reflect on the larger-scale questions of method, approach and current debate. Please bear in mind that **markers will not be concerned with whether the essay originated as a Sources and Historiography essay or as a Theories and Methods essay. They will be looking for the same essential qualities as outlined in the marking guidelines.**

**Past examples of essay titles include:**

1. In what ways does the methodology of global history challenge the writing of national history in 19th century France?
2. How successfully have historians used theories of subjectivity to understand early   
   modern masculinity?
3. How have historians dealt with extreme violence in their study of the Holocaust?
4. The Global Turn of African American History: A Brief Historiography
5. How and why have approaches to the study of medieval heresy changed since the beginning of the 20th century?
6. How have historians used the methods of Oral History to research the lives of women in Twentieth Century Ireland?