

## **Thinking of Writing a Dissertation?**

Choosing whether to take the dissertation option in your final year can often be a difficult decision. In your second year you might have already begun to think about it, but certainly before the time you have taken Part IIA examinations you should be considering the possibility and discussing it with your DOS.

This is a guide to deciding whether or not to write a dissertation. For deadlines, cover sheets, proposal form, and referencing guidelines, consult the relevant documents on the Faculty webpage: <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/admin/document-library>.

### **Why write a dissertation?**

A dissertation gives you the opportunity to explore in greater depth a topic that you are particularly interested in, and to investigate avenues that might not have been covered in such depth in your course papers. It allows you the freedom of independent study, to shape a topic according to your interests and ideas, and to gain research experience. It can also be important for developing your skills, demonstrating for any future career your ability to work independently, plan a larger project, gather data, and present an extended and coherent argument. For those thinking of doing an MPhil or further research, it will allow you to demonstrate your skills in research and independent study.

### **Will it be more difficult?**

The idea that it is more difficult to gain high marks in a dissertation than in exam-based papers is true if you do not plan well and are not organised. A dissertation can be rewarding both in terms of personal satisfaction and in marks, but only if you organise your time well and begin work on the dissertation early. If anything, the dedication that students put into a dissertation since it is a topic of their choosing and of particular interest to them, means they can score more highly in the dissertation. Students usually are more motivated for their dissertation writing, and as long as good methods are applied and time is managed well, then the outcome should at least not be any worse.

### **Choosing a topic**

The basis of any good dissertation is choosing the right topic. Therefore consideration should be given to this as soon as possible before the IIA exams. As soon as you have a sense of what area you would like to work in, identify, in consultation with your DOS, a possible supervisor and discuss it with him or her. This will help you in shaping the topic further, and also allow the supervisor to see whether they are the best choice of supervisors for the topic. A provisional title should be submitted in the June before your final year.

Usually students undertake a good deal of thinking and further refinement of their topic over the summer vacation, before the final deadline of the submission of the title at the start of the Michaelmas term. Ideally, as much of the reading should be done over the summer, both in terms of familiarising yourself with primary sources and covering the main secondary literature. This will allow time for reflection, writing and further reading where necessary during the term time.

The dissertation should not be seen as an essay topic that is extended, or as the opportunity to write about a larger topic. It is rather the chance to go deeper into a small topic, one that can be reasonably well researched in a two to three month period. It should be well defined, identifying both the limits and scope of the subject, the sources to be used and the methods to be applied in the analysis. Where there are subject specific issues, such as for social science research, then the subject specialists will happily advise.

In thinking of a topic, begin with an area in which you are interested, and see if there are questions that have not been put to it, or areas that seem to be little studied. If there are new questions to be asked, think about how they would be answered: it is always possible that there is no conceivable way of answering them and therefore they should be avoided.

### **Standard required**

There is no requirement for an undergraduate dissertation to make an original contribution to research, although the better candidates will make original suggestions in analysing and presenting the material. Originality may be defined as providing a coherent assessment of current scholarly discussion or relating two areas of research not normally brought into dialogue with each other. The marking criteria (on the Faculty website) provide precise information in this regard, but we may here highlight some aspects. Any topic should be located within the wider theological or religious context, including its situation within the current scholarly debate. For this a good review and awareness of scholarly discussions are vital. Primary sources and key issues should be identified and discussed intelligently, showing clear understanding of the issues. The argument should be presented clearly and consistently, summarising results, giving due regard to differing views, and awareness of the limits of knowledge. The style of writing and quality of presentation will reflect the clarity of thinking of the candidate.

### **Supervisions**

Supervisions will be given to guide you on reading and commenting on drafts of individual chapters. You should nevertheless see the dissertation as a mode of independent study and not expect detailed guidance or feedback all along the way. Often preliminary meetings, sometimes brief, involve discussing the methods to be used and key literature to read, and later meetings will focus on feedback of draft chapters. No more than 4 hours in total can be given to the supervisions.

### **Planning the dissertation**

If you prepare a good dissertation proposal, you will be able to refer back to this for ideas about what the main questions are that you need to answer, and what sorts of information will and will not be relevant. Once you have an overall theme, you might wish to treat the dissertation initially as a series of shorter studies on discrete but related topics, to form your chapters, but ensuring that they flow naturally from one to the next.

Plan to submit written work regularly to your supervisor, and do not write it all up in one go. Regular guidance from the supervisor will prevent mistakes along the way. If you only present a complete draft of the dissertation to the supervisor, it might be too late to guide you in the right direction and avoid certain areas. Small sections presented to a supervisor will allow for detailed feedback and ensure each step is taken in the right direction.

### **Submission of title**

The closing date for the submission of titles to the Faculty Office is the first Monday of the full Michaelmas Term before the examination is taken, but earlier submission is strongly recommended. See the relevant form on the Faculty website:

<http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/admin/document-library>