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Notes for Writers of
B.Litt. and D.Phil. Theses
in the Faculty of
Modern History

The regulations concerning the degrees of B.Litt. and D.Phil. are set out in the Examination Decrees. The purpose of this document is to give some general guidance to candidates about the writing of a thesis for either of these degrees

A · WRITING THE THESIS

IT is well to begin with some picture of the ideal thesis. Ideally a thesis should make a positive contribution to knowledge on a small, but not isolated, sector of the front. That is, it should—indeed must—be limited in its own scope, but the limited questions which it poses, and the answers which it gives, should have some discernible relation with problems of more general interest. It should treat the problem in a scholarly, scientific manner, with proper documentation. But it should not, for that reason, eschew the virtue of readability. The results of the inquiry should be presented in rational form and lucid English. The old rubric of the Statutes (up to 1963 inclusive) required that a thesis for the degree of D.Phil. should be worthy of publication. This condition has now been dropped; but it has been dropped merely because of the difficulty of interpretation at a time when publication often depends on factors which are irrelevant to scholarship. It is quite possible that a thesis could be publishable in the commercial sense without being worthy of the degree, and worthy of the degree even if, in its present form, unpublishable. Nevertheless the ideal D.Phil. thesis is worthy of publication as it stands: it does not have to be rewritten in another form. The definition of the B.Litt. thesis has never presupposed publication; but it should be no less lucid in form. In fact many B.Litt. theses have deserved and attained publication.

Not everyone can write the ideal thesis, but at least he can avoid the faults to which thesis-writers are most prone. The following paragraphs are intended to warn him against these faults.

1. *Choice of subject*

Because a thesis requires personal scholarship, and is intended to introduce the student to exact historical method, and give him experience in the handling of sources, the subject must necessarily be somewhat narrow. Narrowness of definition is not itself a fault. Narrow keys can open wide doors. But subjects should not be chosen solely because they are narrow. Too often students, in

search of a conveniently circumscribed topic, settle upon subjects which, even if not themselves trivial, lend themselves to trivial treatment: e.g. the administration of some minucule unit between scarcely separated dates, or the biography of some little-known and perhaps essentially unimportant person. But such subjects are often the worst kind of subjects. They appeal to the student because they are self-contained, but being self-contained they may not contribute to the understanding of any subject outside themselves; and for this reason they do not constitute a useful training for the student, who tends to become buried in a private hole. To avoid such isolation, students should not seek to define their subject too early. The status of 'probationer B.Litt. student', in which all graduate students begin their research, is designed to prevent them from doing this, and to give them an opportunity of exploring a field before committing themselves to a corner of it.

2. Probationer status

While a probationer, the student is committed only to a very general subject—'English fourteenth-century history', 'European eighteenth-century history', 'Economic history of nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. Even if he has chosen, or thinks he has chosen, his particular subject, he is not allowed officially to commit himself to it; and it will be to the advantage of his thesis as well as to his own training, if he takes this generalization of the subject seriously. He should attend such classes as are available to him on historical method and historical problems even if the subject is not always directly related to the subject to which he wishes to commit himself. Apart from the advantage which such classes may give in the exchange of ideas, which can be continued outside the room, he should remember that a narrow subject is valueless in itself; its sole value lies in its relation with wider subjects from which it must never be severed.

3. Full B.Litt. or Advanced Status

After the probationary period, the student will work largely on his own, under the general supervision of the supervisor appointed, or reappointed, by the Board. His supervisor will advise him about methods of work which will naturally vary from subject

to subject. If any difficulty should arise which is not soluble by reference to his supervisor, the student should apply to the interviewer appointed by the Board, whom he will have seen before admission as a probationer student and again before transfer to full status. The amount of time which a student will need for his work inevitably varies, but in planning his work he should always assume that the actual writing of the thesis will take longer than he supposes. It is natural to suppose that once the material is collected, composition is a mechanical process. In fact this is seldom so. The student will find that composition itself entails further research, at least in detail, and conclusions which have seemed firm in advance often need further consideration when they have to be set down in lucid prose.

4. The thesis

(a) *Length.* The regulations of the Modern History Board require that a B.Litt. thesis shall not exceed 50,000 words or a D.Phil. thesis 100,000 words. These regulations must be observed. It is very common for candidates to feel that they must, in justice to themselves or to their subject, exceed this length. Sometimes a candidate considers that the subject itself cannot possibly be treated within the prescribed length. That may be a reflection on the choice of subject, not a reason for prolongation. Sometimes he has discovered a great deal of documentation and, naturally enough, does not like to suppress his findings. Sometimes he considers that the learned apparatus which it requires must necessarily prolong it beyond that length. But these arguments can generally be answered, and before yielding to what he may consider the 'necessity' of applying for leave to exceed the prescribed length, the candidate should consider the answers that can be given to them.

First, the candidate should remember that original documents *in themselves* are of no value. There is no added virtue in quoting a platitude from a prolix medieval manuscript if it can be stated briefly in lucid modern English. There is no special virtue even in having looked at original manuscripts if the manuscripts contain nothing which was not already known. It is easy to fall into the fetishism of manuscript-worship, but it is important always to remember that manuscripts, like other documents, are merely

means to an end, not an end in themselves. Of course, if manuscripts are paraphrased or translated, exact references must be given to the originals; but the idea that all the evidence must be given *in extenso* is one of the vulgar errors of thesis-writers. The ideal thesis displays as much evidence as is necessary to sustain its argument, in as economical a form as can be managed without loss of weight or clarity; and the writer should hold his over-matter in reserve, remembering that a good thesis, like a good book, shares the character of an iceberg: four-fifths of it is out of sight.

Secondly, bibliographical apparatus must not be allowed to get out of hand. The important part of the thesis is the text: the notes, appendices, etc., are subordinate to it. In certain circles it has become fashionable to burden scholarly books with massive footnotes or enormous bibliographies, as if wealth of reading can excuse poverty of writing. An Oxford thesis should avoid this creeping disease of bibliographical hypertrophy. Only refer to books which require or deserve notice, and do not give them more notice than they deserve or require; and never refer to a work which you have not personally used—unless it is to say that you have been unable to find it.

(b) *Style*. There is a tendency for the writers of theses to acquire a particular style, known to and deplored by all examiners. At first sight this is odd, because the style of a thesis, like the style of any work, is created largely by the character (or supposed character) of the reader. There can be no doubt that the familiar faults of thesis style are caused by the candidate's idea of what examiners require. If examiners regularly deplore the style devised to please them, it seems clear that the character of the examiners is generally misunderstood.

In fact, most of the stylistic faults of theses are caused by three assumptions:

- (1) that examiners are always looking for 'original' matter;
- (2) that examiners are purely destructive and read theses for the purpose of discovering exposed positions;
- (3) that examiners are only two persons.

Of these assumptions, only the third is true, but it does not necessarily sustain the conclusions which are evidently drawn from it.

(1) The idea that examiners insist on 'original' matter received countenance from the old form of the statute which required that

the candidate's work must 'have resulted in an original contribution to knowledge'; and it was because this statute was held to have led to the choice of trivial subjects and to the insertion of irrelevant matter that the wording has been changed. The present statutory requirement is 'a significant and substantial contribution . . . presented in a lucid and scholarly manner'. The candidate should remember that no marks are given for mere originality in trivial matters and that laborious efforts to demonstrate such originality, in so far as they impede the argument and cloud its lucidity, are a positive fault. The examiners of a thesis, like the readers of a book, soon learn whether they can trust the writer's judgement, and if there is no judgement, no amount of pedantic incrustation will compensate for that lack.

(2) Candidates should assume that examiners will be critical, but not hypercritical or purely destructive. Positive statements should be documented according to their novelty: a novel or paradoxical assertion naturally needs to be supported, a truism or accepted conclusion does not. A common fault in thesis-writing is caused by the fear that an examiner will object that the candidate seems not to have read some totally unimportant article in some obscure journal. In consequence of this fear, the candidate prolongs his thesis and obscures his style by accumulating unimportant allusions and conducting unimportant arguments in the text. This should not be done. If the article is really unimportant, it can be ignored. At most it can be dismissed in a footnote. If the examiners wish to make their objection, they will make it in the *viva*: there is no need to clutter the text with such supererogatory scholasticism.

(3) Because candidates are writing for two examiners only, and not for the public, they tend to write as if style were unimportant. This is a *non sequitur*. Examiners of theses are as critical of style as reviewers or readers of books, and the most secret state-papers have often been written in lapidary prose. There is absolutely no reason why a thesis should not be as well written and readable as a book should be. The style should of course be 'scholarly'. It should be clear and well-constructed, learned without being rebarbative, fluent without being vulgar. Writers, even of theses, should never forget the readers, even if, in the first instance, they are only two.

5. *The Abstract*

Together with their thesis, candidates for the degree of D.Phil. must present an Abstract. The purpose of the Abstract is to make clear to the examiners, before they read the thesis, what problems the candidate has set out to solve, how he has approached them, and wherein he believes the originality of his thesis to lie. Although the Abstract will inevitably summarize the content of the thesis, it should not be a *mere* summary or synopsis. Rather it should be an attempt by the writer to describe his own work: what he has tried to do, why the effort was worth making, where he thinks that he has succeeded. It should indicate, very briefly, the state of the question at the time, should explain the method adopted by the candidate, and should give a very brief synopsis of the content and conclusions of the thesis. It should be possible to do all this in some 1,500 words. The Abstract should be detachable from the thesis and is best written in detachment from it: after the thesis has been written and corrected and the writer can view his own work, as it were, from outside, as a whole.

B · PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS

So far we have dealt with the writing of the thesis; but between composition and examination lies the problem of presentation. This is obviously a less central problem, but it is still important: tidy and rational presentation makes easy reading, and references which are incorrectly or eccentrically given can be very irritating to the best-intentioned reader. Therefore care should be taken to comply with the regulations and not to flout the convenient conventions of presentation. The following suggestions, in so far as they go beyond the printed regulations, are not obligatory, but they are what the Board of the Faculty recommends as clear and acceptable.

1. *General*

The Regulations of the University of Oxford demand that, unless the Board of the Faculty has excused the candidate from this requirement, a thesis for the degree of D.Phil. or B.Litt. must be typed on one side of the paper only, with a margin of $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches on the left-hand edge of each page. The thesis must have

a stabbed binding with covers of stout manilla or stiff cardboard and a canvas back, or must be stitched and bound in a stiff case.

The main text must be in double spacing. Quotations from 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.

Pagination should run through consecutively from beginning to end and include any appendices, etc. Cross-references should include page-numbers.

2. *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 work.
- (b) 'Table of Contents.' This should show in sequence, with page-numbers, all the sub-divisions of the thesis. The titles of chapters and appendices should be given.
- (c) List of abbreviations, cue-titles, symbols, etc. (see below).
- (d) The Thesis, divided into chapters. Each chapter should have a clear descriptive title.
- (e) Appendices, if any, also with descriptive titles.
- (f) List of Books and Manuscripts used (see below).

3. *Underlining and Quotation Marks*

Underlining in typescript or manuscript is the sign to the printer to print in *italic* type. It should be used:

- (a) For the titles of books, poems, plays, and periodicals.
- (b) For technical terms or phrases in languages other than English (but not for quotations or complete sentences).
- (c) For the following abbreviations, if used (there is much to be said for avoiding or englishing many of them): *a.* (*anno*), *ad loc.*, *cap.*, *c.* (*circa*), *e.g.*, *ibid.*, *idem*, *infra*, *loc. cit.*, *op. cit.*, *passim*, *post.*, *s.v.* (*sub voce*), *supra*, *versus*, *v.* (*vide*), *viz.*

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.

4. *Abbreviations*, though admissible in footnotes, should be used as little as possible in the body of the text. When used, they should follow some standard system and be consistent in form. It is a wise plan to write a card or slip for each book, article, or volume of documents the first time it is consulted and to include on the card or slip the abbreviated form of reference that is to be used. These cards or slips will also serve as the raw material of the bibliography.

5. *Capitals* should be used as sparingly as possible. They should be used for institutions and corporate bodies when the name used is the official title or part of the official title; but for titles and dignities of individuals only when those are followed by the person's name: thus 'Duke William of Normandy', but 'William, duke of Normandy' or 'the duke'.

Capitals should be used for the principal words in the titles of books or articles.

6. *Quotations* should keep the spelling used in the original documents and not be modernized. When quotations include contracted forms, the contractions should normally be extended and the extension indicated by square brackets.

7. *Dates* should be given in the form: 13 October 1966, and 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. In footnotes or similar matter names of months may be abbreviated: Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., May, June, July, Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.

8. *Footnotes*

Footnotes (except for references) should be as few and brief as possible. The practice of putting in footnotes information which cannot be digested in the text should be avoided. Notes should be typed at the foot of the page, unless there are overriding reasons for putting them elsewhere. Index-numbers should begin a new series with each page. Index-numbers in the text should be superior and not bracketed.

Any particularly long notes which cannot be avoided may be conveniently given at the end of the chapter or in an Appendix

of 'Additional Notes', with a footnote referring the reader to the page.

All footnotes should be typed in single spacing.

9. *References*

When reference is given for a quotation, it must be precise. But judgement must be used in deciding whether a reference need be given or not. A reference need not be given for a familiar quotation used for purely literary purposes, nor for a statement of fact which no reader would question. The purpose of a reference is to enable the reader to turn up the evidence for any quotation or statement which he may wish to question or to pursue. For this reason it should be absolutely clear, but it need not be long. Long titles can be abbreviated, provided that no confusion is thereby caused. The titles of standard works may also be abbreviated, but not unduly. Thus *Cal. Pat. Rolls. Cal. S.P. Dom., Hist. MSS. Comm.* should be used, not *C.P.R., C.S.P.D., H.M.C.*

Citations from books should be made thus:

W. Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England* (4th edn., Oxford, 1906), ii. 62-65. (When there is only one volume, insert p. or pp. for page or pages, e.g. p. 61, pp. 61-63.)

When the work forms part of a series, the title of this and the volume number and date should be given, the place of publication being omitted. When the work is an edition of an original text or texts, the title should precede the name of the editor, and in the case of a foreign work the subsidiary parts of the title and references should be anglicized. Thus:

The Estate Book of Henry de Bray, ed. D. Willis (Camden Soc., 3rd Ser., xxvii, 1916), p. 3.

Citations from periodicals should be made thus:

G. Lapsley, 'Buzones', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xlvii (1932), 177-9.

Citations from manuscripts should be made thus:

'Speculum Virginum', *Brit. Mus., MS. Arundel 44*, f. 3v.

Citations from the works of ancient and medieval authors should be made thus:

Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii. 25 (ed. Plummer, p. 181).

Citations from the Bible should be made thus:

Gen. xv. 24.

Citations from unpublished theses and typescripts should be made thus:

J. A. Bossy, 'Elizabethan Catholicism: the Link with France' (Cambridge Univ. Ph.D. thesis 1961), p. 80; stating the place of deposit where necessary.

Citations from collections of papers should be made thus:

Brit. Mus., Addit. MSS. 29132 (Hastings Papers), f. 434: Clive to Hastings, 1 Aug. 1771. [Thereafter contract to 'Addit. MSS. 29134, f. 275' &c.]

P.R.O., Foreign Office Papers, Series 84, vol. 6: Palmerston to Russell, 1 Aug. 1851. [Thereafter contract to 'F.O. 84/6' &c.]

Citations from parliamentary papers and debates should be made thus:

Parl. Papers 1810, xlvi (125), p. 6: Smith to Brown, 1 Jan. 1809.
Hansard, 3rd series, 1832, xi. 602.

Where there are repeated references to the same work, the full reference should be given only at the first occurrence. Thereafter the reference can be abbreviated by the omission of place and date of publication and the contraction of the title, provided it remains clear. E.g. 'W. Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England* (4th edn., Oxford 1906)' can become 'Stubbs, *Const. Hist.*'

Ibid., as a device to avoid repetition of titles, may only be used to refer to the source last mentioned. *Op. cit.*, following the name of the author, refers to the last-mentioned work of that author. This last abbreviation should be used very sparingly. It can cause confusion if more than one work by the same author has been cited, and it can waste the time and fray the temper of a reader who has to hunt through previous pages to discover the title of the work. If there is any possibility of such a result, it is always better to repeat the title.

10. Bibliography

The bibliography is a functional part of a thesis. It is not a mere list of matter read, nor, *a fortiori*, of matter unread. Only include books and manuscripts which you have both read and found useful; and if only a small part has been useful, or the book is relevant to only a small part of the thesis, say so.

The bibliography, thus disciplined, should be subdivided into (A) Manuscript Sources, (B) Printed Sources, and the printed sources should be subdivided into (1) primary sources, (2) secondary sources. Manuscript sources should be listed according to the places in which they are to be found. Printed sources should be listed alphabetically, by surname of author. Anonymous printed sources should be listed alphabetically by the first word of the title (excluding the articles 'The', 'A', 'An' or their foreign equivalents).