Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

Undergraduate Dissertation Guidelines with an Appendix on Practical Tips and Advice

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| Contents |
|----------------|--------|
| Undergraduate Dissertations | 2 |
| General points | 2-3 |
| Outlines | 3 |
| Past dissertations | 3 |
| The Supervisor and the Student | 4 |
| Your SMS Email Address | 5 |
| Presentation | 5-6 |
| Originality | 6 |
| Footnotes | 7-9 |
| Quotations | 9 |
| Bibliography | 9-10 |
| Plagiarism | 11 |
| Style and Structure | 11 |
| Timetable | 12 |
| Help | 13 |
| Assessment | 13 |
| Medical and personal problems | 14 |
| Summary of advice | 14 |

| Appendix: Practical Tips and Advice |
|----------------|--------|
| General Checklist | 15-16 |
| Time and Task Management | 16-18 |
| Identifying Your Question: What's your point? | 18-19 |
| Literature review | 19-22 |
| Literature review techniques and resources | 22-23 |
| Inter-library loans | 23 |
| Making notes/ interactive reading | 23-25 |
| Checklist of dos and don'ts when writing a literature review | 25-26 |
| Analysis and Writing Up | 26-27 |
| Structure and Argument | 27-28 |
| Writing Tips | 30-31 |
Undergraduate Dissertations

Most undergraduates enrolled in single and joint-honours programmes in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies are required to submit a dissertation. All dissertations are worth 40 credits and account for two of the twelve final units of assessment.

You should start thinking about your dissertation as early as possible, even before your period of study abroad. At that point you may feel that the 4th year is in the distant future, but once you return from the Middle East you will realise that the day of reckoning is closer than you think! Also, if you have an idea of a subject for your dissertation, your period in the Middle East may be of use in terms of interviewing people and visiting museums and libraries etc. Should you have ideas about your topic before you leave for the Middle East, you should speak to the Honours Coordinator who will be able to direct you to a potential supervisor and/or relevant bibliography and source material.

General points

The dissertation should be a maximum of **10,000 words in length**. This word count should include **ALL** footnotes but **NOT** bibliography or appendices.

You should submit a 1,000 word outline of your proposed topic by Tuesday of Week 1 of semester 1 of the fourth year (see below page 3). Supervisors will be allocated in the first two weeks of semester 1. At the very latest you should agree a topic and a supervisor by Week 3 of Semester 1.

Two copies of the finished dissertation should be submitted by Thursday of Week 6 of Semester 2 of the graduating year. This early deadline ensures that the dissertation does not encroach on time which will be needed for study and, equally important, revision for finals. Late dissertations will be severely penalized. Applications for an extension will only be considered where there is a very good reason for this.
Before a dissertation topic can be confirmed a member of staff will need to agree to supervise it. Subject to this agreement, the choice of subjects can be very wide and can embrace any aspect of the Arab or Islamic world. It is expected that the supervisor will discuss the outline of the thesis at the beginning with the student and will be available for further discussion. Where your dissertation is of an interdisciplinary nature we will attempt to put you in touch with appropriate experts in other Subject Areas.

**Outlines**

You are required to prepare a **1,000-word outline** of your proposed topic, this should be submitted to the IMES Essay Box, first floor, 19 George Square by **Tuesday of Week 1, Semester 1** of your final year. It should include:

- Title of dissertation
- Topic area (e.g. early Arabic historiography, modern Arabic literature, worker protest, the Seljuqs, Arab nationalism, etc.)
- The rationale underpinning your chosen area of study
- The key research questions to be examined and how you propose to answer them
- The sources to be consulted
- A preliminary discussion of the relevant literature
- A work plan setting out your timetable.

The 1,000-word outline should be discussed with your supervisor following submission.

**Past dissertations**

Note that a selection of dissertations from previous years is available for consultation in the IMES Library. These may be helpful to give you a sense of the kinds of topics and approaches taken by former students. When you submit your dissertation, you will be asked to sign a form granting permission to IMES to put your dissertation in the library. Please give this permission: it will be very useful to future undergraduate students.
The Supervisor and the Student

- Students are supported by a member of staff who acts as supervisor. Supervisors may be expected to give advice on the subject and title of the dissertation, on its organisation and structure, and on source material and bibliography.

- Supervisors may also be expected to comment upon dissertation outlines, chapter plans and timetables, and to provide diagnostic feedback on one or two draft chapters - about half the dissertation - in good time (normally within two weeks of receipt). However supervisors are not expected to direct your work or to give detailed comments on the final draft: a dissertation is intended to demonstrate a student’s ability to work independently. Supervisors have other commitments, and time must be allowed for them to read and provide feedback on your work.

- You need to find out when your supervisor is available and how soon before a meeting they require written submissions (if they don't specify this, assume 5 working days) and how soon they expect to be able to respond, as a rule, to you. It is reasonable to expect supervisors to respond to email queries within 5 days (unless they're away), and provide detailed comments on written work within two weeks of receiving it.

- Staff will not normally be available to provide supervision or written feedback during the Christmas or the Easter breaks.

- It is up to you to make arrangements to meet your supervisor - they will not chase you for progress reports or draft chapters.

- Students should keep a log of meetings with supervisors, including dates of meetings and summaries of discussions.

- Students are advised to submit to their supervisor a chapter-by-chapter outline and at least one draft chapter by the end of Semester 1 of 4th year.
• If you have any difficulties that cannot be resolved between you and your supervisor you should, in the first instance, contact the Dissertation Officer.

Your SMS Email Address
The University assigned you an email address when you matriculated; this email address can be accessed world-wide throughout your career as a student. You must access this address on a regular basis. Both the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies and your supervisor will also use that email address for all official Departmental correspondence. It is your responsibility to read this correspondence and respond when necessary. No official emails will be sent out to any non-University personal addresses (e.g. hotmail, yahoo, gmail, etc.).

Presentation
• Dissertations should conform to University regulations in presentations.
• Papers must be word-processed.
• Use one side of A4 paper with 1.5 or double spacing for the main text and ample margins and room at the top and bottom.
• Footnotes at the bottom of the page are preferable, but endnotes are also acceptable.
• You should also have a list of abbreviations where these are used and a full bibliography at the end.
• Pages should be numbered.

The dissertation should be arranged as follows:

• First page: Title of dissertation, Examination number, Name of Degree (e.g. MA Arabic, Arabic and Social Anthropology, etc.), Name of supervisor
• Acknowledgments: if you need to thank any organisation or individuals who contributed to your research. As the dissertations are marked anonymously please do not add any acknowledgments which would reveal your identity i.e. thank you very much to my mother, Mrs X’

• Table of Contents

• List of Tables: should correspond to the table number and give the page number of the table

• Abbreviations: if necessary

• Then main body of dissertation (usually in about 2 to 4 ‘chapters’ or ‘sections’)

• Bibliography

• Appendices (if necessary, not counted in word count and not examined)

Originality
An undergraduate dissertation is not intended to be an entirely original piece of work in the way that a postgraduate thesis is. What the examiners will be looking for, however, is evidence of original thinking, or a fresh angle on material already available. A mere compilation of bits and pieces from other works would be regarded by examiners with great disfavour. Plagiarism will be very heavily penalised. A dissertation may in some cases be based on fieldwork, and here interviews etc. should also be documented - date and place of interview and name of informant. Where confidentiality is important, informants may be referred to as X, Y, Z and so on. Fieldwork-based dissertations will also need to refer to the relevant literature.
Footnotes

If you are quoting from the work of someone else or using his/her ideas without direct quotation, you must acknowledge that with a reference (footnote/endnote).

i. These are required to identify the source of all quotations and also if unusual or surprising information is contained in the text. They are not called for if fairly widely-known or generally available information is being used.

ii. References should be presented in the form of consecutively numbered footnotes, positioned at the foot of the appropriate page of the text. Do not use the Harvard system (i.e. in-text citations); this is better suited to the social sciences.

iii. In setting out footnoted information, the same rules as for conveying bibliographical information should be observed (see section below) with the addition of the precise page number(s). Note, however, that in a footnote the author’s name appears first name then surname (e.g. Philip Hitti). In the bibliography, works are listed alphabetically by authors’ surname (e.g. Hitti, Philip).

iv. If you are referring to the same work more than once full bibliographic details should be provided in the first citation, then an abbreviated form, i.e. author’s name, shortened form of title, page, thereafter. E.g.

For a book (NB title in italics):


Ajami, *Vanished Imam*, 88. (subsequent citation)

For an article (NB title in quotation marks, journal title in italics):


For an article in an edited book (NB title in quotes, book title in italics):


For a website (NB full address and date last accessed in first citation):


Carboni and Adamjee, ‘Art of the Book’.

v. Do not use Latin abbreviations such as *ibid.*, *op. cit.* and *loc. cit.* in your footnotes. These are often misused and in any case are going out of academic fashion.

vi. Put foreign words and phrases, transliterations, all book and journal (but not article) titles in *italics*. Underlining is an outdated practice from the typewriter era.

vii. The other sort of reference, a true footnote, is where you mention information that is relevant but not sufficiently central to the argument in the main text. Use these
very sparingly: if something is worth saying, it is usually worth saying in the main body of the text.

**Note:**
For further guidance on bibliographical style consult the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)*.

**Quotations**
If you are quoting directly from the work of someone else you *absolutely must* acknowledge that with a footnote as described above.

i. Quotations should be used sparingly, and should usually be brief. They should not be used if the information/views are from basic textbooks.

ii. Quotations should be contained within single inverted commas. If under three lines long, they may be integrated into the text of the dissertation; if longer, they should be presented separately as a block quote by starting on a fresh line and indenting. In the latter case, the essay should resume after the quotation on a new line. Use double quotation marks for a quote within a quote.

**Bibliography**

i. The bibliography should list all items cited in the dissertation.

ii. The bibliography should come at the end of the dissertation. It should be listed alphabetically by author's surname:

For books, give author, title (italics), place and date of publication.

For articles and periodicals:

Author, article title in inverted commas, journal title (italics), volume, number, year of publication in parentheses, and the page numbers for the whole article.


For essays in books:


When websites are used, be sure to reference the full http address and last date accessed as well as, where possible, the author and title of the article, or webpage:


If you are using an electronic database, such as JSTOR, which reproduces in electronic form what was originally a hard copy publication, provide the reference derived from the hard copy, not a web address nor simply JSTOR.

Do not cite *Wikipedia* as a reference. Use it as a research tool that can provide some background and lead you to other more reliable sources.
**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is the reproduction of passages from the work of others without acknowledgement, or the passing of the work of other students as one's own. It is a serious offence and can lead not only to the heavy loss of marks but also to failure in the course. See the university website for further information on plagiarism: [http://www.acaffairs.ed.ac.uk/Administration/GuidanceInformation/AcademicBestPractice/Plagiarism/StudentGuidance.htm](http://www.acaffairs.ed.ac.uk/Administration/GuidanceInformation/AcademicBestPractice/Plagiarism/StudentGuidance.htm) You should complete a ‘Declaration of Own Work Form’ when you submit your dissertation (available at the IMES Office).

**Style and structure**

All dissertations require an introduction, setting out for the reader briefly (ca. two paragraphs) the main points of the essay. The introduction thus defines the subject of your dissertation, but also suggests the approach you are going to take and why you are taking it.

All dissertations require a conclusion. Usually the conclusion entails a brief re-statement of your starting point and summarises the points made in the dissertation, supporting evidence and the approach(es) you have followed. It may include an assessment of the significance of your argument.
Timetable

3rd Year: Consider topic. Seek preliminary advice from staff (Personal Tutor or Honours Coordinator). Seek out supervisor.

4th Year:

Semester 1,  Week 1: Submit 1,000 Word Outline

**Deadline: Tuesday 2.00pm week 1**

*To be submitted centrally to the essay box outside the IMES Office*

Finalise Topic and Supervisor

Week 8: Report on Progress to Supervisor

Week 11: Submit a chapter and detailed outline directly to your supervisor

Semester 2,  Week 1: Submit second chapter

Week 3: Submit draft of dissertation directly to your supervisor. Supervisors may comment on presentation etc but will not give further detailed advice on content

Week 6: Submit final dissertation (two copies and online submission through Learn).

**Deadline: Thursday 2.00pm week 6**

*Your Dissertation must be submitted centrally to the Subject Area Secretary in the IMES Office.*

Allow at least one day for last minute formatting and printing out!
Help

Your supervisor will be available for some consultation. He/she will not write the
dissertation for you. If you need more detailed guidance on writing this sort of project,
consult one or more of the following:

- Russell, Terence M., *Essays, Reports and Dissertations: Guidance Notes on the
  Multiple copies in Library, shelfmark: P .0296 Rus.
  (Particularly, Chapters 2,3,4,12) Multiple copies in Library, shelfmark: LB1028.Bel.
- Crème, P. and Lea, M.R., *Writing at University*, Buckingham: Open University Press,

The TLA Centre [http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/services/effect-learn/advice.htm](http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/services/effect-learn/advice.htm) also offers
courses on writing.

See further the Appendix, below, for numerous practical tips and advice.

Assessment

Dissertations will be double marked within the Subject Area(s) and will be assessed again
by the External Examiner.

All work will be assessed in accordance with the University's extended common marking
scheme:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Class</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Grade Descriptor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>70 - 100</td>
<td>A1-A3</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.i</td>
<td>60 - 69</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.ii</td>
<td>50 - 59</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>40 - 49</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>0 - 39</td>
<td>E-G</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Medical and personal problems
Sympathetic allowance may be made for students who, through circumstances beyond their control, are experiencing medical and personal problems. Staff expect students to inform them immediately of any such circumstances. You should contact your Personal Tutor in the first instance, as well as your supervisor.

Summary of Advice
- Start early
- Finish early
- Choose a topic in which you are interested
- Make sure that you choose a topic you can manage in time
- Credit others where credit is due

Enjoy your dissertation!
Appendix

Practical Tips and Advice

General Checklist

Some questions to think about:

Planning
- Have I allowed enough time? A well-planned, well-researched and well-written dissertation takes time. You will not do your topic or yourself justice by leaving everything to the last minute.

Focus and structure
- Have I clearly formulated the problem or question?
- Have I put it into context – i.e. the relevant literature? historic or soci-economic contexts?
- Is there a clear analytical framework?
- Have I established aims and objectives?
- Are they clear and concise?
- Do they relate to my central research question or problem?
- Have I provided a discussion of my research design/methods?

Reading
- Have I surveyed and selected the relevant works from the general literature?
- Have I critically assessed and not merely reported the relevant issues and debates contained in the literature?
- Have I related the literature to my research problem/questions?

Writing up
- Is there a clear and logical structure?
- Have I written in plain English?
• Have I clearly defined my terms?

• Have I analysed and interpreted my data (of various sorts) or just described them?

• Are my conclusions based on the evidence I have presented in earlier chapters?

• Have I left myself enough time for redrafting and revisions?

_Presentation and scholarly standards_

• Have I used clear and consistent referencing throughout (see above, pp. 7-9)?

• Have I ensured that other people's work is explicitly cited?

• Have I provided a detailed and accurate Bibliography (see above, pp. 10-11)?

• Have I checked my spelling and grammar? (Do not rely on computer checks).

• Have I been consistent in my use of transliteration (where appropriate)? If you plan to use transliteration, we recommend using the IJMES guidelines to transliteration, available in any IJMES journal.

_Time and Task Management_

Much of the advice contained in this guidance should be common sense. However, you should not under-estimate the challenge of juggling different tasks and deadlines imposed upon you both in completing the dissertation, and all the other deadlines and commitments with respect to your other courses.

Below we give some tips and general guidelines. But the tasks involved in each dissertation will be different and varied. So how much time you spend on any given task will depend very much on the nature of the topic you are investigating in your dissertation. So it is very important that you draw up a detailed timetable with the help of your supervisor.

_General Guidelines_

• Remember that a Dissertation is equivalent to a year long course. You should therefore be putting as much time into it as you do to any other year long course. Ask yourself this: so far, have you put as much effort into your dissertation as you have into taught classes where you need to turn up and participate in seminars or
tutorials? If not, you're not doing enough, and you're storing up problems for yourself in the long run.

- On any topic, there are huge numbers of books you could be reading. Remember that you don't have to read everything. You need to be self-disciplined and know when to stop.

- In guiding your time and task management, it's useful to have a chapter outline. This need not be something you stick to rigidly - you might want to play around with the structure at the writing-up stage if you feel this would make it stronger. This is much easier to do once the work has been done! What a chapter outline will do at this stage is ensure that you are covering everything that you need to cover. This should really be an extension of the proposal you discussed with your supervisor.

- Draw up a list of tasks that you have to do, and draw up a realistic timetable in which to fulfil these tasks. (Examples of a task: to examine Nasser's social policy, to read source x and y etc.). Then give yourself a realistic timeframe in which to complete this task.

- Draft a timetable according to the chapter outline. But be realistic. There is no point in setting goals that you will never attain. There is no point, for example, in saying you will have written two draft chapters by the beginning of next term if you know that you're going to spending Christmas and New Year partying with friends and family! Setting goals that you never attain can also be very demoralising.

- At the same time, you should build in time for slippage. It may take longer to do a particular piece of work than you planned. You also need to make sure that you leave enough time for writing-up at the end. You should leave yourself at least two weeks at the end to edit your final draft. Editing is as important as writing.
• Remember that you are not the only student being supervised by your supervisor, and that she or he will have many other commitments as well. You can’t expect to hand in a piece of work and get it back the next day. So you should ensure that you leave yourself enough time to submit work and get it back from your supervisor, and be able to act upon the suggestions she or he has made.

• There is no right way to go about this, but our advice would be to write as you go along, rather than to leave it all until the end. Writing helps you think, as well as the other way around. By writing, you formulate your thoughts and refine your ideas. This should all be part of the research process. You should aim to have at least one draft chapter written by the end of Semester 1 and a second chapter written by Week 2 of Semester 2. Your supervisor will provide you with detailed feedback on these chapters.

**Identifying Your Question: What's your point?**

We cannot over emphasise the importance of ensuring that your dissertation is coherent - that the central research question is evident throughout the dissertation, that the different sections and chapters of the dissertation will all relate to one another, link together, and that they relate to a very specific research problem. So it is vital that you identify and then focus on the central question at the heart of your dissertation, and the related sub-questions that derive from it: what's your point? What's the point of your dissertation?

The 'what's your point?' question is a really useful question to ask yourself throughout the process of research and writing your dissertation. This can also be asked as 'So?' or 'So what?' Such a question helps to determine the relevance of the research, the relevance of the information being gathered, and the relevance of the paragraphs you will eventually be writing. If you ask this, and see no relevance, then forget it because it probably isn't relevant!

• Define the problem. What is the central hypothesis or question under consideration? This is a key contrast with essays, where the question is set for you.
Here you have had to do it yourself, within a broad area of interest (gender, Islamic politics, oil, etc). So, you should provide a statement of the problem - this may include a hypothesis (that A causes B) to be tested, and a central question to be addressed. NB this should be framed in such a way as to allow you to be analytical. Don't just ask 'why did the Abbasid empire collapse, or 'what types of policy options did Israel pursue'. Questions like that would lead you to a more descriptive account of a policy, or system. This question wouldn't answer the 'what's your point' or 'so what' question.

- What is purpose/aim of the research? Is it to examine a policy, evaluate or develop a theory, analyse the significance or consequences of an historical, religious, political development/event, or what? In short, what's the point of your dissertation?

- Why have you chosen this problem for consideration? What has prompted the research? (A current in current affairs? A personal interest? A gap in literature you have identified?). What is it that makes this an interesting area of study, and an important question to be examined?

**Literature Review**

Before embarking on the literature review, it is imperative that you have clearly identified your topic, and that you have 'unpacked' the topic into its component parts. This should have been the task of the Dissertation Outline, which you have submitted in Week 1 of Semester 1. A good and focused outline will ensure you are aware of the nature of the problem to be examined, the main research questions stemming from this, the major concepts you want to examine, the theoretical issues raised by your topic, and the empirical questions you need to address in the process of your research.

The first stage in the research is to conduct a thorough review of the relevant literature, within the boundaries of the research problem as set out in your outline. A review of the literature will be the foundation of all dissertations. Most of you will begin with a chapter
on the existing literature, research and arguments that are relevant to your topic (though this will be more central to some dissertations than to others). Whether your dissertation is theoretical or empirical you still need to have - and demonstrate that you have - knowledge of existing literature. Literature review is an ongoing process - you will go back to it when trying to address research questions and understand the data or findings, or elucidate your thoughts. But it is usually expected that you spend a fair amount of time at the beginning familiarising yourself with the literature relevant to your field.

The literature review serves a number of inter-related functions:

- It helps you refine the problem set out in the outline, and to build upon it

- It allows you to develop an in-depth understanding of the subject area in which you are working, and to learn from existing research in this field. This in turn should give you food for thought that informs your own thinking and your own research.

- It provides guidance in addressing some of the research questions set out in your outline - it won't always be necessary to conduct empirical research from scratch if previous research has answered some of these questions for you. Remember there is a limit to what you can do by way of empirical research anyway (time, resources, expertise)

- It helps you gain an understanding about the theoretical and analytical debates that are prominent within current work on your topic. You are expected to engage in these debates.

- It will help you make sense of your data and findings when you gather them.

- As well as summarising the views and conclusions expressed by established academics, you are expected to be analytical, to weigh up different arguments and points of view, and to critique existing work, where you take issue with it.
• It adds scholarly weight to your dissertation. We are looking to see that you have a good understanding of existing literature, that you can see where your work fits in the academic field. We want not only to see that you have read books, articles and reports, but that you have thought about them, given consideration to them, addressed the merit of existing work, maybe even challenged them as a result of your own research.

Three years of University essay writing has already given you most of the skills you need to undertake this task. The difference now is that whereas in essay writing you are usually addressing a set question and using a set reading list in so doing, with the dissertation you set your own question and build your own reading list. There are a number of cautionary points that you should take note of:

• Always retain focus - this is why it is important to have a good research outline that you have discussed with your supervisor. There is no point in aimlessly reading and reading around the general area and hoping this will bring focus to your research.

• Don't waste time on irrelevant material - if half way through a book, you aren't getting much use out of it, ditch it! Don't feel you have to get to the end of a book if it isn't really relevant. Likewise, resist the temptation to use a book just because you read it. We are always looking to see that you have demonstrated the relevance of the material you have read, i.e. how it relates to the specific topic you are addressing.

• Use academic sources and specialist texts. Textbooks may be useful to direct you to the specialist texts, and familiarise you with the key debates, but in themselves, they are not very useful sources - they are too general for this level. The Internet is useful, especially if examining an ongoing issue where the academic textbooks may be behind events, but the internet is never going to be good enough by itself. You
must embed your research and your written work in the context of the existing academic literature.

- Don't try to read everything! Part of the challenge of the literature review is selecting the relevant material. You are not expected to have read every book or journal article that relates to your topic. You are expected to have read the key ones. Supervisors can help you identify the key texts. Occasionally, you find Readers on the areas that you are working on (for example, Gerner and Schwedler eds., *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, or Hourani and Wilson eds., *The Modern Middle East*). They tend to include chapters from the key contributors to the field.

**Literature review techniques and resources**

There are a number of useful techniques to guide you in the literature review

- **Shelfmarks**: if you find one book that you already know is relevant, this will lead you to the relevant shelfmark where you will find books on a related topic.

- **Bibliographies**: Books and articles will make reference to other books that relate to the topic. Use the references in endnotes or bibliographies to lead you to relevant works.

- **Identify relevant journals**: You are expected to use journal articles as well as books in your literature review. Identify the relevant journals in the library that relate to your topic. Examples of useful journals in Middle East Studies are: International Journal of Middle East Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, British Journal of Middle East Studies. Check JSTOR on-line for further journals.

- Explore the *Library catalogue* ([http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/resources/catalogues/](http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/resources/catalogues/)), and different *University libraries*, for example, the Law Library, the Europa Library. In some circumstances, you can also get access to the National Library of Scotland. See
also COPAC, which is a catalogue of all University libraries in the UK:

http://copac.ac.uk/

- **Databases** – For databases of bibliographical and other resources, see the Library website: [http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/resources/databases/findlits.shtml](http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/resources/databases/findlits.shtml)

- **Index Islamicus**: For subjects relating to Islam and the Islamic world, this online bibliographic database is very useful. It is available via the University Library website, under ‘I’ at ‘Databases A-Z’:

- You can also use the search engines to find useful web sites relating to your research. Please note: there is no quality control on the web.

**Inter-library loans**

*Inter-library loans*: if you have a reference and can't access it in an Edinburgh-based library, you can try and get it through inter-library loan. You need a letter from your supervisor, and you need to fill in the relevant forms in the library. Note - this is very time-consuming and should only be used when local resources have been exhausted.

**Making notes/ interactive reading**

'Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting'  
(Edmund Burke)

*Focused and accurate note taking* is an important part of the dissertations process.

- Skim read for relevance: in what ways is the book/article useful? (For example, arguments/events/concepts/evidence/definitions/questions/ways of thinking). How does it relate to your research questions?
• Note its structure/topic/general reasoning/data and bibliographical references.

• Survey the different parts of the book. Use the Contents and the Introduction to identify key chapters. Skim read the introduction and conclusions to chapters to work out the gist. Skim read the introduction to book and conclusions in order to identify the main arguments/logic for book/approach. How does it relate to your research questions?

• Read key chapters carefully and make detailed notes. It is important that you put things in your own words. Making notes which answer these questions will help you put things in your own words:

  ▪ What are the essential points of the account/discussion/argument?
  ▪ How does this relate to your own interest/ideas/questions?
  ▪ How does it relate to other discussions you have read: does it reinforce or challenge previous explanations or analyses? What are your reactions to the arguments and evidence presented?

• Remember to critique (critically assess) relevant studies- don’t just report them.

• What is your summary and analysis of the work going to be useful for? For example, will it help in constructing a narrative account (Who? What? Why? When? Where? And the ever useful SO WHAT?) or as part of mapping debates in the area? Or as part of your framework for analysis?

• Do the work of assessing the meaning, relevance and significance of each work as you go along. You will not get the meaning through osmosis, or through writing out chunks and putting it under your pillow... The process of active reading involves:

  ▪ Absorbing information

24
• Reflecting upon it
• Relating various bits of the argument/information/analysis to other parts
• Assimilation - relating to previous knowledge
• Retention and recall - storing in a meaningful and accessible way
• Communication - for use in producing an account

• When making notes, remember clarity is the key: mark clearly what is in own words and what is direct quotes. It is advisable to avoid directly copying whole chunks. Before copying a section, ask yourself what work particular quotes might do for your argument. Perhaps mark these in a different coloured pen to avoid any confusion later.

*Make a full note of the details of the book or article at the time* - rather than try to retrieve them later when you are trying to compile your bibliography.

• Record author, title of book or article, publication details (for a book, place of publication, publisher, date; for a journal, journal title, volume and/or part number, date, page numbers for start and finish of article), and page number(s) of quote or argument summarised. (see Citations guidance below)

• Consider setting up a record system using cards or a small diary with reference information and key words (annotated bibliography). An excellent way to do this on a computer is with bibliographic database software, such as *Endnote*:

  [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/tsd/software/student_offers.shtml](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/tsd/software/student_offers.shtml) - *endnote*

**Checklist of dos and don'ts when writing a literature review**

**Do...**

Identify and discuss the relevant/key studies on the topic.
Include as much up-to-date material as possible.
Check the details, e.g. how names are spelled.
Try and reflect on your reading and interpretation- consider your own perspective and make it clear/defend it.
Critically evaluate and analyse the material: don't simple describe and report what is there.
Use extracts, illustrations and examples to support your analyses and argument.
Manage the information - adopt a system to ensure your notes and references are well-organised.
Make your review worth reading by making yourself clear, systematic and coherent: explain why the topic is interesting.

Don't omit classic works or landmark texts, or discuss core ideas without proper references.
Don't discuss outdated or only old materials.
Don't misspell names or get publication details wrong.
Don't use concepts to impress without defining them - this is not impressive!
Don't use jargon or discriminatory language.
Don't accept any position at face value - question the basis of knowledge claims.
Don't only produce a description of the content of what you read.
Don't provide a list of items you have read - a list is not a review.
Don't drown in information by not staying in control of the material you are gathering.
Don't make silly mistakes with respect to terminology.
Don't try to be too sophisticated in the language you are using - it is more important to be clear and concise.

Analysis and Writing Up

“However exciting may be their experiences while gathering data, there comes a time when the data must be analysed. Often researchers are perplexed by this necessary task... they are often troubled by (some of) the following questions. How can I make sense out of all this material? How can I have a theoretical interpretation while still grounding it in the empirical reality reflected by my materials? How can I make sure that my data and interpretations are valid and reliable? How do I break through the inevitable biases, prejudices and stereotypical perspectives that I bring with me to the analytic situation?
How do I pull all of my analysis together to create a concise theoretical formulation of the area under study?”
(A. Strauss and J. Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research, London: Sage, 1990, 7.)

These questions are answered by adopted a thorough approach to data analysis.

Making sense of it all: tips in data analysis

- Set aside sufficient time for the data analysis process and for drafting and redrafting chapters.
- Keep questioning yourself and your material to identify how it addresses your research questions, and how the material inter-relates.
- Be prepared to make a critical and balanced judgment of the material.
- Treat data critically and remain focused. Avoid going off at tangents that detract from the purpose of your study.
- Avoid making exaggerated claims to 'proof' or drawing conclusions, which your material does not support.
- Top tip: use a system of coding to categorise your material into chapters and sub-themes within chapters, to facilitate the analytic process. In doing this, ensure that your analytical categories are consistent with the aims and objectives of the dissertation.

Structure and Argument

We have stressed the need to be clear about the purpose and point of your dissertation. It important when you go into the writing stage that you have a clear idea of what the dissertation is about. What is the purpose of the dissertation, what is problem under examination, what is the central contention or argument you are developing, and what central questions does your dissertation raise and address? Having a clear idea of precisely what it is you're examining is essential if you are to build a sound structure.

- The structure of the thesis is about giving shape or form to the mass of data and material you have gathered in your research and begun analysing in the data
analysis phase. In structuring the dissertation, you need to select the data that is relevant and put it together in a well-organised and coherent manner. There is no set structure that should be adopted. However, the structure you choose must allow you to examine the different aspects of the problem, idea or issue under study, and each chapter must have its place in relation to the overall theme, and together the chapters must hang together to form a coherent structure and argument, where the theme has been developed throughout, leading us to the conclusion. Clearly then, deciding how to put the material together and determining which structure to adopt can only be decided once you have a clear idea of the purpose of the project.

- Selecting only relevant material: Students will often feel a very natural and human desire to demonstrate the full extent of their labours, to prove how much they've read and how much work they've done. One of key skills in dissertation writing is in selecting only the material, which is relevant. That means being prepared to leave out material, which doesn't fit - which maybe superfluous or unacceptable in some way. So, think of it as a journey - avoid temptation to meander down wee side roads that may be interesting but take you off the main track. Leave out what's irrelevant to the central problem being addressed.

- Introduction - all dissertations must have an introduction. This should include:
  - A statement of the problem or main theme of the dissertation;
  - A clear expression of the purpose of the dissertation and its rationale;
  - The research questions it has generated;
  - The methodologies or approaches used in examining these questions;
  - Why this is an interesting topic of study and what it adds to scholarly work;
  - Signposts - how the direction of your argument and how the rest of your dissertation will develop;
- Conclusion - all dissertations must have a conclusion. This should be used to sum up the main points of the argument and pull the threads together. It returns to statement of problem and purpose of the dissertation and draws conclusions in light of evidence presented. Your Conclusion must be consistent with the rest of your argument. It should not come as a surprise to the reader.

- Middle Bit - there are no set rules about how to structure your dissertation. But the outline and purpose of the dissertation may suggest a particular structure.

*Different types of structure*

(a) Chronological Structure - identify where the thesis begins, where each phase begins and ends. For example: the origin of problem, the development of problem, the results. However you must avoid the danger of merely telling the story. The point is to analyse developments not describe them.

(b) Thematic structure - often more appropriate if you are looking at a particular event, or a particular country. Identify key themes or aspects of the problem you have raised (poss. based on research questions).

(c) A combination of the above.

The key points with respect to structure are that each chapter must have its place. The relevance of each chapter to the main problem or theme must be clearly explained. Chapters must hang together and flow one into the other. The reader must be able to follow is a logical sequence.
Writing Tips

- Always ask where each section fits into overall framework - what's the point?

- Wonders of technology: editing is as important as writing - and there is a lot of scope using 'cut and paste' to move things around, make amendments to structure, etc. Leave time to get it right!

- Leave yourself a few days for a break. Put your draft chapters away in a drawer and then come back and read them as though they were someone else's. It is very difficult to criticise your own work (people can be too harsh and too kind to themselves). Try to be an impartial critic. Make an arrangement with fellow students to comment on each other's drafts.

- Read your work aloud - this helps expose awkward sentence structure and unclear expression, and helps guard against repetition, poor construction of argument, etc.

Stylistic conventions

- Accurate spelling is a basic essential because it makes for easy reading and rapid comprehension. Always have a standard dictionary to hand when writing.

- Avoid contractions such as 'didn't', 'wasn't', 'couldn't', 'would've', 'gov't' and above all 'it's'. The essay is intended to be a piece of formal prose, and what is permissible in conversation or more personal writing is not acceptable.

- Avoid slang words and wild generalisations.

Punctuation

Punctuation defines the structure of the sentence by marking off its constituent parts. Faulty punctuation may obscure meaning and confuse the reader. The following points may seem too elementary to need making, yet they continue to be ignored in many essays.
• Full stops are used to signal the completion of a sentence. Commas are used to distinguish parts of the sentence. Avoid over-use of colons, semi-colons, dashes and exclamation marks. A semi-colon can nevertheless be a useful way of distinguishing the two principal parts of a long sentence, where a number of commas might otherwise lead to confusion. Ask yourself, however, whether a couple of shorter sentences might not convey your meaning even more clearly. A variety of types of sentence helps to prevent a monotony of style.

• When used to signify possession the apostrophe is placed before the 's' with single nouns (Muhammad Ali's aims, for example) and after the 's' with plural nouns (the Ottomans' objectives, for instance). With nouns and proper names ending in 's', e.g. Lewis's or Lewis' are both acceptable.

• Please remember that the possessive of it is its. It's is an abbreviated form of ‘it is’ which should be avoided in an essay in any case.