

MSc Dissertation Handbook 2025/26

(for EH496-7, EH498, EH499)

This handbook describes the process of writing a MSc dissertation in the Economic History Department at LSE. Section 1 provides general guidance on how to write a dissertation. Section 2 presents key deadlines throughout the year and discusses submission procedures for the final draft. Finally, Section 3 discusses our department's formatting and style requirements including for references.

The dissertation is an individual project and should be shaped by your own interests. The key source of support and guidance is your academic mentor, who will supervise your work. You can also consult other faculty who may have complementary expertise. In addition, the department offers supplementary workshops and guidance.

Much of the final stage of work on the dissertation is carried out in the summer vacation, when faculty support is no longer available. Your achievement will depend on your own initiative, as a result. For this reason, it is essential that you commit time to developing your project across the first 10 months of the year, when faculty support is easily available.

LSE Life has an excellent set of general resources on preparing and developing dissertations that will assist you in thinking through the research process, literature review and presentation of your work. Do ensure you access that support, particularly if you are unfamiliar with British academic conventions.

1. Writing a Dissertation

The purpose of the dissertation

The dissertation offers you the opportunity to analyse a topic of your own choice in depth. This is your chance to choose a subject that really interests you, to work to your own timetable, and to produce a final product that does justice to your research effort and ability. It is important, therefore, that you avoid a rushed job that does not reflect your true potential.

Choosing the type of dissertation

There are three different dissertations in the Department of Economic History available to students depending on MSc programme.

- 0.5 UNIT DISSERTATION OF 6000 WORDS (EH498)
- 1.0 UNIT DISSERTATION OF 10,000 WORDS (EH499)
- 2.0 UNIT DISSERTATION OF 15,000 WORDS (EH496/7)

Students on MSc Economic History and MSc Political Economy of Late Development can choose between EH498 and EH499.

Students on MSc Economic History (Research) must take EH496/7.

Students on MSc Financial History and MSc Global Economic History must take EH499.

The long dissertation (EH499 or EH496/7) must be based on primary sources, giving new insights into a topic. These projects have a higher chance of achieving true originality and making a contribution to knowledge. They are the fullest test of an economic historian's research skills. This is a useful exercise if you are considering continuing with a career involving elements of research or a PhD.

Students taking either EH499 or EH496/7 must submit their provisional title and outline to their Dissertation Supervisor by the end of Week 1 of Winter Term.

The short dissertation (EH498) should be either a critical survey of a well-defined problem in the literature, or a small self-contained research project using primary evidence, or a policy paper drawing on primary or secondary evidence. It must demonstrate adequate knowledge of appropriate literature in Economic History and an ability to handle problems of evidence and explanation. This allows you to take an extra half unit taught course, giving you a wider exposure to the field, but at the cost of a more limited experience in original research.

Students taking EH498 must submit their provisional title and outline by the end of Week 6 of Winter Term.

Choosing a topic

The subject of your dissertation is up to you, though you should talk over your ideas with your academic advisor and, as appropriate, other members of faculty. A basic criterion is that you are seriously interested in your subject, because you will spend a considerable amount of time working on it.

Some useful points to think about when choosing topic:

- Try to avoid a subject on which there appears to be an almost total gap in the existing literature unless you know that there are primary sources available to you. Topics with little literature are especially problematic for literature review dissertations.
- If you are writing a case-study, in general it is best to choose a subject on which a substantial literature exists, and then to narrow your focus by looking at one aspect of the subject, or at one particular local area.
- If you choose a topic relating to the very recent past, you must ensure that it embodies sufficient historical perspective, that is, you can discuss a process of change with sufficient distance. Generally, this is not hard to do, but it does require thought and care. Dissertations with little historical content, unless they reflect exceptionally strong economic or sociological analysis explicitly motivated by an historical problem, are unlikely to be awarded good marks.

A useful point when you think about a potential topic, for those doing short dissertations focused on a critical literature review:

- If you are writing a critical literature survey, it is fine to tackle a field on which much has been written – provided there is room for you to find your own angle, a fresh question or theoretical perspective, perhaps, from which to comment on and engage critically with the literature.

Specifying a question

It is necessary to move from a general idea to a specific question. Be sure to choose a question/hypothesis which you can answer/test with the resources available to you.

One of the major differences between writing a course essay and the dissertation is that in the former you are set a question or a topic, whereas in the latter it is up to you to ask the questions. Doing so is a vital part of the work.

You may decide to give your dissertation a question as the title, but there is no need to do so. You should ensure, however, that the hypothesis you are investigating is clear in your own mind and clearly stated and “motivated” in the introduction to the dissertation.

Choice of method

A **primary-source-based study** allows you to claim originality in two ways, the sources themselves may not have been used in the same manner before, and the results may induce us to rethink a problem. But it is essential that you can persuade the reader to trust the sources. Discuss sources fully. A **case-study** may enable you to make substantial use of primary sources, originality may be relatively easy to obtain. But it is essential that you show that your case really matters for people interested in economic history, and exactly why.

Because a **critical survey** is unlikely to be able to draw heavily on primary sources, those who are writing one need to try other means of achieving originality. One possibility is to scrutinise the literature, identify a key issue worthy of further exploration, and examine it in as much detail as possible. For example, Kaoru Sugihara and Kenneth Pomeranz, in their influential accounts of divergent economic development in East Asia and Western Europe, differ on the question of whether the western European economies were labour-scarce before the industrial revolution. That issue has implications for our understanding of the causes and mechanisms of the rise of world inequality. In principle it could be pursued through a careful reading of specialist secondary sources (and some published contemporary descriptions) on the two regions.

Evidence

Your dissertation should have a coherent argument throughout. Each piece of evidence whether primary or secondary should contribute to explaining your argument. This does not mean that you should be certain about all your opinions, for this can easily lead to dogmatism. It is therefore quite valid to say that you have insufficient evidence on some points or that appraisal of a particular event depends on a value judgement. In all cases, bear in mind that mere assertion of an argument carries little weight. Weight is only gained through the presentation of evidence and analysis that can also be critically examined independently by others.

Writing and Structure

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of presenting the final product in a clear and logical style, with an argument that is easy to follow. On clear and purposeful writing see George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", in his oft-reprinted *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Penguin, 1957), pp. 143-58. You may also find helpful Donald N. McCloskey, "Economical Writing", *Economic Inquiry*, April 1985.

It usually helps, both for logical thinking about a subject and for clear writing, to divide the dissertation into sections or chapters. In appearance and structure, a dissertation should resemble the historical articles you read: in that it should have a clear introduction and should be divided into several parts, each of which makes a distinct contribution to the overall argument, which is summarized and reviewed in the conclusion. To sustain an argument over thirty-five pages or so requires much more thought and effort than would three or four separate course essays, so start writing early in order to give yourself enough time.

Your introduction should include a succinct account of the purpose of your research project and its contribution to our understanding of the topic. You will have devoted much effort to your research, and you want to convince readers that the time was well spent. The general historiography should also be described, so that your research is placed in context. Also, in the introduction you should describe and evaluate the sources you have used.

It is useful to think about a four-part structure for a long dissertation and a three-part one for the short dissertation, as follows (but this is only a broad guide). For the policy paper option, we also require the inclusion of an executive summary setting out your policy recommendations:

Primary source-based dissertation	Literature review dissertation
Introduction. State your question, justify the question with reference to the literature that you are making a contribution to. You should say why others in that field may expect to gain from reading this text.	Introduction. State your question/interest, justify the question/interest with reference to some weakness or open-endedness in the literature you are making a contribution to. You should say why others in that field may expect to gain from reading this text.
An extended and critical review of the literature. Ensure you include a full discussion of your choice of method and sources.	An extended and critical review of the literature. - Discuss the development of the literature - Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the literature
Analyse your sources and discuss your findings	

2. Deadlines and Submission

Success in a dissertation comes through consistent work across the year. We expect you to work closely with your academic mentor and to use the vacations and reading weeks to advance your research. The majority of the work will be carried out in the Summer Vacation, after exams, but identifying a question, sources and bibliography - and engaging with them to a level sufficient that you are confident your research plan will work - needs to be carried out through work from Autumn Term onwards.

There are several key checkpoints in the year that exist to ensure you are making satisfactory progress towards your dissertation.

Key checkpoints and deadlines

Autumn Term

AT Week 1-2

Introduction meeting with your academic advisor / dissertation supervisor

AT Week 7-11

Dissertation meeting with your Supervisor to discuss dissertation project as well as potential primary and secondary sources.

If you are on MSc EH or MSc PELD, you should agree with your Supervisor in this meeting if your project is suitable for EH498 or EH499.

Winter Term

WT Friday Week 1 - 25/01/26

FOR EH499 AND EH496/7:

Submit a **provisional title and outline** to your Dissertation Supervisor by email and on the Moodle page. Ensure the file you upload is titled with your Supervisor's surname followed by your surname, separated by a dash (eg: Professor Wallis's student Jane Jones would submit: "Wallis_Jones.docx").

Long dissertation:

- Prepare a short outline (2 pages) on your choice of topic, the nature and quality of existing work, what you hope to achieve, and the sources you will use.
- Students working with primary sources should also highlight the sources they plan to employ.

WT Week 2-3

Feedback meeting on your title and outline with your Dissertation Supervisor.

WT Weeks 1-4

Two workshops will be provided for students considering policy dissertations to explore policy issues and how to write policy papers.

WT Friday Week 6 – 27/02/26

FOR EH498:

Submit a provisional title and outline

Submit a **provisional title and outline** to your Dissertation Supervisor by email and on the Moodle page. Ensure the file you upload is titled with your Supervisor's surname followed by your surname, separated by a dash (eg: Professor Wallis's student Jane Jones would submit: "Wallis_Jones.docx").

Short dissertation:

- Prepare a short outline (1 page) on your topic, outlining your question and approach, including a preliminary bibliography.
- If you plan to carry out primary research, discuss the sources you will use.

WT Week 7-8

Feedback meeting on your title and outline with your Dissertation Supervisor.

Spring Term

ST Monday Week 7 – 15/06/24

Submit preliminary work (draft) to your academic advisor for comment by email.

It is obviously in your best interest to have as much of the dissertation completed as possible to allow academic mentors to comment usefully on your work. Mentors can offer no detailed comment subsequently.

Long dissertation: Submit a short paper containing at least 3,500 words including lit review, discussion of sources and methods and a clear outline of your research plan for the Summer.

Short dissertation:

- If your dissertation is a literature review, then submit a detailed outline of your literature review (at least two pages) and a bibliography).
- If your dissertation is primary source based then you should submit a discussion of your research question, sources and methods, and a plan for research (at least two pages) as well as a bibliography.

ST Week 7 onwards

Meet with your Dissertation Supervisor to discuss your submitted draft. Please note that mentors cannot offer detailed feedback on any material submitted after the ST draft deadline. Students should expect to receive feedback from their academic advisor within 10-15 days.

Summer Vacation (dissertation writing period)

Dissertation deadline – Tuesday 01/09/26

Submit final version of your dissertation to Moodle by 4pm

- Follow the submission guidelines below carefully.
- Ensure that you have followed all formatting guidelines

Submitting your Dissertation

The dissertation must be handed in no later than 4 pm on **Tuesday, 1 September 2026**.

You will need to submit an electronic version through Moodle (using the correct course code for your particular dissertation).

You should not put your name anywhere on the dissertation, just your candidate number. You will also need to download and append the plagiarism form to one of your paper copies.

Marks will be deducted for late submission.

Online material and plagiarism

British Universities run a collaborative anti-plagiarism service, which facilitates checking an electronic copy of any piece of work against millions of pieces of existing work. You are required to submit an electronic copy (on Moodle) of all written work that counts towards your final grade, that is, assessed essays and theses. To preserve anonymity, it will not be accessed by the examiners. The Department may submit such work for checking.

Please refer to the Department's policy on the use of Generative AI here: <https://moodle.lse.ac.uk/course/section.php?id=259007>

3. References, Formatting and Style

Word Limits

The Dissertation should not exceed 6,000, 10,000 or 15,000 words, depending on your course. These word limits exclude the abstract (max 250 words), tables, footnote references, appendices and bibliography. There is no margin for over-running this limit.

Footnote references may be expanded to include brief comment on the text (a guideline is at most 50 words of additional text – i.e. text that is not references - per footnote). There is no limit on the words used to provide references to primary or secondary sources in footnotes.

Appendices are not included within the word limit. However, you should avoid their use as much as possible. They must only contain supplementary material that the examiner need not read to understand and evaluate the dissertation.

Please ensure the number of words is given on the front cover of your dissertation.

Note also that the examiners will not be impressed with padding. For example, all tables and figures should be discussed in the text, otherwise they serve no purpose. Whether you come right up to the word limit or have some words to spare, it is important, for clarity and coherence, to maintain a sharp focus and purposefulness throughout. Every section, every page, every paragraph, every sentence, every footnote, every word, and every number must contribute to achieving the aims of the Dissertation or be cut.

Formatting and Style

Title Page: Please use the departmental dissertation title page, which asks you to provide your exam candidate number, programme, year of examination, word count, and the title of the dissertation only.

Abstract: You should provide an abstract of up to 250 words on page 2 at the start of the dissertation.

Layout: The manuscript must be typed/printed on paper size British A4, with standard margins. If you are binding it allow for extra space (3.5cm) in the margin on the left of the page. If possible, we prefer that you print it double sided.

Font etc.: You must use double line spacing. We prefer that you use 12 point Calibri. Section titles. Titles for sections are optional and should reflect what you wish to achieve for the reader: there is no norm on this.

Acknowledgements: the dissertation is an anonymous piece of summative work. Please do not include acknowledgements as they have the potential to break anonymity.

Policy Papers: need to include a one page executive summary formulated for a wider audience.

Notes and Bibliography

You are expected to use footnotes in the Dissertation to give references for your sources. Occasionally you may want to use footnotes to give further information on a point in the text which, in your opinion, if put in the text, would excessively break up the argument. But be sparing about the latter variety of note and keep them short – around 50 words maximum. If the reader really needs to know about something it should be in the text. Notes should be numbered consecutively, and preferably should be placed at the foot of the relevant page.

You should always provide a reference for any direct quotations you use in your text, and you should generally give references for detailed information that you have drawn from specialized sources. Failure to do this conscientiously constitutes plagiarism (the presentation of the work of others as if it is your own work) constituting an Examination Offence, as set out in the Calendar.

“Plagiarism is the submission of work . . . by you for assessment which does not acknowledge the words and/or ideas of another person(s), whether published or not. Any quotation from the published or unpublished works of another person(s), including another candidate(s), must be clearly identified as such by being placed inside quotation marks and a full reference to their source must be provided in the proper format. A series of short quotations from several different sources, if not clearly identified as such, constitutes plagiarism just as does a single unacknowledged long quotation from a single source.”¹

Well-known information, such as dates of Acts of Parliament, do not need to be provided with supporting references, but there is obviously a grey area between the commonplace and the highly specialized where you will have to use your judgement.

When referring to books and articles in references, you should give the author’s name, title of the book or article, and the appropriate page reference. When listing works in a bibliography, you also need to know the publisher and date of publication of a book, and the title and volume number of a periodical. It is therefore essential that, from the very first books and articles you read and notes you make, you keep a full record of author’s name, title (of both article and journal if it is from a periodical publication), date of publication, publisher (if a book), and page reference.

Please follow the Chicago footnote style

¹ For the full LSE guidance on plagiarism, see <https://info.lse.ac.uk/Staff/Divisions/Academic-RegistrarsDivision/Teaching-Quality-Assurance-and-ReviewOffice/Assets/Documents/Calendar/RegulationsAssessmentOffences-Plagiarism.pdf>

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

Always remember that the purpose is to enable the reader to see what evidence you have used and, if necessary, to consult that same evidence to determine if your treatment of evidence and inferences are persuasive. "Evidence" that cannot be examined independently by others carries little weight. In both notes and bibliography, the titles of books and periodicals should be italicized, and the titles of articles should be in inverted commas, e.g.:

13. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.86.

14. Irfan Habib, "Potentialities of capitalistic development in the economy of Mughal India", *Journal of Economic History*, 29, no. 1 (1969), p. 32.

Where you refer to an item that you have cited already, the repeat reference(s) can be shortened to surname and abbreviated title, plus page number, as in:

39. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, p.99.

68. Habib, "Potentialities of capitalistic development", p.49.

The works in the example given above would appear in a bibliography like this (note that in a bibliography you should give the full page-span of articles cited, and likewise of chapters in volumes of collected essays):

Pomeranz, Kenneth, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Habib, Irfan, "Potentialities of capitalistic development in the economy of Mughal India", *Journal of Economic History*, 29, no. 1 (1969): 32-78.

Citation of online material

It is equally important to reference accurately on-line articles and sources. Just as you must cite page numbers as well as the title of the book, so, too, your online citation must be precise. For online resources, the current convention is to cite a brief description in words in the same format as above, then copy in the full web address (url), and then write when you last accessed it. This last information is needed because not all web addresses are "stable" and addresses change.

Global Price and Income History Group (GPIH), Data files. <http://gpih.ucdavis.edu/> (accessed on 25 April 2017).

Ensure your web address is sufficient to allow us to check the source. The Will of Elizabeth Hunter of Fetter Lane, Fleet Street, City of London, of 9 March 1802, should, for example, be given as http://www.documentsonline.nationalarchives.gov.uk/detailsresult.asp?Edoc_Id=794990&queryType=1&resultcount=19 rather than simply as www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

In general, the reader should be able to use your citation to access the item immediately. If the item is a pdf file, you should cite both the URL that leads to the file, and the page number within the document. If the item is available both online and on paper, you may use either form of citation.

Abbreviations and Alternative Conventions

It is permissible and convenient to abbreviate references (eg to journals) where the title is long and frequently used. All that is necessary is that a list of such abbreviations be included in your dissertation, between the preface and the beginning of Chapter One.