

What constitutes a thesis?

A D.Phil thesis requires, according to the *Examination Regulations*, 'That the candidate has made a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the thesis falls', taking into account 'what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after three, or at most four, years of full-time study'. These notes are intended to give a little more information about what constitutes a D.Phil thesis. The criteria discussed below, within their narrower remit will also be of use to those writing a master's dissertation.

Research question The thesis should be driven by a question or problem suitable for original historical enquiry. This is not the same as a 'subject' or 'topic' which simply stakes out a field of enquiry; the research question is the means by which that field is interrogated. While not having the terms 'how' or 'why' in the title, it may often imply them.

Historiography A research question emerges from critical engagement with the literature in a particular field. The *Regulations* say that a thesis should show 'a good general knowledge of the particular field of learning within which the thesis falls', that is familiarity with the important scholarly literature in the subject area. The thesis will not just 'fill a gap' but often arise out of a historical debate and seek to contribute to it using a new approach or new evidence.

Sources A candidate is expected to make considered and effective use of the appropriate sources, which should be consulted in the original so far as appropriate and practical. This may entail travel to consult sources held in scattered collections. It is '*not essential that a thesis exploit hitherto unused primary sources*', say the *Regulations*, but the thesis must be based on primary sources, including archival, printed sources and/or oral testimony. The candidate should demonstrate a good understanding of the possibilities and limitations of the sources being used.

Approach or method A thesis is not an arbitrary or intuitive processing of primary material. It must have a coherent approach or method – one that is thought out and intellectually sustainable. This may be a case study or sample, a regional, local or microhistorical study, a comparative or transnational analysis. It may adopt a qualitative or quantitative approach, draw on allied disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, sociology or literary theory, or combine elements from more than one of these. Whatever the approach or method adopted, the candidate should be able to demonstrate the relevance and effectiveness of the approach for the purpose of the thesis. Engagement with any kind of theory should be developed and critical; mere name-dropping must be avoided.

Presentation Candidates are required to present their thesis '*in a lucid and scholarly manner*'. This means that the thesis must be clearly structured, with an introduction, conclusion and two abstracts. It must develop a sustained argument and be written in fluent, accurate and scholarly prose. It should present quotations, footnotes/references and bibliography in the form described in '[Conventions for the presentation of essays, dissertations and theses](#)'. All reference to other authorities must be footnoted in order to avoid the charge of plagiarism. Careful proof-reading is essential to avoid receiving a long list of 'minor corrections' from the examiners or criticism of an 'incomplete' submission.

In the oral examination for the D.Phil. or M.Litt. a candidate must be ready to defend the thesis, and also persuade the examiners that he or she has a command of the broader field in which the topic falls. It is likely that the examination will in some way explore all the criteria outlined above.



Where can I find Oxford History theses?

For a list of postgraduate Oxford History theses up to the end of September 2005, look for the OLIS added author entry:

a=University of Oxford. Faculty of Modern History. Thesis

For a list of such theses from 1 October 2005, look for the OLIS added author entry:

a=University of Oxford. Faculty of History. Thesis

Theses in Economic and Social History can be found in OLIS only for theses catalogued from 2000 for which there is an added author entry for the college and specific subject area, e.g., "Nuffield College. Thesis (D.Phil., Economic and Social History)". To find them all requires an author keyword search:

aw=thesis economic social history

For Economic and Social History theses from 1986, there is a bound annual list entitled "Graduate Studies : students under board of faculties and committees" held in Duke Humfrey's Library at "R. Ref. 996". There is no listing under "Economic and Social History" before 1986, but "Economic History" appears in earlier volumes.

Obviously, title-keyword and subject (LCSH) searches can reveal relevant material regardless of department. To limit a search to Oxford theses include the author keyword "thesis". This will pick up "Thesis" in added author entries (as above) which is not included in OLIS records for non-Oxford theses.

Theses are consulted in Duke Humfrey's Library. There is an author card index there in which older theses not yet in OLIS can be found. Note that ALL non-scientific doctoral theses are in OLIS, but not all non-doctoral or scientific (RSL) theses. Theses which appear in OLIS with the status "Apply Staff" may be fetched on request to the New Bodleian Reading Room (NBRR). Closed theses bear the status "Embargoed"; the majority of these may be consulted with the permission of the author, which should be presented to the staff at Duke Humfrey Reserve.

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