12. DISSERTATION

The American Studies dissertation forms a core element in the final year of the American Studies degree. The dissertation work spans two modules, one in each semester. Students take two 20-credit modules – AM3018 & AM3019 for three-year students or AM3025 & AM3026 for four-year students – both of which lead up to a dissertation of 10,000 words.

Compulsory Dissertations

All students are required, in their final year, to write a dissertation of 10,000 words on a subject of their choice. If you are a final-year student and you have not already done so, you must submit your proposed topic, using the appropriate form to the Dissertation Tutor, Dr Eleanor Thompson (et104@le.ac.uk) for approval. The dissertation, presented according to the specifications given below, must be submitted by 12 noon on Friday 11 May 2012.

The Role of the Dissertation

The object of a dissertation is for you to make your own contribution to the study of the United States, and to develop your organisational and writing skills.

The dissertation is intended to provide an opportunity for you to follow up your own strengths and interests, by working independently on a topic of your own selection. The dissertation is supervised, but its success rests to a unique degree upon your own motivation, self-discipline, and organisational skills.

It is intended to introduce further flexibility into the syllabus, and students normally choose a topic that is not directly part of any second or final year courses they are taking, or intend to take.

The dissertation involves challenging individual work on a subject that you yourself discover and become expert upon. It trains you in a number of skills, the collection, organisation, and interpretation of a mass of primary evidence. It also tests your ability to communicate your argument with clarity and precision, and to present your work efficiently, neatly, and on time.

Choice of Dissertation Topic

You should first consider which general areas or topics attract your interest for a dissertation study, whether these be in American history, politics, literature, film, culture or society. You should then
work as far as you can towards a detailed and specific proposal before making an appointment to see a potential supervisor.

In selecting your topic, it is important to strike a balance between your interest in the topic and its academic validity. Self-motivation is essential when working on an individual long-term project such as a dissertation, but the study should also involve you in challenging analytical work. It is important that the subject is not too sprawling.

The best dissertations are those that relate to **bounded subjects** with large implications: for example a single election campaign; four films from the work of one director; a literary or film genre; a small group of novels; or the work of a particular reformer.

Members of staff have indicated on p.95 the broad areas in which they are prepared to consider dissertation supervision. Not every topic that falls within these areas may be practicable, and it is the role of the supervisor to guide you in this.

- The supervisor might suggest that your topic is unworkable and ask you to think of another.
- It may be that there already exists too much secondary writing on the topic in question, thus leaving you little opportunity to develop your own ideas.
- There may be no suitable or available source material.
- Your initial idea might be too ambitious and needs refining.

In these initial sessions, your potential supervisor will help you to formulate a specific title, but it is important that due care and consideration be given at the outset to your choice of topic. Once this title has been selected, and officially approved, it cannot normally be subsequently altered (other than in minor details).

**The Use of Primary Sources**

The dissertation will normally involve some primary sources.

Primary sources may be broadly defined. These may include historical sources, usually contemporary with the events described or based on first-hand experience. For a literature dissertation these will clearly include the works of an author or of a particular literary genre. Included under primary sources would be the ‘raw materials’ of a subject: the films of a particular director or film actor, video footage, a specific exhibition, or cultural artefacts.

Primary sources may be available in published form, or you may conduct research on your own account in the original documents. Your supervisor will assist you in the initial location of source materials, and recommend relevant guides and bibliographies.
Conducting oral history interviews

In January 2007 the University adopted a new code of practice relating to the ethics of research. Realistically, this will only have an effect on you if you are planning to undertake oral history interviews as part of your dissertation research. If you are planning to conduct interviews, you must inform your dissertation supervisor as soon as possible, and should become familiar with the University’s Research Ethics Code of Practice which is available at:

http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice

The Role of the Supervisor

Your supervisor will advise you in the formulation of a specific topic and help you to ensure that the project is suitable, but he or she will not select a title for you. Once you have embarked on the work, the supervisor will suggest reading material from which you will be able to go on to compile your own bibliography. Preferably this meeting should take place before the end of the summer term of your second year although students going to the USA for their third year may find it most helpful to have this discussion with a tutor in their exchange university. Your supervisor will also offer guidance on the location and use of primary sources.

Your supervisor will monitor your progress during the year, and some supervisors may ask to see you at specific times to discuss your project, but you should normally expect to initiate contact with your supervisor. It is advisable to contact your supervisor during his or her normal office hours in order to make an appointment at a mutually convenient time when interruptions are less likely than during office hours.

The Centre does not lay down a specific number of meetings or contact hours between supervisors and dissertations students, these should be worked out between the individuals concerned. In general, though, students are likely to receive about three hours of supervision in each semester. It must be stressed that each student’s requirements are different, and it is not the supervisor’s role to chase students who do not request supervisions.

In the writing stage it is advisable to let your supervisor see a plan of your dissertation at the very minimum. He or she will discuss your structure and help you with such practicalities as how to break the dissertation into chapters and how to cite works. Supervisors are also willing to see a draft chapter, if this is submitted in reasonable time: i.e. at the end of the Spring Term.
You should not expect your supervisor to comment on the whole of your dissertation, unless you have particular problems with grammar and spelling. It is not the role of the supervisor to comment on your interpretation of texts or your conclusions, the aim in seeing a draft chapter is to ensure that the dissertation is taking shape sensibly and that it is ‘on the right lines’.

You should bear in mind that one purpose of the exercise is to train you in research skills, and thus the supervisor will aim to offer the minimum of necessary guidance so that you can gain useful experience for yourself. Some projects might by their nature need more consultation than others and to an extent the amount of contact between you and your supervisor is open to the discretion of the supervisor and the needs of the individual student.

**Dissertation Timetable**

It is important to start thinking about your dissertation well in advance. For this reason, you are required to approach potential supervisors **before the end of your second year**, so that you can have exploratory discussions to consider possible topics.

You will need to have settled on a definite topic by the end of your second year, when you must fill in a Dissertation Proposal Form. This must be countersigned by your supervisor, as confirmation that he or she approves of your choice, considers it a viable project, and is willing to supervise it.

**The completed form must be handed in by the end of Semester 2 of your second year.** Topics must then be formally approved by the Dissertation Co-ordinator, Dr Eleanor Thompson. Unless you hear to the contrary, you may assume that your topic has been accepted. Those of you doing the four-year degree will be expected to work on your dissertation while you are in the United States.

Those of you taking the four-year degree must take a research-based module during the second semester of your year in the United States, which will enable you to start your research for your dissertation. This will usually take the form of an Independent Study module offered by your American university, but which will not be assessed in the same way as your other American options and will not form part of your final degree assessment (see page 53).

During the **first semester** of your final year you should have regular consultations with your supervisor as you embark on the first stages of the work. This will involve surveying the relevant literature and sources; compiling a bibliography; reading and note taking; planning the structure of your dissertation, and beginning to draft sections of it.
Oral Presentation

You will all be required to give a 5 minute oral presentation about your dissertation towards the end of the first semester. This should also incorporate a PowerPoint presentation including the following elements:

1. A synopsis of the overall argument or general themes of the dissertation.
2. A plan of the dissertation giving chapter headings and illustrating what will be discussed in each chapter

The presentation will be given in front of two members of staff and other students who are doing dissertations on related topics. Feedback will be provided by your supervisor.

Four-year single subject and joint subject students will give their presentations during the last week of the autumn term (modules AM3025/3026).

Three-year single subject and joint subject students will give their presentations during the second week of the January assessment period (modules AM3018/3019).

N.B. These presentations will make up 10% of your final dissertation mark.

The second semester will be devoted to the writing and typing of the finished work. This should not be started too late, as rushed work here can spoil an otherwise creditable effort. You will need to resist the temptation to keep postponing your write-up, as you become ever more deeply immersed in your reading.

One hard copy and one electronic copy (via Blackboard) of the completed work must be submitted by 12 noon on Friday 11 May 2012 at the latest.

Special Procedures for 4-Year Dissertations (T701)

While you are in the United States you are required to begin collecting materials for your dissertation. You will already have decided what area of study you wish to pursue and have arranged a supervisor to guide you through this here at Leicester.

It is a good idea to keep in touch with this tutor while you are in the USA by email. He or she will be able to answer your questions and advise you on whether you have developed your focus sufficiently to write a good dissertation. The following notes are to give you some practical pointers on how to make the best use of the facilities available to you and your partner university.
Notes of Guidance for Dissertation Research

1. **Find a Supervisor.** As you will know, in your second semester in the United States you will be taking a module which will enable you to spend time on research – this may be called various things, but will essentially be a special study module. It is important that you quickly establish who might be a suitable supervisor for this module, or someone who has similar research interests to your own. Ask people for advice.

2. **Identify possible archives and libraries that may be of help to you.** Do not restrict yourself only to your partner university’s library. Investigate local archives, state libraries, museums, etc. Most now have websites so you can explore their catalogues before you make what might be an expensive trip. It is always a good idea to write ahead to archives – they get crowded and you want to ensure that the materials you need are available on the day you want to visit.

3. **Don’t duplicate work you can do in Leicester.** Obvious, but it is an idea to check the Leicester library catalogue ([http://library.le.ac.uk/](http://library.le.ac.uk/)) and leave any material we have here until you return to the UK.

4. **The information you need to collect.** You are the best judge of this, but there are some practical points to enable you to have at your fingertips the information you need to reference your dissertation properly (the attached notes will help you do this).

   - **Archives:** most archives will give you details of how they want you to cite their materials, if not ask. Essentially you need to jot down:
     i) The name of the library or archive, e.g. Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
     ii) Name of the collection: e.g. Martin Luther King Papers.
     iii) The box number or manuscript number.
     iv) The file number or item number (so that the reader can locate the individual item)
     v) Title or description of particular item: e.g. Letter from AB to CD, dated 21 Feb. 2001, Denver. It is a good idea to write down as much as you can about the item, your supervisor can help you with how to cite it later.

   - **Newspapers and Magazines:** *Write down:* name of the newspaper, place of publication, and also the
editor’s name (if you can find it), date and number of issue. Then the author (if there is one) and title of the particular piece you are interested in, with a page and section number.

- **Websites:** URL in full, plus the date on which you viewed it – websites are liable to change (see below for presentation of website information).

- **Books:** Make sure you take down: full name of author or editors, full title, date and place of publication, name of publisher. Page numbers should be noted, not just of quotations you might use, but also of ideas, etc.

The important thing to remember is:

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YOU ARE UNLIKELY TO BE ABLE TO GO BACK AND CHECK THIS INFORMATION, SO THE MORE DETAIL THE BETTER.
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Any queries, email your supervisor back in Leicester.

**Statement of American Sources and Resources**

As you are aware, part of your grade will be based on research conducted while in the USA. For this reason, the T701 and T700 dissertations A and B have their own module code numbers and are assessed separately.

To meet the requirement for T701 dissertations to be based on American research experience, every dissertation must include a brief Statement of American Sources and Resources. This is NOT part of the word count of your dissertation. It should be no longer than two pages. It should give a summary of the ways in which your work has been enhanced by your research time in the USA.

Aspects to mention might include your use of archive sources; field work (polls/surveys); library or archive resources; exhibition visits; special presentations; consultation with American academics; use of American course material as a foundation/inspiration.

The assessor will be able to reward those students who made best use of their time overseas. See below for the correct positioning of this statement. A note should be made in the contents as part of the format.

**Requirements of the Dissertation (all students)**

The detailed regulations governing the layout and presentation of dissertations are explained below. There are, however, certain points that you should be aware of from the beginning.
1. The text of the dissertation (i.e. the body of the work, which includes quotations and footnotes) should be **not less than 8,000 words** and **must not exceed 10,000 words**.

2. **One hard copy** of the dissertation must be handed in to the American Studies office, and must be in typed or word-processed form: **hand-written work will not be accepted**. **A copy must also be submitted electronically via Blackboard**.

3. The hard copy of your dissertation must be bound (advice on binding can be obtained from your supervisor) and the first sheet of paper must state clearly your candidate number (not your name), the title of your dissertation and the official title and code of the module for which it is submitted.


**Assessment**

The dissertation modules are assessed entirely on the basis of the dissertation that you finally produce. The mark for this is assigned to each of the two dissertation modules.

**Areas of Supervision: American Studies staff**

As a guideline to the supervisors available for dissertation advice, the members of American Studies staff have interests as follows:

**Dr G Barefoot**: American film; film industry; film audiences; American visual culture

**Dr J Campbell**: 19th and 20th century history; slavery; Civil War; race and criminal justice; the Americas

**Dr E Clapp**: women's history; domestic history; social history and social reform; 19th century history.

**Mr N Everett**: US poetry from 1607 to Present; 19th and 20th century American literature; autobiography; popular music.

**Dr S Graham**: 20th & 21st century fiction and poetry; gender and sexuality; adolescence; trauma; post-war music, film, photography.

**Prof M Halliwell**: modern literature; visual culture; popular music; film since 1945; cultural and intellectual history; Native Americans.

**Dr A Johnstone**: 20th century American history; US foreign policy; Vietnam; World War II; Theodore Roosevelt.
**Dr G Lewis:** white segregationists; civil rights; anti-communism; un-Americans and un-Americanism; ethnic minorities/civil rights.

**Dr C Morley:** modern and contemporary American fiction; transnationalism; race and ethnicity; Jewish American writing; masculinity and gender; genre theory.

**Dr E Thompson:** 20th century intellectual history; progressivism; race relations; civil rights.

**Dr A Waddan:** 20th century and contemporary American politics; US presidency; foreign policy; social welfare; electoral politics

It may be possible for you to work with an associated member of staff, but this must be done in consultation with the American Studies Dissertation Tutor Dr Eleanor Thompson.

**Dissertation Regulations and Guidelines**

**Content**

The work for the dissertation is based upon the study of selected primary source material, whether published or unpublished. Secondary reading should be consulted as a background and introduction to the topic, but should not alone provide the foundation of the dissertation.

The purpose of the dissertation is to present your own ideas, in your own words, upon a subject of your choice and on which you have carried out a course of investigation and research amongst as wide a range of sources and reading as may be physically practicable.

The object of the dissertation is not simply to extract the best surveys from other books, link them together, and present them as a thesis. It is not acceptable to present as your own work what is a summary, with altered wording, of another person’s work.

Students who engage in plagiarism, or who use a source without acknowledgement in the hope that it will not be recognised, run the almost certain risk of discovery. In such cases the dissertation will be awarded a merely nominal mark, or even zero, with obvious effects on the final degree classification.

Your candidate number on a dissertation implies that the contents are the product primarily of your own research and thoughts – with the obvious exception of acknowledged quotations from the primary source material properly used in support of your argument.
Text

The general aim in planning the layout of your dissertation is to ensure clarity of exposition and argument. This may be assisted by a sensible division of the text into sections, with suitable chapter headings. Too many sub-divisions should be avoided as this can interrupt the chain of argument and make your writing disjointed. The essential principles to bear in mind are: (i) clarity, (ii) readability, and (iii) ease of reference. In stylistic terms, this means the use of good written English. Care should be taken over grammar and punctuation, and contractions and colloquialisms should be avoided. There is no merit in long and cumbersome sentences: aim for a writing style that – while expressive in using a sophisticated vocabulary – remains clear and concise. The text should be properly divided into paragraphs.

Dates should be given in a consistent pattern, with day, then month, and then year, e.g. 24 August 1931. Dates of years should always be given in full, as numbers, e.g. 1789. When referring to a decade, the construction - the 1780s – is the correct format (but not the 1780’s). If referring to a century, this should be given in word form, e.g. ‘the nineteenth century’.

Names should also follow a consistent pattern. It is permissible to give a full name and title on the first mention, and subsequently refer to that individual by the surname (or title, e.g. Washington) on all subsequent occasions.

Foreign words or phrases embedded in your text should be italicised (or underlined), but not both: for example, ‘The Pentagon staged a coup d’état in January 1964.’ However, italics are not needed for foreign language quotations. Note: where the English name for a place differs from the native form, the English version is used in all cases (except a direct quotation).

Titles of publications, such as newspapers, should be italicised (or underlined). Italics can also be used to give emphasis, but in this respect they should be used very sparingly indeed.

Spacing: the text should be typed using double-spacing between lines, with indented quotations single-spaced (separated from the body of the text by a blank line). Each chapter should begin on a new page, and have a dropped heading, beginning the text about one-third of the way down the first page of the section. Paragraphs should be separated by a blank line (as they are on this page) or the first word of each paragraph must be indented from the left margin by at least 10 mm.
Margins: Make sure that you leave adequate margins. At least 25 mm (1 inch) should be left clear at the right-hand side of each page, and at the top and bottom. In order to allow for binding, the left-hand margin must be not less than 40 mm (1.5 inches). Each page should be separately numbered in the top right-hand corner.

Presentation

Failure to observe the requirements set out below will be penalised, and in extreme cases the dissertation will not be accepted. It should be realised that one important element of the exercise is to demonstrate the ability to present work neatly, consistently, and in accordance with the established academic conventions explained in this handbook. The dissertation must be typed on unlined A4 paper of a decent quality, using one side of each sheet only.

The format of the dissertation should follow this pattern:

1. **Title page:** giving the title of the topic, the candidate number, name of supervisor, month and year of submission, the word length rounded to the nearest 100 words, and the title of the modules for which the work is submitted.

2. **Contents page:** If you have divided the dissertation into a number of sections, the titles and page numbers of these should be given here.

3. **Statement on use of US resources (4-Year students only)**

4. **List of illustrations:** A list of maps, tables, graphs, or other illustrative material used in the text should be given on a separate page. All figures should be numbered consecutively.

5. **Abstract:** A summary of not more than 300 words, outlining the topic studied and arguments presented, and a brief chapter breakdown, should be inserted on a separate page before the main text.

6. **Body of the dissertation:** The text of the dissertation (including references) should be between 8,000 and 10,000 words in length. Dissertations where the text is longer than the specified maximum will not be accepted. Note that the word limit includes any textual material presented in the form of appendices (but not appendices of purely numerical data, such as statistical tables).
7. **References**: These should be presented either in **footnotes** at the foot of the relevant page, or as a list of **endnotes** at the end of the text. In either case, the notes should be numbered in continuous sequence. They should normally consist of references only, and not contain comments or further exposition in addition to that in the main body of the text. Remember: references are included in the word limit.

8. **Bibliography**: A full list of all primary and secondary sources should be given at the end of the dissertation.

**NOTE**: For further details of text layout and system for referencing primary and secondary sources and Internet sites see the section of the handbook on **Bibliographies and Referencing**.

**Submission and Binding**

Make sure that you allow plenty of time for the typing, bearing in mind that you will have to proofread the finished dissertation and make corrections before you submit the final copy. Ensure that a friend or relative helps you with proofreading.

**One hard copy of the Dissertation must be submitted to the American Studies Office on the 15th floor of the Attenborough Tower by 12 noon on Friday 11 May 2012, as well as one electronic copy via Blackboard.**

Extensions will not be permitted except at the discretion of the American Studies Examinations Officer, Dr Alex Waddan, and then only in exceptional circumstances. There are penalties for late submission, as outlined in Section 5 **Submission of Work** of this Handbook. **Please note that penalties for late submission are effectively doubled as the dissertation mark counts twice.**

One bound copy of the work should be submitted with your candidate number, and accompanied by a completed copy of the Centre’s coursework cover sheet. Various binding options are available please enquire at the University Audio Visual Services (http://www.le.ac.uk/finance/printservices/). You should also retain a copy for your reference. In the case of further problems or queries, especially those relating to your topic or period, your supervisor will be able to help you.