

Using special collections and archive texts in your dissertation

The University has a large number of special collections of rare books, archives, manuscripts and other materials. The archives and collections are made up of various kinds of materials which can form the basis of your dissertation in a number of ways. Dissertations could focus on, for instance, the study of a single author, a comparative analysis of two or more authors, a study of aspects of form, style, genre or literary movement, the application of a particular methodology to particular materials, such as genetic criticism (the study of the writing process). Materials from special collections can also be used as contributory or supplementary texts to your dissertation focus. Whatever your topic might be, do search the archives and special collections for materials which relate to your topic or author because the materials you find can add a unique dimension to your work and enliven your dissertation. Basing your dissertation on archive materials means that your dissertation is more likely to produce original research. Some of the Collections have rarely, or never, been consulted by established scholars which makes this kind of work especially exciting. Using unique source materials can raise important and challenging questions about, for instance, authenticity, readership, historicity and authorship. The kind of research you will undertake for this kind of dissertation will equip you with demonstrable and transferable skills which could prepare you for further research or employment.

The special collections and archives are made up of predominantly:

- Rare books
- Archives from publishers
- Archives from authors
- Manuscripts
- Proofs of books
- Book reviews and reader reports
- Contractual materials
- Letters

These are the items that you may have seen on the library's Unicorn catalogue as 'NON-LOAN In Store – available on request'. Rare books are catalogued on Unicorn in this way. Archives are catalogued in a system called ADLIB, available at www.reading.ac.uk/adlib

Detailed information about the collections may also be found on the special collections website www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections. The collections have been acquired and accumulated over the years through donations from authors themselves or by friends, colleagues and relatives and some have been purchased by the University.

This guide only covers certain parts of the collections held at Reading – there are many more subjects that you can explore, and related resources in other collections.

Where are the archives? How do I borrow items?

The special collections and archives are located a short walk away from Whiteknights campus on Redlands Road; they share a building with the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL). The Special Collections website can be found at www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/sp-home.aspx. When you request an item from the Special Collections or Archives an archivist will fetch it for you either on the day or for the following day. Items borrowed from the collections cannot be taken home and so have to be read and studied in the Reading Room at Special Collections. The Reading Room has desks with power points and there is also a photocopier which can be used for a fee at the discretion of the Reading Room staff. To use special collections materials you will have to register, which you can do when you visit, for further details on Reading Room procedures see www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/using/sc-using-readingroom.aspx. The Reading Room also holds catalogues of some of the collections that do not appear on Unicorn or ADLIB, the special collections website will tell you the Manuscript MS number for a particular collection, you then ask the staff in the Reading Room for the catalogue you require. Catalogues differ as to how they organize the references for materials; the staff in the Reading Room can help with making sense of some of the more ‘basic’ catalogues/hand lists. Many of the rare books have been catalogued on the Unicorn catalogue, these items can be called up online. The advanced search option on Unicorn allows you to search the Special Collections exclusively and you can also filter the search to some of the individual collections, for example the Beckett Collection or the Children’s Collections. For items that are not on Unicorn you must fill in a blue slip. The staff at special collections are there to help you and can be contacted by email or phone, but the best way to find out about what you are interested in is to take a short walk to Special Collections and speak to a member of staff there.

How to use this subject explorer

This subject explorer is not an exhaustive list of dissertation titles but is designed to give you a sample of the kinds of materials you can use to base your essay on. Here you will find a pool of ideas and examples which can be developed into a possible dissertation title. The entries are designed to help you generate your own topic rather than give you ready made titles, however, each entry will give you some topic ideas and references for the materials that are relevant to help guide you towards your focus. For some entries, particularly for medieval and early modern material, you will get more detailed guidance about individual items, which should help you to handle and understand the sources.

The subject explorer is divided into the following sections:

- Introduction and list of subject areas (this document)
- Part A – medieval and early modern
- Part B – eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
- Part C – twentieth century

- Part D – Historians and the politics of history (the Stenton letters)

The document can be browsed using the list below. Many of the entries will overlap and connect with each other in several ways: this may seem challenging and even puzzling some of the time, but rather than be disappointed by this, take it as an opportunity to test the way you normally think about a source and what you might do with it.

List of subject areas

PART A – Medieval and early modern

Henry VII

Henry VIII, Edward VI, Jane, Mary I

Elizabeth I

Relations between Scotland and England during the Tudor dynasty

James I and Charles I

The cult of King Charles the Martyr

Charles II

New denominations and the Anglican church

Hobbes' *Leviathan*

Chronicles from the early 17th Century

James II, Mary II, William III

The religious climate in England from 1685 to 1702

Religious dissent under Queen Anne

Chronicles 1688-1723

Minority religions and religious philosophies in England

History and descriptions of English religious buildings

PART B – The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The British soldier

Edmund Burke and Parliament in the late 18th century

The American Revolution

The French Revolution

Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars

Horatio Nelson

The War of 1812

Italian Unification

The Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition (1851)

The Crimean War

The American Civil War (1861-1865)

PART C – The twentieth century

Children's literature in wartime

The Boer War (1899-1902)

Housing after the First World War

Disarmament and appeasement

India 1923-1942

The Second World War (1939-1945)

The Astors and the Cliveden Set

The Astor invitations

Domestic servants

British cinema and its censorship 1920-1940

Illegitimacy and bastardy

Marriage and divorce laws

Lunacy reform and mental health legislation

Moral Hygiene/Prostitution

Christian Science

Temperance

Part D – Historians and the politics of history (the Stenton letters)

Historians and War

University of Reading History

Intellectual Politics

History of Tourism

Local History

History of Place Names

Histories of various Historical Societies (Particularly the Pipe Roll Society)

England & Wales during WW2

The effect of War on Universities

Soldiers in WW2

Aspects of Anglo-Saxon History