GUIDE-NOTES ON WRITING A DISSERTATION IN DRAMA

Undergraduate (maximum length 10,000 words)

Two important points apply:
1. This is *maximum* length. You do not have to write up to the maximum.
2. If you are genuinely bothered about length, you should think again about writing a dissertation. You need a subject that engages you. The length is the subject's breathing space.

Getting Started
The early stages of research can be an anxious period. As far as possible, avoid punishing yourself (or your supervisor) for your anxiety. It's natural enough. There is something frightening about the commencement (and you can't expect your thesis, whether it be conventionally academic or informed by practice, to take its appropriate shape as soon as you've determined your subject); and the mere size of the project is likely to be a daunting prospect.
The likelihood is that something in your past reading will have given you the initial impetus to undertake the dissertation. It's a good idea to retrace your steps, to read again what you previously read in a different context, taking notes according to your new purpose. It's also a good idea to fall immediately into the habit of consistent, accurate bibliographical references. There are various models, but the one I recommend is as follows:


Step-by-Step Progress
The totality of a dissertation may be a daunting prospect, but the individual sections that go towards its composition are much less so. It is a good idea to test your approach as early as you feel able. Select a play/theme/idea/issue on which you feel able already to write with reasonable conviction, then write that section and submit it to your supervisor for comment. (You have nothing to lose by this: if you're lucky, you may even be able to incorporate it in your final draft; and, at the very least, it gives your supervisor something to go on.)
The probability is that every book you read will refer to other books/articles/chapters that you might wish to read. Keep orderly notes of these references, in the bibliographical form referred to above. Although you should ensure that you have regular contact with your supervisor, such consultations will generally be most useful if they are based on written work that you have submitted. Remember that it will not be long before you know more in detail about your chosen subject than your supervisor does. The supervisor's task will then become:

1. to advise you on the conduct of your argument
2. to provide an overview and a context for the particular work you are undertaking.

Aids to Research
The Department has a designated 24-hour access computer suite for postgraduate students. You should familiarise yourself with computer facilities available through the College and, of course, the Library. The Department is unwilling to risk returning drafts by post, if that can be avoided. Please regularly check your pigeon-hole.

Pointers to Style
1. Long sentences are risky. They may, if too convoluted, deter the reader.
2. Punctuation is not a negligible detail. Your punctuation points should be an aid to accurate reading.
3. Paragraphs are crucial units in the construction of an argument. It is a reasonable rule-of-thumb to ask each paragraph to make one point.
4. Split infinitives, though just about tolerable, are not recommended.
5. Short quotations (less than forty words, say) should be signalled by quotation marks and incorporated in the flow of your own lineation, thus:
   Wordsworth's moments of epiphany, his "sense of something far more deeply interfused", would remain a feature of his experience.
6. Longer quotations, however, should be indented on the page, *without quotation marks*, thus:
   Wordsworth's own sense of the mysterious origins of human life was hedged with evasive vagueness:
Our birth is but a sleep, and a forgetting.
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar.
Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home.

Given that your main text is double-spaced, these indented quotations, whether in verse or prose should be reduced to 1½ spacing.

7. Titles of books, plays, films, journals, newspapers should be italicised.
8. Dates should be cited, without punctuation, as follows: 18th August 1973.
9. Foreign words or phrases should also be underlined or italicised.
10. Numbers under 100 should be written in full, as in sixteen or eighty-seven, unless (as in the case of dates cited above) there are good reasons for not doing so.
11. Apostrophes are crucial to meaning. Thus:
    Example a) Wordsworth's poetry is often ecstatic.
    Example b) The Wordworths' poetry is often ecstatic. (referring here to both William and Dorothy).
    Example c) The Wordworths were a devoted couple. (no apostrophe because this is a straightforward plural)

    N.B. Apostrophes should not be used for plurals: e.g. MPs, 1960s.

Notes and References
This is an area where consistency is essential. Provided that you use a sensible system and use it consistently, you need not follow the ensuing suggestions to the letter.

In the presentation of a thesis, there are two distinct types of reference.

1. a simple reference to a primary or secondary source,
2. a development or modification of a point made in your main text - too long to be easily incorporated in the flow of the dissertation, but not long enough to constitute a separate appendix.

For the first kind, I recommend the author-and-date system. This involves a bracketed reference on the page, which guides the reader to the bibliography at the end of the thesis. Thus, your text might read:

    His cachet was enhanced by what Mrs Browning called a "mystery of iniquity, which everybody raved about but nobody distinctly specified" (Dingwall 1947: 105).

The bracket would then be referring to the book cited in your bibliography:


And the '105' would refer to the page of the Dingwall book from which your quotation had been taken.

For the second kind, you will need to number consecutively (chapter-by-chapter, beginning with the number 1 for each new chapter). The normal system is to elevate the number one space, thus\(^1\), but word-processors allow subtler number-references. Provided you use the numbers clearly and consistently, it does not matter what variations of type-face etc. you employ. Numbered notes can then be included either at the end of each chapter or at the end of the thesis.

On the whole, I’d advise you not to go in for vast numbers of notes. I remember being very exasperated by an essay of Harold Brooks’s, in which the notes covered seven more pages than the essay itself. And there are some peculiarities about the recommended format for notes. For example:

1. in abbreviating numbers (e.g. in page references), you shouldn’t abbreviate numbers from 10 to 19. Thus, although 23-8 is right, 17-8 is wrong, as is 112-8. Correct forms include 7-17, 17-19, 43-8, 43-51, 112-18...
2. Latin abbreviations can cause problems, because the conventions are inconsistent. The following (with meaning in brackets) are kept in roman type:

    e.g. (for example)
    i.e. (that is)
    ibid. (in the same book/in the same work)
    N.B. (take note of the fact that...)
loc. cit. (at the point in the work already cited)
ibid. loc. cit. (in the same work on that page already cited)
op. cit. (in the work already cited in an earlier note)

whereas, for reasons obscure, the following are always italicised:

c. (approximately - abbreviated from circa)
et al (and others)
passim (at several places in the work referred to)
sic (thus - referring to an incorrect spelling or factual error within a quoted passage, thus assuring the reader that the mistake isn't yours)

The fact that the conventions are so erratic might usefully discourage you from using these Latin abbreviations.

3. Most people, at some stage, encounter the problem of recording a reference to an earlier (sometimes primary) source, which you have found in a later (always secondary) source. The best answer is to be honest. If you have found a quotation from Meyerhold in a book by Edward Braun, cite Braun, not Meyerhold (unless you are including the original - legitimately - in your bibliography. It is, after all, possible that Braun has noticed something that you regret you missed.)

Plagiarism
(I am plagiarising this from the University of Bristol's English Department handbook. It ceases to be plagiarism because I acknowledge the source. It may, however, remain a breach of copyright, despite the fact that copyright is not claimed in the handbook from which I am quoting. Law is complex.)

We all make use of other people's ideas, and you will often find yourself wanting to include ideas, arguments, and sometimes particular points or phrases which you have taken from others, just as you regularly make use of notions which you have derived from others in your everyday conversation and thought. There's nothing wrong with that. But you must think these ideas through in your own terms, incorporate them within your own argumentative scheme, and, wherever possible, express them in your own idiom, so that it is clear that you have internalised them as parts of your own thought-processes, and are not merely trotting them out unthinkingly, or passing off notions which you haven't thought through properly as if they were your own. Where you need, as you sometimes will, to recall the particular words of another writer, you must always attribute the quotation to its source, either in your text or in a footnote/reference. You must never adopt the precise language and phraseology of other writers (published or unpublished), nor paraphrase their work closely, without acknowledging the debt.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you do not open yourself to any suspicion on this front. You should particularly, always be careful, when taking notes, to distinguish between notes that are copied directly from the work in front of you and notes that are your summary of the gist of the argument of that work. If you do not, you run the risk of unwittingly presenting a transcript of your source as if it were your own work.

To plagiarise is the surest of all ways to fall foul of your examiners.

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