

3. CHOOSING A TOPIC, THINKING OF A THESIS STATEMENT, AND WORKING ON IT

Choosing a Topic

A strong dissertation begins with a well-defined topic that is coherent, manageable, and focused. By *coherent* we mean self-explanatory and with clear boundaries: be specific about the author(s), text(s), period, nationality/geographical area, and central theme. When in doubt, narrow it down: a tightly focused topic explored in depth is always better than a broad one dealt with in passing.

When defining your topic, make sure to distinguish between your primary texts (the literary works you are analysing) and your secondary sources (the critical and theoretical literature you will engage with). In English Literature dissertations, the primary text is always the centre of gravity: secondary sources exist to support, contextualise, and extend your own readings, not to replace them.

Engaging with Secondary Sources

You are not starting from scratch. Critics have already written on the work(s) you are analysing, and engaging with their arguments is an essential part of the process. **Read as widely as you can**, giving priority to scholarly sources that are more clearly related to your approach. Your reading should have a purpose: you are not simply summarising what others have said, but entering into critical conversation with them.

Your dissertation must demonstrate this dialogue with the critical sources. You will need to quote from articles, book chapters, monographs, etc., in order to support your arguments, acknowledge previous readings, or express disagreement with previous interpretations.

Constructing a Thesis

Your thesis is the central argument your dissertation intends to prove or demonstrate. Express it in a clear, concise way, ideally in one or two sentences. This argument should be the backbone of all sections of your work. You will need arguments to support that thesis, based on what you have read on the primary source(s), on your own approach to it, your ideas, the questions you have made yourself, etc. **A good thesis has the following qualities:**

It is specific and focused. Avoid broad generalisations. What you establish as your focus will guide the entire dissertation. If your focus is broad, imprecise, simplistic, and uninteresting, the whole dissertation will be affected.

It is provable through textual evidence. A thesis in English Literature is a claim that can

be supported with evidence taken from the primary text. This means that your evidence is not merely thematic or conceptual but grounded in close reading—paying attention to language, imagery, form, syntax, narrative structure, and other formal elements.

It takes a position. A thesis is not a description or summary; it is an argument.

Working Title

You will begin your dissertation with a working title, which helps you keep sight of your central argument during the research and writing process. In English Literature, titles often point to both the critical method and the scope of the analysis. The definite title is usually selected once the dissertation is complete.

The following categories, numbered 1 to 5, provide a non-exhaustive selection of frameworks and possible case studies. These are listed with provisional titles for orientation.

1. Focus on: Gender, identity & sexuality

- Sovereignty and Submission: A Comparative Feminist Reading of the Loathly Lady in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and the Patient Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale”
- The Feminist Subversion of the Silent Female Motif in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*
- Masculinity in Crisis: Post-war Disillusionment and the Breakdown of the Patriarchal Hero in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*
- Subverting the Myth of Sexual Liberation in Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*
- The Domestic Prison: Spatial Metaphors of Female Entrapment in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*

2. Focus on: Character evolution

- Subverting Chivalric Idealism and the Iconography of Perfection in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- Art as Externalised Moral Corruption in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
- Deconstructing the Myth of the Self-Made Gentleman in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*
- Evolution-Dissolution Dynamics and the Erosion of Identity in Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff
- The Static Oppressor: Clegg’s Resistance to Moral and Psychological Evolution in John Fowles’s *The Collector*

3. Focus on: Genre traits and subversion

- Sonnets for the Prosaic: Subverting Petrarchan Constraints and Courtly Idealism in Simon Armitage’s *Book of Matches*
- Class Displacement and the Gothic Urban Fairy Tale in Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*
- Breaking the Cycle of Fate in Angela Carter’s Fairy-Tale Rewritings: A Comparative Analysis of “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Lady in the House of Love”
- Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*: Deconstructing the Whodunnit through Historiographic Metafiction

4. Focus on: Specific critical approaches/theories

- Industrial Scars: An Ecocritical Reading of the Changing English Countryside in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
- A Postcolonial Re-Reading of the Caliban-Miranda Dynamics in John Fowles's *The Collector*
- Reversing the Offense or, the Architecture of Perpetrator Trauma in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*
- Artificial Empathy and the Posthuman Condition in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*
- Mapping Postcolonial Liminality and the Hybridised Self in John Aggard's Poetry
- A Psychoanalytic Reading of Identity Fragmentation and Collective Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

5. Focus on: Formal & stylistic analysis

- Interlace Theory and the Function of Digressions in *Beowulf*
- A Stylistic Analysis of Syntactic Ambiguity and Unreliable Narration in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*
- Carol Ann Duffy and the Persona Poem: Dramatic Monologues and the Reclamation of Agency
- Digital Epistolarity and the Reader as Detective in Janice Hallett's *The Appeal*

Keeping the “Big Picture” in Mind

Understanding the overall structure of your dissertation from the beginning will help you plan better and organise your arguments more clearly.

Your dissertation will consist of the following main sections: an **Introduction (1)**, followed by **the body of the work (2)**, subdivided into chapters or sections (2.1., 2.2, etc.), then a **Conclusion (3)**, and, finally, the **Works Cited**. Note that neither the Works Cited nor the Table of Contents are preceded by a section number.

The Introduction and the Conclusion follow inverse but complementary movements. As Wiesław Krajka, Professor of English Literature at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, puts it:

The sequence Introduction, the chapters [the body of the work], and Conclusion may be illustrated by the sand-glass where sand falls down to measure time: the upper bulb (which gradually narrows), the neck, and the lower bulb (which gradually broadens toward the bottom) standing respectively for Introduction, the chapters, and Conclusion, with the direction of movement from the general to the particular in the upper bulb and from the particular to the general in the lower bulb.¹

In the Introduction you move from broad contextual perspectives—situating your topic historically, theoretically, or critically—towards a precise formulation of your thesis and

¹ Krajka, Wiesław. *Master's Dissertation in English Literature. A Practical Guidebook*. Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, 2024. p. 105.

research objectives. In the Conclusion, you reverse this movement: you start with the specific findings developed in the body of your work and then progressively broaden your perspective to address the study's wider implications.

The next section examines the structure of the dissertation in greater detail.