

1.03 How to write a dissertation

The advice given here is very general in nature: you must always check with your supervisor and with course documentation what the specific requirements are on your course.

Introduction

A dissertation is a structured document, normally between 5,000 and 15,000 words long at the undergraduate or masters levels. It is the product of a piece of personal research, demonstrating both theory and practice. It needs to have a clear focus so that it can be achieved within the time and resource constraints available to the researcher.

Dissertations are more in-depth than essays. They also usually have a more explicit methodology.

Most dissertations involve both primary and secondary data collection. A small minority involve only secondary data collection (although they are more common in some subject areas, such as Law); generally they should only be attempted if there is a clear reason why primary data collection is impractical for your chosen topic.

Most dissertation research is overseen by a supervisor. This relationship is very important. You should see your dissertation research as a developmental process in which your supervisor is advising you.

Qualities of a good dissertation

A good dissertation will:

- Have a clear aim based on a well posed central question
- Be well planned and structured
- Be widely researched
- Demonstrate a good grasp of relevant concepts and their application to your study
- Include analysis, critical evaluation and discussion, rather than simple description
- Follow academic writing conventions
- Contain consistent and correct referencing
- Demonstrate to your tutors that you have learnt something on your course and have been able to use this to produce a well-argued extended piece of academic work

A poor dissertation will:

- Have a general or unclear title
- Be poorly planned and structured
- Lack systematic research (in terms of both primary and secondary data collection and analysis)
- Rely heavily on secondary source material, with little or no attempt to apply this to your study
- Be mostly descriptive rather than analytical and evaluative
- Not follow academic writing conventions
- Contain plagiarism or little referencing or use an incorrect referencing format or a repetitive style of citation
- Not convince your tutors that you have learnt very much

How to produce a good dissertation

1. Choose a good topic

Choosing a good topic is vital for obtaining a good grade for your dissertation. You will probably need to have your topic or a proposal document approved by your supervisor. Choose something you are genuinely interested in. Start thinking about your topic choice as early as possible. Brainstorm ideas, draw mind maps (see Guide 2.11), search for relevant information, read critical literature and discuss with your peers and supervisor (if one has already been assigned).

Initial dissertation topics ideas are normally too broad. For example, "IT in Primary Education" could be narrowed by focusing on a specific aspect, considering how the data will be obtained, or perhaps trying to solve a particular problem. For example, the final title may instead be: "Reliance on Information Technology in UK Primary Education: Case Study of an Inner City School".

Your choice of topic will probably evolve and clarify over a period of weeks before you agree a final version with your supervisor.

2. Plan your research

Dissertations are a major piece of academic work and involving dependencies and multi-tasking. They therefore need careful planning:

- Start early
- Set aside adequate protected time each week
- Stick to your timeline
- Keep your project simple yet innovative
- Leave extra time for unanticipated problems (e.g. plan to finish a couple of weeks before your hand-in deadline)

A useful tool for scheduling is a GANTT chart. This should be a living document which you review regularly, not just something you put in your proposal.

3. Carry out a literature review (see Guide 1.04)

If you need to write a dissertation proposal (see Guide 1.07) you will need to choose a few vital references. These need to be built upon in your literature review.

First define the aim and scope of your review then select your sources using consistent criteria, such as quality of publication (peer reviewed sources are best), quality of research, age and relevance to your research. You will need to obtain and evaluate a lot more sources than you eventually use (perhaps twice as many).

Secondly, evaluate your resources collectively by comparing them with your initial mind map then evaluate them individually (see Guide 2.04 and Guide 2.05).

If you are doing a secondary data only dissertation your literature review will form the main body of your thesis and will be several chapters long. It will also come after your methodology.

If you are doing primary research you will probably not be able to finalise your literature review chapter until after you have analysed your data as you should not introduce new ideas at this stage.

4. Choose an appropriate methodology

Your methodology chapter should explain to your reader what method you have chosen and why, and how you have implemented it. It should relate to theory and could include a discussion of limitations and ethics.

For a primary research dissertation it is a good idea for your choice of methodology to be informed by the research studies you have cited in your literature review which are closest to your own study.

5. Collect and analyse your data

If you are doing a primary data collection dissertation you will next need to collect and analyse your data using your chosen methodology. Make sure you leave enough time to do this. You may need specific support from your supervisor if you are unfamiliar with the analysis techniques. Be practical about how much data to collect and analyse and make contingency plans in case you do not obtain sufficient data of a particular type (e.g. do interviews as well as a questionnaire survey in case your questionnaire response rate is low).

If you are doing a secondary data only dissertation, you will need to carry out an in-depth literature review using your chosen methodology.

6. Think about your reader

Your dissertation marker is a busy person who will not read your dissertation in a linear order. Therefore you should make sure the parts they are likely to read first are well written and 'sell' your research so that they are interested in reading more of the detail. The parts markers tend to read first are the title, the abstract, the introduction and the conclusion.

Also, try to start each paragraph with a topic sentence and make sure these topics flow in a logical order (indicating a clear argument structure).

7. Revise and edit your work

Most of your writing will probably need redrafting several times. This is hard work which cannot be skipped. Distance yourself from your writing then re-read it and ask yourself:

- Have I created a strong thread of argument throughout my thesis?
- Have I given evidence to support each point, with thorough explanations?
- Have I provided transition sentences to link subsections?

You may need to move sections around, delete sections or add new sections.

Once you have produced your final draft, carefully proofread everything you have written (see Guide 1.36), or perhaps swap with a friend. Also remember to leave time for binding your finished dissertation, if necessary.

Structure of a dissertation

As stated above, please check with your supervisor and module guide what the required structure is, as there are many variations. A basic framework is:

Title page: (see Guide 1.24) Title, your name, course name, date, name of supervisor

Abstract: (see Guide 1.28) A concise summary your whole dissertation research

Acknowledgements: (see Guide 1.26) Thanks to those who have assisted you

Table of contents: Chapters, sections and sub-sections (but no further) with page numbers

List of tables and figures: (if appropriate) Numbers, titles and page numbers

Introduction: (see Guide 1.22) A contextualised presentation of your research question/problem/thesis followed by a brief outline of the structure of your dissertation

Main body: Several chapters covering your literature review, methodology, findings, analysis/evaluation and discussion of your dissertation. With a primary research

dissertation the chapters will probably be in the order stated. For a secondary data only dissertation you could start with a methodology followed by an extended literature review then a discussion.

Conclusion: (see Guide 1.23) Where you bring it all together, stating very clearly your answer to your central question and if appropriate making recommendations, suggestions, etc. Don't undermine your work by apologizing for poor results or complaining about lack of time. Always be positive. If there were problems, analyse these objectively in an appropriate place. Any research has weaknesses; they're part of the process.

References: (see Guide 1.13) A complete list of your sources, correctly formatted

Appendices: Any information not central to your main text or too large to be included, for example: complete questionnaires, copies of letters, statistical software output, etc. Do not include your raw data.

Content and style

Use an academic writing style - see Guide 1.20.

You should normally avoid too much personal language ("I", "my" etc) - see Guide 1.21.

Sentences should be well-punctuated, complete but not over-long - see Guide 1.29.

Paragraphs relate to a single topic and start with a topic sentence. This topic should then be adequately developed in at least four or five additional sentences. See Guide 1.30.

You should use linking words or phrases to guide your reader through your writing - see Guide 1.33.

Your paragraphs should flow to provide a clear line of argument - see Guide 1.15.