

**Dissertations** have become an increasingly important component of Higher Education over the past few years, and are often included in third year undergraduate work, as well as forming an important part of any Masters level programme. A dissertation provides you with an opportunity to work independently, at length, on a topic that particularly interests **you**. It is also an effective means of research training, which helps to develop advanced intellectual skills such as evaluation, analysis and synthesis, as well as management skills. This guide gives advice about how to approach, undertake and evaluate your own dissertation, so that you can make the most of this challenge.

The guide is made up of four parts:

1. Dissertation overview
2. Selecting and researching your topic
3. Writing up your findings
4. Being your own critic

## The dissertation: an overview

As preparation for a more detailed consideration of various aspects of dissertation preparation, in this section we review what is meant by the term 'dissertation'. We also suggest how to 'manage' two key resources, your supervisor and your time.

### What is a dissertation?

A dissertation follows the fundamental principles of academic writing, but bear in mind the following key points. It is an **extended piece of writing**, usually divided into chapters. Make sure that you know the lower and upper word limits acceptable for **your** dissertation, and what that will look like in terms of word-processed pages. Be sure to find out whether you should be following a particular sequence of chapter headings – for example, introduction followed by literature search followed by an experiment or a survey and/or an analysis of your research - or whether you are expected to devise your own sequence and structure.

A dissertation contains a detailed exploration of evidence. The evidence referred to may comprise evidence from published texts, for example if you are exploring the literary texts of a particular writer; or it may consist of primary data gathered by your own first-hand research, for example a sociological study of attitudes to gender roles, based on research

methods such as interviews and questionnaires. You are required to be clear about the nature of the methodology you will use for gathering the evidence – why are you collecting data or analysing evidence in **that** way rather than in another way? It must be underpinned throughout by awareness of theory - your argument should be placed within the context of existing theory relevant to the subject. It has to be presented in a professionally finished manner. Your tutors should give you precise details about the format, layout and stylistic requirements of your assignment. Make sure that you know exactly what these are.

**Note:** Please remember that the contents of this guide are generic and that it is important to ensure that you adapt them to meet the particular requirements of your discipline.

## Dissertation supervision checklist

Since a dissertation is an individually devised piece of work, you will be allocated a personal supervisor to support you while you are writing it. Do not delay in having your first meeting with her or him, as it is vital to discuss not only **what** topic you will start by exploring, but also **how** you can best work on your dissertation. To help you further with this aspect of your dissertation the following activity is in the form of a checklist. This consists of things that need to be considered in managing relations with your supervisor, not just initially but throughout the period that you are working on your dissertation.

	Aspects of managing your tutor and the dissertation process	Yes/No
1	Let your supervisor know how much contact and support you would like.	
2	Accept that there are limits to the amount of help that can, and should, be given with a dissertation studied at an advanced level.	
3	Agree together at the outset on when you will meet and how best contact can be made (for example, by phone or by email).	
4	Plan together some interim deadlines for the work, so that you are able to manage your time effectively.	
5	Make sure that you know from the start how your dissertation will be assessed – what assessment criteria will be applied to it – and that you understand these, discussing them with your supervisor if you need to.	
6	Ask for access, where possible, to past dissertations of the kind you are being asked to write, so that you can get a sense of their scope, structure, tone and the methodology used.	
7	Consider contributing to the setting up of appropriate support groups or pairings with fellow students, so that you can clarify your own thinking by discussing it with others if this is acceptable to your tutor	
8	Find an appropriate way of mapping and monitoring your own progress; for	

	example, by using a checklist of tasks to be completed. Use this to ensure that discussions with your supervisor focus on areas where you need particular advice.	
9	Listen to, evaluate and respond to your supervisor's feedback by making notes and reflecting on what has been said or written, then applying the feedback to the next stage of your research or writing.	

## The importance of time management

Writing a dissertation can be very demanding in terms of managing your time and the process itself. It is a major piece of work and you are likely to have months before it is due for submission, so the dissertation sometimes causes problems even for people who are normally good at meeting deadlines. It may help to organise a weekly schedule, and map out the weeks available to you.

## Selecting and researching your topic

When you have been used to having essay questions and assignment topics set for you, it can be difficult to decide what to do when you have been given some freedom in this respect. There is also a risk that the freedom might go to your head so that you take on more than you can cope with in the time available. When deciding on a subject for your dissertation keep in mind the research requirements, and be guided by the adage 'the narrower and more specific the better'. If you are unsure consult your supervisor.

## Choosing your topic: the hunt for an idea

So how do you choose a topic in the first place? You will probably already have an inkling about the kind of topic that appeals to you, and it is likely that you will have been asked to engage in background reading before the start of the term or semester in which you begin your dissertation unit. This should narrow down the possibilities. Finding a topic of particular interest is a bit like a treasure hunt – you pick up an interesting idea, perhaps from something you have read or discussed in class, and follow it up through published texts such as books, journals and websites by following up references, until you fix on a particular aspect which you feel needs to be addressed.

Keep the following points in mind:

- **Is the topic of academic significance, and not trivial?** It would be possible to find out whether Shakespeare used the word 'and' more often in his comedies than in his tragedies, but would it be of genuine interest??
- **Is the topic really manageable in the time available?** It is a common mistake to

imagine that you can cover far more than is actually feasible, so keep a suitably narrow focus. Do not ask too big a question. Make sure that you take advice from your supervisor on this.

- **What is your own opinion or stance on the topic?** How do your own attitudes, values and beliefs affect your research? No one can be entirely objective – be honest about your own interests and values.
- **What is your thesis statement?** As early as possible, write down your thesis statement – the proposition that you are investigating. Keep this to hand whenever you are analysing evidence or writing out your argument, so that you do not fall into the trap of simply collecting facts rather than unfolding a clear argument relating to a narrowly defined issue.

## Conducting a literature search or review

In order to write with confidence about your topic, you will need to read what members of the academic community have already said about it. Make sure you develop an effective search strategy, take advice from library staff on this if necessary, and ensure that you know how to access relevant material in a variety of formats. Always ask for guidance from staff – do not avoid looking at a particular resource because you are not sure how to access it. Library staff are there to help you do exactly this.

Remember to look for up-to-date references to the topic. There may well be classic texts, particular relating to underpinning theories, but you should also see what has been said in recent years. The availability of electronic journals will help greatly with this, as they are easily searchable. Look at DelphiS on the library website <http://library.soton.ac.uk/delphis>. DelphiS is a single interface which allows you to discover electronic and print items in the library's collection. It searches the library catalogue (WebCat), many of our databases, and most online journal articles. For a more comprehensive and 'in-depth' search you can also access individual subject databases through the subject guide for your discipline <http://library.soton.ac.uk/home/subjects>. If in doubt, ask a member of library staff to help you.

## Researching and exploring your topic: methods and methodologies

Research is a form of learning, or finding out. When you find out anything, you do it in a particular way, or using a particular methodology, even if you are not aware of it. If you are a third year student, and particularly if you are a Masters level student, you should be aware of the methodology you are adopting in your search for evidence, and of where that methodology fits in the spectrum of possible approaches. For example, it is common to read about quantitative research and qualitative research.

**Quantitative research** is based on scientific method. It purports to be as objective as possible, and is often based on statistics or other measurable, empirical data. Conclusions will be drawn from the analysis of things clearly measured.

**Qualitative research** is often based on subjective data items, which cannot be given a numeric value, for example the attitudes and opinions of a range of individuals on an issue. Anthropological study, for example, may be based on small details of people's experience, collected through observation. These will be described in words rather than numbers, and statistical generalisations cannot be drawn from them.

In practice, few dissertations involve only qualitative or only quantitative methods, but there is often a major focus on one end of the spectrum or the other. Where will your focus lie? The answer should depend upon the kind of enquiry you are engaged in: again, ask your supervisor for advice about this.

## **The importance of having a thesis and evaluating it critically**

Remember that you are constructing an argument or defending a thesis, from the beginning to the end of your assignment. Keep your thesis statement – the statement you are defending or central argument you are asserting – in the forefront of your mind as you write. Think of this central idea, and the logical development of your argument (train of thought) around this, as being the central path of your dissertation, and make sure that you do not have sections or paragraphs which are somewhere in the shrubbery out of sight of the main path. Every paragraph should further the central argument, by providing another angle on it, additional evidence, and evaluation of that evidence in relation to the central thesis.

## **Managing your notes**

With a long assignment of this nature it is essential that you manage your notes well, from the start of your research to the editing of the final version of the dissertation. Organise them using methods that suit your learning style and make sure that you keep detailed notes of all of the references you will want to use, including a detailed annotated bibliography.

## **Writing up your findings**

As you carry out your research it is important to remember that the time you have at your disposal is limited, and that the effort you put into this aspect of your dissertation needs to be reflected in the end product. To this end it is essential to plan your strategy and think

about the overall structure of your dissertation sooner rather than later. Try to ensure that your research effort is aligned with the way in which your dissertation will be structured.

## **Planning and staging your deadlines**

### **Organising your weekly schedule**

Draw a typical week's timetable on a large sheet of paper. Show every day, whether or not you have any lectures or classes, and write or draw in the 'fixtures' for each week; these will include your University timetable, and other regular commitments such as part-time work and regular social events. Once you have marked in the essentials, as you see them, take a good look at where you could commit time. Look for slots of between 30 minutes and 2 hours (your brain starts to slow down when you have been working for more than 2 hours) to spend on your dissertation. Look particularly for those odd hours which are easily frittered away doing nothing much and see if you can turn these into study time so that some clear chunks of time are left for you to relax, keep fit, go shopping, watch TV and so on.

Now fill in your timetable with personal study periods. When are you going to work on your dissertation, and when on your other commitments? Take account of when you are at your best for studying – for example, can you work early in the morning or late at night? Think, too, about where you will study, and make sure that you know of a place where you can actually get on with your own work, whether it is a study area at university, a library or computer room, or a quiet place where you live. Use colours to mark out your free time and any other activities on your weekly chart – this makes it easier to see the pattern.

Be realistic – do not aim for the impossible. But, make sure you get a reasonable number of study sessions in each week in which you will only work on your dissertation.

Once you have found a reasonably regular pattern of study that suits you, look for ways of prioritising the work that needs to be done. Keep a list of everything you have to do, and everything that is not vital but would be good to do (like background reading, additional research on the internet and so on). Use your first study session each week to review the list; make a note of what needs to be done that week, and anything additional that you would like to do. Use a diary to pencil in roughly how your study times will be used.

Use every trick you can think of to persuade – or bribe – yourself to stay committed to your study times. You will probably want to review your study timetable every few weeks to see whether it is working for you. Regular work throughout your dissertation unit will mean less chance of any all-night, last-minute, nail-biting sessions during the week before it needs to be submitted.

Look at this example of an action plan; then devise one for yourself which is suitable for your own context, subject discipline and length of time available.

<b>Week number</b>	<b>Main task to be completed by end of this week:</b>	<b>Also find time this week to:</b>	<b>Possible interim deadlines</b>
1	Background reading	Follow interesting 'trails', until one leads to a provisional question or 'thesis statement'	
2	Finalise topic and title	More background and focused reading on your chosen aspect of the topic	Agreement of title
3	Literature search – what has already been written about your topic? Seek out up-to-date resources, asking for help from library staff if necessary	Investigate methodological issues, implications of particular methods and ethical issues  Consider using bibliographic software to help you construct and maintain your bibliography	Brief annotated bibliography
4	Dissertation plan, informed by your literature search	Reflect on methodological issues in writing and revising your dissertation plan	Overview of design of dissertation plan
5	Develop dissertation plan	Begin to conduct your research and gather evidence or data	
6	Gathering evidence or data		
7	Gathering evidence or data	Begin to analyse evidence or data	
8	Gathering evidence or data	Begin to analyse evidence or data	
9	Use initial findings to begin to draft the dissertation	Continue to analyse and evaluate evidence or data	Interim report to supervisor
10	Refine assignment plan and develop draft, referring to the self-evaluation checklist shown later in this guide	Focus on adopting an appropriate academic tone and style, together with accurate, reader-friendly presentation of evidence	
11	Continue drafting and refining		
12	Complete draft	Refine style	Completed draft

13	Apply self-evaluation checklist again	Last refinements of written style and presentation; final check of data and its presentation	
14	Produce final assignment		Submit dissertation

Take your plan to a meeting with your supervisor. It will help to structure your discussion and should impress him or her.

## Creating an appropriate structure for the dissertation

It is important to be clear about the structure of your dissertation to ensure that your ideas are clearly and logically presented to your reader, so that your argument, with its supporting evidence, can be followed. You will need a clear introduction, followed by the main body of your argument, and then a conclusion, but make sure that you talk to your supervisor about how your assignment should be structured. There may also be written guidance on this aspect in your Academic Unit.

Try noting down your provisional chapter headings here, together with a few initial thoughts on the contents of each chapter.

Again, once you have done this take it to the next meeting with your supervisor to check that you are on the right lines.

## Academic integrity: ethics, referencing and intellectual honesty

It is absolutely vital with a dissertation, as with all academic work, that your assignment meets the required standards in terms of ethics, accurate referencing and intellectual honesty.

### Ethical standards

All research must be carried out in an ethical manner, without exploiting others or breaking agreed ethical rules. Your own discipline will have a set of ethical standards to which you



must adhere: make sure that you know what these are, and take advice from your supervisor about any ethical issues arising from the nature of your particular study.

### **Referencing and intellectual honesty**

Make sure, too, that all of your references to other people's work are made accurate and in accordance with the academic conventions of referencing, citations and bibliographies appropriate for your subject discipline – there is more information about referencing and academic integrity on the Academic Skills LibGuides. It is vital that all ideas and arguments drawn from the work of others are acknowledged, to ensure that you are not open to accusations of plagiarism or of passing off the ideas or words of others as if they are your own. Your dissertation should be your work, made up of your evaluation of evidence relevant to your central argument.

### **Writing with accuracy and elegance**

Remember to check the accuracy and style of your own writing. Communicate as clearly as possible, in a style appropriate for serious academic work, but avoiding the use of difficult sentence constructions wherever possible.

### **Using a self-evaluation checklist**

You may find the following grid useful in checking aspects of your work. Depending on your subject discipline, you will probably find some terms and some categories more useful and important than others, but this is a generic overview of the kinds of criteria markers use for dissertations.

For this checklist to be of any real value, you need to start using it while there is still time to address those questions where your answer is 'no', or seek further guidance where your response is 'not sure'.

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Yes/No/ Not sure</b>
<b>Dissertation topic</b> Is the topic clear and well defined? Does it involve a problem, question, or hypothesis that sets the agenda and points precisely to what needs to be explored or discovered? Is the topic of genuine relevance or interest within your subject discipline? Does it pick up on important or interesting themes or subjects arising from your studies?	
<b>Literature review</b> Have you accessed the most recent literature of relevance to your topic, as well	

as seminal sources from the past? Does the literature review hang together, to show how the ideas and findings have developed, or is it merely a shopping list of books and articles? Does it briefly evaluate, showing how your dissertation fits into what is mistaken or lacking in other studies?	
<p><b>Theoretical underpinnings</b></p> <p>Are you asking yourself a key question, presenting a thesis, or defending a statement?</p> <p>Theory is the framework of your study – not a luxury. Your dissertation will be judged, in part, by how well you express and critically understand the theory you are using, and how clearly and consistently it is connected with the focus and methodology of your dissertation.</p>	
<p><b>Methodology</b></p> <p>Is your choice of methods and research techniques well suited to the kind of problem you are studying? Methods work if they provide a persuasive response to your question, positive or negative. Is your description of the methods you have adopted clear enough to take a blueprint and replicate?</p>	
<p><b>Results</b></p> <p>Have you provided enough evidence to make a convincing case?</p> <p>Have you presented everything directly relevant to the question in such a way that the reader doesn't have to flip back and forth to make her or his own connections?</p>	
<p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <p>Have you answered the question 'So what?' What should we do with your findings and conclusions? What do they imply? Have you explained what your findings mean and their importance, in relation to theory and practice?</p>	

## Related approaches

When you have written something that relates to your dissertation, always put it aside for a few of days. In other words 'sleep on it'. Then re-read it with a critical eye. Try to put yourself in the position of someone who is interested in your topic but knows nothing about it. Would it make sense to him or her? Have you used the best words to express the points you are seeking to make? Where does what you have written fit into the dissertation as a whole? Will the joins show? In considering these and similar questions you will often be surprised at the changes you decide to make in the interests of enhanced clarity and greater variety and elegance in the language used. The 'Three Rs' of competent writing are revise, revise, revise. This is especially important with a substantial piece of work like a dissertation.

## Over to you

As has been emphasised, one of the key challenges in preparing a dissertation is consistency of effort. You must avoid the temptation to coast and cram. What you need is someone who will act as a sounding board for your ideas and be prepared to brainstorm with you. She or he might also act as a progress chaser. It is unlikely that your supervisor will be able to meet all the demands that you have in this respect. Hence there is a need to find someone else. The most likely, and most suitable, person will probably be a fellow student. In this case, you must of course be prepared to reciprocate. While this might seem like additional pressure on your time, if you have chosen wisely the benefits will almost certainly outweigh the costs.