

Writing your Dissertation

Description of this Guide

This guide focuses on the skills and strategies needed to plan, write and review a dissertation.

Learning Outcomes

1. Recognise the purpose of a dissertation, the importance of working effectively with your supervisor and the challenge of managing your study time effectively
2. Select and research a topic, with due attention to methodology and related theory
3. Structure and write up the dissertation effectively, thinking critically and writing with accuracy and style
4. Evaluate own performance against a list of generic assessment criteria for dissertations

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Writing your Dissertation

Dissertations have become an increasingly important component of Higher Education over the past few years, and are often included in third level undergraduate work, as well as forming an important part of any Masters level programme. Dissertations provide 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.

Using this guide

The following advice is made up of four parts:

1. **The dissertation: an overview**

- What is a dissertation?
- How to manage your supervisor
- The importance of time management

2. **Selecting and researching your topic**

- Choosing a topic: the hunt for an idea
- Conducting a literature search or review
- Researching and exploring the topic: methods and methodologies
- The importance of having a 'thesis' and evaluating it critically
- Managing your notes

3. **Writing up your findings**

- Planning and staging your deadlines
- Creating an appropriate structure for the dissertation
- Maintaining academic principles: ethics, referencing and intellectual honesty
- Writing with accuracy and elegance

4. **Being your own critic**

- Using a checklist to evaluate your own dissertation before you submit it: using your tutor's assessment criteria

1.0 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.

1.1 What is a dissertation?

Before you begin to think about possible topics for investigation, make sure you are clear in your own mind about what a dissertation *is*. You will be familiar with the principles of essay writing, the most common form of academic writing, but it is worth reviewing briefly what an essay is really designed to do, and looking at how a dissertation may echo but also differ from a standard essay.

Different subject disciplines may emphasise different features, but, broadly speaking, an essay is a continuous piece of writing, arranged in clearly demarcated paragraphs, in which an argument (a clear line of thought) is developed, in response to a central question or proposition (thesis). The line of argument is supported by evidence you have acquired through research, which you are required to analyse, and which supports or contradicts the various perspectives explored in the course of that argument. The essay then reaches a conclusion in the final section, which pulls together the threads of your argument, supporting, qualifying or rejecting the original thesis.

It is worth bearing in mind that an academic essay is *not* a piece of writing designed to reproduce information available elsewhere, but something new and expressive of *your individual abilities* to analyse and synthesise.

In addition, the process of academic writing will, of itself, help you to learn, by enabling you to work with concepts and information relevant to your subject, and thereby developing your intellectual skills. For a more detailed examination of this topic have a look at the *Writing Effectively* Guide.

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.

It 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? This can be a difficult area and there is a separate section on it in 2.2 below.

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.

1.2 How to manage your supervisor

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. In order to help your supervisor help you, have a go at the short self-analysis quiz below and take your responses with you to your first meeting.



Which of the following statements apply to you?

Statement	Yes/No
1 I am good at managing my own work and don't need any reminders from a supervisor about where I should be up to, or how much time is left. Just leave me to it.	
2 I am quite good at organising my own work, but would still appreciate some interim deadlines and reminders from time to time.	
3 Time management can be a real problem for me. I tend to leave work till the last minute and can only get going when a deadline is looming fast!	
4 I do not find it easy to bother my tutors – they are all so busy, I do not like to cause a fuss.	
5 I need lots of reassurance and probably contact my tutors more often than I really need to.	
6 I am clear about the requirements of the dissertation and can translate these into a plan for ensuring that I meet the final deadline.	

The above are just some of the things students say they feel: we are all different - we have different styles of learning and levels of motivation. There are no right or wrong answers. However you have responded, the challenge is to establish the best way of working with your supervisor.

To help you further with this aspect of your dissertation the next 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.



Use the final column to note whether or not you have dealt with a particular aspect of the dissertation process.

	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 help the discussions with your supervisor to 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 up	

Aspects 1 to 4 relate to the setting of ground rules with your supervisor and as such need to be agreed as early as possible. Aspects 5 and 6 relate to the gathering of background information to help you understand 'the nature of the beast'. Aspects 7 to 9 relate to the support available as you work towards the completion of your dissertation. All are important and need to be closely monitored.

1.3 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. If you know that you have a problem with independent work, or if you think that such a major undertaking will cause problems, make sure you read the *Being and Independent Learner* Guide, which is full of practical advice about keeping on top of your work. You might also want to look at Section 3.1 in this guide, which is about organising your weekly schedule, and mapping out the weeks available to you.

2.0 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.

2.1 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's 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. Look at the *Developing an Effective Search Strategy* Guide for practical advice about how to do this. 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.
- Be aware of your own standpoint – your own take 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.
- As early as possible, write down your thesis – 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. See Section 2.4 for more on this.

2.2 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 been said about it. Take advice from library staff on this, and read the *Developing an Effective Search Strategy* Guide to 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, particularly 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 the library website on www.library.soton.ac.uk and click on the 'Electronic resources' button – but, if in doubt, ask a member of library staff to help you.

2.3 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.

2.4 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 – 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.

2.5 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 (see *Understanding Your Learning Style Guide*), and make sure that you keep detailed notes of all of the references you will want to use, including a detailed bibliography (see the *Referencing Your work Guide* and *Using Endnote Bibliographic Software Guide* for further help on this).

3.0 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.

3.1 Planning and staging your deadlines

3.1.1 ORGANISING YOUR WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Draw a typical week's timetable on a large sheet of paper (there is a copy of a blank timetable in the *Being an Independent Learner* Guide that you could use). Show every day, whether or not you have any lectures or classes, and write or draw in the 'fixtures' for each week – 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 on your weekly chart your free time and any other activities – it is 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, and 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.

3.1.2 MAPPING OUT THE WEEKS AHEAD OF YOU

Do not just bumble along for the first few weeks, thinking you have months ahead of you to spend on your dissertation – time passes quickly.

At the outset, and preferably in collaboration with your supervisor, map out a timetable of sub-tasks and interim deadlines on the following grid, or something like it adapted to

your own needs. Undergraduate dissertations are likely to be shorter and have less time for study and any primary research than postgraduate dissertations, so bear this in mind.



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

Wk no.	Main task to be completed by end of this week:	Find time this week also to explore:	Possible interim deadlines
1	Background reading	Follow interesting 'trails', until one leads to a provisional question or 'thesis'	
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	Investigate methodological issues, implications of particular methods and ethical issues. See the <i>Developing an Effective strategy Guide</i> and <i>Using Endnote Bibliographic Software Guide</i> for help with constructing and maintaining a 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 self-evaluation checklist in Section 4	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.

3.2 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 School.



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.

3.3 Maintaining academic principles: 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.

3.3.1 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.

3.3.2 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 – see the *Referencing Your Work* Guide for more information about this. 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 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.

3.4 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. For more advice on this subject see the *Writing Effectively* Guide .

4.0 Being your own Critic before Submitting your Work

There is much to be gained from critiquing your own work; by now you may have become used to doing this before submitting your assignments. If not, it is particularly important to do so with such a substantial piece of work as a dissertation.

4.1 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. Make sure that you also have in front of you a copy of the specific marking criteria for your dissertation: these should be available from your School or Faculty, and are often to be found on your subject website. If you cannot find these criteria, ask!



Clearly, for this checklist to be of any real value, you need to be use 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’. Thus, in Section 3.1 it is suggested that you apply it in Weeks 10 and 13.

Questions	Yes/No/ Not sure
<p>1 Dissertation topic 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?</p> <p>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?</p>	

<p>2 Literature review</p> <p>Have you accessed the most recent literature of relevance to your topic, as well as seminal sources from the past?</p> <p>Do you refer to major books, articles, artefacts? Since quality is more important than quantity – how well have you selected your material?</p> <p>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?</p> <p>Is the review critical? Does it briefly evaluate, showing how your dissertation fits into what is mistaken or lacking in other studies? The literature review should provide a critically appraised context for your studies.</p>	
<p>3 Theoretical underpinnings</p> <p>Does theory permeate the structure from beginning to end, from statement of problem to conclusion? Are you asking yourself a key question, presenting a thesis, or defending a statement? Be clear about your approach.</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>4 Methodology</p> <p>Two chief criteria:</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.</p> <p>Is your description of the methods you have adopted clear enough to take a blueprint and replicate?</p>	
<p>5 Results</p> <p>Are your findings faithful to what you actually found – do you claim more than you should? Don't 'massage' your evidence or findings...</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>Are results or findings clearly and accurately written, easy to read, grasp and understand?</p>	
<p>6 Conclusions</p> <p>Have you answered the question 'So what?'. What should we do with your findings and conclusions? What do they imply?</p> <p>Findings don't speak for themselves – they need to be analysed. Have you explained what your findings mean and their importance, in relation to theory and practice?</p>	

If you have completed your checklist in Week 10 you should be able to take it to a final meeting with your supervisor. At this meeting it can serve as an agenda to guide your discussion and help you decide your priorities for the final stages of the dissertation process.

4.2 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 reread 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.

5.0 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.