

Planning and writing a dissertation



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Workshop overview

- What is a dissertation?
- Planning: what all is required?
- Formulating a topic.
- Structure and chapter layout.
- Do you need a literature review?



What is a dissertation?

- A final year project at Undergraduate Level / part of a Taught Postgraduate Masters.
 - Different to other assessments in that it is longer and there is the expectation that **you** will take more responsibility and ownership for your learning:
 - Selection of a topic / question area
 - Consideration of sources
 - Method?
 - Argument and Discussion
 - Conclusions
 - Enables you to choose an area of interest and explore it in-depth.
 - Develops your research skills.
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Planning: what is required?

- Every department, subject area and supervisor is different. Check what the requirements are.
 - Some considerations:
 - What is the word limit? Does this include / exclude bibliography and appendices?
 - Is there a specific layout / structure? What chapters should be included?
 - Is a literature review / overview of the sources required?
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Planning: deciding on your topic and formulating a title

- Close discussion with your supervisor: ensure that your question is well-formulated.
 - For example, is it a topic in which there is:
 - Plenty of scope to write about in terms of argument, not just describing or re-telling what has already been written
 - Sources: a good range to consider; can you access the most important ones?
 - A suitable angle to discuss: area of controversy/ debate / area that is under-researched / only become a recent consideration?
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Planning: deciding on your topic and formulating a title

- Consider your methodology:
 - Are you actively acquiring data and comparing it with past research e.g. experiment?
 - Are you conducting interviews or surveys as part of your research?
 - Are you using case studies to make comparisons?
 - Are you using written sources e.g. History: are you doing a comparison, evaluation, analysis etc.?
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Structure: what is required?

- Title page
- Abstract
- Acknowledgements
- Contents page(s)
- Introduction
- Materials and methods **or** Literature review
- Results **or** Sources and methods
- Discussion **or** Findings
- Conclusions
- References
- Appendices



Structure: what is required?

- **Title page**
 - **Abstract:** a succinct summary of your research & main conclusions. Best written once dissertation is finished.
 - **Acknowledgements:** thank supervisor, any research organisations, archives, funding bodies etc. (sometimes necessary).
 - **Contents page(s), list of figures, tables or images.**
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Structure: what is required?

- **Introduction:**

- Begin with a rough draft and re-write at the end to ensure that it is fit for purpose
 - Introduce topic: context? Engage with the question
 - Provide a clear outline of how the dissertation will proceed i.e. what each chapter will discuss
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Structure: what is required?

- **Materials and methods or Literature review**
 - **Materials and methods:**
 - How and why you conducted the research in this particular way
 - For example, why you chose questionnaire/ survey / a particular research method
 - Justify your rationale
 - Mention any shortcomings in the approach e.g. small number of questionnaires returned
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Structure: what is required?

- **Materials and methods** or **Literature review**
 - **Literature review:**
 - Provide an overview of the significant literature already published on the topic (what the sources already say on the subject)
 - Convey knowledge / ideas already established on the topic
 - Evaluate the materials: how do they contribute to the topic? Conclusions? Arguments?
 - Identify any areas of controversy
 - Identify any 'schools of thought': groups of scholars / researchers who have formulated specific perspectives
 - Describes the relationship; comparatives; differences; similarities with other relevant materials
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Critical appraisal of your sources:

- Read, or skim the key works. Then consider where relevant:
 - What: what type of material is it?
 - When: date written / published?
 - Who: who wrote it / published it?
- Consider the writer's purpose, bias or agenda:
 - Identify the argument and conclusions
 - Identify any different or similar approaches within the literature
 - Question surface appearances



What should a literature review show?

- Sometimes it will help to identify a 'gap' in the existing scholarship.
 - Highlights under-developed areas for new / further research (you should then try to link this to your own work).
 - Raises questions requiring further research.
 - Places **your** work in the context of the existing literature.
 - Discusses studies which are **contrary** to your perspective / argument.
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Structure: what is required?

- **Key chapters:**
 - This is where you will develop your argument, provide evidence and critical discussion
 - If a scientific subject, your chapters may be structured around: Results **or** Sources and methods, and Discussion **or** Findings
 - **Remember don't just describe: analyse and evaluate. Discuss why significant in relation to your topic.**
 - **Show your critical thinking: analyse all angles and perspectives.**
 - **Discuss counter-arguments.**
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Structure: what is required?

- **Conclusions:**

- Draw together your conclusions
- Ensure that you closely connect this section with reference to the initial question

- **References:**

- Check what referencing system you need to use and remember to include a bibliography / reference list at the end

- **Appendices:**

- Sometimes appropriate: text that the reader may want to see but would take up too much room in dissertation and disrupt the flow e.g. copy of questionnaire distributed
 - Make sure that you reference the Appendices within the main text where necessary
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Summing up:

- Spend time planning your research.
- Think about your question carefully; what sources you will use; your methodology etc.
- Rough draft your structure and chapter headings.
- Write as you go along.
- Be prepared to draft and re-draft!
- Try and get regular feedback.
- Be prepared to add in extra arguments, quotes, references and conclusions as you re-draft.

