

How to write a dissertation

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How to write a dissertation?

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This guide tackles what might be the most daunting aspect of your university or college career: writing your dissertation. But don't panic: with plenty of time and careful planning you can make this daunting task much easier. Below we offer some pointers to make your dissertation go as smoothly as possible...

How to Plan and Write your Dissertation

Many colleges and universities run workshops to help you plan your dissertation. Make sure you are aware of what's on offer, and make full use of it. You can learn a lot from reading and talking to other people, but these specially focussed sessions are very worthwhile.

You might be daunted by your dissertation, but it's much easier to handle if you divide the process up into simple steps.

The main steps involves are initial planning (including deciding upon a topic); detailed reading and planning; carrying out primary research (if applicable); writing up the draft; and finalising the dissertation. Table 1 shows typical steps in more detail...

It might be useful to have a time planner: table 1 shows a detailed example

Task Done? Comments

Devise work schedule

Decide upon a topic area

Read all course documentation about dissertations or final projects

Schedule session(s) with supervisor

Prepare ideas for first meeting with supervisor

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Undertake background reading

Define Title

Plan approach or methodology

Prepare for literature searches, including listing possible search terms

Set up a recording system for searches and other activities related to the dissertation

Undertake literature searches

Make enquiries regarding ethics procedures, including deadlines for submissions of applications

Devise research plans

Discuss research plans or methodology with supervisor

Devise interviews schedules and/or related documentation to support field research

Prepare and submit applications for ethics procedures

Negotiate access to research participants if required

Undertake data collection

Thank you letters to participants etc.

Collate data

Develop plan for structure of dissertation

Schedule meeting with supervisor

Devise detailed writing timetable

Undertake writing in stages

Complete Chapter 1

Complete Chapter 2

Discuss drafts with supervisor

Complete Chapter 3

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Complete Chapter 4

Complete Conclusions

Check timings and costs of services for printing and binding

Complete all writing including references, appendices, introduction, abstract, front page

Give draft to a critical reader to proof read and/or comment on the work

Rest the final draft before doing a last read and edit of the dissertation or project, incorporating critical reader's comments

Print and check the document

Take to printers

Complete any dissemination promises to research participants

Pick up from printers

Submit

Celebrate (any way you want!)

Table 1: A planner for your dissertation (source: University of Birmingham

your tutors, look at dissertations from previous years, or think about what really interests you personally. You could even be inspired by other studies: it's a common approach to extend an existing study to wider areas, or try a new methodology.

Once your topic has been given the go-ahead by your department, you need to refine the general topic and turn it into focused research questions, a working title, aims and objectives. You need to identify the main issue you will look at, work out what your thesis is (what you want to explore, prove or disprove) and set any limits to your investigations (decide what you are not interested in).

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Remember, it's fine to be flexible and change your ideas as you find out more about the topic.

It's likely you will need to write a research proposal, a document of roughly 1,000 to 1,500 words in which you plan out exactly how you will write your full dissertation. Even if you don't have to write one for your course, it's often a useful exercise to help you focus. See our guide to research proposals for more details of how to tackle this.

Your supervisor is there to help you. Make sure you get acquainted early, and don't be afraid to ask them for meetings if they don't ask first. They are likely to be pretty busy, so it's always a good idea to remind them you are around!

The Structure of a Dissertation

Every dissertation is different, but there's a structure which many dissertations have in common:

The introduction should cover a number of areas including the background to your research topic, why the topic is important, what is currently understood about the area and what needs more research, and why your dissertation can add to the current theoretical understanding. It should also give an indication of the structure of what follows, and you might also discuss key terms here.

The literature review will make up the main part of your dissertation if you are doing a study with secondary sources only. For studies including primary research, it should provide a background to this research. In either case, it will look at previous work in the field whether theoretical work or empirical studies. It's important not just to describe existing work but also to engage

with it critically. You are likely to define your research question at the end of the literature review, particularly in studies including primary data.

The Methodology will deal with the research methods you use, and will explain what the methods are and justify why you use them. Here you will explain why you chose to do primary or secondary research. In general, if you are doing primary research the methodology section will be much longer as it will cover data collection, sampling, data analysis and other details. You will also need to discuss ethics here, particularly if your research involves the participation of human subjects.

The results section is only relevant for primary studies. How you present the results will depend on the type of data you are collecting (presentation conventions for quantitative and qualitative data are very different). The results and discussion section are sometimes combined.

The discussion and conclusion can also be combined, though this is relatively unusual. While some secondary reviews can consist only of a literature review, it is also possible to have a separate discussion section, where ideas described in the literature review are analysed, compared and contrasted.

The point of the discussion, whether your study is primary or secondary, is to link findings with the research question and themes explored in your literature review. This section should take a critical and analytic perspective.

The references include all the texts you cited during your dissertation. Make sure you understand what referencing system you are required to use, and stick to it. There are multiple versions of some systems, for example Harvard, so also ensure you use the version your course requires.

The appendices contain information which was too long to include in the body of the text. You should put, for example, copies of the questionnaire,

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transcripts of interviews, complex diagrams and tables here. Seek specific guidance from your tutor(s).

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