

Dissertation Writing A Guide for Students



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Education Support

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What is a dissertation?

A dissertation is a detailed discussion on a subject that is the result of in-depth independent research. It has a clearly stated aim. It makes use of theories. It includes analysis and evaluation, not only of ideas related to the topic, but of its own research method and results. It develops an argument or point of view that is supported by evidence and examples, and draws on conclusions.

A dissertation is not just a long essay as is usually divided into sections or chapters. It might be useful to think of the dissertation in terms of three or four separate essays.

A dissertation is likely to contain these sections arranged in the following order:

- Title page
- Abstract
- Acknowledgements
- Contents page
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Research methodology
- Data collection
- Discussion/analysis
- Conclusion
- Bibliography
- Appendices

Dissertation guidelines

Your School or discipline will probably have given you some dissertation guidelines. These are very important and you should make yourself familiar with them right from the start. It is useful to highlight important information such as the **word limit**, the **hand-in date** and information about how to present **quotations** and how to **reference**: www.soton.ac.uk/library/infoskills/references/index.html. Make sure that you fully understand the guidelines. Ask your tutor, if necessary.

Organising your time

A dissertation is quite a long piece of work and written over some time so it is very important that you organise your time and plan ahead. You may like to look at our **Organisation and Time Management** guide.

It is helpful to draw up a time-plan working backwards from the hand-in date. A suggested time plan is given below.

Hand-in date		Number of weeks
TASK	TIME ALLOWED	COMPLETION DATE
Planning/clarifying		
Reading/research		
Assembling notes		
Writing drafts		
Editing		
Proofreading		
Bibliography		
Assembling/binding		

Planning your writing

It is a very good idea to draft a plan of your dissertation quite early in the process. One good way is to open a Word file for each section and add information as you find it. **Each section generally has its own introduction, main argument and conclusion.** The following template gives the common structure of a dissertation in the usual order.

Dissertation Structure

Section	Section Information
Introduction	Should give an overview of what your dissertation is about; the research question or hypothesis; why it is relevant or important.
Literature review	This may take more than one chapter. It includes previous work done and defines the current state of research in your field and explains why you have chosen a particular area to research. It deals with the theory underpinning your work and puts your work in context. It will probably include a large number of references to the literature in your chosen field and shows that you have read around your subject. It may be arranged in more than one chapter.
Methodology	Should detail the method you are using and explain why it is appropriate and other methods you have considered. It will identify disadvantages as well as advantages of your method and any variations or amendments.
Findings/Results	This section should present the main findings of your research. You may include charts, tables etc. It is important to analyse your findings rather than describe them.
Evaluation/Discussion	Have you answered the research question? Are you able to confirm or reject the hypothesis? This section discusses how the findings are related to the underpinning theory. You should link your findings to the literature presented in the literature review.
Conclusion	The conclusion reviews your work as a whole. Have you answered the research question? So what? What do the findings imply? Make sure you explain your findings, discuss any implications and make appropriate recommendations.

Stages in Writing the Dissertation

Clarify and analyse the task. Read the information you have been given and make sure you understand what you need to do. Discuss with fellow students and if still unsure ask your tutor.

Research. Find the relevant books and journal articles. Be selective. Target your reading. See our guide on Research Reading. You may like to use a data base such as Reference Manager or EndNote to record your sources.

(ATS will help: email ats@soton.ac.uk or www.ats.soton.ac.uk/).

Draw up a rough plan and organise your ideas. This may be on one piece of paper or may be drawn up under each section/chapter on the computer and may initially involve only a few words to summarise your ideas. It is useful to write a few sentences setting out your train of thought or the argument that you are going to present. You might like to use software such as Inspiration.

Make notes. These can be added to your plan or recorded directly into EndNote www.endnote.com/. **It is important that you record the full bibliographic information for every source you use.** Make sure you have a note of the page number if you are making a direct quotation and also so that you can return to the information quickly later. The Harvard referencing guide is available from www.soton.ac.uk/library/resources/documents/harvardcitations.pdf . Be sure to use the correct referencing style for your School.

First draft. Word process from the start if possible. Begin with any section/chapter where you feel comfortable. Concentrate on getting your ideas onto paper – you can edit later. Make sure that you are building up your bibliography/reference list as you go.

Edit, revise and check. Check that your argument, or line of thought, is clear. Rearrange, remove or change sections so that it makes sense. It is sometimes useful to write points on post-it notes which can then be arranged in a logical order.

Proofread. Check for your common spelling errors and that you have made the correct choice when using the spell checker.

Final check. Make sure that the bibliography/reference list is complete. Check guidelines for presentation such as font size and spacing.

Research Reading

You will need to gather lots of background information on the subject you are writing about so that you are able to form your own view. The information may be from a variety of sources such as electronic journals, books, the internet. You might like to read our guide on Research Reading for more tips.

Do make sure that you keep a note of the source of every piece of information. Remember that you will need the page number if you quote someone else's exact words.

Before you start reading, check that the book or journal is relevant and recent enough for your purpose. Skim text quickly by reading titles and headings, introductions and conclusions or the abstract if it is a journal article. Avoid copying out large chunks of text. Try to summarise points in your own words. Keep a record of your notes which may be stored in a variety of ways:

- On computer
- Notebook for each topic or section
- File pockets for each topic
- Boxed cards
- EndNote software

You may like to colour-code notes for different sections. Remember that you can view each section of your dissertation almost as an essay in its own right.

While reading, make notes about the central theme or main argument of the book or article. Ask yourself what the person is trying to say and why and if it differs from the way others see the topic – this is **critical analysis**. You will probably be able to incorporate many of your notes in the final version of the literature review.

Remember that throughout the dissertation process you may come across additional relevant material which can be added to your literature review.

Top tips

Top Ten tips for dissertation writing

Book a tutorial
with Dyslexia
Services

Seek guidance
from your tutor or
supervisor early in
the process

Begin writing early!

Make a time plan
and stage your
deadlines

Make a list of
points you plan to
cover - a word or
two on each is
enough

Look at examples
of dissertations

Check presentation
guidelines

Ask the library
staff to help you
search for
information

Record a complete
reference for each
source as soon as
you begin to use it

Save your work in
multiple places -
why not email a
copy of the file to
yourself?

Key terms and what they mean

What is an abstract?

An abstract is a short summary. It gives the purpose, methods, results and conclusions of your research.

What is an argument?

An argument is a line of thinking or a train of thought – it is the central idea. You are constructing an argument or thesis from the beginning to the end of your writing. If you keep this central idea in mind then your writing should develop a logical argument (or train of thought) around this. Every paragraph/section should provide additional evidence or another angle on your central argument. Try not to stray off the path so that the reader gets lost.

What is a literature review?

The purpose of the literature review is to take a look at what has already been written about a subject, the theories that have been applied and current thinking on the topic. Ask your tutor and the library staff for guidance on relevant areas and how to access information.

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is presenting the ideas, work or words of others as your own. It is viewed very seriously and must be avoided. Sometimes you need to quote someone else's words; the words must be enclosed in quotation marks and you will need to give the page number in the reference. If you are using someone else's ideas put into your own words you must acknowledge the original author.

Guidelines on presentation

You should refer to the guidance given by your department. In general the following often applies:

- Your dissertation should be word-processed on white, A4 paper
- There should be a title page and a list of contents
- Pages should be numbered
- Text should be double-spaced
- Indented quotations should be single-spaced

Glossary

Abstract A brief written summary of the purpose, results and conclusions of your research.

Action research Where the researcher is involved in a situation, makes changes and observes effects.

Bibliography An ordered list of works consulted or referred to in the dissertation.

Case study Research into one particular group or defined institution, describing and investigating the variables and relationships.

Correlational research Exploring the possible relationships between variables.

Convenience sample A sample chosen because it is easily available.

Data All the information and facts collected from your samples.

Dependent variable A variable which takes on values when an independent variable is deliberately altered.

Descriptive research Describing what exists in your sample in a structured way without analysing variables.

Empirical Based on observation, experiment and recording.

Epistemology The philosophy of knowledge and ways of knowing

Ethics Philosophical systems of belief values.

Ethnography Study of a group's culture, customs and behaviour by observation and recording.

Experiment Obtaining data by quantitative methods with scientific precision and control.

Generalisability Concerns external validity and applying your findings to others.

Hypothesis A tentative or supposed proposition based on observed happenings or theories about a testable relationship or quality.

Independent variable The variable controlled by the researcher to investigate its effects on others.

Instrument Any research 'tool' such as a questionnaire used to obtain data.

Positivist Considering only observable, objective facts.

Purposive sample A non-random sample of those believed to be representative.

Qualitative Concerned with description, qualities and feelings.

Quantitative Concerned with measurements and numbers

Random sample Where every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected.

Reliability Would someone else get the same results if the procedure was repeated?

Research question A proposed focus of inquiry; what you want to find out.

Sample A group selected from a studied population which supposedly possesses the same characteristics as the whole.

Survey A method of obtaining data from a large sample of the population.

Validity Are you truly measuring the variable that you say you are measuring?

Viva (viva voce) An oral examination.

Additional resources

Cottrell, S. (2008) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 3rd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Hart, C. (2000) *Doing a literature review: realising the Social Science Imagination*. London: Sage

Swetnam, D. (2000) *Writing your Dissertation*, 3rd edition. Oxford: How To Books Ltd