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What's It All For?

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1.1 Why do I have to do a dissertation? The point of independent study

The dissertation is commonly the last component of a degree course, or a module taken towards the end of the undergraduate course. After having, over the years, been fed with lots of information, guided step by step through various assignments and been tested on your knowledge and understanding in examinations, you undertake the dissertation as an exercise in independent study. It tests your abilities to educate yourself, to demonstrate your expertise in collecting and analysing information, and to come to conclusions based on solid argument. It also gives you an opportunity to show how well informed you are, how well organized you can be, and how you can make a clear presentation of your work for effective communication.



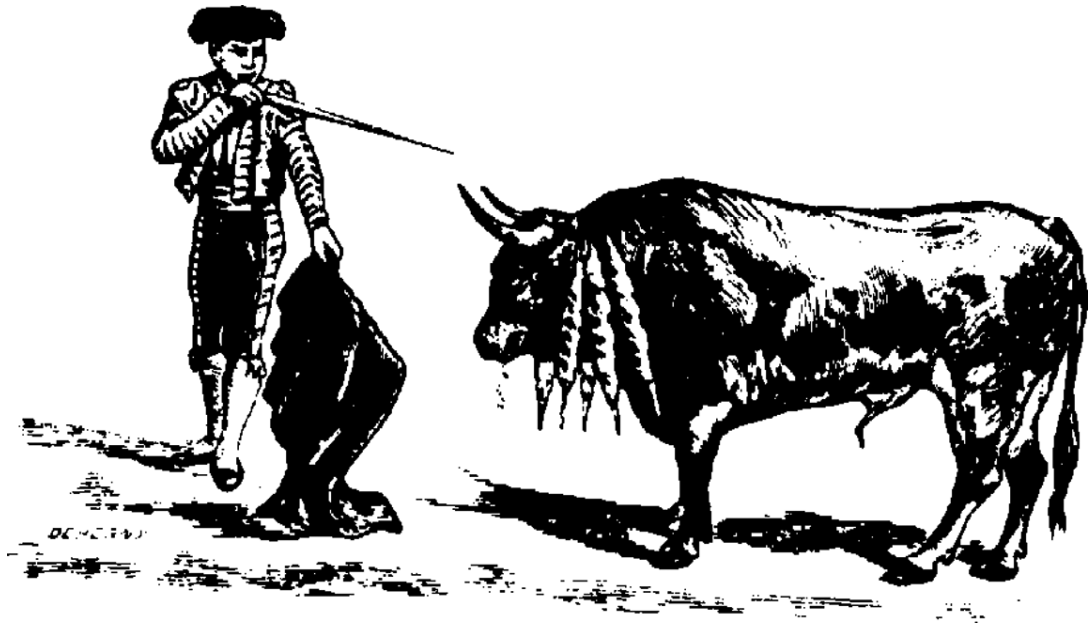


FIGURE 1.1 You will be doing this on your own

The big difference between this and your previous work is that you will be doing the dissertation on your own. You will probably receive some general guidance, but most of the decisions about what you do and how you do it will be yours. This not only gives you a lot of freedom to pursue a particular interest, but also enables you to put your own individual talents to their best use. This will inevitably require some soul-searching and evaluation of where your strongest talents lie. It is really up to you to make yourself shine in your best light!

What you are required to do can be termed ‘research’, as it is about finding out new things (even if they are only new to you), making sense of these, and presenting your findings in an organized and well-argued way. As with any research project, there must be stated aims at the outset, and some kind of achievement of these by the end.

This type of work obviously presents lots of opportunities, but also some dangers. The point of this book is to guide you through the process of doing a dissertation, and to explain and discuss the options you might have at each stage. It will help you to make informed decisions that you can build on in order to produce a successful outcome. It should not be all hard slog, but it will present some serious challenges in terms of your knowledge and understanding of your subject matter, and of your abilities to organize and motivate yourself. In fact, it can be one of the most satisfying processes to go through – and come out of at the other side.



FIGURE 1.2 Lots of opportunities, but also some dangers

1.2 The main components of a dissertation

Although dissertations come in many shapes and sizes, there are some aspects that are shared by most of them. Of course, the subject and how it is dealt with will have an enormous influence on the form and appearance of the finished work. However, as all dissertations are an exercise in academic research, there will be certain components that are regarded as essential for them to have academic credibility. A standard type of dissertation in, say, the social sciences or education will probably have the following components.

Preambles

- A title – this provides the briefest summary of the dissertation.
- An abstract – a slightly longer summary of the dissertation outlining the main issues, methods of investigation and conclusions.

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- Acknowledgements – an expression of thanks to all those people and organizations that have helped you in the preparation and writing of the dissertation.
- A list of contents – the guide to the various sections of the work.
- Lists of figures, tables, appendices – as appropriate.

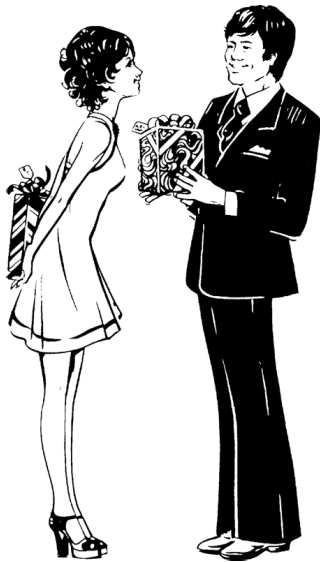


FIGURE 1.3 An expression of thanks

The main section

This is usually a series of chapters or sections. A typical example contains separate sections consisting of:

- An introduction to the dissertation.
- Some background to the research that reveals the issues to be researched and the work already done on the subject.
- A statement of the research problem and an explanation of how the research work was carried out (i.e. the methods used).
- The results of data collection and analysis.
- Some conclusions based on the results.

The add-ons

At the end are sections that provide important information on aspects of the work:

- A list of references – fuller details about all the publications and other sources that you have cited in the text.
- Perhaps a bibliography – other literature that is relevant to the study but has not been referred to directly in the text.
- Possibly some appendices (supplementary information such as questionnaire forms, letters, related information, pictures, etc.). These give examples of your methods of working and/or further background information about issues that are important to your work, but not so central as to warrant being included in the main text.



FIGURE 1.4 Some kind of illustrations or diagrams

I don't know about you, but I always like to see some kind of illustrations or diagrams in things that I read. Not only do these enliven the appearance of the page, but they also can encapsulate ideas or issues in an incredibly compact manner. Not all subjects lend themselves easily to this, but some demand it. (I studied architecture – picture books galore!)

1.3 What will impress? Seeing it from the examiner's point of view

In order to be awarded a really good grade, it is obviously useful to understand exactly what the examiner will be looking for when giving marks. The following list will indicate the main areas that gain marks in any dissertation, regardless of the subject. These areas will be discussed in detail in the following chapters of this book, with many handy hints to help you achieve the best possible result. The list is not presented in any order of priority. It will help you to understand the particular requirements of your own course if you read through the instructions for your dissertation extremely carefully. Make a note of the issues mentioned and compare these with the comments below. There may even be a breakdown of how the marks will be allotted. If not, read between the lines to see if there are any hints. Don't hesitate to take any opportunity you may get to discuss the requirements with your tutor or supervisor.

Here is the list of main assessment areas and the sorts of questions that the examiner will be asking him/herself.

First impressions

Presentation How does it look? A neat cover, practical binding and well-designed page layout all give a favourable impression to start with. Remember that your dissertation will be on a pile with all the rest, so comparisons can easily be drawn with the others. Your examiner will be naturally better disposed to the more attractive submissions.

Organization A brief scan through the dissertation should give an immediate impression of how the work is organized. This means clearly headed sections, easily spotted chapter divisions, and a logical arrangement of the sections of the study. The examiner will feel much more comfortable with work that is easy to navigate. A clear structure is a strong indication of clear thinking – a markable aspect of the work.

Length This should conform to the requirements. A report that looks too thin or too thick immediately rings alarm bells for the marker. The former will be difficult to award sufficient marks and the latter will be a daunting task to wade through.

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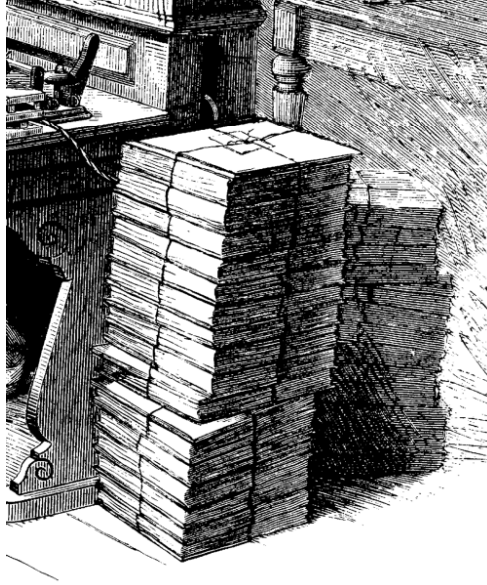


FIGURE 1.5 On the pile with all the rest

Quick review

Abstract Though not always a requirement, this is so useful as a brief introduction that it should not be left out. Summarize your whole dissertation in 150–200 words, including main conclusions. Not an easy task but good practice, and again demonstrates clear thinking.

List of contents Situated near the front of the dissertation, this gives a simple overview of not only what is in the text, but how it is organized. It will also provide a useful navigation tool for later on to find the page numbers of the different sections.

Main conclusions One of the main points of doing a dissertation is to come to some conclusions based on the research. The final chapter should spell out the conclusions extremely clearly so that they can be picked out by the examiner by simply scanning through the pages. He or she will check that the conclusions relate exactly to the research problem or question.

Reference list This will be a measure of your background reading, both in depth and in scope. You will impress your examiner if the relevant books are cited, but won't if your list is padded with numerous extraneous references.

Detailed reading

Relevance and quality of background study You will not be reinventing the wheel. Whatever the subject you are tackling, there will be numerous other writers and experts who have worked in the same area. The examiner will look to see if you have discovered the main



FIGURE 1.6 The foundation stone of your dissertation

ones relevant to your study and have understood what they have written. This will provide the context for your own research and will enable you to pinpoint the particular issue that you will tackle in your study. It will also provide precedents of how the research might be carried out.

Clarity of the research problem or question It is essential to be clear, not only in your own mind but also in your writing, about the exact problem or question that you are tackling. This is the foundation stone of your dissertation and produces the main aims of the research. The research problem or question will be elaborated and dissected during the course of your study, but it remains the linchpin of all your research efforts. It should be possible throughout the dissertation for the examiner to relate the writing to the stated aims derived from the research problem or question.

Selection of methods for data collection and analysis One of the main aims of doing a dissertation is to discover and implement basic research methods. The choice of methods is huge, so you will be marked both on the discussion about possible methods and on the appropriateness of your choice.

Use of research methods Each method has its own rules and procedures, so you need to demonstrate that you have understood these and implemented them correctly.

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Solidity of argument to support findings and conclusions You could see the whole dissertation as a piece of detective work, with the report being the evidence and argument that leads to your conclusions. Do you have a watertight case? The examiner will dissect the logic of your argument and weigh the strength of your conclusions based on the evidence you bring forward.

Quality of referencing Your work will inevitably be based on the research and writings of others; after all, that is how we learn about most things. It is therefore essential that you acknowledge the source of your information and ideas by consistent use of a citing and referencing system. Marks are specifically allotted to this aspect of the work.

Quality of writing The main form of your communication is the written word. Correct spelling and grammar are basic requirements (your word processor will help to some extent). Proper sentence and paragraph construction are also essential; these will be partly dependent on your personal style. You should aim at clarity throughout. The examiner will have limited time to read your work, so make it easy for him or her: you will be rewarded for this. If you are not writing in your first language, it is a good idea to find a native English speaker to read through your work and correct it as necessary.



1.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have discussed the reasons for doing a dissertation, which are to demonstrate that you can do a piece of independent work and that you understand the basics of research.

The main components of a dissertation are: the preambles – consisting of a title, abstract, acknowledgements and lists of contents, figures, tables, etc.; the main section – consisting of an introduction, background, research problem, methods, data collection and analysis and conclusions; and the add-ons – such as list of references, bibliography and appendices.

The examiner will be looking for clear presentation, good organization and the correct length. The quality of the main components of the dissertation will also be checked, particularly for evidence of reading of the relevant literature, identification of the research problem and questions, appropriate use of research methods, and the solidity of the argument that leads to your conclusions.

1.5 What should I do now?

Even if you do not know yet exactly what you are going to choose as a subject for your dissertation, it is a good idea to go and look at the work of students

from previous years. Your department or your university/college library should keep copies of all the dissertations. Find out where they are. You will probably be impressed by the sheer number of them, so how do you start looking to find something useful? Here is a good way to do it.

Find out what order they are in on the shelves. If they are in some kind of subject order, then choose four or five on the subject area that you are interested in. If not, any recent dissertations from your course will do. If you can only get them by request from the library catalogue, then choose some from the list. Ideally, choose dissertations that have been completed according to the regulations and instructions that you have to follow.

Don't sit down and try to read them! First, compare the following features:

- format (size and shape)
- design of cover
- type of binding
- design of page layouts
- printing fonts and styles and text layout
- number and type of illustrations.

Now that you have got a general impression of a range of designs (note how important these are in the initial impact), it is time to look more carefully at the components and structure of the dissertations. Check each for the following:

- Title – length and clarity. Can you understand what it is about just by reading the title? Is it too long and complicated? Is it too short and general?
- Preambles – are these clearly labelled and set out? Check what they consist of: title page, acknowledgements, abstract, list of contents with page numbers, lists of figures and tables, anything else (e.g. statement of individual work, dedication, etc.). Look at the layout and design of each of these.
- Chapters or sections – how many, how long and in what sequence? Does the sequence of chapter titles show you how the dissertation is structured? One example might be: introduction, background, research problem, research methods used, data collection, data analysis, conclusions. There are, however, several different ways of structuring dissertations, depending on the type of research undertaken. Compare those that you have selected.

Now go to the end of each dissertation and compare the add-on sections.

Note:

- length and format of the list of references
- number and type of appendices.

Now, if you want to, you can read a few sections of the text to see what the written style is like. Note the use of technical words, the method of citing

references and the style of the writing. Check the length of paragraphs and sentence construction. Are they short and precise, or long and complex? Explore how the illustrations are used to complement the text. Whatever you do, don't try to read all the way through. Rather, if you have the time, pick a few more examples of dissertations and repeat the exercise. You will soon get a feel of the difference in quality and style, which will help you to form preferences on which to base your own work.

The length and complexity of the dissertations might be rather daunting, particularly when you consider that you will have to produce something similar within a few months or even weeks. Don't get too worried. Although there will be a lot to learn and plenty to write, if you can choose a subject in which you are really interested, then despite the hard work it should be a pleasurable and rewarding exercise, and something to be proud of when you have finished.

1.6 References to more information

As mentioned above, a good place to start is to look at previously completed dissertations in your subject. This will not provide you with instructions on how to proceed, but will give you plenty of food for thought, and help to stimulate your own critical faculties about the quality of the work presented. This will be important when it comes to reviewing your own work later on.

Most books on this subject cover the whole sequence of preparing and writing essays and dissertations, much like this one. But hardly any actually discuss why you should do a dissertation, and what the examiners will be looking for. Despite this it is interesting, if you have time, to compare the advice given at this stage of the process. The approaches vary, depending on the level of essay or dissertation aimed at, and in some, the specific subject area catered for. Only look at the preliminary advice given in the first few pages of the books and scan the contents page to see if there is anything else of interest further on. You can probably do this in the library without even taking the books out on loan.

Here are a few books that I have found, and I have given notes on what to look for in them. They are in no particular order as each gives a slightly different view of the issues, so refer to as many as possible. Consult your own library catalogue for these and any similar ones that are available. When you locate them on the shelves, look at the contents list of promising books for relevant chapters.

Further reading

- Redman, P. (2011) *Good Essay Writing*, 4th edition. London: Sage/Open University. Chapter 2 discusses what tutors look for when marking essays.
- Mounsey, C. (2002) *Essays and Dissertations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See Chapters 1 and 10.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2010) *How to Research*, 4th edition. Buckingham: Open University Press. The first chapter gives an entertaining review of what research is about.
- Swetnam, D. (2009) *Writing Your Dissertation: How to Plan, Prepare and Present Successful Work*, 3rd edition. Oxford: How To Books. See Chapter 1.