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Writing your Dissertation

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Contents

Writing your dissertation..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Introduction	3
Managing your time	4
Getting started	5
Choosing a subject and working with your supervisor	5
Choosing a title	7
How to approach your dissertation.....	8
Research.....	9
Structure	13
Writing.....	14
Title.....	15
Contents	15
Summary/Abstract	15
Introduction	15
Literature Review	16
Methodology	16
Findings/Results	16
Conclusion.....	16
Stop!	17

Introduction

Writing a dissertation is a long but often very rewarding process in which you will produce a piece of work looking in depth at an area of your subject. A dissertation is longer than a normal assignment, although a lot of the lessons you have learned in your time at university will still be relevant when researching, writing and redrafting. A dissertation is a chance to show off your knowledge and research.

Managing your time

A good way to get started is to create a weekly or monthly timetable for your dissertation writing. This will help you focus your efforts – for large projects like dissertation writing, it is important to be organised. Creating a timetable is good practice and can provide a structure for you to work within.

From your previous assignments and University work, you should be aware of your strengths and weaknesses. Consider these when creating your timetable. For example, if you are a slow reader schedule extra time for reading. If your dissertation will involve making journeys to archives, sites, museums or galleries, or other external sources, plan these in advance; you could end up saving money as well as time.

It is likely you will be studying other modules at the same time as writing your dissertation so make sure you factor in other course deadlines when planning your time.

Getting started

Your first step should be to familiarise yourself with the dissertation specifications for your course. This can be found in your module handbook.

1. Different subjects might want different length pieces. Some can be as short as 8000 words, others can be 40,000 or more.
2. The structure of the dissertations might vary depending on the subject. Some will want separate, subtitled sections for literature review or methodology, while others might want these included in the body of the text. The module handbook will give you an idea of what to include.
3. Check what system of referencing your school uses.

Choosing a subject and working with your supervisor

Your choice of subject is very important. You will be spending a lot time reading, writing and thinking

about your subject, so it is important to choose one you are interested in and which fulfils the requirements of your course. You may have a free choice in what you write about, or you may have to choose your title from a list provided by your school. Check this with your school, but in all cases think about your choice carefully and the practicalities of it.

Your next step is to acquire a supervisor. Some schools will allocate a supervisor depending on what you are writing about, while other schools will allow you to approach an academic and ask them if they would be your supervisor. They should be someone with knowledge of the subject you want to write about. It will also help if they have written about your subject. You may find yourself having lots of contact with your supervisor, so a good working relationship is very important. Agree on your expectations, how often you will meet and how you will deal with any absences.

Discuss your subject with your supervisor. They can give you reading suggestions and information on the topic. Use this time to narrow your focus with your tutor's help. After this, you may be required to write a research proposal.

Choosing a title

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do I find this question interesting?
2. Can I see myself still being interested in this subject after weeks of working on it?
3. Do I feel confident tackling this question?
4. Have I thought this question through, and understood the demands it will make of me?
5. Is this definitely the most interesting question on offer to me, and if not, am I happy to do this one knowing there might be others which are more interesting?
6. Have I considered the scale of the question?

If the answer is no to any of these questions, you may need to reconsider your choice.

Choose a subject which has plenty of research material easily available. You do not want to choose a topic only to find once you are halfway through that most of the sources needed for completion are abroad or extremely expensive to acquire.

Choose a title which makes sense, and which you can construct a coherent piece of writing from. Make sure it allows you to fulfil all marking criteria as set out in your module handbook.

Some courses will ask you to submit your title some time in advance of the final hand-in date. Even if this does not apply on your course it is advisable to pick a title and stick with it as early as possible.

Sometimes changing your title is unavoidable if you find your research has taken you to new and unexpected areas. In these circumstances, the old title might become unsuitable. In these situations, consult with your supervisor about how to continue, and the suitability of your new title and direction.

How to approach your dissertation

A dissertation shares many similarities with other pieces of work you will be asked to do, but it has a longer reach – it will be longer in length and will require more in-depth research and writing. It will also require a lot more independent work.

Do not be overwhelmed by it!

1. Do not worry about the size of the dissertation – you are researching and writing about something you find interesting, so this is an opportunity to satisfy your curiosity.

2. Your supervisor is here to help you.
3. Your coursemates will also be working on their dissertations, so talk to them as they may have advice and tips on study (and relaxation) which you might not have thought of.

Research

Be selective in your research. You do not have to read every single page of every source on the subject. Use chapter titles, key words, article titles, subheadings, indexes and references from other sources to find the information which is relevant to your work.

Some courses will require you to do a literature review as part of your dissertation. They may supply you with a blank template form for this, so check your course handbook.

When reviewing literature, consider the following:

1. When and where was the piece written? Do you think this has had an effect on the author's position, and if so, what was that effect?

2. What are the main issues and themes in this piece? Are there any underlying themes or subtexts? Have they used any theory to back up their writing?
3. What is the author's position on the subject? How is it presented?
4. How has the author addressed the subject?
5. Does it support or contradict your position? If it does not seem to do either, do you need it?
6. Does it lead you to more sources? The source might not be very useful on its own, but it might mention another source in the text or in the references which could be useful.
7. Is it a primary or secondary source? A primary source is a source which is directly related to the subject. This could be the raw results from an experiment, an account of an historical event written by someone who witnessed it, a novel which you are writing about, etc. A secondary source is one which uses primary source material to create a new source. Your dissertation will be a secondary source.

For your dissertation you will be encouraged to engage with more primary sources than you might previously have done for other assessments. Using

primary sources in your research can increase your marks - you will be demonstrating your use of original research in support of your answers and opinions.

Record the details of every source you read as you go along. Accurate referencing is an essential part of dissertation writing and keeping a record will help to you compile your reference list.

Here is an example of how to keep track of your references:

Kidd, A. (1993). Manchester. Keele: Ryburn Publishing. (942.73309/KID)*

Chapter 2 – ‘First Industrial City, 1780-1850’

p.30 – Cottonopolis, author believes the label ‘overworked’. Cotton production dependent on other engineering expertise being in area – thus other industries present.

p.31 – Iron work example, Fairbairn.

p.33 – Road carriers vs canal carriers – road cheaper. ‘Railway Age’ starts properly in Manchester, Liverpool & Manchester Railway showed viability of rail.

* This is not part of a reference. The library uses a numbering system called the Dewey Decimal System. This ensures that all books on a particular subject are stored together, and are easily found. A book's number is printed on a small label on, or near, the book's spine. It is useful to keep a note of the library number of all your sources in case you need to find the hard copy again. If you have used an online source you can record the URL, and for journals and magazines the name, date and publication number will often suffice.

For details on referencing workshops and help with using the (APA Harvard) style, go to the Skills for Learning website: <http://www.salford.ac.uk/skills-for-learning>

It will help you to periodically review your research so you can keep tabs on what you have found. A good system of organisation will save you time, and if you familiarise yourself with your material you can find it easier to form your arguments. Make sure you keep your references somewhere safe by storing them in an electronic folder and/or a physical file. In very long dissertations you might end up with dozens of references, so a good filing system will be essential.

Structure

When you have done enough research you can start planning the structure of your dissertation. Some schools will expect very rigidly structured dissertations, so it is important to check your module handbook for guidance.

It can sometimes help for you to view your dissertation as several smaller pieces; you can then break down your dissertation into chapters or parts, each presenting a different part of your argument. This can make the dissertation seem less daunting.

Writing

Leave yourself plenty of time to draft and redraft your dissertation. It is important to review what you have written, and rewrite it where necessary.

Sections of a dissertation:

1. Title
2. Contents
3. Summary/Abstract*
4. Introduction
5. Literature Review*
6. Methodology**
7. Findings
8. Conclusion
9. Recommendations*
10. References & Bibliography

* Not all courses require this, please consult your module handbook or supervisor.

** For some courses you will not be required to write a separate section and can include this information in the main body of the text.

Title

The question you are attempting to answer. It is important that your dissertation answers the question in your title as this is what the marker will be expecting it to do.

Contents

A clear list of what sections are in the dissertation and what page they are on. It is advisable to do this last so the page numbers for every section is known.

Summary/Abstract

A brief overview of the dissertation, introducing the subject, the angle the dissertation will take, and the evidence it will consider.

Introduction

An expanded summary/abstract which introduces everything which will be discussed in the dissertation. The introduction should refer to all major sections of the dissertation, as well as ideas and themes which run through it. It is not necessary to put in the conclusions the piece will reach. Some students prefer to write this after the other parts of the dissertation have been written.

Literature Review

Follow the template found in your module handbook. The handbook might also advise you on where to position the literature review within the piece. If you are unsure about this, ask your supervisor.

Methodology

Some subjects will require you to present your methodology – how you obtained the data you have used in your dissertation. Different schools will have different styles for this section, consult your module handbook or supervisor.

Findings/Results

The main body of the text where you will bring together your sources, and construct an argument using them. Remember to keep your argument clear and easy to follow.

Conclusion

Brings together all the ideas, evidence, themes and theories from the main body of the dissertation. This can include an assessment of how the dissertation went, whether the conclusions reached were expected, and what potential further research is

suggested by the piece. Some schools will expect you to split the conclusion into a Conclusion which covers the first part of this (the bringing together of the piece and answers) and a separate Recommendations section for further research or refinements to any part of the dissertation.

It is a good idea to leave writing the conclusion to near the end of your writing period, once most of the revision and redrafts have been done, so that it is consistent with the rest of the piece.

Stop!

Your dissertation will have a word limit – do not go over it. Dissertations are about quality not quantity, so do not use more words than are necessary to get your points across. Going over the word limit can also incur penalties, such as marks being deducted. Be careful about writing too few words, as this can indicate that you have not answered the question fully or done enough research.

You could spend years redrafting your dissertation, but it is best not to do more than a handful of rewrites - do too many and this will make it harder for you to be objective about what you have written.

Write objectively and in an appropriate style. Be analytical and back up all claims and arguments

with evidence. You need to show you have put a lot of thought into your work.

Have enough sources – check with your supervisor what would be an appropriate number of sources for your dissertation. There are no set rules about how many sources you should use, and it will vary between schools.

Check your spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Check all material is correctly referenced.

Check your argument makes sense.

Bring all the strands of your dissertation together in your conclusion. Do not leave any loose ends, and if you find you cannot connect a strand to your overall argument then you might need to reconsider whether it should be included.

And finally, remember to allow enough time for **printing and binding** your dissertation as this can take several days.

You might also find the following study guides useful:

Writing a research proposal

Research projects and reports

Critical analysis of a journal article

Reviewing literature and paraphrasing