

# How to Write a Dissertation

*The prospect of writing a dissertation can initially appear a bit daunting. However, the actual experience is rarely as frightening as it at first seems. The dissertation provides you with the opportunity to conduct an in-depth study of a subject of personal interest – so you might even enjoy it!*

## Choosing your subject

- choose something manageable and focused, with clear objectives and boundaries – not too wide, not too narrow.
- make sure that there is sufficient published material available that will give you a strong foundation upon which to build.
- select something which doesn't overlap too much with other assessments you have submitted. If you have already handed in an extended essay on a topic, make sure the dissertation isn't too closely related - you could run the risk of being accused of self-plagiarism.
- discuss your choice, and your rationale with your supervisor, who should be able to give you an indication of the feasibility of the study.

## Your Supervisor

A dissertation is a piece of self-directed study, so the majority of input should come from you as the researcher. However, your dissertation supervisor can provide guidance, support, and direct you towards relevant materials. To get the most out of supervisory meetings you should:

- obtain guidelines about how much of your supervisor's time you are entitled to
- arrange a series of meetings to discuss your progress with him/her
- play an active part in meetings in order to get maximum benefit from them
- set yourself deadlines for sending drafts to the supervisor prior to meetings. This gives you a date to work to and will give your supervisor time to read your work before feeding comments back during the meeting
- maintain contact with the supervisor even if things aren't going well. If there is a problem it is better to get it sorted out sooner rather than later

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Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is available in Welsh.



# The Structure of Dissertations

In the absence of any departmental guidelines, there is a standard structural form that can be adapted to fit most dissertations. All of these sections may not be suitable for all subject areas. Whatever the topic of research, it is important to divide your work into a number of manageable sections.

The conventional structure for reporting research divides the material into three parts: the preliminary part, the main text and the end matter.

## 1 The preliminary part

### Title

The title itself needs to indicate accurately the contents of the work. It also needs to be fairly brief. A good way of combining the two is to have a two-part title. The first part acts as the main title and gives a broad indication of the area of work. The second part adds more detail. For example, 'Ethnicity and Friendship: the Contrast between Sociometric Research and Fieldwork Observation in Primary School Classrooms'.

### Abstract

The abstract is a summary of the research. It enables other people to see, at a glance, what the dissertation is about.

### List of contents

This can range from being just a list of chapter headings and their starting pages through to being an extensive list including sub-headings of the contents within the chapters.

### List of tables and figures

This should list the titles of the various tables and figures and their page numbers.

### Acknowledgements

Under this heading, credit can be given to those who have helped with the research. It is usual to acknowledge the support of anyone who you feel contributed to the dissertation - supervisor, technicians, participants, family.

### List of abbreviations

If the nature of the report demands that many abbreviations are used in the text, these should be listed, usually alphabetically, alongside the full version of what they stand for.

## **2 The main text**

The main text is generally divided into the following sections:

### **Introduction**

At the beginning the reader needs to be provided with information about:

- A general background to the work including an overview of the main topic and your rationale
- The aims of the research
- Key definitions and concepts to be used
- An indication of the limitations (if any) of the study
- An overview of the dissertation, briefly indicating the content of each chapter

### **Literature Review**

This may be presented as an integral part of the 'Introduction' or it may appear as a separate chapter. Check with your supervisor to see if there are specific departmental requirements regarding this. This section demonstrates an understanding of the topic through the work of others, providing a review of the material that already exists on the topic in question, and highlighting strengths and weaknesses where necessary. It should also express links between previous research and the particular issues, problems and ideas that the current research addresses. (See separate handout for more on literature reviews).

### **Methodology** (Arts and Humanities students, or anyone taking a less scientific approach, go to 'Chapters')

Having analysed the existing knowledge on a topic, it is necessary to describe the methods that were used when conducting your own, primary, study. This section includes a description and justification of the methods used to gather data and the piloting that was undertaken. It draws on methodology texts to support your decisions and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of your methodological approach.

### **Findings**

This is where the reader gets introduced to the data. Aspects of the findings are singled out and described. The first step is to say, 'This is what was found with respect to this issue...This is what was found with respect to another issue...'  
You need to describe the findings before you are in a position to move on and consider what significance the data might have in the context of the overall aims of the study.

### **Discussion and analysis**

Here, the findings that have been outlined are subject to scrutiny in terms of what they might mean. They are discussed and analysed with reference to the theories, ideas and issues discussed earlier in the literature review. The researcher 'makes

sense' of the findings by considering their implications beyond the confines of the current research.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Finally, in the main text, the researcher needs to draw together the threads of the research to arrive at some general conclusion and, perhaps, to suggest some way forward. This part of the study should be constructive and positive. It can contain some of the following:

- A retrospective evaluation of the research and its contribution
- Recommendations for improving the situation, guidelines or codes of practice
- Identification of new directions for further research

### **Chapters**

Not all dissertations follow the more scientific format outlined, although all will have a separate Introduction and Conclusion as mentioned above. Some are based on secondary data and will have the work of writers throughout the entire dissertation. In this sense, the chapters are like a series of linked essays. Each chapter should:

- Include both an introduction and conclusion
- Focus on one main theme, or a series of inter-related ones
- Use sub-headings to guide the reader
- Develop points carefully, step by step, recapping when necessary
- Make sense on its own while simultaneously sharing a common 'thread' with other chapters

## **3 The end matter**

### **Appendices**

An appendix is the place for material which is too bulky for the main body of the text. The following are usually placed in the appendices:

- extensive tables of data
- questionnaires used in a survey
- extracts from an interview transcript
- memos or minutes of meetings
- technical specifications

The above should all be presented in separate appendices and given their own number or letter.

### **References**

The positioning of these will vary depending on the style of referencing used by the researcher. When the researcher uses the Harvard System of referencing, a complete list of those works cited in the research should be included in an alphabetical list at the end. With an Endnotes system, references are sometimes placed after individual chapters, and you should check if this is expected with your supervisor. The footnoting style of referencing requires the references to be inserted at the bottom of each respective page. (See specific referencing handouts for more information).

## **Bibliography**

For those using the Harvard System, the bibliography includes any texts that have been useful but which are not cited within the text (and therefore not listed in the reference list). In most Endnote and Footnote systems the Bibliography should include all of the books used.

### **Style and Presentation: Some Points to Consider:**

- **Organising information** - Organising and sequencing information is vital in a dissertation. Chapters should have clearly focused titles and should only contain information that is relevant to each title.
- **Develop logical links from one section to the next** - A good dissertation is one that takes the reader on a journey. Therefore the steps and direction should be clear, and the reader should never be left in doubt about the progression of the points being made. Links between information need to be clear. It is a good idea to recap at certain stages of the dissertation. The logic of the discussion should build point on point towards a final conclusion.
- **Use headings and sub-headings to divide the text into clear sections** - Headings and sub-headings can separate the text into blocks in a way that makes the reader's task of understanding the overall piece of work far easier. They act as signposts. As with signposts, too few and the reader gets lost, too many and the reader gets confused.
- **Use care with the page layout** - The visual element of the presentation can be important, and the researcher should give some consideration to things like the page layout and the use of graphs, tables and photographs. It is important that these are all relevant to the content.
- **Present tables and figures properly** - It is important to ensure that reference is made in the text to all photographs, illustrations, tables etc. Tables and figures should be presented in a consistent style that provides the reader with the necessary information to decipher the meaning of the data contained in them. There should be:
  - a clear and precise title
  - the source of the table or figure (if it is not original material)
  - the units of measurement being used (£, cm, tonnes etc)
  - x axis as the independent variable (where relevant)

## **References:**

Adapted from: Denscombe, M. (1998) *The good research guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.