Dissertation and project writing

Academic skills guide 2

Produced by Dyslexia Support Enabling Services

View at www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

Contents

Dissertations and project reports

Writing a dissertation or project report can be daunting for three main reasons:

- It usually carries a lot of marks.
- It is probably the longest piece of writing you have ever tackled.
- It involves more reading and independent research than you have ever done before.

Don't despair! A dissertation is not just an extra-long essay, it is divided into sections or chapters. It may be useful to think of a dissertation in terms of three or four linked essays. By now you will have already written several essays, so writing a dissertation isn't really that different.

Typically, the term *dissertation* is used in humanities and social science disciplines and *project report* in science and engineering, although this is not a hard and fast rule.

What is a dissertation?

A dissertation is a detailed **discussion** on a specific topic that is the result of in-depth independent research. It has a clearly stated **aim**. It makes use of **theory**. 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 **conclusions**.

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

- Title page
- Abstract
- Statement of authorship
- Acknowledgements
- Contents page
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Research methodology and methods
- Discussion/analysis
- Conclusion
- Bibliography
- Appendices

A project report is very similar although some sections may have different names.

This podcast outlines the process in some detail:
http://connect.le.ac.uk/dissertation

Dissertation guidelines

Your Faculty or discipline will give you dissertation guidelines. They may be available on Blackboard or hidden away in your programme handbook, but they 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 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. Make your personal deadline at least two weeks in advance of the published deadline; this helps to avoid last-minute crises. Remember no one was ever penalised for handing in early.

This time plan is still very broad and you will need to break down the task still further. Make an overall outline plan first and read with a clear purpose in mind. Write as you go along. Many people find it easier to start with either the literature review or the methodology.

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

You will need to produce an overall plan for your dissertation early in the process. Many people use Inspiration or another mind mapping programme for this. Another way is to open a Word file for each section and add information as you find it. You will also need a separate Word file to assemble your references if you are not using a reference manager. **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; explain the research question or hypothesis; justify why it is relevant or important. Define terms, clarify boundaries, introduce your topic. **Need not be written first.**
Literature review	This may take more than one chapter. It defines the current state of research in your field, discusses previous studies 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 should include a large number of references to the literature in your chosen field and shows that you have read around your subject. **Aim for about one reference for every 100 words.**
Methodology	Details the methodology you are using and explains why it is appropriate. Justifies your research methods and approaches. Identifies disadvantages as well as advantages of your method and any variations or amendments. **Make sure you understand the difference between methodology and methods**; they are not the same.
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 simply describe them. **There are no right or wrong answers at this stage; if your results are unexpected this does not make them wrong!**
Discussion	Have you answered the research question? Are you able to confirm or reject the hypothesis? This is the most important section of the dissertation. It 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 and summarises your work as a whole. What do the findings imply? Make sure you explain your findings, discuss any implications and make appropriate recommendations for further research needed. Do not expect your dissertation to change the world.

Stages in Writing a Dissertation or Project Report

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.

Some science and engineering projects are more structured and you may be given clear guidance as to what is expected, possibly working as part of a team or continuing previous research.

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 jot down or record notes setting out your train of thought or the argument that you are going to present. You might like to use software such as Inspiration.

Research. Find relevant books, websites and journal articles. Be selective. Target your reading. See our guide on **Research Reading**. You may like to use a reference manager such as EndNote (commercial) or Zotero (free).
www.endnote.com/
www.zotero.org/.

Make notes. These can be added to your Word file of references or recorded directly into a reference manager. **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 Faculty or discipline.

First draft. It is best to word process from the start; handwriting is less flexible. If you are confident with Word, set up your styles for headings, subheadings and normal text from the start. This will help you keep each chapter consistent. If you have visual stress, it is fine to draft using a coloured background and using a font you feel comfortable with. However, zoom in rather than changing the actual font size, or you will have to do more formatting at the end.

Begin with any section/chapter where you feel comfortable. Concentrate on getting your ideas down – editing comes later. Some people find it useful to **turn off the spelling and grammar checkers** at this stage as those squiggles can interrupt your train of thought. **Continue to build up your reference list as you go along.**

Edit, revise and check. Check that your argument, or line of thought, is clear throughout. 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. **Reading your work aloud to yourself, or getting the computer to do so, can help you make sure you are making sense.**

Proofread. Leave some time before this stage, if possible. **Turn the spellchecker back on.** Go through systematically, eliminating all errors – some will be typos, others may be more fundamental. If in doubt, use Google Dictionary or Thesaurus to ensure you have made the right choice. You could proofread each chapter as it is completed to make the task less tedious.

Last sections. It is often easier to write the introduction last; it is much easier to introduce what you have written rather than what you hope to write. The **abstract** should certainly be written last. **Appendices** may include instruments used in your research, transcripts etc; they are not there to give you an extra word count!

Final check. Make sure that the bibliography/reference list is complete and insert it in the right place. 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 or paper journals, books, the internet. You might like to read our guide on **Reading and Research Skills** 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.** This should be avoided as far as possible.

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, introduction and conclusion, or the abstract if it is a journal article. **You do not have to read every word of everything you cite.** 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:
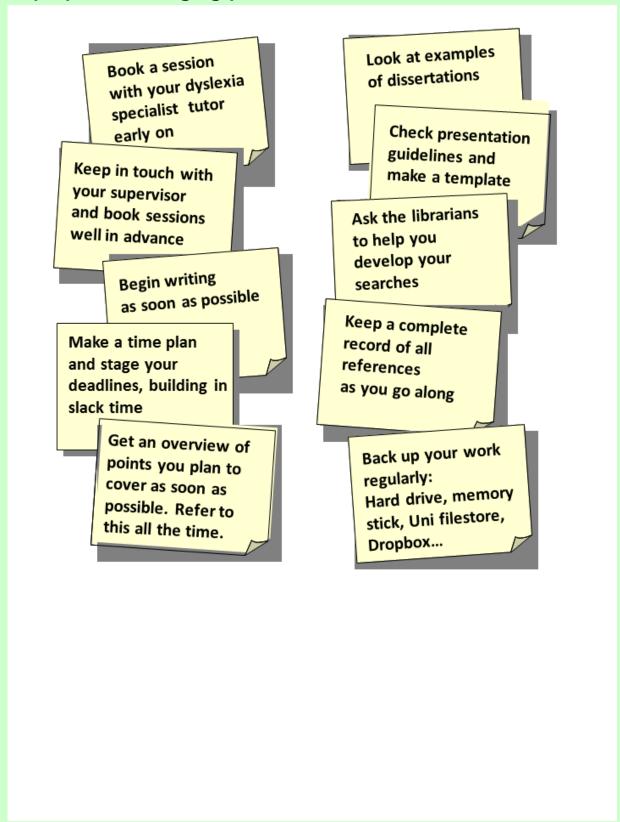
- Word files
- Audio notes
- Notebook for each topic or section
- File pockets for each topic
- Boxed cards
- Reference manager software

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 for managing your dissertation

Book a session with your dyslexia specialist tutor early on

Keep in touch with your supervisor and book sessions well in advance

Begin writing as soon as possible

Make a time plan and stage your deadlines, building in slack time

Get an overview of points you plan to cover as soon as possible. Refer to this all the time.

Look at examples of dissertations

Check presentation guidelines and make a template

Ask the librarians to help you develop your searches

Keep a complete record of all references as you go along

Back up your work regularly: Hard drive, memory stick, Uni filestore, Dropbox...

Key terms and what they mean

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 examine and analyse 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, without acknowledgement. It is an academic crime and must be avoided. Sometimes you need to quote someone else's words; the words must be enclosed in quotation marks (short quotes) or indented and single spaced (above 20 words) 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 your specific course guidelines. In general the following often applies:

- Your dissertation must be word-processed on white A4 paper
- There should be a title page and a list of contents
- Arial or Times New Roman are sometimes specified. You should always use a clear, simple font, usually in 12 or 11 point size.
- Pages must be numbered.
- Text should be double-spaced.
- Left-hand margin must be at least 35mm to allow for binding.
- Indented (long) 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.

Mixed Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology.

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, using large samples.

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

- Greetham, D. B. (2009). *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pears, R. & Shields, G. (2010). *Cite Them Right: The Essential Referencing Guide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reardon, D. (2006). *Doing Your Undergraduate Project*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Weyers, J. & McMillan, K. (2011). *How to Write Dissertations & Project Reports*. London: Prentice Hall.

Academic skills guides available from Dyslexia Support

1. Academic writing
2. Dissertations and project writing
3. Memory, revision and exam technique
4. Note taking and note making
5. Organisation and time management
6. Reading and research skills

View on line or download

www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

Do you know about the *Study Skills Toolkit*?

This is a set of interactive online resources to help you develop your academic skills.

Log into the University's Blackboard website www.blackboard.soton.ac.uk and look for the link to *Study Skills Toolkit*

There is also the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) Toolkit for international students