

DISSERTATIONS

This leaflet will attempt to outline the elements to be considered if you have been asked to write a dissertation at Undergraduate or Master's level. Its purpose is to give generic advice helpful to any student from any discipline. It is hoped that this will not conflict with guidelines set out by individual courses, but if it does, then **your course policy must take priority over anything contained herein.**

After a definition of terms, advice will be given under the headings Title, Planning, Abstract, Searches, Literature Review, Preparatory Reading, Time Management, Writing and Saving on disk, Presentation, Reference List and Bibliography, Proofing and Editing.

Definitions

Strictly speaking, an essay is an attempt to answer a question or discuss a topic, with the implication that there are so many ramifications or possible interpretations that a definitive answer cannot necessarily be given. It can be of *any* length, though in literary history - with one or two exceptions - it has traditionally been 'moderate' in length. In an educational and assessment context, however, and for the purposes of this leaflet only, an **essay** will be taken to mean:

a piece of continuous writing up to about 5 or 6 thousand words in length on a set topic or in answer to a specific question.

A **dissertation** will mean, again for the purposes of this leaflet alone:

an extended piece of writing of between 10 and 20 thousand words on a topic set by a department or one chosen by the student him or herself.

The other basic contrast with an essay is that a dissertation would be divided into chapters and may contain headings and sub-headings, but these would not normally be numbered as in a report. When completed, postgraduate dissertations will also usually be bound according to University regulations. A Master's level award may be given either by dissertation alone or by any combination of dissertation, teaching, course work and examination(s). Undergraduate dissertations may not be hard bound if they are for internal departmental use only.

Theses, usually reserved for doctoral qualifications, will not be considered here, although those writing one may find some of the advice given below of some use. A thesis is not only bound and of much greater length than a dissertation (anything from 50 thousand words upwards), but must also be original and *inter alia* contain an element of research by the author, thus contributing to the store of human knowledge on the chosen subject. However, there is no reason for a dissertation not to contain some research.

Title

Getting this right is more crucial than you may think. If you decide on a title which is too vague, you run the risk of the dissertation lacking focus or cohesion and not making any specific points worthy of note. Construct a title which forces you to concentrate on something in particular, ask a specific question or make a specific comparison. You could have a two-part title where the first part, the main title, is short and perhaps rather general in nature but the second part very focused, picking up a particular aspect of the main title. You might also adopt a similar procedure but make the main title enigmatic, cryptic or apparently contradictory, followed by a sub-title which begins to explain what it is all about. It is a journalistic approach which works by grabbing the reader's attention from the outset.

Planning

Much of the advice here resembles that given for planning essays and useful information can be found in the Study Skills leaflet “Essays”. As for essays, planning is a crucial, preliminary part of the process and the better it is done the better the final outcome will be. Devote time and careful thought to this - it will not be wasted. Apart from the amount of content, the only other difference of note is that a dissertation may well contain a review of the literature already published on the chosen topic, probably as a separate chapter or section.

Because of the length of a dissertation compared to that of an essay, you will also need to plan your time. Make a rough paper note of the amount of time needed for each part; you could do this according to the headings of this leaflet. Over-optimism is a characteristic of this exercise so begin as early as you can and allow more time than you first think for each part - books can become unexpectedly unavailable, people can (and do) re-arrange appointments, for example, so you need to build in time to allow for unforeseen circumstances. This kind of planning gives you ‘margins of error’ but also a motivational boost if something is completed ahead of time. Write down your time plan so you can refer to it as you proceed.

Abstract

This is a short summary, usually about 300 words in length, of the contents of the dissertation and perhaps its conclusions. It is a separate sheet of paper inserted, unbound, inside the front cover on submission of the dissertation and is subsequently placed or copied into a filing system or inputted into a database so that those searching for information of interest to them can see quickly whether or not your work will be of any use to them.

Despite the fact that it is placed at the beginning of the work, it is much easier - and will save you a great deal of trouble - if it is written last of all; that way, you can ensure that the contents of the abstract exactly match the contents of the dissertation!

Searches

In order to prepare the literature review and to conduct further research into your chosen topic, you will need to scour library shelves and databases for appropriate and relevant material. You may also need to conduct experiments or studies involving questionnaires and/or interviews. Time and care are needed for this process (see paragraph on (time) planning above). Your Programme Leader is the person who will advise on how to conduct studies - the form of the study, its scope, how to choose representative samples of respondents, any ethical issues, how to formulate questions so as to elicit the kind of information required, the format of the questionnaire and so on. Do allow also for the fact that not everyone is likely to respond and ensure you know how you are going to analyse and present the results *before* you design the study and/or the questionnaire. You must ensure that it (or they) will give you the information you require and that it will not be too much of a burden for respondents to complete.

You may need to go on a course on how to use SPSS before you start this process if the analysis of the data could be complicated or presented in various ways.

Literature Review

The purpose of this is to summarise what has already been written about your topic so that:

- you do not repeat unnecessarily in your dissertation work which has already been done
- you and the reader are able to distinguish between the work you do and your own ideas from those of others
- there is a basis from which your own study can begin and, hopefully, which you can extend
- you can demonstrate that you have read and understood the work, research or studies already carried out and are therefore in a better position to continue study in that area.

How well you are able to do this section may partly depend on how carefully you have chosen the title; if it is too vague or all-encompassing, the amount of literature on the subject may be so extensive that you will be unable to sift through it all or to select appropriate material; if it is too focused or specialised, then there may be too little information to review. If, despite a careful wording of the title, you find that there is still an extensive literature to review, then you will need to select carefully those works or studies which are most relevant or the most important or recent or those which give a historical perspective. Do this carefully so that the review will provide a *balanced* reflection of past and/or current knowledge on the subject and decide with your Programme Leader how long this review needs to be.

Each chosen work, study or collections of these should be described, along with the conclusions they reached, and your comments on all this should also be added - for example their historical or current importance, their relevance to what you are about to do. It is important to show that you have understood and can discuss work previously done or theories proposed by others.

As you proceed, make a careful note of all works referred to, in particular where you are likely to use direct quotations in your dissertation; it must be fully referenced according to convention, both in the body of the text and in a reference list and/or bibliography at the end. Refer to the section 'Reference List and Bibliography' below and consult previous dissertations in the Library if you want an idea of how this is done, preferably one in your subject area. See also the leaflet "Literature Reviews".

Preparatory Reading

Much, if not all, of this will be of the literature already written on the subject but there may be associated work which will be of use or interest, either by way of additional information or of stimulating some ideas of your own; the more of these you can generate the better but do be careful not to make statements which cannot be substantiated with either direct evidence or good argument. The more reading you can do the better understanding you will have of your chosen field and of the range of opinion on or research done about it. See also the leaflets "Resource Gathering" and "Information Overload".

Time Management

It is a good idea to plan your time as well as the dissertation itself and a good starting point is to ask "When is the deadline?" Beware, however - you would be well advised to allow at least a couple of weeks between completion and the deadline. Do not forget to leave time for proofing, revising and binding, especially as the latter can not usually be done immediately at certain times of the year. Once the dissertation itself is planned, allocate time periods to each task, bearing in mind everything else on your weekly agenda. The tasks could follow some of the sections of this leaflet. Write down your plan so you can refer to it from time to time - this will help to motivate you and keep you on track. The rest is will-power and dedication but the Study Skills "Time Management" and "Motivation" guides may also be of help to you.

Writing and Saving on disk

Word processing your work of course has many advantages: the ability to save your work in a number of places, for security, and to make changes of all kinds without having to re-write whole sections.

Whether you are saving the work on to a memory stick or on to a CD, it is probably best to create a separate file for each section; this will save you the tedium of having to scroll around a long document.

Presentation

The way the dissertation is to be set out on the page will be described in the course handbook. If not, ask your tutor or Programme Leader.

Normally there will be a minimum left and right margin, the left probably wider than the right to allow for the binding process, and the type will be in 12 point (minimum 10 point) and in an acceptable font, usually some form of Times Roman or Arial. This leaflet is in Arial 11.5 point. It will be in either double or 1½ line spacing and printed on one side of the paper only, with each page numbered. It will comprise the following parts, in this order:

- Title page (according to a prescribed format given by your Programme Leader, usually in the form “ [Title of dissertation] being a dissertation in partial fulfilment of the degree of [name of degree] in the University of [name] [date]” or similar - check carefully with your Programme Leader, followed by your name)
- Possibly an Acknowledgements page which thanks those who have helped you in all kinds of ways to compose your dissertation
- List of chapters, sections etc and their page numbers
- List of any abbreviations, acronyms or other specialist terminology or references (if any)
- List of Figures and/or photographs (if any)
- List of Appendices (if any)
- The main body of the dissertation, with each chapter titled and begun on a new page
- A reference list
- (Possibly) a bibliography

As mentioned previously, the abstract will be inserted inside the front cover and at least two copies of the dissertation will be required.

Reference List and Bibliography

These are not the same.

A reference list is a list of all the works from which you have quoted or which you have specifically referred to in the dissertation.

A bibliography is a list of all works you have read or part-read during the preparation of the dissertation, including those to which you have not made any reference at all, but which have helped you formulate your ideas or given you further information.

Sometimes, courses allow you to combine the two - check this with your Programme Leader.

Proofing and Editing

This is an essential part of the process and should be done very carefully. Remember, you are writing this for publication (or as if it will be presented as such) so it must be correct. Proofing is checking for errors of spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax. Editing is correcting or improving the style and register of the text and ensuring that there are no factual errors.

All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication