

## SKILLS FOR LEARNING

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# GUIDE TO PLANNING YOUR DISSERTATION

### WHAT IS A DISSERTATION?

A dissertation is an extended piece of writing requiring more thorough research and wider reading than typical essays or reports. From planning through to completion, the dissertation provides you with the opportunity to pursue a topic that interests you. It will also enable you to demonstrate and develop specific skills that are highly regarded by both potential employers and university admissions. This includes problem solving and time management skills in addition to critical thinking and written communication skills.

There are two main types of dissertation: one that involves an element of **primary research** which requires you to gather data of your own, and another that involves **secondary research** which relies on data collected by other researchers. This type of research would usually take the form of an extended literature review.

A project that involves an element of **primary research** with an 8,000 to 10,000 word limit would typically contain the following elements:

- Introduction (800 to 1,000 words)
- Literature review (1,200 to 2,000 words)
- Methodology (1,500 to 2,000 words)
- Research (800 to 1,000 words)
- Data analysis (2,000 to 2,200 words)
- Research findings (1,000 to 1,200 words)
- Conclusion (800 to 1,000 words)

A project that involves **secondary research** with an 8,000 to 10,000 word limit would typically contain the following elements:

- Introduction (800 to 1,000 words)
- Methodology (1,500 to 2,000 words)
- Specific issues/debates. This should include two or three chapters, each addressing specific issues in the literature (4,000 to 5,000 words)
- Key themes. This draws together key themes from the above chapters, relating them to the research question (1,000 to 2,000 words)
- Conclusion (800 to 1,000 words)

Proofreading involves checking the content and appearance of your written work: looking for errors in typing, spelling and grammar, and ensuring that it is presented in a style that meets the requirements of a module or course. Proofreading is a skill that requires time, but the more you practice, the quicker and easier it will become to spot any corrections that need to be made.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you begin planning for your dissertation, make sure that you have considered and sought clarification on the following:

- ✓ Your research question.
- ✓ The exact submission date and word requirements.
- ✓ Any key dates such as when your proposal needs to be approved and submitted.
- ✓ How the dissertation is to be presented and any formatting rules.
- ✓ Who your dissertation supervisor will be and the level of support they can offer you.
- ✓ Any restrictions on what topics can be covered and any ethical issues that must be considered.
- ✓ The estimated workload.
- ✓ Writing out a project schedule.
- ✓ Considered the likely value and use of the work.

## CHOOSING YOUR TOPIC

A dissertation is your opportunity to research something that interests you. You can seek inspiration from many different sources which may include a recently viewed news item, current developments in your field of study, an incident at work or a personal interest. Whatever the topic, you need to ensure that it will sustain your interest over a long period of time, that you will be able to complete it within specified deadlines, and that you can make an original contribution to your chosen field.

## CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING A TOPIC

- ✓ Is the subject specific enough?
- ✓ Do you have a clear aim?
- ✓ Do you have a feasible approach to the subject?
- ✓ Is there a good chance you'll come up with an interesting conclusion?
- ✓ Are you enthusiastic about the subject?



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