Introduction to Dissertations

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Variety is the Spice of Life!

Different Schools... 

....Different Rules

- Can you use ‘I’ in an academic text?
- Should an essay have section headings?
- How long is a report?
- Do you use primary or secondary research?
- Footnotes, endnotes or no notes?
- Harvard style referencing or MLA? What about APA?

Which school are you in? What is acceptable and what is unacceptable in your field?

Always check in your module handbooks or with your tutor if you are concerned about appropriacy
Introduction to Dissertations Aims

— To know what your lecturer expects from your dissertation

— To become familiar with the typical structures of a dissertation

— Strategies for writing up the core sections of your dissertation
Common Dissertation Concerns

I have never heard of a Dissertation before and am worried by the thought of writing one.

I read so much but don’t know what I should be including.

There is so much to cover and I don’t know how to structure it.
What Is A Dissertation?

Depending on your school and programme, your dissertation may be referred to differently...

— ‘Dissertation’ used in all schools except Art & Design
— ‘Contextual and Critical Proposition’ is used in Art & Design
— ‘Project’ is the next most common
— ‘Report’ used in Science & Technology for Computing
— Health & Education is the most diverse in naming

What do all these different names actually mean?
Task

There are four main expectations when writing a Dissertation. What do you think these are?

— Able to undertake a substantial study
— Show skills in finding, selecting and critically analysing information
— Show skills in decision making, task management and problem solving
— Show skills in summarising and presenting findings
A Dissertation...

A Dissertation typically:

- **Identifies** a problem / issue(s) / controversy
- **Refines** a topic to generate research question(s)
- **Works to** a thesis or hypothesis

There are a number of different methods of research:

- A Practical Study
- An Artefact Study
- Testing a Hypothesis
- A Library / Conceptual Study
- A Research Based Study

You may have already considered this as part of your proposal; if not, the AWL Open Workshop How To Write A Proposal might be useful.
The Value Of Your Dissertation

When thinking about the focus of your Dissertation, think about the questions below to help develop your ideas:

— Why is your project **important** to the academic community/profession? Why is it **worth addressing**?
— Is there enough **evidence** to support your ideas?
— Do you have a credible **strategy** for addressing the issues in your project?
— Has your idea already received enough attention? If so, what can you **contribute** to the existing discussion?
The Dissertation Process

Choosing a topic
- Personal considerations
- Practical considerations
- Academic considerations

Refining the topic
- Adding parameters/scope
- Looking for a gap
- Cross-linking unlikely areas

Forming research questions
- Thesis or hypothesis will potentially answer

Formative Research
Dissertation Make Up

What elements/sections do you think are typically included in a Dissertation?

A Dissertation will typically be made up of some or possibly all of the following:

— Abstract
— Introduction
— Literature Review
— Methodology
  • Research approach
  • Research design
— Results
— Discussion
— Conclusion

Don’t panic! There are AWL Open Workshops on How To Write An Abstract and How To Write A Literature Review!
The Look Of Your Dissertation

As already mentioned, this may be subject to variation depending on your school:

— Title, signature, copyright, originality statement, acknowledgments
— Abstract
— Table of Contents
— List of Tables and List of Illustrations
— Chapter I. Introduction or statement of the problem
— Chapter II. Literature review and RQs
— Chapter III. Methodology
— Chapter IV. Findings (likely to be more than one chapter)
— Chapter V. Discussion (may be more than one chapter, including discussion, limitations, conclusion, implications or recommendations)
— Reference list or bibliography
— Appendices
Thinking Ahead

Writing a Dissertation is like running a marathon, so pace yourself and leave enough time for everything:

— Common Limitations
  • Time constraints on data collection
  • Time constraints on data analysis
  • Time constraints on the reading~thinking~writing process

— Project Management Skills
  • Think always with the goal in mind
  • Timelines with milestones
  • Action lists
  • Contingency time (life happens!)
Reading and Writing To Find Direction
Critical Reading

Reading critically is essential for Dissertations, as it can help you to enter the conversation in two ways:

— Intellectually
  • The location of your question within the discipline and its wider academic context: meaning, significance, relevance, purpose

— Socially
  • Establishing ‘the right to speak’, why people should listen to you

You may find the How To Read Journal Articles AWL Open Workshop helpful
Research Questions

A good research question must be:

- Precise
- Open to discussion
- Answerable
- Serious
Introduction

- Context, background to your topic
- Brief overview of dominant arguments relating to your topic
- Research Question / Hypothesis
- Signposting the structure of your dissertation
Methodology = How?

- Textual analysis
- Surveys
- Case study
Literature Review

What exactly is a Literature Review?
— A synthesis of previous research

What exactly should a Literature Review do?
— Evaluate the literature, and lead logically to your research question

Functions of a Literature Review:
— Justify your research – what’s the issue? Why should the reader care?
— Explain and justify your research methods
— Give the background info/context your reader needs to know
— Get the vocabulary needed
— Show you are familiar with the research field/issues/techniques used
— Get your reader ready for your study
Keep Your Literature Review Clear

A Literature Review is not a chance to show off what or how much you have read. It is for your reader, so keep it clear and relevant.

Help your reader find their way:

— Guide your reader assertively through to your research question
— Use signposting phrases along the way
— Use topic sentences, and paragraphs with one topic each
— Review and preview to help your reader
— Use transition paragraphs to change topics
— Use summaries to help your reader
Dangers And Pitfalls...

A poor Literature Review is:

- An annotated bibliography
- Confined to description
- Narrow and shallow
- Confusing
- Long-winded
- Vague and generalising
- No contrasts
- Only uses old research

A good Literature Review is:

- A synthesis of available research
- A critical evaluation
- Clear and concise
- Uses rigorous and consistent methods

Don’t forget, you can book a spot on both the How To Write A Literature Review or Critical Thinking AWL Open Workshops!
Sources

- Journal Articles
- Monographs (long articles)
- Conference papers
- Earlier Dissertations
- Empirical studies (research reports)
- Government or organisational reports
- Historical records
- Statistical Records
- Text books
Writing Up Findings / Results

What do you think cause the most problems for students when writing their results?

— Results are not relevant to the original research question.

Therefore, make sure your results:

— Derive from your research methods, as given in your methodology
— Make sure they fit with your research question / hypothesis

If your results are unexpected:

— Don’t panic – this doesn’t mean something’s gone wrong. Look at how and why they are unexpected. What can be learned from this?
Writing Up Findings / Results

- Tables and graphs must stand alone
- Text should highlight the importance or interest of the results shown, not just repeat the information in the tables and graphs
- Double check the numbers add up
- Tables and graphs need to be clearly labelled and scaled
Writing Up Findings / Results

— Should support your thesis / hypothesis or answer your research question
— Put your results in the order that seems reasonable

When writing the conclusion remember:

— Incidental or ‘sidelight’ results should not receive equal weight
— Don’t include your entire output – be selective
— Summarise the main points
— Refer back to your research question
Writing Abstracts

WHY, HOW, WHAT, SO WHAT?

The reason behind the research being done

The basic approach and methodology, sometimes just in one sentence

The main findings (results) in a few sentences

The conclusion (briefly) and the broad implications of it
Writing Abstracts

Don’t:
— Use references
— Refer to the report structure
— Include statistics
— Use abbreviations

Do:
— Summarise the whole work in one paragraph
— Stand alone as a description of the study
— They are not introductions
— They are short (approximately 200 words, or less)

Don’t forget the How To Write A Abstract AWL Open Workshop!
Where now?

— Need more detailed assistance? Book a tutorial!

— Want feedback on a specific section? Drop in to Getting Your Assignment Ready!

— Want somewhere quiet to write, and get on the spot assistance? Try The Writing Space!

— Got a few quick questions? AWL Office Hours at [The Study Hub] are for you!

— AWL Open Workshops can be booked here!

• Suggestions:
  — How To Write A Literature Review
  — How To Write An Abstract
  — How To Write A Proposal
  — Critical Thinking
  — How To Read Journal Articles
How To Write A Dissertation

It's QUESTION TIME!!