

## Preparing and Writing a Dissertation

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### Introduction

The first point to note about preparing and writing your dissertation is that there is no one best way to do it! We all have our own styles and these pages give you some practical pointers from which you can construct your own approach.

It is important to recognise right away that the process of writing shouldn't start on some distant day when you sit in front of your blank screen, with several files of notes and results and a template for your title page. The process starts now as you begin work; it involves thinking and jotting down ideas. Consider having a notebook with you at all times where you can note thoughts that come to you, however vague they seem. They could develop into something important.

Consider the model below as a possible way of preparing and writing up your dissertation. Where might the problems lie?

<b>A Model to Criticise!</b>	
1	Decide on your topic; write your proposal
2	Locate your sources
3	Do your literature review
4	Carry out your research
5	Gather your data for analysis
6	Write it all up
7	Set it aside for a week
8	Do some quick revisions
9	Submit the dissertation

What did you think of it? Hopefully you saw that there might be problems with it, given the opening comments of this section. Many people follow an approach similar to this, but it will not usually lead to the best of final dissertations. Try this advice: **start to write as soon as you can**. It helps to clarify your thinking and the more you write the better you get.

## Getting started

You may not be happy with the idea of starting to write before you have finished all your research. You might worry about what happens if you discover something that makes you revise your ideas. No problem; this is exactly what should happen. You need to write and think; and write and read; and write and consider your findings; and certainly you will need to review and revise and rewrite. These are essential parts of the process. If you have already achieved some success in your academic writing, or in writing at work, you will perhaps be more ready to accept this process. If not, you need to give it a try. Resisting writing is often a form of procrastination. If getting started is a problem for you, try this exercise:

**Activity:** Brainstorm any ideas at all that you have for ways you might get into writing.

Everyone will have different suggestions but here are ideas that have worked for some writers.

- Start by writing anything relevant (in some way) to your dissertation. Get rid of that blank screen. Don't censor yourself but go back and edit what you've written and see what can be used.
- Tell someone what you are thinking about and see if it helps to clarify your ideas (take notes of your conversation or tape it). You could try talking aloud to yourself if you prefer.
- Try finding a different place to write. At home, if you usually write at work; at work if you usually write at home. Consider moving your computer to a different room, or to a different part of the room.
- Try writing at a different time of day. Get up early; or take a nap in the evening and then write late at night. What would suit you best?
- Type out your research methods, or your references, or your bibliography.
- Type out quotations that you think you may use.
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## How to write

Your dissertation has to be written to length. How will you do this? There are two possible approaches. Consider which sounds more like your style.

- **The structured approach:** Here you plan the content of your writing in detail, and decide how many words or pages to each section. While you write you have these limits in mind and try to keep to them.

- ***The diving in approach:*** Here you simply write and do not worry about numbers of words or pages. Afterwards you will need to go back and cut or lengthen your drafts.

Whether you monitor the length as you go along, or when you finish a draft, you will need to contract (shorten) or expand parts of your writing. Try these suggestions.

### **To contract writing**

- Use tables, flow charts, diagrams or bullet points wherever possible.
- Remove any repetitive or unnecessary words or sentences.
- Cut whole paragraphs. Ask yourself if their content is really needed.
- Replace a paragraph with a sentence summarising its content. If you can't, the paragraph is probably badly written and needs amending anyway.
- Delete quotations unless they help to move your discussion forward.
- Decide if more of your material belongs more appropriately in an appendix.

### **To expand writing**

- Describe material presented as tables or diagrams. Develop paragraphs from lists of bullet points.
- Expand sentences by adding more description and analysis to develop your argument.
- Add more references or use more quotations to illustrate your argument. Remember to critically analyze the material that you quote.
- Move some material from the appendices to the body of your dissertation.

### **Tips for successful writing**

Here are some tips for successful writing which have been made by experienced writers and by students. See which ones appeal to your style.

- Plan to write regularly; stick to your plan. It is better to try to write for twenty minutes every day than to plan to spend all day weekend writing but never get started.
- Make a time plan and stick to it. Revise it as needed if you don't meet your deadlines.
- Write up a section as soon as it is ready. You don't have to write the sections of your dissertation in any particular order.
- When you are writing stop at a point when you could go on. Make a quick note about the next point you will make. This makes it easier to settle back down to writing next time.
- Decide where and when it is best for you to write and try to capitalise on this.
- Don't force yourself to write when you're exhausted. Take breaks, or you may find that you are writing badly (and making numerous typos).

## Writing a Literature Review

**Activity:** Do you understand the purpose of a literature review?

Possible ideas that you might have noted should include:

- to give reasons why your topic is important enough to be researched.
- to provide a brief account and discussion of the issues relevant to your topic.
- to provide a theoretical context in which to place your topic.
- to discuss relevant research carried out on the same or similar topics.
- to demonstrate that you have read the relevant literature and to apply this reading to your research topic, rather than merely describing the reading (don't produce a shopping list).

### Questions to ask yourself while writing

- Why am I writing this? How does it fit in? Will the reader understand?
- Have I included too much detail or too little?
- Am I connecting the different ideas in my writing ? What links am I using to help my reader?
- Have I presented evidence and argument to support my views?
- Am I putting this in the right place?

### The importance of editing

How many drafts of your dissertation do you think you will write? Some sections will write themselves and need little amendment. But other sections will need two or three (or even more drafts) before you are happy with them. Be ready for this and allow the time.

Before rewriting a section try to put it away for several days. You can then return to it with a fresher, more critical eye.

Work through your final draft section by section. Do not try to do it all at one sitting. Consider reading aloud. You may be surprised how much easier it is to catch errors that way. Ask a friend or colleague to read it through for you or with you.

**Activity:** List at least six points that you should check.

Did you get some of these points – or some additional ones, maybe? Sense; accuracy; logical sequencing; errors of expression; inappropriate vocabulary;

unclear expression; repetitive passages; spelling errors; punctuation inaccuracies or inconsistencies.

### **Next steps**

The next advice page related to dissertations is either:

Planning a Dissertation: for undergraduate students

Or

Planning a Dissertation: for postgraduate students

### **Further Information**

Use these links to find out more:

- Planning your Dissertation
- Academic Writing for Postgraduate Students
- Effective Reading
- Procrastination and Motivation
- References and Plagiarism

The Hertfordshire Integrated Learning Project, at the University of Hertfordshire, has valuable advice on:

- Creative thinking
- Evaluating information
- Critical thinking
- Working reflectively
- Problem solving

Once you have reached their website, follow the links to **Graduate Skills**, then to Skills Support Materials. Then read the index and follow the links to the relevant topics. Start at:

<http://www.herts.ac.uk/envstrat/HILP/>

Longview Community College (Missouri, USA) also has a comprehensive introduction to critical thinking:

<http://www.kcmetro.cc.mo.us/longview/ctact/toc.htm>

*Improve your Writing Skills* is a free downloadable e-Book published by Mantex. It is a guide which takes you through writing skills from commas and paragraphs to editing and presentation. It includes suggestions about tackling writer's block. It runs in Windows 95/98/2000/NT and uses Internet Explorer 4.0 or above. <http://www.mantex.co.uk/samples/ebooks.htm>

## **Recommended Reading**

Baxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (1996) *How To Research*, Buckingham, Open University.

Bell, J. (1999) *Doing Your Research Project*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Buckingham, Open University.

Denscombe, M. (1998) *The Good Research Guide*, Buckingham, Open University.

Rudestam, K. and Newton, R. (1992) *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide To Content And Process*, London, Sage.

This advice page was written by Alison Britton.

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