

Writing a Politics Dissertation

A dissertation - whether a 14,000 word MA dissertation, or a 100,000 word Ph.D - is a *limited* piece of *academic* work. The two italicised words are important. Because the dissertation is limited in length, the scope of topic that a dissertation may cover is limited. Hence "The Debt Crisis" is unlikely to be a suitable topic, while "Peru's Response to the Debt Crisis 1984-1987" could be a dissertation topic. It is important to remember that your dissertation is not your magnum opus, but an academic exercise to demonstrate your mastery of certain academic skills - such as the collection and manipulation of data, the understanding, assessment, and structuring of arguments, or the ability to do a sustained piece of work in a proper academic manner. It is not an advantage or a demonstration of strength to exceed the word limits; it is far more difficult to write concisely and precisely than to ramble on interminably. Candidates who exceed the word limit face the possibility of having their dissertation returned to them for shortening before the award of the degree.

While it is always difficult to say precisely what originality is, there is no requirement for the master's dissertation that it be original work in terms of the theory used or the information or data utilised. Thus, an application of Hechter's Internal Colonial theory to the problems of Kosova using secondary material could be a very presentable dissertation. Having said this, many dissertations do reach very high standards both in terms of the aims of the exercise, and in terms of originality. A brief glance at *Paradigms: The Kent Journal of International Relations*, where a number of MA dissertations have been published, demonstrates this.

The criteria of originality becomes crucial in a Doctoral Dissertation. However, originality is interpreted in a number of ways, which can include a theoretical innovation, the presentation of new empirical material, or the application of an existing theory to the analysis of material in a new way.

A. Selecting a Topic

Due to the various definitions of "international relations", "conflict analysis", and "international political economy" existent at the University of Kent and the wide acceptance of methodological pluralism, there are very few social science topics that can not in some manner be related to one or more of these perspectives. Hence, there is very little proscription of topic on substantive grounds. Queries, when they are raised, tend to be on much more pragmatic grounds of 'do-ability'. The following points should be borne in mind.

Remember, "do-ability" is crucial. Doing a Ph.D within three or four years rather than taking six or seven years will distinguish you from many other candidates in your future career. Doing an MA dissertation by the deadline means the difference between getting your MA, and not getting it!

Availability of Information

One of the most important considerations to bear in mind is data/information availability. A potentially fascinating dissertation topic might be "The Foreign Policy Effects of Mongolian Party-Factional Disputes". But can you get the data? It is no good knowing that there is data or information somewhere unless you also know that you can get access to it. Access may be limited in various ways; the archives may be private, or not available to Lithuanians; you may not have the necessary language skills to use the information; or some essential papers are lodged in a library in Cairo. So, when you choose a topic, make sure that you can get information on that topic that you can use. One way of approaching this problem is to do a library search, either manually or by computer. A good way of discovering whether there is accessible material is to use the BIDS system,

or Web of Science; this will indicate both articles on the topic and, by following up the book reviews section, key books in the area. BIDS, Web of Science, and other such services can be accessed through Athens, or through Ultra Access from the Templeman Library.

Interest

Certainly, a piece of research should be interesting to the reader. But it is equally important, if not more important, that it be interesting to the writer. In general (but not universally) people tend to do better on topics in which they have an interest.

It is understandable that people tend to be more interested in the part of the world they come from and the problems it has. Hence, it is naturally attractive to a Malaysian candidate to do a dissertation on ASEAN, or for a Nigerian candidate to do work on the OAU. But there are dangers! The difficulty is that coming from a particular region or country you can be "too close" to a problem and not be able to maintain the appropriate academic distance. The same may be said of candidates who are too wedded to a particular ideological perspective. While we very, very, rarely proscribe a topic on these grounds, candidates are warned of the dangers of staying too close to home.

B. Process

The following outlines a method for beginning an M.Phil/Ph.D thesis, since the criteria of originality are more stringent for the award of these degrees. However, those beginning an MA dissertation may find the following useful.

1. Source Research

The march of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The first step in writing a dissertation should be a search for sources. All writers need to know that there is sufficient material for the dissertation. The author of an **M.Phil or Ph.D** must perform a much more exhaustive search for another reason. These writers must satisfy a criteria of originality, so they will search not only to see if there is sufficient material, they will also perform an exhaustive search of existing work on a topic to be able to argue effectively that their contribution is "original". "Originality" has many definitions, but all of them assume that the work has not been done before in the same manner. This exhaustive search will comprise the following steps:

Step One: The Search

* Library Search is an excellent resource; you can limit this by all electronic resources – books, journals, etc. At the same time, Google Scholar is also an excellent resource, giving you the valuable “cited by” option as well.

* Don’t forget to enter in different search terms, look through bibliographies and see who has cited that valuable 1996 article.

Step Two: Classification

* Once the search has been performed, the researcher should give in to the primeval instinct of an International Relations scholar to find order in anarchy and start making categories. It is difficult to give advice on what these categories should be, as the topic and the instincts of the individual will differ (ie., they could be by chapter, theory/empirical, key-word, etc.). Typing in a Word document the list of sources found at this stage will save time at the end of the process when it comes to completing the bibliography.

Step Three: Reading

* Yes, all of the sources uncovered that deal remotely with the topic must be read. This may appear daunting when seen as a whole. At this stage, read the books/theses/articles/ that deal specifically with your topic (ie., as in the earlier example, books on British Foreign Policy Towards Iran, 1973 to 1979). Finding book reviews can help in the weeding-out process.

2. The Source/Originality/Topic Report

The length of time devoted to Step One depends entirely on the nature of the research (is yours a well-trodden path?), and of course whether you are a full-time or a part-time student. It is not unusual for the first three to five months to be spent in the Step One stage. Remember, the most important stage of building a tower is making sure the foundations are solid and square - however agonisingly painstaking - to ensure that the rest of the structure is "true".

When this research is completed, a report should be submitted to the supervisor, containing the following:

- A. The categorised bibliography
- B. An annotated list of the sources that deal closely with the topic of the dissertation. These annotations should explain:
 - i. what the book/thesis is about;
 - ii. the organisation of the material
 - iii. the methodology of the author. This is sometimes explicit, sometimes not. If it is not, is the book a polemic memoir, or did the author live in the British archives for three years?;
 - iv. the theoretical approach, and the main points emphasised by that approach.

This annotated list is the basis for the following decision (ie., what will be going through your supervisor's mind as he/she reads the report): Originality, Originality, Originality.

If there is no work on the topic of your research, it is likely that you will get a "green light" to proceed to the next stage.

If there does exist work on the topic, the supervisor will want to know how your proposed research outline differs from the extant literature, hence the third part of the report should be an argument. This differentiation can take several forms, for instance, 1) you will be using primary material that has been released recently and hence not available for previous efforts; 2) your approach differs substantially, ie., previous writers were all Marxist and you think you can make a case that this approach has left important points left un-illuminated (can your theoretical perspective permit greater/new understanding of the topic?) If you cannot make an argument for originality, the topic needs re-thinking.

3. The Research

It may seem daunting to be faced with the task of writing 14,000 words. However, a dissertation is written in chapters; the strategy is to break down the work into its component parts which makes it more manageable. Rest assured that the hardest part is writing the first sentence, and it is generally

the case that students end up writing *too much* rather than not enough. So, once you get going, it does become easier. Also, it is generally better to write too much and cut down later by summarising less central points.

You should never begin with the Introduction. The Introduction is generally written last, after the Conclusion, on the principle that you cannot possibly say what you are going to say before you have said it. But be encouraged by the fact that the summary of the existing literature that you have done in the Source Report generally will be incorporated into the Introduction, though in modified form.

It is generally best to begin with a "service chapter". A "service chapter" is a chapter that is necessary for the story that you are telling as a whole, but not central to the points that you will make. Thus, a service chapter could be one that recounts briefly the history of an issue, a relationship, or an organisation, depending on the topic of the research. For instance, if you are researching on the changed nature of peacekeeping in the post-Cold War period, you as a researcher and your reader will need to know how the practice developed and evolved in order to know how it has changed.

From this point on, it is a question of tackling one manageable part of the work at a time, such as a chapter, a report on field work, a questionnaire, etc.

These points should be used as a "template" for MA Dissertation Proposal.

C. Writing Your Dissertation

There is no one way of writing a dissertation; many of the points made here could be ignored and a good piece of work still produced. But one of the things it is important to remember is that successful Ph.D Dissertations and MA Theses that are awarded Distinction will be going into the Templeman library at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Students and scholars in the field covered by your work may well consult it. Hence it is important that the basic rules be followed. For example, if your references are checked out by someone consulting your dissertation and found to be wrong, the work will be categorised as "sloppy" and its credibility will suffer.

Style

If men would only say what they have to say in plain terms, how much more eloquent they would be. [Samuel Coleridge]

Anyone who wishes to be a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid. [Fowles & Fowles]

Scholarly writing is so full of verbosity that those who avoid it should be appreciated all the more. [Barass]

If you wish to use language as an instrument for the expression rather than the concealment of thought, you should never use a long word where a short one will do, eg:

Short	Long	Short	Long
do	accomplish	suggest	hypothesise
extra	Additional	sign	indication
expect	Anticipate	simple	simplistic
is	Represent	so	consequently
meet	Encounter	end	terminate

The following tables from Barass illustrate the common pitfalls of ambiguity, circumlocution, and pomposity, which are usually adopted to hide ignorance and persuade the reader that you know more than you do.

INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

As is well known
It is evident that
It is perhaps true to say
It is generally agreed that
All reasonable men believe
For obvious reasons
There is no doubt that
It is likely that
As you know
Tentative conclusions
So far as we know
It is not necessary to stress the fact
The most typical example

INTERPRETATION

I think
I think
I do not know what to think
Some people think
I believe
I have no evidence
I am convinced
I have not got enough evidence
You probably don't know
Possibilities
We could be wrong
I should not need to tell you
The example that best suits my purpose.

Avoid the unnecessary qualification of words:

INCORRECT

absolutely perfect
the actual number
not actually true
conclusive proof
cylindrical in shape
deliberately chosen

CORRECT

perfect
the number
untrue
proof
cylindrical
chosen

Always proof read your text carefully!:

You may have handwritten your manuscript and handed it to a typist and proof read the returned typescript before passing it back for correction. Re-proof read it on return. Where the typist has had to redo a complete page other errors may well have occurred. Remember also, that the number of errors in the typescript can sometimes be related to the clarity of the material you give to the typist. Where you are unclear, the typist will use his/her own judgement, and this may not be the same as yours. This is important, for every year a number of dissertations have to be re-worked prior to the award of the degree merely because of sloppiness of this kind.

Remember also that proof reading on a computer screen is not as efficient as proof reading the printed page.

A further useful ploy for those candidates for whom English is a foreign language, is to get a native English speaker to read the text for grammatical and spelling errors. This may cost you a pint or two of good ale but is often worth it, especially if you participate in the reward ceremony.

It doesn't happen often, but when it does it is a disaster: your manuscript gets lost! This can cost you weeks of work. The golden rule is to *always keep a copy* of everything. Whatever copying or back-up process you use, *don't keep the copy and the original in the same place*. You will feel very silly if you lose a bag with both the original and the copy in it!

Footnoting:

Footnotes and citations are important, because they indicate the depth of your research and reading; because they save you time and space in the text; because they legitimise points made in the text by reference to the work of other scholars; and because they allow you to avoid deviating from your central theme in the text while drawing the reader's attention to a significant sub-theme. While there are different methods of footnoting and citing, what is important is that your usage is consistent and accurate. No one method is better than the others; it is largely a matter of taste. Please use a method that includes a year.

Whatever the style adopted, however, the final product should include a bibliography. The bibliography must contain all the works cited in the dissertation, and may contain more. The bibliography must be ordered alphabetically with respect to the author's names, and each reference must contain :

- name or names of authors
- title of article or book
- year of publication
- place of publication if a book
- page numbers if an article in a journal or chapter in a book
- title of journal if relevant
- volume and issue number of journal if relevant

A USEFUL HINT: (Actually, this is a VERY useful hint) You may think when you begin your research that you will remember references etc. In general you will not. You will save yourself a great deal of time if you *meticulously* keep your references up to date. Refworks is very helpful in this regard. There is nothing more irritating than spending precious hours in the library tracking down details of references you could have noted in seconds the first time around.

Quotations:

Direct quotations should always be footnoted to their source, and should be enclosed in quotation marks. If the quotation is more than three lines long, it should be indented five spaces and single-spaced.

Structuring the Dissertation

Introduction and Conclusion

(Outline the ARGUMENT, and JUSTIFY everything)

1. Statement of Topic (what):
 - a. "This dissertation is **about**..."
2. Statement of Thesis (**what**)
 - a. "It **argues** that..."
3. Statement of Importance and Relevance (**why**)
 - a. "This is interesting/important because....."
 - b. "The central argument speaks to current debates in International Relations concerning..."
4. Statement of Method: - (**how** and **conceptual relationship** – of **each chapter to central thesis and of each chapter to each other**)
 - a. "The argument proceeds as follows. The following chapter summarises the central points in the theoretical literature concerning X to provide a framework for analysis for the study that follows. In particular, it exposes This is because..... Chapter Two is a service chapter that provides essential background to the case study as it shows..... The argumentation begins in Chapter Three,

where the theory is applied to an analysis of the case of Y. This is a critical engagement with central themes, such as A, B, and C, that will be developed to show the central argument of the thesis that.... It draws from the theoretical literature to highlight..... and it shows This analysis leads to the conclusion that....”

- b. The theory of X was chosen for this study because it Information for the case study was obtained from a search of newspaper articles from, from materials published on the web site of.... and from information obtained from the Embassy of

Note: **Words to Avoid:** “attempt”, “try”, “survey”, “outline”,

Words to use: “argues”, “analyses”, “engages”, “exposes”, “shows”, “demonstrates”, “critical”, “concludes”.

Chapters

INTRODUCTION TO EACH CHAPTER

You should give plenty of ‘signposts’ to the reader to tell him/her where he/she **has been**, where he/she **is**, and where he/she **is going**.

1. Statement of Topic:
 - a. **What:** “This Chapter does this.”
2. Relationship to the Central Thesis:
 - a. **Why:** “The argument presented in this chapter exposes X in order to establish this part of the argument: that A later chapter will build on this to”
3. Relationship to Other Chapters:
 - a. **Why:** “This part of the argument draws from the points made in chapter one that” and/or “This argument is crucial in order to lay the foundation for the analysis in Chapter three that....”
4. Methodology (**how & why**):
 - a. “The first section does this; the second section does that, and the third section does this”

INTRODUCTION TO EACH SECTION:

What: “This section does this”

Why (relevance & linkage): “This is to establish this”

CONCLUSION TO EACH SECTION:

1. **STATE THE ARGUMENT:** “This Chapter argued that....”
2. **RELATE THE ARGUMENT TO THE THESIS:** “which is a crucial component of the overall thesis that ”
3. **RELATE THE ARGUMENT TO THE OTHER CHAPTERS:** “The following

chapter builds on this by in order to” OR “The following chapter now turns to an examination of and the argument made here will be picked up in chapter.... that analyses....”

PARAGRAPHS:

- Each paragraph should contain an introduction, a body, and a concluding sentence that links it to the following paragraph.

TIPS:

1. Write the Thesis. Then write the Conclusion by observing the conclusions to each chapter. Write the Introduction LAST.
2. You should be able to know exactly what the **thesis** says by reading only the Introduction and Conclusion, and the Introduction and Conclusion to each chapter. If you can't make sense of your argument reading it in this way, the Introductions and Conclusions need work.
3. You should be able to know exactly what each Chapter says by reading only the Introduction and Conclusion, and the first line of each paragraph. If you can't follow the argument by reading in this way, the structure of the chapter needs work.

University of Kent

A Very Interesting Title

by

A Very Bright Student

**A Dissertation Submitted to the
Brussels School of International Studies
of the Department of Politics and International Relations
in the Faculty of Social Science**

**In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Award of the Degree of
Master of Arts in International Relations**

**Brussels,
Monday 12 August 2014**

(11, 241 words)

Organisation of the Dissertation

1. **Title Page**
 - a. Must be visible from the front cover of the dissertation
 - b. Must include the word count*.
2. **Blank Page**
 - a. (To ensure no writing is visible through to the cover page)
3. Abstract – (optional)
4. Acknowledgements – (optional)
5. Dedication – (optional)
6. **Table of Contents** (see overleaf)

Sample Table of Contents

A Very Interesting Title

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Notes:

1. Preliminary pages are numbered in lower-case roman numerals at the bottom centre of each page;
2. Page numbers begin with 1 at the first page of the Introduction, and pages are numbered henceforth sequentially to the very last page;
3. Page numbers should appear at the top-right hand corner on each page **except** for the first page of each chapter where they appear at the bottom centre of the page.