Planning a Dissertation/ Project

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Agenda

General principles of dissertation writing:
• Structural framework
• Time management
• Working with the literature
• Some Practical issues

Dissertation ≠ long essay

Content:
• Topic is your choice
• More
  – depth & detail
  – ‘angles’ covered
  – literature used
  – critical/summative evaluation of the literature
  – independent, ‘original’ research

Physical artefact:
• Stricter on formatting (font type & size, line spacing)
• Formal presentation (division of contents into chapters/sections)
• More formal writing style
• Binding format
• Use of graphics

Dissertations (in general)
• Present clear question(s) that the dissertation seeks to answer
• Review the relevant literature in your field
• Engage in independent thought and research
• Explain and justify methods used
• Present findings clearly and demonstrate how they relate to the original question

What (else) does your school want from you ?
> look at sample dissertations

Supervisory relationship

Supervisor should …
• monitor your progress
• give advice
• recommend literature
• give you feedback on a draft
• not proofread your work
• not chase you up

You should …
• make and maintain contact
• keep appointments
• be prepared
  • Have an agenda/ have ‘something to show’
• be open to new ideas and criticism
• take responsibility for your research

Tips on Organisation

• Keep a ‘logbook’ (paper/electronic) to capture ideas/ information/ references
• Compile reading list
  • Maintain reading records/ annotated bibliography
• Use a referencing management programme (RefWorks, Mendeley, Microsoft Office…)
• Keep copies/backups ‘elsewhere’
• Do NOT throw away ‘used’ notes & discarded material
Finding a topic

- Personal interest
- Controversies/new areas in your subject
  - Things you disagree with
  - Items in the News
    - that can be applied/linked to your subject

Start early. Keep ideas in one place - start an ideas book or a box file to keep useful notes or articles.

From Topic to Research aim

What are you interested in?
- International students

What exactly?
- The expectations international students have

What about them?
- What they are and whether they are/have been met
- Who cares?
- Universities do, a lot of competition for International students

So what can you contribute?
- A comparison between different groups
  - Ask them what their expectations were before they came to Kent
  - Ask them whether their expectations were met

So what?
- Recommendations as to how to promote the UoK (and manage expectations)
- Recommendations as to how international students can prepare

Nice topic, but is it …?

- Relevant
- Realistic
- Interesting
- Original
- Achievable
- Accessible
- Practical
- Ambitious enough
- Up-to-date
- Affordable

Research topic

- The expectations of international (Asian) students

Research aims and objectives

- Aims: what do want to achieve
- Objectives: how you are going to achieve the aim

Research question

- You will only be able to finalise this when you are writing up

Research topic

- The expectations of international students

Aims and objectives

What is a research aim?

A general statement, which reflects the intention or purpose of your chosen area of research

- what you want to achieve

Example:

To evaluate the expectations that international students from Asia have of the University of Kent.

Aims and objectives

What are research objectives?

Specific statements relating to the defined goal or aim of your research

1. To understand the expectations international students from Asia have
2. To establish the factors affecting the expectations of Asian international students
3. To assess whether expectations vary by country of origin
4. To find out if expectations are met, once the students are in-country
5. To offer recommendations to UK universities on …
How?

1. To understand the expectations international students from Asia have
2. To establish the factors affecting the expectations of Asian international students
3. To assess whether expectations vary by country of origin
4. To find out if expectations are met, once the students are in-country
5. To offer recommendations to UK universities on...

Doing research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empirical research</td>
<td>Library research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Literature</td>
<td>• findings from other people’s research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identify a cohort</td>
<td>• Primary data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Questionnaires</td>
<td>• Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interviews</td>
<td>• Interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Data analysis</td>
<td>• Theories/ suggestions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SPEAK TO SUPERVISOR

Literature
- Identify a cohort
- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Data analysis

Primary Empirical research
- Qualitative
- Quantitative
- Experiments
- Takes time
- Needs cooperation
- Requires pilot study
- May involve ethical issues

Secondary Library research

Generic stages in your Research Project

- Choose research area
- Preliminary research (scoping)
- Decide on research topic
- Decide on methodology
  - Submit or present proposal
- Finalise methodology
- Conduct research (fieldwork)
- Analyse findings/ process data
- Write up
  - Submit finished dissertation

Dissertation structure

- Title
- Acknowledgements
- Abstract
- Table of contents
- Main body
- Bibliography
- Appendices

- Introduction
- Literature review
- ‘n’ Chapters
- Conclusion

Gantt Chart for project planning

- Time Management example
- Choose research area
- Preliminary research
- Decide research topic
- Decide methodology
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Time Management example

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**Dissertation structure**

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- Introduction
- Background info
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Findings/results
- Analysis
- Discussion/analysis
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

**Literature review**

- Should demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the topic
- Should provide context and justification for your work
- But **NOT** be a descriptive list of sources

The ‘find-out-all-you–and’ approach will lead to a ‘write-all-you-know-about’ dissertation.

**Literature Review – Key stages**

1. Find relevant literature
2. Identify themes/ideas/theories/approaches
3. Introduce ideas by themes
4. Explain each theme (in a relevant and critical way)
5. General references to the topic area
6. Direct references to the topic area

**Some questions your literature review should answer:**

- What are the key sources/landmark studies?
- Who are the main thinkers?
- What are the key concepts, theories and ideas? Can they be grouped?
- What are the main questions and problems that have been addressed to date?
  - What other research (perhaps not directly on the topic) might be relevant to your investigation?
  - What are the sub-areas of the topic you need to explore?
  - How is knowledge on the topic structured and organised?
  - What are the main research methodologies used?
  - What are the origins and definitions of the topic?
  - What are the political standpoints?
  - What are the major issues and debates about the topic?
  - What has not been said/covered?
  - When, where, by whom was this knowledge produced?
  - etc.

**Staying on target**

- Revised research topic

**Critical thinking**

**Question:**
- Date
- Source
- Bias
- Statistics/Percentages
- Sample size
- Conditions of data research
- Language
- Assumptions
- Conclusions

**Ask:**
- What does this mean?
- Why is this significant?
- Is this convincing? Why/why not?
- What are the implications?
- Is it successful?
- Is it transferable?
- How and where else can it be applied?
- What can be learnt from it?
- What needs doing now?
Writing tips

• Learn from the best
  • Sample dissertation in the library
  • Academic publication in your field

• Use your computer
  • Update IT skills (workshops)
  • Add specialist vocab to the dictionary
  • Use auto-save
  • Use referencing management tool

Discussion section

• This is the most important part of your dissertation!

• This is where you demonstrate you understanding/ thinking.

• This is where you score points.

Discussion section

• Does your study answer the questions posed at the beginning?

• What do your findings tell us about the concepts, theories and ideas you discussed in your literature review?

• Do your findings confirm, add to or challenge existing knowledge?

• How do your findings compare with that of other researchers?

Discussion section cont.

• Could your research methods have had any impact on your findings?

• Are there any other limitations within your research that could have affected the results?

• What is the significance of your findings?

• Why is your argument/study better than the alternatives?

• What recommendations do you have for further research?

That’s all?

For today, yes!

• Get thinking
• Get planning
• Get writing

Good luck,
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Introduction

• establishes the context, background and/or importance of the topic
• gives a brief synopsis of the relevant literature
• indicates a problem, controversy or a gap in the field of study
• establishes the desirability of the research
• lists the research questions or hypotheses
• provides a synopsis of the research method(s)
• explains the significance or value of the study
• defines certain key terms
• provides an overview of the dissertation structure
• explains reasons for the writer’s personal interest in the topic
Writing tips
• Start somewhere easy
• Write it now, edit it later
• Don’t limit yourself to a keyboard
• Set word targets, but don’t fixate on them
• Write-up research as you go along
• Allow time for proof-reading
• Allow time for printing & binding

Conclusion
• Summarises the content
• Restates the aims
• Summarises the findings
• Suggests implications
• States the significance of the findings
• Points to the limitations of the current study
• Makes recommendations for further work

Editing
• Does my writing follow the outline in my introduction?
  – Have I put things in the right sections?
• Is it logical?
• Is the literature relevant? Does it give the context?
• Are my ideas linked?
• Have I said what I meant to say?
• Am I clear?
• Is anything too vague/ too absolute?
• Have I answered “So what?”
• Have I answered “How and why?”
• Have I used an academic voice?

Academic voice
Use boosters to establish authority
• Current research clearly links methods of fundraising to changes in public and private spaces.
• The relationship between migration and population change was shown to be very strong, which proves that migration is the major force between population change.
• Of course, these statistics also fail to reflect the existence and behaviour of non-users of the library who did not participate in the survey.

Use hedging (cautious language) to make statements as accurate and fair as possible
• Johnson (2007) appears to ignore the adverse psychological side-effects of this approach.
• The risks of the new vaccine may have been overstated.
• There are certainly cases where this would seem to have been the only possible method of transmission.
• E. coli, when found in conjunction with urethritis, often indicate infection higher in the uro-genital tract.

Proofreading
• Referencing style
• Page numbering
• Headers/footers
• Punctuation and grammar
• Spelling
• Repetition of vocabulary
• Line spacing
• Font size
• Correct style
• Reads well
• Makes sense
• Proofread once more
• Check your printed copies
• Allow time for binding
• Check submission rules
• Submit in plenty of time
• Relax, it’s over!!