

KEEP CALM AND FINISH YOUR DISSERTATION

Dissertation writing: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid

Table 12.1 Dissertation writing – summary of *good* practice to adopt

Phase	Summary of good practice to adopt
Dissertation Proposal	– Provide background information on research topic – Justify the need for your study – Identify overall research aim and specific research objectives – Outline your research methods – Estimate duration of dissertation phases
Abstract	– Write it last! – Identify the problem/issue that you investigated – Outline how you did your research (i.e. your research methods) – State your main findings/conclusion(s) – Indicate your recommendations – Include keywords – Keep to one paragraph (it is not an essay!) – Apply the abstract template!
Introduction	– As in Dissertation Proposal, and: – Show initiative (in sourcing information) – Produce clear, achievable research objectives – Emphasize the value of/need for your research – Remind the reader of your research objectives – Let the reader know about the topics you intend covering – Develop meaningful discussions, providing evidence of critical evaluation (offer views, support views) – Use wide variety of sources (websites, journals, books, reports, etc.) – Reference sources properly – Avoid dissertation <i>drift</i> – keep focused on your research objectives
Literature Review	

Systematic Reviews	– Summarize main Lit. Rev. findings and highlight emerging issues – Provide link (and justification) for empirical research – Frame your research question using PICO – Find literature to meet your research question, adhering to Evans's hierarchy of preferred evidence – Exploit online resources (e.g. MEDLINE) – Justify exclusion of literature – Pool data – Place findings in context – Use AMSTAR checklist
Research Methods	– Identify your research strategy (case study, survey, grounded theory, experimental research, etc.) – Justify why your chosen research strategy meets your research needs – Describe your data collection techniques (interviews, questionnaires, documents, observation, types of experiments, etc.) – Explain where you will get your data, and state your sample size – Summarize the above, using diagrams where possible – Explain how you will analyse your collected data (framework for data analysis) – Outline limitations/potential problems (but explain why your work is valid and reliable)
Findings and Discussion	– Keep it simple: describe the data, compare/contrast with Lit. Rev. findings – Stick to your framework for analysis (if you have one!) – Keep focused on relevant research objective(s), thus avoiding <i>drift</i> – Summarize main empirical findings – Place evidence of (non-confidential) empirical research in appendices (questionnaires, interview transcripts/notes, experiment results, etc.)
Conclusion	– Remind reader of your initial research objectives – Summarize Lit. Rev. and Empirical Research findings (related to research objectives) – Elicit main conclusions from your findings – Offer recommendations (specific to your research objectives), including ideas about implementation – Include self-reflection (limitations of study, lessons learnt, advice to others)

Table 12.2 Dissertation writing – summary of *bad* practice to avoid

Phase	Summary of bad practice to avoid
Dissertation Proposal	– Lack of subject focus – Vague research objectives – Over-ambitious – Unrealistic timescales – Not justifying need for research
Abstract	– Write it without having a clue what you are supposed to be doing! – Engage in mini Literature Review (not the place for that) – Fail to provide basic information about your work – Write an essay (it is an <i>abstract</i>, not an essay)

Continued

Table 12.2 (Continued)

Phase	Summary of bad practice to avoid
Introduction	– Paying scant attention to Background reading – Too dependent on supervisor for research ideas – Devoting too much attention to Background reading! – Lack of continuity between sub-sections – Unconvincing rationale (or no rationale!) on the value of the work
Literature Review	– Ill-structured – Superficial, skeletal sub-sections (lists, simple descriptions, lack of discussion) – Concentrating almost exclusively on web sources – Not offering, or justifying, your own views (i.e. devoid of critical evaluation) – Lack of development of ideas – Inconsistent referencing styles – Plagiarizing work – No sense of direction – No obvious relevance to research objectives – No evidence of need for empirical research – Ends abruptly with no obvious link to next section (Research Methods)
Systematic Reviews	– Vague research question – Unmethodical literature search process – Publication bias – Focusing at the lower end of Evans's hierarchy of preferred evidence (uncontrolled trials, expert opinion, etc.) – Inappropriate pooling of data – Failing to place results in context
Research Methods	– Spending the bulk of your time describing a whole realm of research strategies (case studies, ethnography, experimental research, surveys, etc.) – Not justifying your chosen research strategy – Misunderstanding the nature of qualitative/quantitative research – Introducing unexplained philosophical terms! – Producing a long descriptive monologue on the different ways that data can be collected (questionnaires, interviews, etc.) but: – Lack of detail on how and where you will collect data or what you intend doing with the data once you get it
Findings and Discussion	– Having an unstructured, confusing approach to analysing your collected data or using inappropriate analysis techniques, or using appropriate techniques incorrectly! – Coming to conclusions without any evidence of meaningful discussion – Not relating your findings/discussion to your research objectives/Lit. Rev.
Conclusion	– Not revising your research objectives to check on whether or not you have achieved them (as a result of your Lit. Rev. and Empirical Research) – Not linking your conclusions, if you have any, to your Lit. Rev. or Empirical Research findings – Not summarizing your work – Offering no recommendations on the way forward – Treating your Conclusion as if it were another Literature Review! – Ending abruptly!

Practical issues: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid

Table 12.3 Practical issues – summary of *good* practice to adopt

Practical issues	Summary of good practice to adopt
Presenting your work	– Prepare and practise for your presentation – Give out handouts of your (e.g. PowerPoint) presentation at the start – Have a logical structure: → who you are → what you are going to talk about → your research objectives → how you did your research → what you found . . . Literature Review . . . Empirical Research → your recommendations – Invite questions
The viva	– Prior to your viva, summarize, for revision purposes, your different dissertation chapters – Anticipate questions (and prepare answers): → on preliminary issues (e.g. research focus, need for your research, etc.) → aspects of your Lit. Rev. (scope, depth, focus, range of sources, relevance, your interpretation of what other people are saying, etc.) → your research methods and data collection techniques (relevant, justified, clearly explained?) → how you analysed your empirical work → your conclusions (justified?) and associated recommendations – Have a mock viva – Write examiner questions down – Take your time answering questions – Defend your work!
The marking scheme	– Get hold of how your dissertation will be marked – Use it as a checklist as you do the work (are your research objectives clear, do you show evidence of critical evaluation? Etc.) – Pick up easy marks (for abstract, dissertation structure, referencing, research objectives) – Make sure that you know what you are getting the big marks for in your dissertation – Before submission, have a go at marking it yourself!
Grammar	– Watch your language! – Know the difference between <i>it's</i> and <i>its</i> – Apply the apostrophe correctly – Keep your infinitives intact – Use the colon and semi-colon properly
Plagiarism	– Understand your institution's rules and regulations on plagiarism – Give credit where credit is due!
Research Ethics	– Complete a Research Ethics Approval Form or NHS equivalent – Adhere to the core principles of <i>transparency, confidentiality, voluntary participation, no harm</i> to your participants (or you) and <i>impartiality</i>

Table 12.4 Practical issues – summary of *bad* practice to avoid

Practical issues	Summary of bad practice to avoid
Presenting your work	– Fumbling with the equipment – Rushing through your presentation at break-neck speed! – Cluttering your screen with text – Standing in front of your projector (blocking your presentation!) – Reading directly from your notes – Not anticipating obvious questions – Rushing your answers – Arguing with the examiners (there is a difference between having a professional disagreement and rudeness) – Giving monosyllabic answers – Not referring to your dissertation when answering questions (you are being tested on the work that you have submitted, so it is to your work that you refer when giving answers)
The viva	– Ignoring the things that you are getting marked on – Confusing <i>it's</i> with <i>its</i> – Misplacing the apostrophe – Unnecessarily splitting infinitives – Inappropriate use of the colon and semi-colon – Copying the work of others without due acknowledgement – Failing to complete a Research Ethics Approval Form – Ignoring the core principles of <i>transparency, confidentiality, voluntary participation, no harm</i> to your participants (or you) and <i>impartiality</i>.
The marking scheme	
Grammar	
Plagiarism	
Research Ethics	

Final Assault exercise

Read through the good and bad practice in *dissertation writing* (P.254-256).

1. Highlight which of the points (Bad/Good) you recognise from your undergraduate dissertation.
2. Consider how you will address the 'bad' points for your postgraduate research.
3. Note and discuss with class.

Read through the good and bad practice in practical issues (P.256-258).

1. Highlight which of the points (Bad/Good) you recognise from your undergraduate dissertation.
2. Consider how you will address the 'bad' points for your postgraduate research.
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Appendix A: Sample Introduction

Background • Research focus • Overall research aim and individual research objectives

Background

The traditional approach to teaching and learning has, for millennia, rested on the central premise that for instruction to take place, the tutor and student co-exist in the same place at the same time. Aristotle's lectures, preserved in the writings of Plato, are examples of such an approach, where the student is educated on particular topics through the mechanism of illuminating conversations – *dialogues* – between tutor and student (Taylor 1955). However, few universities have the generous resources required to support one-to-one tuition as the prevailing mode of educational delivery; rather, the common method consists of a combination of lectures, seminars/tutorials and, where appropriate, laboratory work; where each of the aforementioned ways of imparting knowledge involves face-to-face instruction and discussion.

At a simple level, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are used frequently to support the traditional teaching and learning paradigm. Academic staff regularly employ presentational software, such as PowerPoint, to facilitate lectures; during laboratory sessions, university networked computer systems are used by students to access applications software and print to a common printer; and email systems are used by students to send messages to one another and receive advice from tutors. Haywood *et al.* (2004) believe that most students about to enter university own a PC with Internet access, and that they use ICT regularly, for a variety of activities, ranging from recreational purposes, such as browsing online music stores or emailing friends, to more complex activities, such as media downloads or shopping; and that as a result, their expectations of ICT-usage at university are high.

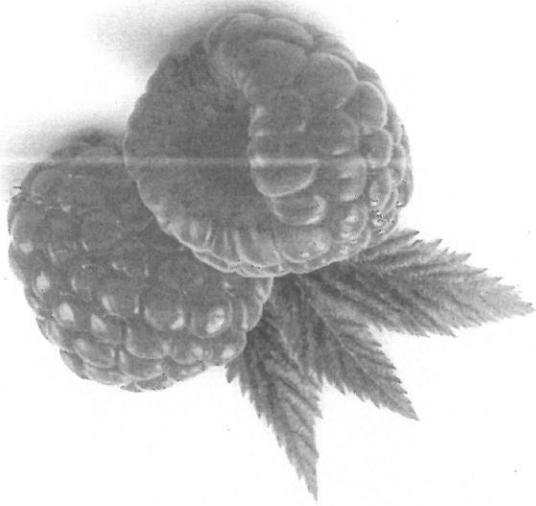
Universities not only utilize ICT at a simple level – for emailing, printing documents, student access to common application software – but have

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