

UNIT 7: THE DISSERTATION

Choosing a Topic

Probably from an early stage in your studies, you will be thinking about possible dissertation topics. The topic may emerge from something in which you have a long-standing interest, or it may be directly sparked off by something that you encounter when you are working on your modules. It goes without saying that the choice of topic is something to which you need to give very careful attention. Are you sufficiently interested in it to do the research necessary to generate a 15,000-word dissertation (MA and MTh) or a 30,000-word dissertation (MRes), and is it practical for you to do it? Will you be able to reach libraries, archives or field sites? Does the topic lend itself to treatment at the appropriate length and depth? It is often the case that people start with topics that are too broad, and have to narrow their focus. For example, 'The religious ideas of John Henry Newman (or of the Buddha)' would be far too broad. It could perhaps be narrowed down to the ideas that he explored in one or a couple of his writings (in the case of Newman), or at a particular period of his life, or to his ideas about particular issues. Once again, as with your essay titles, you need to work on formulating a question. The most important thing here is for you to identify a topic suitable for treatment at this level, and produce a coherent and well-presented piece of work, giving you scope to work to the best of your ability.

Once you have come up with a topic, or if you want advice on possible topics, contact your Programme Coordinator, who will put you in touch with the member of staff whose own subject expertise relates to it best. If you are at a very unfocussed stage, the staff member will be able to talk you through various options, either in person or over e-mail or the phone. But do not expect him or her to give you a topic. An essential part of the dissertation process is identifying the topic, and formulating the research question, for yourself.

The Proposal

Once you are happy that you have come up with a topic which is more or less workable, you should write a proposal, and then send it to the proposed supervisor for his or her assessment. The proposal should contain a draft title, and explain, in clear and concise language what your thesis will be about, what specific problems it will try to address, and what specific sources or methods you will or might use. There is a pro-forma for this and one has been attached to this section of the Module.

Your approach to the proposal should resemble your approach to the dissertation, in that it should be very focussed, and should discuss specific analysis of specific sources of information. You should try to give as much detail as possible in terms of what primary sources (see above, Section Three, for primary and secondary sources) you will consult, and where you will find these, either published or unpublished. To this end, the proposal needs to contain a bibliography of primary sources, and, in its body, needs to

make reference to particular items on this bibliography. If you anticipate problems with access to primary sources (for example, in terms of distance, or even language), you'll need to think about how these might be overcome, choose your topic accordingly, and be sure to address potential difficulties in your proposal.

You should also attempt a very brief literature review of secondary sources, that is, of recent (more or less) scholarly work. This could be along the lines of 'This subject has been discussed in the work of A and B, and most recently by C. D has concentrated on x and E has focussed on y. This dissertation will consider the following...' The literature review of secondary sources immediately signals to the assessor that you have identified the academic discourse into which your proposed dissertation could fit, and that you are familiar (or will become familiar) with the work of those scholars who already work in this field. It shows that you are ready to join their debates, even if in a fairly modest way.

Your proposed supervisor will give you feedback on your proposal, and tell you whether he or she thinks that it is viable as it stands, or needs further refinement. You should not embark on detailed work on the dissertation until you have obtained the approval of the proposed supervisor, and he or she has indicated their willingness to supervise it. (Technically, the Programme Coordinator appoints the supervisor). It would also be wise to wait for confirmation that you have passed all your modules, as you cannot submit a dissertation unless you have passed the taught element of the course. You need not wait for your Part 1 work to be formally approved at an exam board unless your marks are very near the pass/fail borderline, in which case you should consult your Programme Coordinator about whether you should start on the dissertation.

Working on the Dissertation

Once your proposal has been approved, you can start on the research. Obviously, the study and research methods that have been outlined earlier come into play at this point and you may find that the research techniques outlined in the 'Optional' section are also useful. A well-organised and methodical approach to the research will pay dividends. It is important to keep in regular contact with your supervisor, both to discuss the way in which the work should develop, and later on, to receive comments on drafts. You can stay in touch via email or telephone, or by meeting your supervisor face-to-face. All these methods are advisable, although personal meetings do have some advantages. The onus is on you to initiate contact with your supervisor, to give to your supervisor an indication of the level of supervision you will require, and to submit drafts or outlines of the thesis. When you start to write, you will find that 15,000 words (MA and MTh) or 30,000 words (MRes) will get taken up in no time, so it is vital not to get side tracked, and to remain focussed on the main question or questions. One good idea is to summarise your thesis in a couple of sentences or in a point-form outline on one page, and to keep this handy so that you can refer back to it regularly.

As we have stressed throughout this module, good presentation is very important. You should consult the University's guidelines about the practical aspects of presenting your thesis.

Your supervisor will set out at which point he or she would like to see written drafts. In all cases, enough time must be left for the supervisor to properly read drafts, and for such comments and requests for changes to be acted upon. In particular it is essential that your supervisor sees and approves the final draft.