

Tips for writing your proposal and dissertation

• **Start early** – you will need time to think about your topic, to do research, to write and to revise. You will also need time to discuss your work with your supervisor.

• **Choose a topic** that interests you and that you are passionate about. It should be a topic that you can write about for a long time. It should be a topic that you can research and that you can discuss with your supervisor.

• **Write a proposal** that outlines your topic, your research questions, your methodology and your expected findings. This will help you to focus your research and to plan your dissertation.

• **Write your dissertation** in a clear, concise and logical way. Use a good structure and make sure you have a strong introduction, a clear thesis statement and a strong conclusion.

Tip 1

Write your Introduction after the other chapters

Content of a dissertation

Opposite is a general description of the structure and content of a dissertation.

Main point(s), for the purpose of this session, are in red and relate to when chapters are written.

Introduction will be initially written early in the process. But it needs to be redone after the other chapters are completed.

ABSTRACT	Written last	CONCISE EXPLANATION OF THE MAIN DETAILS. Research question, aims and objectives How and why you approached the research in the way you did. Main findings, conclusions, and implications.
INTRODUCTION	Leave until other chapters complete.	INTRODUCES THE FOCUS OF THE DISSERTATION. Set out the focus, context and potential importance of your work. Outline the A and O. Explain the rationale(s) for doing the work – academic, applied and personal. Briefly set out methodology/method. Explain the structure of the dissertation.
LITERATURE REVIEW	Done early but continues until end	CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND. Critical review of literature – not just descriptive summaries of people’s work. Cover development of knowledge – themes, timelines, differences,. Identification of gap to be filled – importance of your work
METHODOLOGY		EXPLANATION OF METHODOLOGY AND METHODS. Choice of methodology, methods, conceptualisation (quantitative), sampling, instrument design, analysis, ethics. Enough detail to allow replication.
RESULTS		EXPLANATION OF YOUR RESULTS/FINDINGS. Present the specific results. Indicate why specific results are important – these are your findings. Clear and concise presentation. Only include tables/figures/graphs/quotations that serve a purpose.
DISCUSSION		CRITICAL REVIEW OF YOUR FINDINGS. Review your research findings in the light of theory/other research. Identify the significance of your research. Discuss implications of findings for theory, research and practice. Provide an explanation of the limitations.
CONCLUSION		WHAT YOUR MAIN FINDINGS MEAN FOR THE TOPIC AREA. Not a summary. - focus is on what you have found, not how you found it out. Could be organised by objectives etc. – outcomes not process Recommendations - future research directions and applied recommendations.

Tip 2

Write with a purpose

Process of writing

- Begin by **planning the dissertation** – chapter by chapter – based on the overall argument you want to present. Think of it like planning a story – the chapters have to form a coherent text taking the reader from the beginning to the end.
- **Write with a purpose**. Ask yourself what is the relevance of this section, this paragraph, to my argument and is the progression of ideas logical.
- Do not expect to get it right first time. **Check and revise** what you have written.
- It is important to **leave time at the end** to check whether what you say at the beginning matches where you ended up the dissertation. **Work backwards from the end**.

Tip 3

Write simply and clearly

General writing style

- **Use short sentences** - using short sentences forces you to break your ideas into simple understandable statements. Sentences should not be more than 20 words.
- **Break up long sentences** - when you have a long sentence you would make it clearer by breaking the sentence up.
- **Use common words** - use words readers understand.
- **Specialist terminology** - If you use specialist words or acronyms explain them.

Tip 4

Adopt a critical approach in your thinking and writing

Critical writing

- Demonstrating understanding of the topic by:
 - analysis not description.
 - discussion not just facts.
 - arguments and conclusions supported by evidence.
 - **Making your voice heard** through including your thoughts and reflections – use wording such as: ‘this is important because...’, ‘the conclusion that can be drawn from this is..’.
- Be careful that what you draw attention to by making such statements is based on **what the literature/data is telling** you and **not what you would like to be the case**.

Critical writing

(Cottrell S., Study Skills Handbook, 1999, 2003, 2008)

How to move from a descriptive to a critical writing style.

Descriptive writing

Critical writing

States what happened.	Identifies its significance.
States what something is like.	Evaluates its strengths and weaknesses.
States order in which things happened.	Makes reasoned judgements about why.
Says how to do something.	Argues case from the evidence.
Explains what a theory says.	Shows why the theory is/is not relevant.
Notes method used.	Indicates whether something is suitable.
States different components.	Weights up importance of components.
States options.	Gives reasons for selection of options
Lists details.	Evaluates the relative significance of details.
States links between items.	Shows relevance of links
Gives information.	Draws conclusions

Tip 5

In writing about quantitative results the text interprets the tables, it does not simply repeat what is in the tables

Reporting quantitative research

- Be **comprehensive** in setting out what you did.
- Statistical analysis is a way of dealing with information/data in a way that makes our understanding more complete. It is **the interpretation of the analyses that is most important not the analytical tools.**
- **Tables and graphs** should contain enough information to be **understandable** without the supporting text.
- Care needs to be taken in writing the text so as **to interpret, and not repeat the tables/graphs** and **not to make statements that are what you would like to the case** – extent of generalisation, interpretation of hypothesis tests etc.
- **You cannot ask yourself enough ‘why?’** when explaining your results.

Tip 6

In writing about qualitative results do not simply give lists of quotations without synthesising or interpreting them

Reporting qualitative research

- **Findings and discussion** are often in the same chapter.
- **Your data/findings have priority.** The literature is included to corroborate or challenge your findings.
- **Use of direct quotes** is done to help the reader understand how findings were derived from the data – similar to tables in quantitative.
- **Problem 1** – simply summarising what the participant said without illustrating with quotations.
- **Problem 2** – simply giving quotations without synthesis or interpretation – this is not analysis.
- Somewhere it is normal to **reflect on the study** and any biases that might have arisen from the researcher.

Tip 7

The discussion text has to adopt a critical stance

The discussion chapter

- Provides a **critical review** of your findings – see critical writing. The presence or absence of this criticality makes it better or worse.
- The chapter
 - focuses and **gives primacy to your research findings** which you compare and contrast with theory/other research.
 - discusses the **implications/significance of your findings** for theory, research and practice.
 - provides an **explanation of the limitations**.

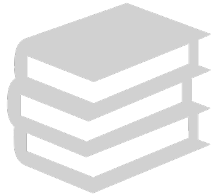
Tip 8

The final stage of your dissertation, checking and revising your document, will take longer than you might think

Checks on written presentation

- Is each **paragraph** dealing with only one idea?
- Are there **sentences** that are too long and complicated?
- Is the **spelling and grammar** correct?
- Does the **visual appearance** of my dissertation set the right image?
- Is there any '**widowing**' – sections, lists, tables and figures.
- Has my **signposting**, headings and sub-headings, been applied consistently and numbered correctly?
- Have I used an **appropriate academic style**? No abbreviations such as 'don't'.
- Have I **conformed to the requirements** set out in the Dissertation Handbook

References



Cottrell S. (2008): Study Skills Handbook. Palgrave.



Griffith University (2004): Written Communication Toolkit.



Holloway I. and Brown L. (2012): Essentials of a qualitative doctorate. Left Coast Press.