

WRITING A MASTER'S DISSERTATION IN SOCIAL SCIENCES



The purpose of the dissertation is to give students the opportunity to work on a suitable subject of their own choice and to utilise the techniques developed in the research modules. A MA dissertation is designed to assess a student's ability to define a researchable 'thesis' in the light of past and current academic research.

Students need to demonstrate a capacity for independent thought and to use their critical and analytical abilities, including the use of appropriate research methods, in the interpretation of a substantial quantity of relevant material (empirical and theoretical). Further, they need to be able to write up the results of any research carried out in an extended and coherent form, paying close attention to matters of structure in addition to normal expectations regarding referencing and bibliographic information.¹

◆ Choosing the topic

When choosing a topic for your dissertation, you could ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you know about your potential topic?
- Have you previously studied this topic? Rate your knowledge.
- How familiar are you with the terminology, concepts and issues?
- How familiar are you with key authors, theories, paradigms?
- Is your topic substantial enough for a MA dissertation?
- What do you still need to do or explore in order to develop a basic or better understanding of your topic?²

Select a topic in which you are interested and about which you believe you have some knowledge. This does not mean necessarily that you should pick the topic for which, currently, you have the most background knowledge. For instance, suppose there is an issue where you know the standard literature well. Unfortunately, you find the topic rather boring and you have no thoughts of your own about it. If you decide to write your essay on that topic you may well produce something that is itself boring to read, contains little but a summary of standard material and will merit only a mediocre grade. It is better to choose a topic where you feel more strongly motivated to express your own views.

The subject area should not be so broad that it is impossible to read the appropriate literature in the limited time available; nor should it be so narrow that there is insufficient literature to provide the stimulus for writing a complete dissertation. It is also wise to ensure that the relevant literature is easy to identify and is readily available.³

¹ 'The dissertation'. University of Durham. Available online: <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sass/dissertation.pdf>> [Accessed: 17 May 2007]

² 'What do you know about your topic?'. Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London. Available online: <<http://port.igrs.sas.ac.uk/researchtopicknowyourtopic.htm>> [Accessed: 17 May 2007]

³ University of Dundee. Available online: <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/philosophy/current/undergrad/module/PI40007_Dissertation_06-07.htm> [Accessed 17 May 2007]

◆ Structure

A proposed structure for the key sections/chapters of a Master's dissertation in Social Sciences could be as follows:

- **Introduction**
- **Literature Review**
- **Methodology**
- **Findings and Discussion/Evaluation**
[these could be separate chapters depending on length]
- **Conclusion**

◆ Questions to ask

While preparing each part of your dissertation, it is worth setting yourself the following checklist and noting whether you answered these questions or not⁴:

QUESTIONS	YES/NO/ NOT SURE
<p>1 Dissertation topic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Is the topic clear and well defined? Does it involve a problem, question, or hypothesis that sets the agenda and points precisely to what needs to be explored or discovered?■ Is the topic of genuine relevance or interest within your subject discipline? Does it pick up on important or interesting themes or subjects arising from your studies?	
<p>2 Literature review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Have you accessed the most recent literature of relevance to your topic, as well as seminal sources from the past?■ Do you refer to major books, articles? Since quality is more important than quantity – how well have you selected your material?■ Does the literature review hang together, to show how the ideas and findings have developed, or is it merely a shopping list of books and articles?■ Is the review critical? Does it briefly evaluate, showing how your	

⁴ 'Writing your dissertation'. University of Southampton. Available online: <<http://www.academic-skills.soton.ac.uk/studyguides/Writing%20Your%20Dissertation.doc>> [Accessed 17 May 2007]

<p>dissertation fits into what is mistaken or lacking in other studies? The literature review should provide a critically appraised context for your studies.</p>	
<p>3 Theoretical underpinnings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does theory permeate the structure from beginning to end, from statement of problem to conclusion? Are you asking yourself a key question, presenting a thesis, or defending a statement? Be clear about your approach. ■ Theory is the framework of your study – not a luxury. Your dissertation will be judged, in part, by how well you express and critically understand the theory you are using, and how clearly and consistently it is connected with the focus and methodology of your dissertation. 	
<p>4 Methodology</p> <p>Two chief criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is your choice of methods and research techniques well suited to the kind of problem you are studying? Methods work if they provide a persuasive response to your question, positive or negative. ■ Is your description of the methods you have adopted clear enough to take a blueprint and replicate? 	
<p>5 Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are your findings faithful to what you actually found – do you claim more than you should? ■ Have you provided enough evidence to make a convincing case? ■ Have you presented everything directly relevant to the question in such a way that the reader doesn't have to flip back and forth to make her or his own connections? ■ Are results or findings clearly and accurately written, easy to read, grasp and understand? 	
<p>6 Conclusions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have you answered the question <i>“So what? What should we do with your findings and conclusions? What do they imply?”</i> ■ Findings don't speak for themselves – they need to be analysed. Have you explained what your findings mean and their importance, in relation to theory and practice? 	

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◆ Presentation

Your final draft should include the following sections:

HEADING	DESCRIPTION
■ Title page	with a signed declaration that the dissertation is your own work
■ Abstract	a short overview of the work in your project
■ Table of contents	a list of page numbers for all major section headings, tables and figures
■ Introduction	a section explaining the background to the topic, defining your aim for the study and outlining the structure of the dissertation.
■ Literature Review	referring to key research relevant to your topic (if your topic is popular and a significant amount of research has been conducted on it, try to focus on recent literature mostly; do not refer to very old research as it most likely that it will be out-of-date), pointing out its value as well as possible limitations and indicating how your study is going to add to it.
■ Methodology	a section recommending appropriate approaches/methods for carrying out the research and commenting on their advantages and disadvantages. Amongst these, you will have to define the one you are going to use and justify your choice.
■ Results/ Findings	a section stating your original contributions and outcomes of your research.
■ Evaluation	taking a view on the results reached and critically evaluating them in the context of a hypothesis.
■ Conclusion	repeat your aim as stated in the introduction, summarise your main findings, stress the main issues surrounding them or your contribution to the field and make recommendations for further research.
■ References	a list of books and other publications that have been used and referred to in the text.
■ Bibliography [optional]	a list of sources which are recommended for further reading on the topic, and which you might have read in order to inform your study but have NOT actually used in the text.
■ Appendices [SINGULAR: Appendix]	supplementary material which could relate but is not central to your topic so as for readers to understand your case should be included in appendices.