Dissertations and major projects can seem daunting, as they are probably the biggest piece of work you've done and worth more marks than most other pieces of coursework. However, the good news is that a dissertation or project isn't something totally new; it brings together the research and writing skills you have learned throughout your course and gives you an opportunity to apply these to a topic that interests you.

You may have developed your research skills across different assignments and at different points during your course, so it is good to reflect back over what you have done, and any feedback you've had, to see how it can be applied to your dissertation or project. Doing the basics well, like planning, structuring and referencing, will provide a strong foundation and enable you to sustain your work over a longer period of time, and word count!

Having a clear question and direction for your research will keep you focused and on track; this is something your supervisor can advise on, so it is good to keep in contact with them. Breaking the overall project down into different steps and then into smaller, specific tasks will let you see how to get started, and then keep going.

This advice in this guide will help you apply your research skills to finding a question, planning, conducting, and communicating your research, and completing your project successfully.

Planning your dissertation

It's natural to feel slightly directionless at the start of any dissertation or major project because you are not sure what to research or how to find the information you need. Start early and allow yourself some time for reading around topics that interest you and scoping out the kinds of sources that are available. This initial reading, thinking and planning time is really valuable and will provide a good basis for focusing your ideas into a research question.

The guidance on this page gives strategies for identifying a topic, refining this into a clearer research question, and starting to plan how you will answer it.

What does a dissertation look like?

A dissertation is an extended piece of written work which communicates the results of independent research into a topic of your own choice.

At one level all dissertations ask you to do broadly the same things:

- Formulate a clear question that your dissertation seeks to answer
- Review the relevant literature in your field
- Engage in independent thought and research
- Explain and justify whatever methods you use
- Present your findings clearly and demonstrate how they relate to your original question

What does your department do…?

Ask if you can have a look at finished dissertations from your department to get an idea of how they look and what they should contain.

Finding a topic

Finding the topic and question for your dissertation can take longer than you think. You shouldn't feel worried if you don't hit on the ideal topic straight away... you have enough time to be creative and enjoy exploring your subject. At this stage no ideas are barred!
Good sources of ideas are:

- Something you've always wondered about
- Lecture notes and old essays
- Flicking through current journals
- Media / news items
- Things you disagree with
- A hunch that you have… is there evidence for it?
- Controversies / new areas in your subject
- Talking with friends

Thinking outside your subject area may also help – are there any current affairs issues or controversies that you can apply your subject to?

It's never too early to start thinking of ideas. Keep them in one place - start an ideas book or a box file to keep any notes or articles you find that might be useful.

What does your department do…?
At this early stage, find out the word length and deadline for your dissertation – note them down somewhere obvious – this will influence the size of project you undertake.

Going from a topic to a question
A dissertation question is not the same as a topic…it has to be phrased so that it can be answered in a specific and focused way. There are various ways that you can get from your topic to a question:

- Do some reading around your topic – are there any gaps in current research that could provide a question?
- If you usually write too much – think smaller and focus on one narrow aspect of your topic.
- If you usually don't write enough – think bigger and link some related areas of your topic together.

Think of two factors that might influence your topic – could they be put together to make a question?

**Topic** = representation of women in the media

**Factor 1** = TV advertising
**Factor 2** = Women's perception of their bodies

**Question**: Does the depiction of women in TV advertising influence women's perceptions of their bodies

Keep asking yourself "what in particular about this do I want to study?" until you get down to a question.

**Subject** = sociology

**Topic of interest** = elderly people

**More specifically** = elderly people in care

**Especially** = elderly people in residential care

**Precisely** = elderly people in warden-controlled residential care homes

**Question**: What do elderly people think of the service they get in warden-controlled residential care homes?

Remember your initial question isn't set in stone at this stage – it can be modified over the course of your project to suit what you end up investigating.

It is a good idea before you make any final decisions to discuss your choice of question with your supervisor, as they will have the academic experience to know what kinds of questions will be manageable, and which will need more refining.

Before settling on a question – ask yourself:

"Will it keep me interested for a long period?"
"Can I answer it with the time and resources that are available to me?"
"Is there someone who can supervise me and can I get on with them?"
"Do I have some idea of how to go about answering it?"

What does your department do…?
Check what you will have to include in a dissertation proposal. It should contain a clear summary of what, why and how you are going to do your research.
You may be asked to give a presentation on your work in the early stages of your dissertation. Treat this as an opportunity to:

- explain why your chosen topic is interesting;
- show how it fits into the context of your course generally;
- try out your plan for how to tackle the research.

Remember that you’re not presenting the end result of your research, but work-in-progress. Think about including some questions for your audience to encourage useful feedback.

Researching your dissertation

The research process for a dissertation or project is substantial and takes time. You will need to think about what you have to find out in order to answer your research question, and where and when you can find this information. As you gather your research, keep returning to your research question to check what you are doing is relevant.

This page gives advice on keeping on track during your research by using your plan, your method or research process, your structure, and your supervisor.

Doing the research

The kinds of research you will need to do will depend on your research question. You will usually need to survey existing literature to get an overview of the knowledge that has been gained so far on the topic; this will inform your own research and your interpretations. You may also decide to do:

- primary research (conducting your own experiments, surveys etc to gain new knowledge)
- secondary research (collating knowledge from other people’s research to produce a new synthesis).

You may need to do either or both.

Primary research

If you are doing qualitative or quantitative research, or experiments, start on these as soon as you can. Gathering data takes a lot of time. People are often too busy to participate in interviews or fill out questionnaires and you might need to find extra participants to make up your sample. Scientific experiments may take longer than you anticipate especially if they require ethical clearance, special equipment, or learning new methods.

- Design and plan your data collection methods – check them with your supervisor and see if they fit with your methodology.
- Identify and plan for any ethical issues with collecting your data.
- Do a test or pilot questionnaire as soon as possible so you can make changes if necessary.
- Identify your sample size and control groups.
- Have a contingency plan if not everyone is willing to participate.
- Keep good records – number and store any evidence – don’t throw anything out until you graduate!

Secondary research

The key to effective secondary research is to keep it under control, and to take an approach which will make your reading and your notes meaningful first time round.

- Start small with one main text and build up.
- Once you have an overview, formulate some sub-questions which will help answer your main dissertation question.
- Look for the answers to these questions.
- Do more reading to fill in the gaps.
- Keep thinking, and analysing the relevance of the information as you go along.
- But be aware of your work schedule – you can’t read everything, so be selective.

If you need help, consult your liaison librarian - they may know about materials you hadn’t thought of. Find their details on the Library website.
Methodology

Methodology means being aware of the way in which you do something and being able to justify why you did it that way. Each academic discipline has a number of different sets of methods for conducting research.

For example: One method of conducting qualitative research is semi-structured interviews, another method is case studies – each are appropriate for finding different levels and types of information.

The method you choose will be the model for how you go about your research:

- Why is the method you chose the most appropriate way of finding an answer to your research question?
- Are there any other methods you might have used...why didn't you choose them?

Throughout your dissertation be aware of the decisions you make and note them down explaining why you made them:

- Did you change your plans when you encountered a problem?
- Did you have to adjust sample size, questions, approach?

This awareness of why you did your research in a certain way and your ability to explain and justify these choices is a vital part of your dissertation.

Thinking about structure

It's a good idea to start thinking about how you might structure your dissertation quite early - it will help you to focus your research on aspects that are relevant, rather than trying to cover all of your topic. Dissertations are usually structured in one of two ways:

Do bear in mind that no structure, title or question is set in stone until you submit your completed work. If you find a more interesting or productive way to discuss your topic, don't be afraid to change your structure - providing you have time to do any extra work.

Working with your supervisor

Your supervisor can give you expert guidance, but they can't formulate and plan your project for you. They can only work with what you give them – so it is useful to prepare for supervisions and have some idea of what you need help with:

- Have some specific questions to ask your supervisor: These can be general like "How can I narrow down my question?" or more detailed such as "Am I interpreting this result correctly?"
- If you are unsure of an idea or approach, don't be afraid to talk it through with your supervisor – that's what they're there for! Just explaining it to someone else can help sort out your own thinking.
- It is easier for supervisors to give advice on a specific piece of work, so bring your research proposal, or chapter draft, to the meetings – your supervisor might not have time to read it all, so highlight places you'd like feedback on.

It's worth taking the advice of your supervisor seriously. You may have a strong idea of what you want to do in your dissertation, but your supervisor has academic experience and often knows what will and won't work. If you explain your ideas and are polite and enthusiastic, your supervisor can be a great sounding board and source of expert information.

What does your department do...?

In your first meeting with your supervisor, find out about frequency and times of supervisions. Check whether they mind being contacted by email, and if they will be away at any time during your project.

Managing your data

A common concern when starting a dissertation or research project is collecting enough data. This tends to be a concern whether you are collecting primary data (data you generate yourself from experiments, questionnaires, interviews, field work) or secondary data (data generated by other people, such as previous research findings, government reports, business figures).
But it is also really important to consider how you will organise, store, and keep track of your data as you collect it. Good data management strategies:

- Prevent you from losing data
- Increase your efficiency when analysing the data
- Show trends, patterns, and themes more clearly
- Ensure your findings are based on robust, comprehensive results
- Demonstrate that you are a rigorous researcher

**Before collecting your data...**

**What do I need to collect?**

Good data management starts by collecting suitable data to answer your research questions. Gathering data that is fit for purpose means your analysis will be more efficient, and prevents you from becoming overwhelmed by having to process a lot of irrelevant information. When designing your data collection methods, look back at your research question(s) and keep asking yourself: How will the information I plan to collect help me answer these questions?

**Ethics forms**

If you are gathering data that involves human subjects, it is likely you'll need to fill in an ethics form which will ask you to consider issues such as the confidentiality of your participants. Your project supervisor or department should be able to advise you on the type of ethics form you need to complete. Plan ahead to complete the ethics form in good time as it may need to be approved by a departmental committee, and you won't be able to start collecting your data without it.

**During your data collection...**

**Storage**

Keep your electronic files on the University network (N drive) as it is reliable and backed up. If you are storing data directly on your own laptop or PC outside the University network, make sure you have a rigorous backup system in case your device crashes, or is lost or stolen. Use an external hard drive or USB stick and save your data regularly. Have a safe place to keep your USB stick or hard drive and remember to take it with you when you leave the library!

A cloud service such as Dropbox (link below) can automate backups for you and is accessible online anywhere. Dropbox is suitable for sharing files and short-term storage or backup for any newly-written documents before they can be saved to a more secure location. Public cloud services, like Dropbox, are not suitable for personal or confidential data.

**Security**

Collect the minimum amount of personal data necessary and avoid collecting any personal information that you don't need.

Store any personal data in an appropriate, secure location, e.g. a locked filing cabinet, or password-protected or encrypted online files.

Avoid sending or storing personal data over unsecure networks such as via email or in cloud services like Dropbox.

Process and safely destroy any personal data as soon as they are no longer needed, for example promptly downloading and saving interview recordings from your phone or recording device into a password protected file.

If you have said on your ethics form that you will be anonymising data (e.g. interview responses) to protect participants' confidentiality, make sure you do this. Have a system for anonymously labelling each response such as assigning a letter, number, or changing their name (Participant A, Interviewee 1, 'Johnny').

**Organisation**

Have a systematic and clear way of naming your online files and, most importantly, stick to it!

You should be able to tell what's in a file without opening it.

Including a date formatted like YYYY-MM-DD means you can sort files chronologically.
Having a version control number means you can easily distinguish between your 1st, 2nd, or 10th draft!

For example:

2015-07-05_InterviewRecording_ClassroomAssistant A
2015-07-01_InterviewRecording_TeacherB
2015-06-12_InterviewRecording_TeacherA

Or:

MethodsChapter_Draft 1_2015-07-10
MethodsChapter_Draft2_2015-07-11

Store your electronic files in a logical folder structure to make them easier to locate and manage, e.g. creating folders to group files according to content type, activity, or date. For further examples see guidance from the UK Data Service (link below).

Also have a system for safely storing any field notes. You don’t want to lose vital parts of your research on site or in an unfamiliar library that you won’t be returning to. Simple systems are the best, for example putting things in box files is easier than having to find a hole-punch and ring binders.

Documentation

As well as making good notes from the books and journal articles you read (including the full bibliographic details for your references) it is also important to keep clear records of other parts of your research process:

Record your search strategy: Note down the combinations of keywords you use and the library databases you have searched to avoid duplication and confusion later.

Keep your lab book up to date: If you are doing primary scientific research, a good lab book helps you record what you did whilst it is fresh in your mind; it makes writing your methods and results much easier.

Label your equipment and any work in progress: If you are using a shared research space, clearly identify your work, as you don’t want people accidentally moving it or throwing it away!

After your project…

Keeping your data

If you have the opportunity to continue with similar research, for example in a postgraduate degree, or present it to a public audience, such as at a conference or in a journal paper, it is good practice to keep your data in case fellow researchers want to access it; your project supervisor can help advise you about this.

In most cases, though, for undergraduate research projects it is very unlikely you will have to store your data after you have graduated. However, before you rush off to burn your notes, it is a good idea to keep everything safely until you have your final marks, just in case!

Writing up your dissertation

Writing up your dissertation makes it sound like this is the last thing that you do, but it is a good idea to write as you go along, as the writing process will help clarify your thinking. It is also reassuring to have some words down on the page. You may have other coursework due so it is important to protect your dissertation writing time.

The guidance on this page takes you through the whole writing process from managing your time to those crucial mark-gaining final checks.

Managing your time

Don’t panic! Your dissertation might seem like an endless project, but you can break it down into a list of tasks. Having a plan for using your time to complete those tasks will get it done.

Plan an overall work schedule

Break down your dissertation into stages and plan backwards from your deadline to fit them all in.

- Start with your literature review
- Think about your methodology
- Identify primary sources
- Identify secondary sources, if appropriate
- Write as you go along
- Organise and analyse your material
Write up
Redraft / check / proofread

Do a little bit on a regular basis

- Decide in advance when you're going to work on your dissertation – set aside time each week or have a particular day to work on it
- Give yourself a specific task to do in that time
- Do difficult tasks at the times of day you work best
- Do easy tasks when you're tired / less motivated

Top tip... have a contingency plan!

No one ever sticks to their plan perfectly, and you can't predict all the things that might intervene, so build in some extra time for "catching-up".

Also be aware that mechanical tasks like sorting the bibliography and proofreading will take longer than you think. Computers and printers know when you're in a hurry and will scheme to break down at the most inconvenient moment!

Structuring your dissertation

Dissertations based on qualitative or quantitative research are usually organised as follows:

Abstract
Chapter 1. Introduction
Chapter 2. Literature Review
Chapter 3. Methodology
Chapter 4. Results
Chapter 5. Discussion
Chapter 6. Conclusion
Bibliography & Appendices

Other dissertations may be based around discussions of themes or texts:

Chapter 1. Introduction
Chapter 2. (theme / text 1)
Chapter 3. (theme / text 2)
Chapter 4. (theme / text 3)
Chapter 5. Conclusion
Bibliography & Appendices

This kind of structure often can't be finalised until you've done some research and found out what themes or texts you want to focus on as your chapter titles will depend on this.

It's a good idea to write an overall plan outlining what you need to cover in each chapter and how it builds your overall message.

Think of a dissertation like a series of linked essays; each chapter is self-contained and has its own purpose, but they all connect together to contribute to the argument of your dissertation.

The chapters don't have to all be the same length – some can be longer because they are more detailed (like the literature review) and others can be shorter because they are summarising and finalising information (like the conclusion).

Writing up

Your dissertation may be the longest piece of writing you have ever done, but there are ways to approach it that will help to make it less overwhelming.

Write up as you go along. It is much easier to keep track of how your ideas develop and writing helps clarify your thinking. It also saves having to churn out 1000s of words at the end.

You don't have to start with the introduction – start at the chapter that seems the easiest to write – this could be the literature review or methodology, for example. Alternatively you may prefer to write the introduction first, so you can get your ideas straight. Decide what will suit your ways of working best - then do it.

Think of each chapter as an essay in itself – it should have a clear introduction and conclusion. Use the conclusion to link back to the overall research question.

Think of the main argument of your dissertation as a river, and each chapter is a tributary feeding into this. The individual chapters will contain their own arguments, and go their own way, but they all contribute to the main flow.
Write a chapter, read it and do a redraft - then move on. This stops you from getting bogged down in one chapter.

Write your references properly and in full from the beginning.

Keep your word count in mind – be ruthless and don’t write anything that isn’t relevant. It’s often easier to add information, than to have to cut down a long chapter that you’ve slaved over for hours.

Save your work! Remember to save your work frequently to somewhere you can access it easily. It’s a good idea to at least save a copy to a cloud-based service like Google Docs or Dropbox so that you can access it from any computer - if you only save to your own PC, laptop or tablet, you could lose everything if you lose or break your device.

Keeping going

After the initial enthusiasm wears off, it can be hard to keep motivated – it’s also natural to feel confused and overwhelmed at points throughout your dissertation; this is all part of sustaining a longer project. Here are some suggestions to keep you going:

Break down large, unappealing tasks into smaller bearable ones. Molehills are always easier to climb than mountains!

Give yourself rewards when you’ve completed tasks - these might range from a cup of coffee, to an exercise session, or a night out.

If you're not in a good thinking mood, do more straightforward tasks like compiling the bibliography or doing the title page.

If you're feeling confused about what you're doing, try writing a short paragraph summarising what your research is about. This can help you find a focus again.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, try identifying the one thing that you need to do next; often this will logically lead to further steps, and you'll be able to get started again.

Talk to friends or your supervisor about what you're doing; explaining where you are in your project and how it’s going can help clarify your thinking.

Finishing off and checking through

This stage can be time consuming, so leave yourself enough time to have a final read through of your dissertation to pick up any lingering mistakes or typos. Good presentation matters – it gives a professional appearance and puts the reader in a good mood. So it is worth making sure you have enough time to proof-read and get your layout right.

General principles are:

- Double-space your writing, do not have narrow margins, and print on one side of the page only.
- Use a font that is legible and looks professional (Comic Sans is not appropriate!).
- Check what should be included in cover pages and headers and footers (e.g. page numbers).
- Have a clear Table of Contents to help your reader, and a separate List of Illustrations or tables if appropriate.
- Consider what information should be put in Appendices and check that you have referred to the appropriate appendix in your text.

If you’re trying to track down that missing reference for your bibliography, you can always ask your liaison librarian for help finding it.

What does your department do…?

Check your course or dissertation handbook for your department's preferences on:

* Style
* Referencing
* Layout
* Binding

If possible, look at dissertations from previous years to see how they have been presented.

Binding

Undergraduate dissertations are usually 'soft bound'. This means having a soft card cover, with
the pages joined together with comb, spiral, or thermal binding. You can get this done at many print shops, often while you wait.

If you choose to get your work hard bound, it can take a few days (more at busy times), so check with the printers / stationers beforehand.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on Dissertations and Major Projects. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/dissertations

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at:

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice