

Introduction: Why Do a Dissertation in the Social Sciences?



Overview

Why do a dissertation?

To have or to be? Your dissertation experience

What does the dissertation mean to you?

- The love of learning
- Career moves
- Broadening your horizons

The benefits of research for undergraduates

How to use this book

- An overview of the book
- Boxes, tables, figures
- Tasks
- Chapter structures
- Overviews
- Summaries
- Discussion points
- Further Reading

Doing a dissertation in the social sciences can be a rewarding end to your degree, rounding off studies with the opportunity to explore more or less anything you want to. A dissertation is all your own work. From the original idea to the final product which is an independently conducted, fresh piece of inquiry, it will be you, and you alone, will ultimately make all the creative, academic, and editorial decisions. You are the designer, the board room executive, the professor and the D.J. all rolled in to one!

Even so, you might walk away from your first dissertation class feeling a little apprehensive as well as excited. A dissertation is a challenge. After all, by the end of it you will be able to reel off books and ideas as well as the best data sources, who's who in your field of study, and will have your own anecdotes about doing research. Finally, you will have written up your work, submitting a beautifully presented document in its own binding, with a title page, a table of contents, a literature review, a methods debate, data, findings, conclusion and appendices. You will have produced tables and charts, built up quite a long bibliography, and will have had experience of discussing your research and of giving and receiving constructive feedback. Phew! Yes, it's a lot of work, and even the most competent and hard working students will know that the dissertation will find your weak spots as well as allowing you to shine. But don't have preconceptions about how the dissertation will go for you or your classmates. You might be surprised by some of the outcomes, your colleagues' ingenious solutions and great ideas, in turn, you might surprise some of them.

This book is for everyone doing a dissertation. It has been written in the knowledge of the challenges you face, and the aim is to be both supportive and encouraging, pushing you a little. Dissertations are curiously personal documents: no two are the same: They often represent the first real opportunity which you have had to discover something about your own voice unique research and a, to mark the intellectual landscape with your footprint. This is at once an exciting and daunting prospect. The aim of this book is to guide you through the process of the dissertation so that you can make the most of the journey rather than become stressed and bored.

Like most things in life, the dissertation is what you make of it. The first thing you have to decide is what you want from your dissertation. What is your attitude towards your dissertation? To decide this, read on.

Research: To Have or To Be?

This book assumes a readership of mixed experience – not mixed ability. Everyone reading this book can do a dissertation. The question is – how well can you do the dissertation, and will you enjoy the journey? Your attitude towards your dissertation will make quite a difference to your experience of doing it.

Erich Fromm, in his book *To Have or To Be* (2005), argues that people operate largely in one of two modes of self:

- The having mode: a mode of self which is acquiring, possessing, conquering. In turn this gives rise to other basic feelings and motivations, for example, being jealous (of others' possessions); becoming violent (to achieve having);
- The being mode: a mode of self which is loving, generous, open, critical and reflexive.

In his book *Successful Study for Degrees*, Rob Barnes (1992) connects Fromm's thinking to studying for a degree. He argues that students' approaches to their studies in the 'having' mode leads them to strive to acquire knowledge. In other words studying is focused on the object (the degree), rather than the experience, so the goal becomes an instrumental one, i.e., to have or acquire your degree becomes more important than living and learning from it. The consequences are a different set of attitudes towards doing a degree, and a different approach. On the one hand, there is the process of jumping hurdles and ticking boxes in which the experience never touches the sides. On the other hand, there is a learning mode, in which students become open, honest, critical, well informed, reasoning and engaged. Of course, in practice we should expect that you will engage to some extent with both modes. After all, doing a dissertation is usually a requirement of honours degrees programmes, and it is important to realise that if you are serious about your degree, then doing a dissertation is an essential part of the task of doing your degree. However, in order to do a good dissertation, you will need to develop your interests and should aim to become critically engaged with your line of inquiry.

Doing a dissertation is an opportunity to develop competencies as a researcher and thinker. Don't assume that you won't produce anything of interest to the academic community. Every year, some undergraduate students do go on to get work published in academic journals. At the time of writing, there are many more outlets for work, including journals and networks specifically for undergraduate research. See Box Int. 0.1 for some suggestions.

Box 0.1 Browse: Undergraduate Research On-line

Universitas 21 is a small network of international research intensive universities which provide some opportunities for undergraduates to publish

www.universitas21.com

Geoverse journal publishes undergraduate research in geography at Oxford Brookes University

www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/social/geoverse

The Reinvention Centre at Warwick University publishes an undergraduate research journal

www.warwick.ac.uk

The University of Lancashire has launched a new undergraduate research journal, *Diffusion*, (at time of going to press)

www.uclan.ac.uk

Approaching the Dissertation: What does the Dissertation Mean to You?

'Interesting', 'boring', 'exciting', 'difficult', 'fun', 'an awful experience', 'wouldn't have missed it for the world' are some of the descriptions of doing a dissertation used by students. Before you get stuck into the practicalities, take a moment to reflect upon what doing the dissertation means to you.

You will find that there are many different attitudes, expectations, and feelings towards it amongst your class. For example, the possibilities include:

1) The 'love of learning'

The likeable aspect of doing a dissertation is that you get to study something of interest to you. You can study it purely because you want to. This is a common reason given by students in the social sciences for doing their dissertation. Student surveys show that students give the subject of study as the number one reason for their degree choice. It seems that most students embark on their studies expecting to enjoy at least some aspects of the experience, and being able to pursue something in depth and develop an independent view is a marker of this. While recognising some of the challenges which lie ahead and possibly feeling trepidation about some aspects of them, many people regard doing the dissertation as an intrinsically rewarding experience.

2) To prepare for career moves

Employers are keen to find graduates with transferable skills, and many of the skills developed by independent research are precisely those which are sought. These skills include being able to take a line of inquiry and shape a project through to a successful conclusion, on time. Others include being able to find appropriate sources, developing good working relationships with people and organisations, and being able to make a logical argument. Sue Duncan, the first Government Chief Social Researcher, was in charge of social research in the civil service for many years. As part of her role, she developed a graduate recruitment and training scheme, and was actively involved in the selection and interview process. She commented that graduates do not always see the benefits of their degree experience including their dissertation experience. See what she said about this in Box 0.2.

Box 0.2 Sue Duncan on Talking About your Dissertation

'Employers are looking for evidence of potential; in a competitive job market, applicants need to draw fully on their experience to make their

application stand out. Graduates tend to cite dissertations purely in terms of the subject matter; if the subject is relevant to the job, they mention it. But a successfully completed dissertation also provides evidence of a number of key competencies, such as critical analysis, written communication, project management and the ability to work on your own initiative. These competencies are key to a wide range of jobs...'

Sue Duncan, first Government Chief Social Researcher and independent consultant

You may be able to use the dissertation to develop an area of present or future professional interest, for example, by developing your awareness of, and insight, into an area, problem, policy, organisation, particular social or client group, or a social issue dear to your heart. It is also an opportunity to apply some of the principles which you have been learning about in the real world.

The research design may necessitate making links with people and organisations and learning about their work and the issues that they face. One aspect of this presented by students who recognise the value of linking their dissertation with their future career moves, is the opportunities it provides for developing your own working relationships outside of the university and being able to find ways of connecting these back up with your learning at university. You might be able to do research which a client group or organisation will be pleased to know about, and you might find that you can make a difference, however small.

If you are already an established employee, then completing your dissertation demonstrates academic ability as well as personal characteristics such as determination and good organisational and time management skills. As a new graduate, you may wish to use your degree study to ask for promotion or to access different kinds of development opportunities at work which perhaps are only open to graduates. You could consider identifying a research project which is of interest to your employer. Alternatively, you might not wish to pursue those ends, but may still find that you have a sympathetic manager who is willing to agree to providing some support towards your studies particularly when you get to the final stages. For example, your workplace might be able to help you to access potential interview subjects (for example via a staff newsletter or e-bulletin) or might give you some leeway with time off to complete some empirical work (as long as this is not abused).

3) Broadening your horizons and rising to the challenge

Doing a research project allows you to broaden your horizons in academic, personal, and professional terms. There is a balance to be struck between defining your research project so that you can successfully complete it, and ensuring that you build into the project a sufficient degree of challenge, interest, and opportunity.

Dissertations in every subject are demanding. Moving away from being prisoners of the work ethic, we can see that dissertations can still be demanding in a good way, or simply demanding! For most of you, doing a dissertation is an opportunity to take some risks and learn about yourself as well as the world at large. Enlist your tutor's help in setting the bar so that you attempt a manageable project, but bear in mind that reaching for something and stretching yourself is ultimately more enriching than doing yourself a disservice, missing the opportunity and muddling through at the lower end. The idea that what you get out of something is related to what you put into it seems true when thinking about dissertations. See Box Int 0.3 for some further ideas about the benefits of doing a dissertation.

Box 0.3 What are the Benefits of Doing a Dissertation?

Deepening and extending your knowledge of your chosen field of study

Thinking on your feet and solving problems with confidence and style!

Applying things which you have learnt in your course to the real world

Developing networks and contacts which broaden horizons

Developing your career interest and employability

Learning to talk about your own work with confidence; exchanging feedback; learning to take on board feedback

Finding out your strengths and weakness in doing large and complex projects

Seeing the world differently; developing your own unique view of the world and the judgements and values which you hold about it.

Relating to staff and students in a different way than in taught courses

Task 0.1

Discussion Point: Why Are You Doing a Dissertation?

What does doing a dissertation mean to you?

Make a bullet point list arranged in priority order from the reasons which are most important to you to the least important.

How do you think the dissertation will go for you? What do you think will be the highs and lows?

Compare your thoughts with your colleagues'.

How to Use This Book

This book is written in a series of chapters which break down the dissertation into a process consisting of a series of tasks. The chapters broadly tackle these in chronological order. Each chapter starts with an Overview, has a main body, a Summary and a Further Reading section. Chapters contain tables and charts, and there are a few tasks to complete.

To explain further, here is an overview of the structure of the book:

Ready to Research?

This chapter takes you through a reflection upon your preparedness to research, helping you to think through your attitudes to study at this stage in your degree programme. In practical terms, the chapter emphasises:

- getting organized;
- brushing up the study skills you will need for the dissertation;
- your dissertation team: getting your people behind you.

You are asked to identify what actions you need to take in order to make sure that you are ready to research.

Great Expectations

This chapter will help you to see how doing a dissertation fits into your degree programme. Doing social research is valued as part of doing a degree in the social sciences. Learning how to do it, how to talk about it, and how to write it up, are all invaluable skills and rewarding experiences in their own right.

The chapter also provides a debriefing on dissertations, beginning with a typical dissertation structure and its main sections. This will allow you to develop an overview of the project and what's involved in the production process.

Next, the chapter considers what makes a good dissertation in the examiners' eyes, and explores a marking scheme. Finally, the chapter looks at the relationship between you and your supervisor.

Defining the Research Question

This chapter takes you through the process of selecting a theme or topic, and turning this into a focused, manageable, and clearly defined research question.

The chapter begins by considering ways of generating possible research topics using mind maps and brainstorming, and then moves to consider how to choose between them.

You are then asked to consider the difference between a *theme* or topic area, and a research *question*. This is followed by a tips list of common pitfalls in defining a question.

What Kind of Researcher Are You?

This chapter considers the possible answers which you could give to the question: what kind of researcher are you? The question relates to your view of truth and knowledge; ways of thinking about what they are and how they might be established.

The chapter considers the place of empirical research and positivism, inductive and deductive approaches, and considers different perspectives on the scientific method. The chapter next considers how this translates into the personal stances of researchers, giving some examples of how academics of different kinds have thought about their role, and what thinking and writing means to them.

Chapter 4 isn't a comprehensive guide to this complex, philosophical area. Rather, the aim is to provide some signposts which you should investigate under your own steam, according to your needs and interests.

Writing the Research Proposal

This chapter takes you through the process of writing the research proposal. You should draft a proposal, however roughly, as part of reading this chapter. It is suggested that designing, proposing and writing the research project is a process of going back and forth between the different parts of the proposal. Most proposals benefit from an investment of time being spent on them.

Finding Resources and Doing the Literature Review

This chapter turns to preparing a literature review. The chapter explores the purpose of the literature review and gives some tips on producing a good one. This includes working with a range of sources and different ways of finding and accessing them, such as via on-line gateways and sources. The chapter encourages you to critically evaluate the usefulness and reliability of sources. Next, the chapter turns to consider how to build up the literature review, providing some tips on linkages, giving the review some pace, and referring you to Chapter 12, Writing Up, for further thoughts about grammar and English for academic purposes.

Research Design

In this chapter, we consider research design and how this can help you to achieve your project, beginning with some common pitfalls and then moving on to consider key concepts such as validity, reliability, generalising and triangulation. Next, the chapter identifies the characteristics of a good research design before examining the diversity of possible approaches to doing a research project. These are: Case Studies; Surveys; Grounded Theory; Narrative Research; Ethnographies; Action Research; Theoretical Explorations; and Comparative Approaches. After this, we refresh our memories about qualitative and quantitative methods, both their strengths and weaknesses and their vexed relationship. Qualitative and quantitative methods: combination or separation? The big debate!

Collecting Data: Quantitative Methods

This chapter focuses on quantitative methods. The larger part of the chapter deals with surveys, and includes using secondary sources and doing your own surveys and the different kinds of sampling techniques available. There is a discussion about how the different mechanisms for administering surveys, such as by post or phone, will affect the sample as an example of the more general problem of bias. Following this, we move on to designing questionnaires, including a detailed section on setting questions and some tips on making your questionnaire attractive and easy to use. Finally, other quantitative methods are considered, particularly tally or score sheets, which are a quick and easy way to collect data in an unobtrusive way.

Collecting Data: Qualitative Methods

This chapter focuses on mainstream qualitative techniques, based on a framework of biographical inquiry and lived experience. Suggestions of good examples are made under each section which explore in turn, using documents: life histories; oral history; and data collection for these by interviews. Guidance on doing both one-to-one and group interviews is provided alongside discussions about structured, semi-structured and focused techniques. Another form of data collection is considered, that of time budgets, logs, and diaries which allow for detailed record-keeping, often by the research participants themselves. Finally, the chapter considers visual methods.

This chapter, like chapter 8, explores a rich area, and does not seek to be comprehensive. There are suggestions throughout of possible avenues for further exploration and more detailed texts, as well as additional suggestions under *Further Reading* at the end of the chapter.

Carrying out the Research

This chapter considers the nuts and bolts of doing research, taking you through the various stages, such as actually finding your research respondents, including those hard to reach people, such as the disadvantaged and elites. Following this, how to manage the research relationship is examined with tips on relationship maintenance, money, gifts, and what to do about being case in the role of expert and asked advice.

The next section looks at safety and the researcher, with some suggested *Do's and Don'ts*, before moving on to consider how best to manage the research by keeping track of it as a project. Without needing to do anything overly complex, keeping a running log of completed and outstanding tasks is recommended.

Finally, the chapter raises the issue of doing research in real life, and foregrounds the need to stay flexible, go with the flow, make adjustments, and keep it real.

What do I do with All the Data?

This chapter begins by considering when it is time to stop collecting data, and the next steps to take in response to that frequently asked question: What do I do with all this data?! The chapter will briefly survey the coding of both quantitative and qualitative data and making an analysis, including a brief overview of the main principles of making sense of quantitative data by bringing variables together using statistical techniques. Examples of interpretations of qualitative data are also given. The section that follows briefly refers to using software for quantitative and qualitative data analysis, before moving on to consider negative evidence, i.e. the significance of omissions in data, before finally turning to the question of the relationship between qualitative research and numbers.

Drawing Conclusions and Writing Up

In this chapter, we finally turn to writing up. A core task is to work towards drawing conclusions which are based on the preceding dissertation. In this chapter we look at what goes where in a dissertation; what a good conclusion looks like; and how to produce a dissertation draft which is interconnected, moves at a pace, and covers all the bases. Specific issues in writing up include guidance on managing the process; some tips on making the material read well; on good grammar and using English for academic purposes; avoiding plagiarism; and finally, 'knowing when to stop'.

Troubleshooting

This is less of a 'chapter' than a quick reference guide, the theme of which is 'what to do when things go wrong'. This troubleshooting section looks

at issues such as word counts which are the wrong length; adjusting your research design to scale up or down; problems of access and so on.

Appendices

- Appendix 1
This is a listing of on-line sources mentioned in this book, to inspire your successful browsing.
- Appendix 2
This consists of a readability index, a fun and insightful guide to the readability of texts, useful in the contexts of populations who do not read as easily as might be expected.
- Appendix 3
An example of a template for a consent form, showing the items typically found in one.

Glossary

This is a quick reference guide to definitions of many of the key concepts used in doing a research project.

Guide to Study Aids

Here is a guide to the study aids in each chapter:

- Boxes, tables, figures
These present useful summaries, checklists, and signposts to potentially useful sources.
- Remembers
'Remembers' are a few lines or short paragraphs which repeat a vital point.
- Tasks
The optional tasks for completion present you with the opportunity to check your understandings and reflect a little. Some provide discussion points, some are geared towards working on your own and others towards working in pairs.
- Overview
Each chapter begins with an Overview which gives a brief rundown of the chapter's contents.
- Summary
The Summary appears at the end of the chapter and repeats the main points made.

- Further Reading

This is the last section of every chapter. Suggestions made under Further Reading are in addition to those made in the main body of the chapter. They are a mixture of introductory level material, survey texts and more specialised, in-depth texts.

Summary

- You will find that students in your class do dissertations for a variety of reasons in addition to needing to meet course requirements. Common ones tend to be for the love of learning; to further career opportunities; and to broaden their horizons. Task 0.1 will have revealed many more.
- Independent research has a special place in the undergraduate curriculum, providing opportunities to synthesise your learning across your degree programme and allowing you to delve into areas of interest in greater depth.
- Attempting the dissertation provides many challenges and most students find it a worthwhile experience in the sense of learning something from doing it. There are also clearly defined benefits which you could familiarise yourself with, and remember when the going gets tough!

Further Reading

- Barnes, R. (1992) *Successful Study for Degrees*. London: Routledge.
- Levin, P. (2005) *Excellent Dissertations!* (Student-Friendly Guides series). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Rudestam, K.E. and Newton, R.R. (2001) (2nd edn.) *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*. London: Sage.
- Slibergh, D.M. (2001) *Doing Dissertations in Politics: A Student Guide*. London: Routledge.