

## Chapter 1

# What Is a dissertation?

### Chapter contents

- Why do I have to do a dissertation? The point of independent study
- Evidence-based practice
- The main components of a dissertation
- What will impress? Seeing it from the examiner's point of view
- The marking criteria
- What should I do next?
- Where to find out more
- Further reading

## Why do I have to do a dissertation? The point of independent study

The dissertation is commonly the last component of a degree course, or a module taken towards the end of the undergraduate course. After having, over the years, been fed with lots of information, guided step-by-step through various assignments and tested on your knowledge and understanding in examinations and during clinical or practice placements, you undertake the dissertation as an exercise in independent study. It tests your ability to educate yourself, to demonstrate your expertise in collecting and analysing information, and to come to conclusions based on solid argument. It also gives you an opportunity to show how well informed you are, how well organized you can be, and how you can make a clear presentation of your work for effective communication.

The big difference between this and your previous work is that you will be doing the dissertation on your own. Your dissertation supervisor will provide you with support and some general guidance, but most of the decisions about what you do and how you do it will be yours. This not only gives

## 4 Your Undergraduate Dissertation in Health and Social Care

you a lot of freedom to pursue a particular interest, but also enables you to put your own individual talents to their best use. This will inevitably require some soul-searching and evaluation of where your strongest talents lie. It is really up to you to make yourself shine in your best light!

What you are required to do can be termed 'research', as it is about finding out new things (even if they are only new to you), making sense of these, and presenting your findings in an organized and well-argued way. As with any research project, there must be stated aims at the outset, and some kind of achievement of these by the end. With the increasing focus in health and social care on evidence-based practice, the dissertation component provides an ideal opportunity to consider a pertinent clinical question for practice.

This type of work obviously presents lots of opportunities, but also some dangers. The point of this book is to guide you through the process of doing a dissertation in health and social care, and to explain and discuss the options you might have at each stage. It will help you to make informed decisions that you can build on in order to produce a successful outcome. It should not be all hard slog, but it will present some serious challenges in terms of your knowledge and understanding of your subject matter, and of your abilities to organize and motivate yourself. However, undertaking a dissertation can be one of the most satisfying processes to go through – and come out of at the other side.

### Evidence-based practice

Evidence-based practice has gained considerable momentum in health and social care practice in the UK since the early 1990s. It is defined by Straus et al. as 'the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients' (2005: 280). Evidence-based practice involves not only using the best available evidence, but combining this with the needs and preferences of the client, and the clinical expertise and judgment of the health and social care practitioner (Straus et al., 2005). It is about ensuring that finite resources are used for those health and social care interventions and care activities that are known to be the most effective and safe. Evidence-based practice is a systematic process that starts by identifying a clinical question, gathering relevant evidence, appraising and evaluating the quality of that evidence, and then using that evidence to underpin decision making and practice.

It is important to point out that evidence informing practice comes from a number of different sources not just research evidence. Indeed there is a substantial amount of practice for which research evidence is not available. 'This does not mean practice for which there is no evidence is wrong, but that the evidence does not exist in a formal [research] way' (Coles, 2008: 19). Where research findings are not established, evidence might come from policy directives, experts, practice experiences, theory that is not research based and from the experiences of clients, patients and carers (Le May, 1999).

## What Is a dissertation?

5

So what relevance has evidence-based practice for the undergraduate dissertation? The concept is of central importance for a number of reasons. Over the course of your undergraduate studies, you will undoubtedly have become an informed consumer of evidence-based health or social care practice, developing skills in critically evaluating contemporary evidence in your subject area. You will have developed a questioning approach to your practice and studies and it is likely that you will have identified several practice questions that interest you and issues that have challenged your thinking. The undergraduate dissertation provides you with an opportunity to consolidate these skills and examine a practice issue that has really caught your interest. This might involve examining an area of practice through a comprehensive literature review, challenging an aspect of practice by examining the evidence in the area or generating new knowledge to increase understanding about health or social care practice. Evidence-based practice is a central feature all these dissertation examples, it is about finding the evidence and then putting that evidence into current health and social care practice (Clare Taylor, 2000).

## The main components of a dissertation

Although dissertations come in many types, shapes and sizes, there are some aspects that are shared by most of them. Of course, the subject and how it is dealt with will have an enormous influence on the form and appearance of the finished work. However, as all dissertations are an exercise in academic research, there will be certain components that are regarded as essential for them to have academic credibility. A standard type of dissertation in health and social care will probably have the following components.

### Preambles

- A title – this provides the briefest summary of the dissertation.
- An abstract – a slightly longer summary of the dissertation outlining the main issues, the research question, methods of investigation and conclusions.
- Acknowledgements – an expression of thanks to all those people and organizations that have helped you in the funding of, or preparation and writing of the dissertation.
- A list of contents – the guide to the various sections of the work.
- A list of illustrations and figures – if this is appropriate.

### The main section

This is usually a series of chapters or sections. A typical example contains separate sections consisting of:

## 6 Your Undergraduate Dissertation in Health and Social Care

- An introduction to the dissertation.
- Some background to the research that reveals the issues to be researched and the work already done on the subject.
- A statement of the research problem or question and an explanation of how the research work was carried out (i.e. the methods used).
- The results of data collection and analysis.
- A discussion of the results and what they mean.
- Some conclusions based on the results.
- Recommendations for health and social care practice, education and/or research.

### The add-ons

At the end are sections that provide important information on aspects of the work:

- A list of references – fuller details about all the publications and other sources that you have cited in the text.
- A bibliography – other literature that is relevant to the study but has not been directly referred to in the text.
- Possibly some appendices (supplementary information such as letters of support, ethics committee review information, participant invitation letters, information sheets, consent forms, detailed literature search strategies, questionnaire schedules or data extraction forms, etc). These give examples of your methods of working and/or further background information about issues that are important to your work, but not so central as to warrant being included in the main text.

We do not know about you, but we always like to see some kind of illustrations, diagrams or summary tables in things that we read. Not only do these enliven the appearance of the page by breaking up rows of solid text, but they also can encapsulate ideas or issues in an incredibly compact manner.

### What will impress? Seeing it from the examiner's point of view

In order to be awarded a really good grade, it is obviously useful to understand exactly what the examiner will be looking for when giving marks. The following list will indicate the main areas that gain marks in any dissertation, regardless of topic. These areas will be discussed in detail in the following chapters of this book, with many handy hints to help you

## What Is a dissertation?

7



Figure 1.1 Some kind of illustrations or diagrams

achieve the best possible result. The list is not presented in any order of priority, but focuses on three areas that the examiner is likely to focus on:

- first impressions of the thesis;
- quick review;
- detailed reading.

There follows a list of the main assessment areas and the sorts of questions that the examiner will be asking him/herself.

### First impressions

**Presentation** How does it look? A neat cover, practical binding and well-designed page layout all give a favourable impression to start with. Remember that your dissertation will be on a pile with all the rest, so

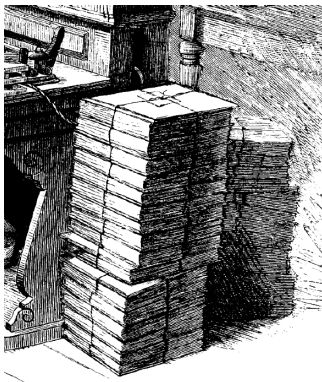


Figure 1.2 On the pile with all the rest

## 8 Your Undergraduate Dissertation in Health and Social Care

comparisons can easily be drawn with the others. Your examiner will be naturally better disposed to the more attractive submissions.

**Organization** A brief scan through the dissertation should give an immediate impression of how the work is organized. This means clearly headed sections, page numbers, easily spotted chapter divisions and a logical arrangement of the sections of the study. The examiner will feel much more comfortable with work that is easy to navigate. A clear structure is a strong indication of clear thinking – a markable aspect of the work.

**Length** Should conform to the requirements. A dissertation that looks too thin or too thick immediately rings alarm bells for the marker. The former will be difficult to award sufficient marks and the latter will be a daunting task to wade through. Studies that are over word limit are likely to attract a penalty. When submitting your thesis you should state the number of words used (excluding references and any appendices).

### Quick review

**Abstract** A very useful, brief introduction that should never be left out. Summarize your whole dissertation in 150–200 words, including main conclusions. Not an easy task but good practice, and again demonstrates clear thinking.

**List of contents** Situated near the front of the dissertation, this gives a simple overview of not only what is in the text, but how it is organized. It will also provide a useful navigation tool for later finding the page numbers of the different sections.

**Main conclusions** One of the main points for doing a dissertation is to come to some conclusions based on the research. The final chapter should spell out the conclusions extremely clearly so that they can be picked out by the examiner by simply scanning through the pages. He/she will check that the conclusions relate exactly to the research problem or question.

**Reference list** This will be a measure of your background reading, both in depth and in scope. You will impress your examiner if the relevant journals and books are cited, but will not if your list is padded with numerous extraneous references.

### Detailed reading

**Relevance and quality of background literature** You will not be reinventing the wheel. Whatever the subject you are tackling, there will be numerous other writers and experts who have worked in the same area. The examiner will look to see if you have discovered the main ones relevant to your study and have understood what they have written. This will provide the context for your own research and will enable you to

pinpoint the particular issue that you will tackle in your study. It will also provide precedents of how the research might be carried out.

**Clarity of research problem or question** It is essential to be clear, not only in your own mind but also in your writing, about the exact problem or question that you are tackling. This is the foundation stone of your dissertation and produces the main aims of the research. The research problem or question will be elaborated and dissected during the course of your study, but it remains the linchpin of all your research efforts. It should be possible throughout the dissertation for the examiner to relate the writing to the stated aims derived from the research problem or question.

**Selection of methods for data collection and analysis** One of the main reasons of doing a dissertation is to discover and implement basic research methods. The choice of methods is huge, so you will be marked both on the discussion about possible methods and on the appropriateness of your choice to answer your research question.

**Use of research methods** Each method has its own rules and procedures, so you need to demonstrate that you have understood these and implemented them correctly. The methods selected should be appropriate to the particular question being asked and must be rigorous and sensitive.

**Solidity of argument to support findings and conclusions** You could see the whole dissertation as a piece of detective work, with the report being the evidence and argument that leads to your conclusions. Do you have a watertight case? The examiner will dissect the logic of your argument and weigh the strength of your conclusions based on the evidence you bring forward.

**Quality of referencing** Your work will inevitably be based on the research and writings of others; after all, that is how we learn about most things. It is therefore essential that you acknowledge the source of your information and ideas by consistent use of a citing and referencing system. Marks are specifically allotted to this aspect of the work.

**Quality of writing** The main form of your communication is the written word. Correct spelling and grammar are basic requirements. Proper sentence and paragraph construction are also essential; these will be partly dependent on your personal style. You should aim for clarity throughout. The examiner will have limited time to read your work, so make it easy for him or her: you will be rewarded for this. If you are not writing in your first language, it is a good idea to find a native English speaker to read through your work and correct it as necessary.

## The marking criteria

It will help you to understand the particular requirements of your own course if you read through the instructions for your dissertation extremely

## 10 Your Undergraduate Dissertation in Health and Social Care

carefully. Make a note of the issues mentioned and compare these with the comments highlighted above. Do not hesitate to take any opportunity you may get to discuss the requirements with your tutor or dissertation supervisor. It is also really important that you familiarize yourself with the marking criteria for the dissertation, as this provides a very useful indication of how marks will be allotted or weighted to the various sections of the dissertation thesis. If there is no breakdown of the marks, try and read between the lines to see if there are any hints. Remember the marking criteria are there to help you and should be used as a guide on where to place most emphasis in your dissertation thesis.

### What should I do next?

Even if you do not know yet exactly what you are going to choose as a topic for your dissertation, it is a good idea to go and look at the work of students from previous cohorts/years. Your department or your university/college library should keep copies of all the dissertations. Find out where they are. You will probably be impressed by the sheer number of them, so how do you start looking to find something useful? Here is a good way to do it.

Find out what order they are in on the shelves. If they are in some kind of subject order, then choose four or five on the subject area that you are interested in. If not, any recent dissertations from your course will do. If you can only get them by request from the library catalogue, then choose some from the list. Ideally, choose dissertations that have been completed according to the regulations and instructions that you have to follow.

Do not sit down and try to read them! First, compare the following features:

- format (size and shape);
- design of cover;
- type of binding;
- design of page layouts;
- printing fonts and styles, and text layout;
- number and type of illustrations and or figures.

Now that you have got a general impression of a range of designs (note how important these are in the initial impact), it is time to look more carefully at the different types of research dissertations, their components and structures. Check each for the following:

- Title – length and clarity. Can you understand what it is about just by reading the title? Is it too long and complicated? Is it too short and general? Can you determine whether the focus of the dissertation is a literature review, audit study or empirical piece of work?



## What Is a dissertation?

11

- Preambles – are these clearly labelled and set out? Check what they consist of: title page, acknowledgements, abstract, list of contents with page numbers, lists of figures and tables, anything else (e.g. statement of individual work, dedication, etc.). Look at the layout and design of each of these.
- Chapters or sections – how many, how long and in what sequence? Does the sequence of chapter titles show you how the dissertation is structured? One example might be: introduction, background, research problem, research methods used, data collection, data analysis, and conclusions. There are, however, several different ways of structuring dissertations, depending on the type of research work undertaken. Compare those that you have selected.

Now go to the end of each and compare the add-on sections. Note:

- the length and format of the list of references;
- whether there is a bibliography;
- the number and type of appendices.

Now, if you want to, you can read a few sections of the text to see what the written style is like. Note the use of technical words, the method of citing references and the style of the writing. Check the length of paragraphs and sentence construction. Are they short and precise, or long and complex? Explore if and how the illustrations are used to complement the text. Whatever you do, do not try to read all the way through. Rather, if you have the time, pick a few more examples of dissertations and repeat the exercise. You will soon get a feel of the difference in quality and style, which will help you to form your preferences on which to base your own work.

The length and complexity of the dissertations might be rather daunting, particularly when you consider that you will have to produce something similar within a few months or even weeks. Do not get too worried. Although there will be a lot to learn and plenty to write, if you can choose a subject in which you are really interested, despite the hard work it should be a pleasurable and rewarding exercise, and something to be proud of when you have finished.

## Where to find out more

As mentioned above, a good place to start is to look at previously completed health or social care dissertations in your subject area. This will not provide you with instructions on how to proceed, but will give you plenty of food for thought, and help to stimulate your own critical faculties about the quality of the work presented. This will be important when it comes to reviewing your own work later on.

Most books on this subject cover the whole sequence of preparing and writing essays and dissertations, much like this one. But hardly any

## 12 Your Undergraduate Dissertation in Health and Social Care

actually discuss why you should do a dissertation, and what the examiners will be looking for. Despite this it is interesting, if you have time, to compare the advice given at this stage of the process. The approaches vary, depending on the level of essay or dissertation aimed at, and in some, the specific subject area catered for. Only look at the preliminary advice given in the first few pages of the books and scan the contents page to see if there is anything else of interest further on. You can probably do this in the library without even taking the books out on loan.

### Further reading

Here are a few books that we have found, and we have given notes on what to look for in them. Each gives a slightly different view of the issues, so refer to as many as possible. Consult your own library catalogue for these and any similar ones that are available. When you locate them on the shelves, look at the contents list of promising books for relevant chapters.

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2006) *How to Research*, 3rd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press. The first chapter gives an entertaining review of what research is about.

Mounsey, C. (2002) *Essays and Dissertations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See Chapters 1 and 10.

Redman, P. (2005) *Good Essay Writing: A Social Sciences Guide*, 3rd edn. London: Sage/Open University. Chapter 2 discusses what tutors look for when marking essays.

Swetnam, D. (2000) *Writing Your Dissertation: How to Plan, Prepare and Present Successful Work*, 3rd edn. Oxford: How To Books. See Chapter 1.

For more information on Evidence Based Practice in general, visit:

Users Guide to Evidence Based Practice: <http://www.cche.net/usersguides/main.asp> and for more information on Evidence Based Medicine and resources, visit: <http://www.cebm.net/>