

# **PREPARING FOR DISSERTATIONS AND PROJECTS**

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## 1. Introduction

"I wish I'd started earlier"

Ask anyone who's completed a dissertation, or project, what their main regret is and they're likely to make comments similar to these. This booklet offers some advice on the key elements of preparing and writing a dissertation, to minimise the likelihood of your making similar statements. It is organised into the following sections: Ideas, Planning, Literature Searching, Research/ Analysis, Writing Up, and Presentation.

"Given more time, I could've done something far better"

## 2. Ideas

For many students, the entire dissertation/project falters because they cannot get past this first stage.

"If only they'd give me a topic, a title, anything! Then I could get on with it"



But the ability to come up with your own ideas is, often, one of the very things that the dissertation is assessing. So, here are some ideas on generating ideas:

- *Interest* – Try to choose a topic that you are keen on, that motivates you. You'll probably spend longer on the dissertation than on any other piece of work during your student career, so, if you find your topic boring, it's going to be very hard pushing yourself to get through it.
- *Existing Knowledge/Success* – Choose a topic in which you already have a good grounding, and in which you have performed well. Obvious perhaps, but some students seem to deliberately select areas in which they've always under-performed. Unless you are compelled to look at a particular area because of external pressures (career plans, for instance), play to your strengths.
- *Accessibility* – Choose a topic in which material is readily available. Ask yourself: will I need to visit a special collection

of material? Do I have access to particular documents? Will I be able to interview people in a particular business area? Will my project cost me money, in terms of books, travel, correspondence, special equipment? Consider these issues carefully before you finally decide on a topic.

Generally, try to play to your strengths in your dissertation: do you like analysing texts, or searching archives, or do you prefer doing practical, empirical work? Is there any way you can capitalise on these preferences?

### *Generating Ideas*

Many researchers are quite superstitious, believing in ‘serendipity’ – the chance finding of the material they need. But such good luck only happens because they have done some solid groundwork. You know the phrase, “Genius is 90 percent perspiration, 10 percent inspiration”. Here, then, are some ‘perspiring’ techniques to help the inspiration flow:

*Browsing Physically.* Walk past the library or bookshop shelves (in the general area of your research) and pull off any interesting volumes. Skim through them, looking for inspiration.

*Browsing Virtually.* Do the same in more depth; that is, using keywords, see what comes up on the library catalogue on a particular topic; search databases in a similar manner. Remember that you can combine terms here. Try “surfing the net”, too, putting together anything that interests you (for example, the terms D.H. Lawrence, Tourism and Transport – an unlikely combination – came up with 178 items on Google).

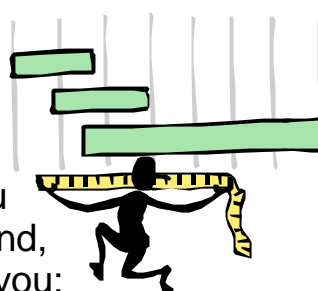
This should give you an idea of what others have done in a particular area, and will either inspire you to do something along similar lines, or to criticise what others have done, offering your own way forward.

*Previous Research.* Try looking at what past students have produced. Some dissertations/projects are held in the Learning Support Centres. Also, have a look at research published in journals. You might find yourself surprised at what constitutes an ‘idea’, or ‘project’. It may be that you are expecting too much of yourself. Remember, not everyone can be a John Nash (of the film, *A Beautiful Mind*) – nor, perhaps, would want to be!

*Dial-a-Supervisor.* Arrangements for supervision differ across subject areas. You may be assigned a supervisor, or you may be allowed to choose one. If the former, you may have to submit a proposal before you know who will supervise it. But whatever the arrangements, this is a key person to help you fine-tune your dissertation topic. This said, do try to come up with some ideas of your own.

### 3. Planning

This is one of the hardest things to do 'up-front' – although, in retrospect, we can all see what we should have done. What you need to remember is that your ability to plan is one of the things a dissertation tests. When you undertake a taught module, on the other hand, your tutors do most of this preparation for you: they look at all the material you have to learn, break it down into digestible portions, logically sequence it; give you guidance on what you need to read and think about in your private study; organise practical activities and, finally, set up tutorials and assessments as milestones, giving you feedback on your progress.



In a dissertation, however, the above is left to you. You have to manage yourself. Here's a suggested way forward.

1) *List all activities involved in completing your dissertation.* Among other things, it might involve the following:

- |                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| ✓ thinking of a topic        | ✓ statistical analysis                      |
| ✓ finding a tutor            | ✓ tabulating results                        |
| ✓ drawing up a questionnaire | ✓ writing up                                |
| ✓ piloting study             | ✓ visiting libraries, museums, interviewees |
| ✓ undertaking interviews     | ✓ binding                                   |
| ✓ transcribing material      | ✓ proof-reading                             |
| ✓ literature searching       | ✓ compiling a bibliography                  |
| ✓ background reading         |   |
| ✓ textual analysis           |   |

This, of course, is an indicative list only; and not in any final order.

2) *Order the items chronologically*, noting which can proceed simultaneously, as opposed to those that have to occur sequentially. For instance, you could continue background reading while conducting interviews; however, you would have to conduct an interview before you could transcribe it.

3) *Estimate the time that each item is likely to take*. Try to be realistic in apportioning time, taking account of the entire duration of the project. For example, if it takes you *two* hours to read *one* journal article, and *twelve* hours to digest a book, don't compile a bibliography that amounts to two years' reading! Also, remember that your dissertation needs to fit in with other commitments: other coursework, a job, housework, family, holidays – and, of course, socialising.

4) *Aims, Objectives, and Titles*. One clear way to make sure that your dissertation is achievable is to have a concrete aim in mind; you can then establish what you'll need to do to attain it. In Technology and Business areas, you may be required to specify aims and objectives as part of your project.

An *Aim* is a general statement of what you hope to achieve (e.g. to complete a dissertation).

*Objectives* are specific, operational statements detailing the intended accomplishments (e.g. to undertake a literature search covering print and e-sources; to compile a bibliography in Harvard format). Objectives, should be as SMART as possible; that is:

- **S**pecific – having just one indicator (as do the above)
- **M**easurable – show a change from a baseline (e.g. no bibliography, to one with 20 items, to one with 40!)
- **A**chievable – be realistic, fit with timescales
- **R**elevant (i.e. to aim) – move the project towards its goal
- **T**ime-limited – divided up into milestones (milestones being markers of achievement along the way, such as a 40 item bibliography, or the piloting of a questionnaire in the Gantt chart – fig. 1).

The aim can also help you formulate the title of your work, which should be explicit without being too wordy. In the title, seek to indicate:

- the subject area
- the specific aspect/group/unit of analysis
- the approach/method of analysis
- any geographical/historical focus

e.g. 'Small business use of the Internet: a qualitative analysis of clothing retailers in Bolton'

'The negative influences on cycling as a means of travel to the University of Bolton: a multi-methods approach'

In some subject areas (e.g. Humanities), more allusive titles are often used, but these should be complemented by informative subtitles.

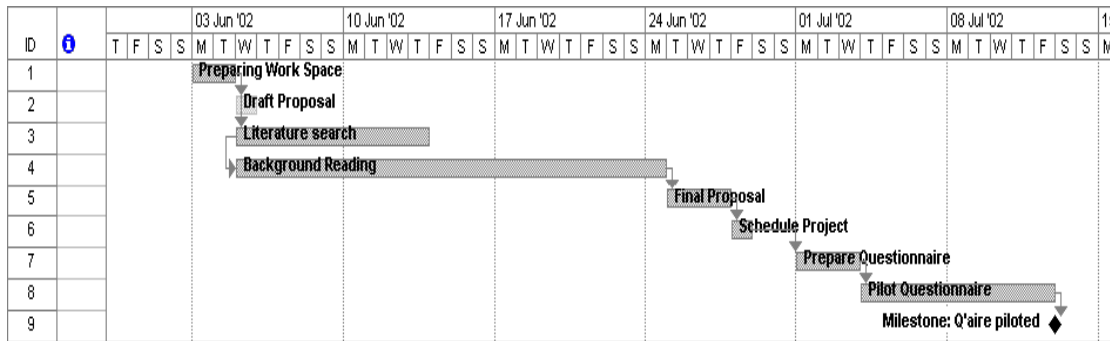
e.g. ' "Trouble at t' mill": industrial unrest in the cotton mills of Preston during the 1860s'

'Girls on top: feminist theatre in England in the 1970s'

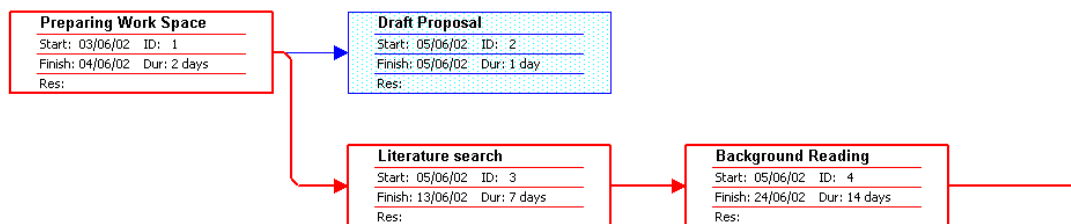
Note that in some courses, your ability to plan counts towards your final marks. Even in those where it does not, thoughtful planning is still likely to impress your supervisor. (Your supervisor may also have an input in this process, suggesting a particular schedule of meetings; at this stage it is also a good idea to draw up some commonly agreed ground-rules, to avoid any future misunderstanding.) Lastly, you are more likely to get to the end, successfully, covering all the stages, if you have a plan.

5) *Tools and Space*. Devise a visual representation of your dissertation/project, whether a Wall-chart (a calendar, pinned up for all the family to see), Gantt chart (fig. 1), or Network diagram (fig. 2). These examples, below, were generated by Microsoft Project (available on University of Bolton's network, under Microsoft Office), a very useful tool for helping you manage your entire project.





**Figure 1 - Gantt chart of part of a project, leading to first milestone**



**Figure 2 - Network diagram of same project as figure 1**

Besides these organisational tools, it is worth considering more physical ones.

The quote from this student encapsulates the dilemma experienced by those who don't set up suitable physical spaces. They are in such a mess that they can't find anything when they need it. Yet they think that they have no time to rectify this until they've finished their dissertation – the very time when they'll no longer need the material!

**"As soon as I get this dissertation finished, I'm going to get all these papers in order and clear up my room – it's a disaster area!"**

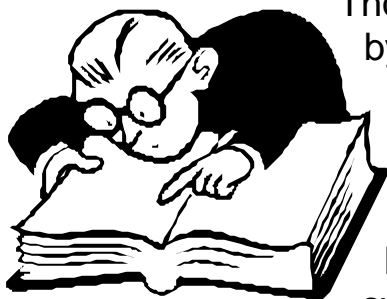
So, at the outset, try to anticipate what sorts of materials you are likely to gather, and think of suitable receptacles for them; for instance, boxes for photocopies, files for dissertation documents (briefing sheets, notes on meetings with supervisors), a hardback book for ideas, and so on. Label each, and use dividers, so that material can be organised appropriately (e.g. alphabetically).

6) *Cautionary Tales!* Nowadays, most of your material will be kept on computer, but it is wise to keep hardcopy, too. Also, get in the habit of making regular back-ups – a floppy-disk/ CD/ pen drive copy of your work – and consider keeping one copy in a different location (with a friend or neighbour). It's bad enough losing an hour's work when the computer crashes (so Save, regularly) – but to lose your entire work, as has happened (see the famous examples below), is heartbreaking. Always Practise Safe SEX: **Save Every Xtract!**

Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century historian, lost the only copy of his manuscript of *The French Revolution* (a three volume work!), when a maid burnt it as waste-paper.

Jilly Cooper, the popular writer, left the complete manuscript of her novel, *Riders*, on a bus. It never turned up, and took her thirteen years to rewrite.

#### 4. Literature Searching



Though these stages are being discussed one by one, they clearly overlap, so it may be that you have already undertaken some literature searching by the time you formally arrive at this stage (especially when you are seeking ideas). A proper literature search, though, involves the systematic exploration of material already produced on a particular topic area. Traditionally it covers books and journals but, more recently, it has been extended to cover electronic materials (e-journals, newspapers; web sites; pdf files, discussion lists, etc.). Depending on your topic, it might also involve searching previous dissertations/ theses, conference proceedings, newspapers, government sources, statistics, catalogues (from museums, exhibitions), archives (both sound and picture), standards, patents, business/ local history records ...the list is endless! Hence you need to be organised and focused.

You are undertaking a literature search in order to:

- discover what exists on a topic
- increase your knowledge of that topic
- use earlier work as a foundation or springboard (borrowing the approach, theory, method, etc. – with acknowledgement, of course)
- find gaps/errors/inconsistencies in previous work
- generate ideas for your own work
- avoid duplication of previous work
- justify and lend authority to your work
- provide a sizeable number of words for your dissertation!

Here is a suggested way to proceed:

1) *Brainstorm a list of terms*, including synonyms, broader and narrower terms, as in figure 3.

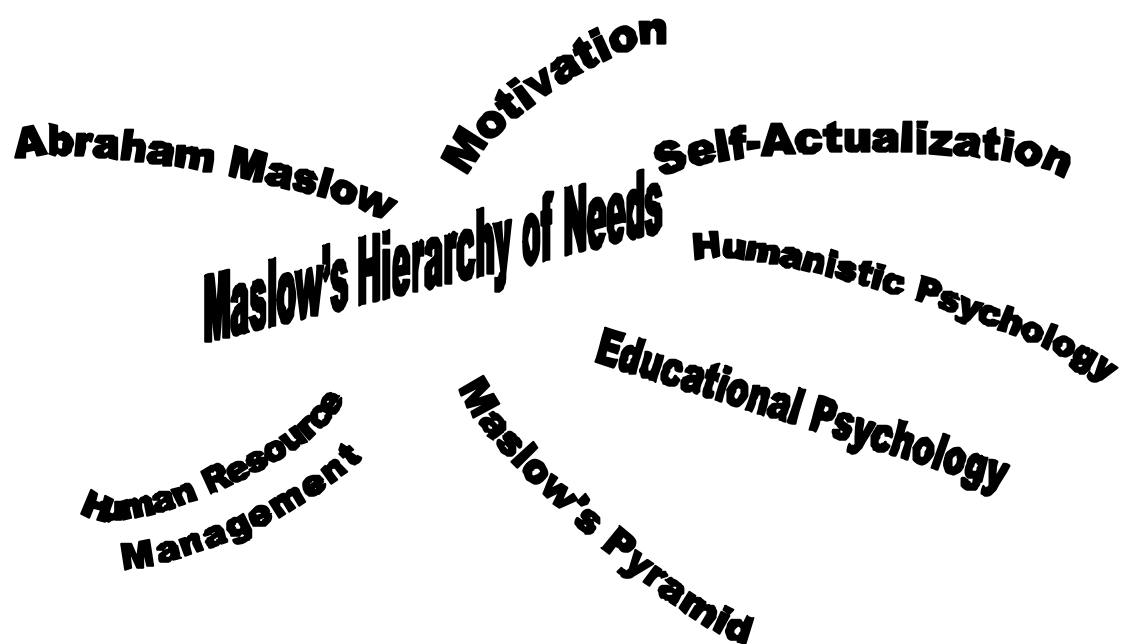
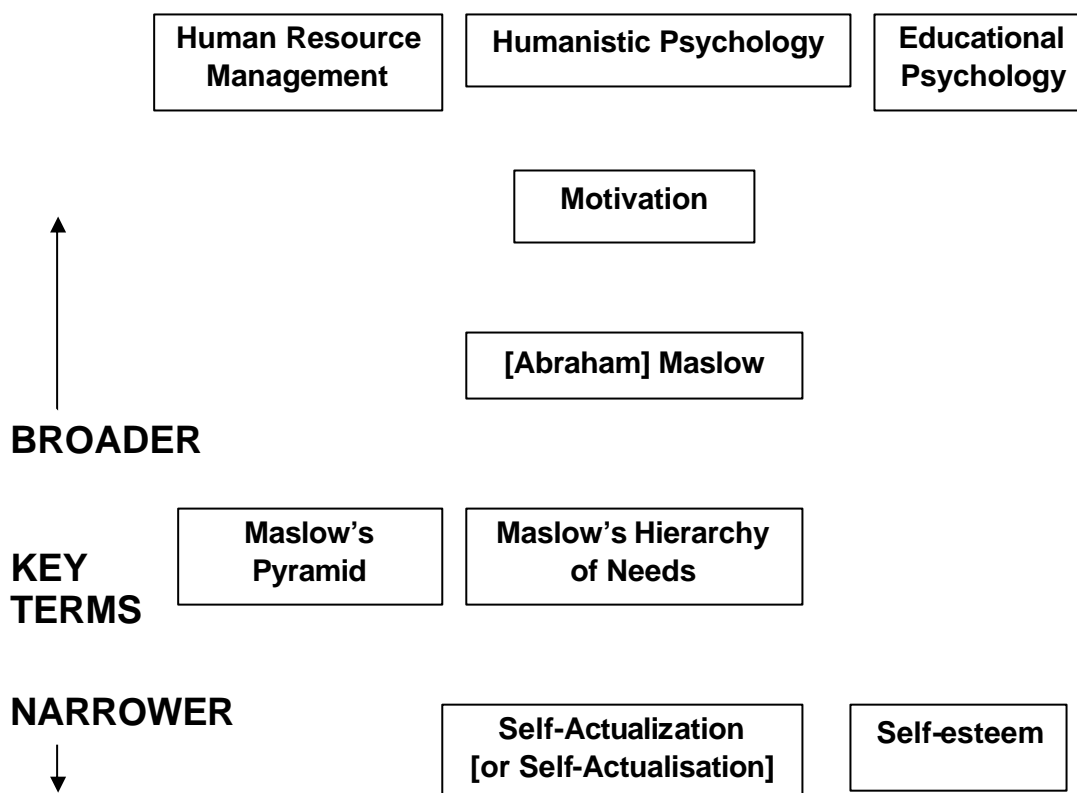


Figure 3 - Example of brainstormed topic

2) *Draw up a search net*. Order your terms from the general to the particular (depending on your needs), so that you end up with a linguistic net in which to 'catch' relevant material. You can then alter the size of the holes in the net depending on how much, or how little material you find. If too much, narrow your terms; too little – broaden them. For example, it may be that there are many books in the library containing material on Maslow's hierarchy of

needs, although this phrase itself produces nothing. So, a broader term, 'Motivation', or 'Educational Psychology', might profitably be used. Figure 4 is an example of such a hierarchy, though the top term would depend on your subject area.



**Figure 4 - Example of hierarchy of search terms**

To help you find suitable terms, use the specialised dictionaries in the Reference sections of the Learning Centres (there are a number dedicated to differing subjects), and the dictionaries and thesauruses to be found via 'Subject Resources' pages on LS and D, <http://www.bolton.ac.uk/learning/subjects/index.htm> (some of the specialised databases also have their own thesauruses).

Remember that, besides different words for a topic, there are also different spellings and versions of the same word (as with 'actualize'/ 'actualise', above): colour/ color, behaviour/ behavior; feminist/ feminism/ female; method/ methods/ methodology/ methodologies / methodological. So, always consider truncating, or abbreviating a term when you search (e.g. method\*); or using a wildcard; e.g. actuali\$ation.

Also, remember that by using Boolean search techniques (And, Or, Not), you can include or exclude particular elements. For

instance, if you searched for material on the fish, 'bass', you might also catch a lot of material on the 'bass' guitar; so you could either exclude this – bass NOT guitar – or insist that the term is always accompanied by another word – e.g. bass AND fish. (Most databases will provide more detail on the syntax used for such operations – and the Learning Support Centre staff are an invaluable help.)

### 3) *Decide where to search.*

With a literature search, you want to be thorough and systematic. It is a good idea to start locally, then go further afield. Traditionally, literature searches began with book material, then journals, then e-material; but nowadays, many start with the Internet. However, don't neglect traditional sources – the Internet is quicker, but the material is often less reliable! Here is a suggested search order:

- University of Bolton library catalogue
- other library catalogues
- e-sources:
  - general search engines (e.g. Google)
  - specialised databases (e.g. ABI/Inform, ERIC, Assia; ICONDA, Proquest, MLA, Guardian, Infotrac Web etc.).

Sometimes you will find bibliographical references only (often with an abstract, summarising the work), in which case you will have to see if the University of Bolton takes the journal, report, book, or whatever, in hardcopy. In other instances, you will be able to access the complete text. As each item usually has its own 'References', you can soon build a bank of potentially useful sources, allowing you to become progressively more focused.

However, it's easy to get lost! So, keep a record of each database you have searched, the terms you searched for, and the date (fig. 5).

| Terms searched:                           | Bolton Catalogue | Other Catalogues                                  | Google   | InfoTrac  |
|---|------------------|---|----------|-----------|
| Maslow, Motivation, Humanistic Psychology | ?<br>28/5        | Manchester Metropol., 28/5<br>Central Lancs, 28/5 | ?<br>7/6 | ?<br>28/5 |

**Figure 5 - Form for recording progress in a literature search**

#### 4) *Record your results*

At the output end, you need to keep a record of all the potentially useful items you discover. Make sure you keep all the details necessary for the Bibliography that will appear at the end of your dissertation. In fact, if you get in the habit of recording these details in the required format at the time, you'll avoid hours of painstaking work at the end (see Rudd, 2006a; Rudd, 2006b).<sup>2</sup> Traditionally these references were kept on small cards, alphabetically filed, but a computer database is now favoured. Although there are dedicated databases, Microsoft Word, with its 'Sort' facility (to arrange items alphabetically), should be quite sufficient for most purposes. Remember, too, that material you find on the Internet can be 'bookmarked' ('Favorites' in Internet Explorer).

As said earlier, you want to make sure that you undertake a single, systematic and thorough literature search, so that you don't repeat yourself later. But make sure you know when to stop! It is easy to go on searching endlessly for new material, ending up with too much to read, and too little time to do anything else. This said, you will want to repeat some of your searches before the final write up, to see if there is any startling new material available (hence the value of dating searches). With some databases it is worth noting that you can save your search history, to run the same search again.

#### *Some additional tips:*

- Remember that people, too, are valuable resources. Your supervisor has already been mentioned, but there are many electronic discussion groups that you might want to join, if

only to 'lurk' on them. (see 'Groups' tab in Google, or go to <http://groups.google.com/> ).

- Ask your Subject Specialist for more details of useful sources in your area.
- Electronic information is often less reliable and unvetted; see Kirk (2002) for information on evaluating web sites.
- There's an inter-library loan service for material not available at the University.
- There's a scheme (UK Libraries Plus), which can grant you access and borrowing rights at HE libraries elsewhere (more information at: <http://www.bolton.ac.uk/learning/issuedesk/access/otherlib.htm>)
- You need to *read* material, not just collect it. Some people like to keep notes on key sources, as in figure 6.

| Ref.                           | Pages, sections | Notes   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| D. Child (1997)                | Esp. pp. 54-7   | Good overview, with few criticisms, too.                                      |
| A. Wahba & L. Bridgwell (1976) |                 | Reviews empirical support for theory  |
| E. Mathes (1981)               |                 | Revision: 3 levels only: Physiological<br>Belongingness<br>Self-Actualization |
| W.G. Huitt (2002)              |                 | Good overview and links with other work; also good diagram                    |

**Figure 6 - Form for taking brief notes on material**

## 5. Research/ Analysis

How your research progresses will depend on your subject area. For some it will be a process of analysing primary texts, often with the help of secondary sources, and building up an argument giving reasons as to why they agree or disagree with other writers. A grid such as the above (fig. 6) might prove a useful starting point, adding other columns as necessary (e.g. thesis/argument; main points; key concepts; theoretical stance; methodology; evidence; key sources). If your dissertation is of this nature, you should aim to begin writing as early as possible.

For others the work involves more practical or empirical work: constructing a model, undertaking an experiment, designing a program or rig, creating artworks of some sort (written, photographic, etc), drawing up a questionnaire, interviewing. This is why your literature search is so important, in that it shows not only *what* other people have done, but *how* they did it. As long as you reference your sources, it is quite legitimate to adopt or adapt other people's theories, approaches, techniques or methods.

In this booklet we can only provide some general tips on research (for more detail, consult specific works via the library catalogue).

- Think carefully about health and safety and ethical issues in regard to your work; many subject areas have specific guidelines on these.
- Plan your research carefully and remember that it takes time to set up interviews, receive and analyse questionnaires. However, a thoughtless move (e.g. not undertaking a pilot study, not backing-up material) can very quickly ruin months of work! *You* might work best at the last minute but you can't expect others to fit in with your time frame.
- Always pilot any research activities.
- Always write up what you did as soon as possible after you did it (and date it).
- Empirical research always takes longer than you imagine (e.g. a one-hour interview will probably take ten-hours to transcribe in full).
- Finally, remember that your empirical/ practical work is only part of the process. You usually have to write about what you have done, describing, analysing and evaluating it. So, leave time!



## 6. Writing Up

This is the most misleading heading in the booklet. 'Writing Up' implies that you undertake some research, then put down in words what you did. But it's not so simple: words never express exactly what you want them to; in fact, they often seem to wander off in quite inappropriate directions.

This is the problem of writing, but also its reward, in that it helps you see your work in a new light: it makes you think about what you really mean, and of ways of expressing it more precisely. As E.M. Forster famously put it, 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?' Unfortunately, it takes a long while, and often several drafts, before your writing lucidly expresses what you hope it will.

In practical terms, leaving writing to some mythical 'writing up' stage, near the end, frequently means that work is submitted which is still only in draft format, as there has not been sufficient time to shape and craft it. However gifted you are at practical work, at doing research, it is no good if that is not reflected in your written account. As Robert Sternberg says,

whereas it is usually easy to distinguish well-presented good ideas from well-presented bad ideas, it is often impossible to distinguish poorly presented good ideas from poorly presented bad ideas. (1993, p. 2)

The answer, then, is to start writing from Day One, and thereafter write regularly. The more time you have between getting your first ideas down, and their final expression, the more polished the final version will be. And, of course, you can write material in any order. For example, though your final version will start with an 'Introduction', this is often the last thing to be written.

Consider writing as a way of thinking on paper – a process in which the word processor can prove very helpful.

So, make a start on the dissertation as early as you can, constructing a 'shell' for it by creating a number of files along the following lines (fig. 7).

|                             |                          |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Title                       | Ch 4 Results             |
| Contents Pages              | Ch 5 Analysis/Discussion |
| Acknowledgements            | Ch 6 Conclusion          |
| Ch 1 Introduction           | Appendix                 |
| Ch 2 Literature Search      | Notes                    |
| Ch 3 Methodology            | Bibliography             |
| Ideas / Queries / "To Do's" |                          |

**Figure 7 - Suggested files for dissertation framework**

You can now work on your dissertation at any time, in small sections, letting it grow organically, rather than seeing it as an intimidating lump, to be put off till the last minute. For example, if you were writing in your Literature Search file about what you'd read, you could simultaneously copy the reference into a Bibliography file (remember that you can have multiple files open in Microsoft Word). Material on an interesting methodological issue that you wanted to adapt could be copied from the Literature Search into the Methodology file. And, when you came to realise how wonderfully helpful the staff in the Learning Support Centres were, you could open your Acknowledgements file and thank them formally!

Remember, the Introduction – where you set out what you are going to do, and outline the general way that the work unfolds – is normally completed last. It's only when you've been there that you can signpost the route for others.

The final files, for 'Ideas', 'Queries' and 'To Do's', are there as aids, so that, when you meet your supervisor, all your queries will be together. As ideas arise, you can make sure you capture them instantly. Likewise, each time you think of something that needs doing, add it to your 'To Do' list, so that, for example, when you next come to the Learning Support Centre, you can renew your books, search for particular articles, request Inter-library loans, search a specific database, use the colour printer, and so on – all at one go.

## 7. Presentation

It is a good idea to decide on the look of your document at the outset, too, to avoid discovering, at the end, that you have a number of conflicting styles. The font size, spacing and page margins might be determined for you by your Subject Group's style-sheet but, beyond this, there are decisions you yourself can make when you set up your files (as discussed above).

For example,

- Are you going to indent or block paragraphs?
- Are you going to have chapter headings, or is it going to be in sections? Are you going to use a formal Report style, using a decimal numbering system (1, 1.1, 1.2, etc. – see Rudd, 2004, for more detail)?
- If you have headings, what size and style of font will you use (bold, underlined, italicised)? What differing levels of heading will you use? (Word has some preset styles, but you might wish to define your own).
- How are you going to incorporate illustrations/tables/charts? Have you a particular 'style' of Table in mind? (See Tables – Autoformat for examples.)
- Are you going to generate Table of Contents /List of Figures pages when you have finished your document (as here)?
- How are you going to paginate consistently throughout your document? (Word does have a Master Document facility for this; it also has a Thesis Template, but this is rather restrictive).
- Have you thought of setting up some fields in each file (Insert – Fields)? Particularly useful are the automatic Word Count (called 'Numwords'), and 'Save Date', which lets you know which version of your document you are working on.

These are indicative of the types of issue to sort out before you become too immersed in the dissertation. But presentation also needs to be considered in its own right. While a well-written and

presented dissertation is not necessarily a good dissertation, attention to these issues will certainly make it better – and first-class dissertations are almost always both presentable and readable. Although subject areas have slightly differing guidelines on presentation, the following are fairly standard.

- Begin each section on a new page, unlike the space-saving layout adopted here.
- Avoid having single, stray lines of text at the top or bottom of pages ('widows and orphans'), if they form part of a paragraph.
- Use double-spacing and write on one-side of the paper only.
- Quotations and notes can often be in single spacing.
- Use standard default for margins (left and right margins, 3 cm/ 1.25", top and bottom, 2.5cm/ 1") – don't try to cram more on a page.
- Number tables/charts/illustrations and add suitable captions (Insert – Caption) – as in this booklet.
- Short quotations (normally, anything less than one sentence long) should be run into your main text; longer quotations (longer than a sentence) should be set apart in their own indented (*not* centred) paragraphs (see p. 17 for examples of each; for more detail, see Rudd (2006a), Rudd (2006b)).
- Use lower-case, normal font for your text, including your quotations, saving italics and bold for headings and special words (e.g. for emphasis, for foreign phrases).
- Justified text (with straight margins either side of your text) – as in the Acknowledgements (p. 3), and Cautionary Tales examples (p. 10) – looks neater, but is less readable in quantity. Hence left aligned text has been used elsewhere in this booklet.
- Material that is not part of the main argument you are developing (e.g. datasheets, computer printouts, questionnaires, extensive tables) should be consigned to an appendix, or to numbered appendices (see p. 23).

- Numbers, from one to ninety-nine, are conventionally written in full, with those in the 100s and larger being written as numbers. Never start a sentence with a number, though; thus, ‘One-hundred-and-six ...’. Dates are also written numerically (e.g. 16 June 1904, 1939-1945, 1900s, 1840s), but note that centuries are written in full: nineteenth century.
- Generally, don’t use abbreviations in your academic writing; that is, don’t write ‘i.e.’, ‘e.g.’, ‘etc.’ in your main text (though they are often acceptable within brackets and in notes).
- Avoid sexist constructions in your writing (e.g. ‘Man is the only creature to give birth in this way. He is unique.’ Prefer: ‘Humans are the only creatures to give birth in this way. They are unique.’).
- Assessment of the lucidity of your expression can be calibrated by the utilisation of the Microsoft Readability facility. *In other words*: See how easy your writing is by using the Readability tool. (Both these sentences say the same thing, but the second is far more readable.)

Microsoft Word provides two Readability tests that you can apply to your text. Go to:

Tools – Options, and select the ‘Spelling & Grammar’ Tab

Tick the ‘Show readability Statistics’ check box – and OK

When you next click ‘Spelling & Grammar’ on the standard toolbar, the reading level of your work will be given after the spelling/grammar elements.

‘Help’ will give you full details of how to interpret these tests, but the Flesch Reading Ease Score is the simpler to comprehend. It should normally be between 50% and 70% (the higher the percentage, the easier the text – but remember, higher education should not be too basic).

Applying the Flesch formula to the two sentences at the beginning of this bullet point, the first scored zero (unreadable!), whereas the second scored 64% (quite easy to understand).

## **8. Conclusion**

This booklet should have given you a brief idea of how to tackle a dissertation. By this point it should also be clear that planning is the key to success, informing all other stages.

Though you do not have the opportunity to formally assess your own dissertation or project, good students usually have a reasonable idea of how their work is progressing, as they build in their own evaluation as they go along ('milestones' can help in this process – especially if the work is empirical). An awareness of some of the common weaknesses in student dissertations can also help. These are tabulated in the Appendix, together with reasons for such problems.

One thing not mentioned there, but a common problem experienced by students, is loneliness. The dissertation, or project, is one area where you do not have others working alongside you (unless you are working on a group project). Consequently, some students have found it useful to set up their own support group – to meet either physically or, by forming an email discussion list, to keep in touch in cyberspace. Try it, but keep it small and positive. Doom-pronouncing Jeremiahs are not helpful.

Good Luck!

## Appendix

| <b>Weakness</b>   | <b>Reason</b>   |
|---|---|
| Too descriptive – not enough analysis.<br>Too broad a topic, so loses depth.<br>Over-reliance on secondary sources. | These are all connected, often resulting from too much reading, not enough thinking.<br>Try to start writing sooner, to gain focus and get below the surface of issues. |
| Others' views not considered.   | The opposite of the above: originality is seen as a premium, so secondary sources are neglected – rather arrogant and insulting to previous researchers!                |
| Cut-and-dry answers, not questions raised.  | Good research does not usually emerge with clear-cut answers; it tends to raise further issues. Don't hide them – foreground them!                                      |
| Inappropriate approach/ methodology.  | This shouldn't happen if you follow your supervisor's advice; so it's only a problem for those that don't!  |
| Lack of analysis of empirical data/ primary sources.  | A common complaint: others see a lot more in your data/sources than you have discussed. Look carefully!   |
| Ends up somewhere different from where it started.  | Deviating from an initial proposal is quite common, and can be a sign of original work – but your final submission must cohere, from beginning to end.                  |
| Poorly structured/ presented.<br>Begins well – peters out.<br>Writing unclear.                                      | These also go together, usually indicating a lack of time; not starting writing early enough.   |

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While it is right to acknowledge those who have helped you in any way, don't overdo it. In particular, avoid trying to 'butter up' your supervisor in the hope of extra marks. It won't work!

<sup>2</sup> This booklet is laid out in Harvard style. The Numeric – as in Rudd (2006b) – would use Endnotes or Footnotes more extensively.

## Further Reading

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- White, Brian (1999) *Dissertation Skills: For Business and Management Students* London: Cassell [808.06665 WHI]