

WRITING AN UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION



An undergraduate dissertation is not expected to be an original contribution to knowledge, but it must be original in the sense of being an independent piece of writing, based on wide reading, and giving evidence of your understanding of the subject. It usually covers a narrower field than a course based on lectures, and requires more thorough reading. The work is normally carried out under the guidance of a supervisor.

Steps to writing your dissertation

◆ Introduction

Formulate your proposal (i.e. what your argument is, what you will try to prove) as clearly and as concisely as possible in an introductory section. It is always a good idea for your topic to be rather narrow and manageable, as a wide topic will usually direct you to a huge amount of research/sources available which will prove unmanageable and frustrating to go through.

It might be helpful to put this introductory section together at an early stage as this will help guide your research and your later work. Remember, however, that whatever you write is likely to undergo significant changes as your work progresses, depending on the evidence you collect.

◆ Literature review

The literature review usually comes immediately after the introductory chapter. What you should produce is an overview of previous research on the topic related to the one proposed in the dissertation.

Once you have decided what area you wish to focus on, try to do as much reading as possible about it. You might find yourself overwhelmed by the vast amount of material there is out there but try to remain focused on your topic by disregarding research carried out on areas only in some way relevant to it. Do not attempt to read everything there is on the subject but restrict yourself to selecting only book chapters/sections and articles that pertain to the aspects you've chosen. Your aim is to find a way of either building on research already conducted on your subject or showing limitations in the area which your work can fill.

While doing your reading, make sure you keep records of all the sources (i.e. author's full name, title of book/chapter/journal article, publisher's name, place and date of publication, page numbers); this will definitely save you a lot of work at a later stage.

◆ Methodology

In this section, you will need to explain the methods, tools, and procedures used (if you are a student in the sciences) while conducting the research. If you are a humanities student, explain the structure you will use for your dissertation by stating the core argument of each chapter, the links between chapters and how this will help prove the point you wish to make. For humanities students, this section could be part of the dissertation's introduction.

◆ Findings/ Discussion

Here the results are summarised, evaluated and interpreted with respect to the original research questions and hypotheses. In this section, you are free to examine, interpret, and qualify the results, as well as to draw inferences from them. Remember that you should **NOT** introduce any new literature at this stage.

◆ Conclusions/ Recommendations

This section will repeat your initial proposal, will include an overall assessment of what you found out, how successful you were and suggestions for future research.

◆ Bibliography

This section, also called 'References' will include details of all the sources you used in your dissertation. The references you list at the end should all be found in the body of your dissertation (i.e. in your footnotes, endnotes, in-text brackets, depending on what system you used). Remember that you should include **ONLY** the references you used in your dissertation and **NOT** all the sources you read but might not have included in your work.

So, to recapitulate, the structure of your dissertation should look like this:

Dissertation Structure ¹	
SECTION	SECTION INFORMATION
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊕ The research question that is to be investigated.⊕ A summary of the contents and main arguments in the dissertation.
Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊕ Previous work done on the field of study and anything that you consider to be relevant to the hypothesis or research question and to its investigation.
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊕ A detailed account of the research questions and/or hypotheses to be investigated.⊕ Relevant methods of investigation.⊕ Why you think these methods are the most appropriate ones for the question and for your circumstances.
Findings/ Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊕ Presentation of the main findings, evaluation and interpretation.⊕ (You may wish to include an evaluation of any difficulties you encountered in collecting and analysing data, together with an assessment of how this affected your plan of research).
Conclusions/ Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊕ Brief repetition of initial proposal⊕ Brief summary of results⊕ Suggestions for future research
Bibliography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊕ List of references you used.

¹ Adapted from 'Writing a Dissertation'. *Companion for Undergraduate Dissertations*. Available at: <http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/s11.html> [Accessed: 19/10/06].