Guidelines for  
Structure and Content  
of the  
MSc Dissertation

# Master’s Dissertations: Guidelines for Structure and Content

In order to complete your Master’s programme, you are required to submit a dissertation which accords with the module specification. Although a very high standard of writing and reporting is expected, assessment is not focused particularly upon the layout and presentation of the document but upon its structure and content as a measure of its academic merit. The guidelines below refer largely to ‘structure’ - with only limited attention to ‘content’. The latter will be a matter that you should spend much of your time discussing with your supervisor for it is the academic content, which is of primary importance.

Dissertations should have a ‘reader friendly’ structure; that is, they should be clear, well written and well laid out following the [IEEE 2-Column format paper](https://wrexhamglyndwr.instructure.com/courses/200/pages/7-dot-1-1-reports-essays-and-articles?module_item_id=16559). The flow of description or argument should be readily understandable to someone not fully acquainted with the subject matter. The entire content of the paper should be relevant to the overall aim.

Superfluous material will detract from its merit.

The writing style should be impersonal and in the third person throughout. Any use of the first person (“I”, “my”, etc.) is not appropriate for an academic submission. Terms such as “one”, “the author”, “the researcher” or “the writer” should not appear in the dissertation.

It is essential that the dissertation justifies the conduct of the work and the reasoning used; this will be necessary in many respects. In addition, it must contain the evidence upon which reasoning, or argument is based in order to substantiate the reliability of the process and validity of its outcomes.

# Appearance of your paper

This Research-based dissertation will be presented as an IEEE Academic Paper of publishable standard, e.g. for an appropriate conference or appropriate Journal. It should fit into the publisher’s template and should be a minimum of 8 pages, and a maximum of 14 pages with no more than one image per page. See [IEEE 2-Column format paper](https://wrexhamglyndwr.instructure.com/courses/200/pages/7-dot-1-1-reports-essays-and-articles?module_item_id=16559), or the Student Orientation (7.1.1) for a template.

# Contents

The content of the paper can be subjective, but a typical (recommended) structure could include the following:

## Title

Your paper title should be specific, concise, and descriptive. Avoid using unnecessary words such as “new” or “novel”. Include keywords that will help a reader find your paper.

Note that the title of the dissertation does not have to be exactly the same as your original proposal.

## Abstract

This should provide a short summary of the dissertation with concise information about the research questions, aims, methodology, findings, analysis, results and discussion, and any conclusions or recommendations made. (Refer back to CONL701 Critical Research for Postgraduate Study for a refresher).

It should be self-contained with no abbreviations, footnotes, references, or mathematical equations and be approximately 250 words.

## Introduction

The Introduction should introduce the dissertation and help the reader understand why your research is important. It need not be lengthy but should provide the reader with a clear and unambiguous statement of the research hypothesis and questions which the dissertation addresses. The Introduction can also be used to outline the structure of the dissertation so that the reader can understand its flow. It may also help to describe the research aim and objectives in the Introduction.

Many students leave the writing of this chapter to the end, that way, you can introduce what you have already written about in the main body.

## Literature Review

A literature review is a search and evaluation of the available literature on your chosen topic. It demonstrates knowledge and understanding and includes a critical evaluation of the material.

“A substantive and thorough literature review is a precondition for doing substantive and thorough, sophisticated research” [1, p. 56], and it is imperative to understand the back story of any topic. It will help you build on your knowledge, identify gaps in the available research, identify the key experts, and justify your research hypothesis and questions in the context of the existing and current research.

Within this chapter you should justify your chosen literature, demonstrate key theories, arguments and controversies, highlight ways in which the research area has been investigated to date, and identify inconsistencies and gaps in knowledge that are worthy of further investigation [1].

Remember that for some areas the volume of literature will be extensive, one topic may have multiple bodies associated with it, and some literature will be central to the study and some not (but might be worth a mention).

The WGU guide for planning, developing and writing your literature review can be found [here](https://students.glyndwr.ac.uk/home-2/learning-skills/academicskills/contact-us/learning_resources-literature_review/): <https://students.glyndwr.ac.uk/home-2/learning-skills/academicskills/contact-us/learning_resources-literature_review/>

## Methodology

A methodology is a systematic approach where you can resolve research hypothesis and questions using a variety of techniques, to interpret the data and draw conclusions.

In this chapter you will describe, in some detail, what you are going to do, from start to finish: why, when and how. It determines the manner and form of your research, and underpins your chosen research method. Basically, it is the method you use to collect and analyse data, and if done correctly it will exhibit both reliability and validity. Your methodology must seek to achieve both.

You must understand a range of research approaches in order to select the appropriate method/s for the dissertation, but remember that your methodology should be linked back to your research hypothesis and questions, and literature review.

Remember, a methodology is a blueprint for a research project.

## Initial Findings or Data Collection

The type of research you have conducted is essential in determining if this chapter is essential. You need to ensure that it clearly identifies the data that relates to your research hypothesis and questions. If interviews or the analysis of a text has been your focus, then your findings may go inside your analysis chapter, but if you have organised a questionnaire survey, then a findings chapter would be a useful way of presenting your data. Here the data is best presented in table format, although it is important to explain the data. The use of graphs should be kept for the analysis and discussion [2].

## Data Analysis

This chapter looks at what was done with the data found from the findings, the results of your research study, and only be based on the data you have collected, no extraneous data, evidence or assumptions should be used. Here you restate the research hypothesis and questions, and explain the object of each experiment, question, and present the results.

The methodology you have previously determined in an earlier chapter should be used. It is neither good practice nor acceptable to indicate that you will be using certain tools of analysis and then not to do so. This chapter may well contain limitations encountered whilst applying your methodology such that interpretation is limited. Consequently, not all analytical tools will contribute to your study in equal proportion - that is for you to decide.

## Results and Discussion

The results and discussion chapter is an interesting, but challenging chapter. The focus of your writing is to interpret what the results mean and to discuss the implications, for example why are the results important, and what, if any, are the limitations in what the results are saying?

This chapter must be analytical and discursive. You are reasoning your original research hypothesis and questions, and stating the arguments for and against. This is where you bring together the opinions and views that you have found from your literature review and what you have found from your research – what is reinforced and what fails to be supported.

It is not acceptable to simply describe your results without reference to the bases upon which you commenced your research. This chapter has the capability of transforming a basic piece of work into a very good one. It exhibits to the reader knowledge of the subject matter, the degree to which the methodology has successfully been chosen, appropriate selection of literature for re-inclusion and the intellect and reasoning that has put it all together, culminating in the drawing of conclusions from the work.

## Conclusion (including future work and recommendations)

This chapter is much more than a conclusion about your findings; it is a systematic set of informative observations on what you have done [2]. It aims to demonstrate that your research is credible, and worthy of a Master’s qualification.

The purpose of a conclusion is to summarise the main findings of the research, how your research related to the literature and to identify any further research. You may also want to ask yourself a few questions: did I make the correct assumptions; did I select the appropriate methodology, etc. The answers to many of the questions may be reflected in the recommendations made.

# References

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| [1] | D. Gray, Doing Research in the Real World, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018. |
| [2] | C. Hart, Doing your Masters Dissertation, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006. |
| [3] | K. McMillan and J. Weyers, Dissertations & Project Reports, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2011. |

References MUST be complete and presented using the IEEE style.

A Bibliography is different to a Reference List. A bibliography is not usually seen in an IEEE Paper, and is simply a list of texts and sources which you found useful and wish to pass on to readers who may seek to broaden their understanding of the topic area. **A Reference List, is indexed in numerical order where you acknowledge the source of an idea or an argument, or of some data, or a quotation, etc.** The reference is cited in order to authenticate the source. Its form must, therefore, contain full and exact information to enable someone else to access the original source.

*Note that References and Bibliography are often used interchangeably – but are very different.*

## Appendices

Appendices should be kept to a sensible length. They are not meant as a vehicle for ‘other interesting bits and pieces’ - but for incorporating essential and relevant information which might be too lengthy and detailed to be included in the main body of the dissertation or would disrupt the flow of text if included there.

# A Final Thought

This is an opportunity for you to use all of your newly acquired skills and for you to engage in an area of work that (should) genuinely interest you.

When looking back at the finished version it will probably be one of the highlights of your academic career. Be proud of what you have achieved. It will represent the pinnacle of your achievements at university level and provide concrete evidence of your advanced academic skills [3].