

MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA)



A GUIDE TO DISSERTATION WRITING

Guidelines for Satisfying the Minimum
Requirements of the MBA Dissertation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The dissertation component is an important element of the MBA programme. This component will give you the opportunity to demonstrate your 'mastery' of skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation and data collection. A good dissertation demonstrates more than the acquisition of skills. It is testimony to the capability, attitude and qualities of the student to be accredited as a competent researcher (Hart, 2005).

This guide is aimed at assisting and preparing students for their Masters dissertations. You should, therefore, become familiar with this guide before proceeding with the actual writing of the dissertation.

2. ASSESSMENT FOR DISSERTATIONS

Dissertations are assessed by the following criteria:

- Quality of conceptual analysis, argumentation and critical evaluation of a business management problem
- Originality of ideas and aims
- Relevant use of secondary literature, knowledge of existing research in the field
- Accuracy of information
- Application of theory to the problem under consideration
- Argumentation and understanding of topic related and critical issues
- Structure and organization of argument
- Quality and range of expression
- Referencing, citation and general presentation

2.1 Dissertations are Assessed According to the following Criteria:

DISTINCTION [75% +]	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A distinction is awarded for work that shows a wide breadth of knowledge and application, together with an ability to develop and sustain an appropriate depth of argument and level of reflection across the whole of the dissertation.• A thorough synthesis of available literature is provided and this sets a clear rationale for the study.• Key themes are identified and fully developed.• The research remains focused at all times, while transparency is ensured through appropriate explanation and justification of the research design used.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A high level of accuracy, insight and clarity of thought is demonstrated in the analysis of the findings, leading to valid conclusions and recommendations. • The work provides evidence of originality in its approach to theory and/or method and/or application, and is suitable for publication [with necessary editing]. The organization and presentation are excellent throughout, with accurate and consistent bibliographic citations for a wide range of sources.
PASS: 50% -74%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dissertation at this level identifies key issues and demonstrates reasonable competence in carrying out an advanced independent study. • The literature review sets the standard into context although some aspects might have needed deeper investigation. • Relevant issues or factors are identified and developed using a coherent structure and research strategy that is appropriate to the investigation. • The work may fail to support conclusions fully by drawing strands together or by referring back to the objectives and to issues raised by the literature review. • Overall the structure and presentation are satisfactory, although the bibliographic citations may include some inconsistencies or references are not entirely appropriate.
FAIL: BELOW 50%	<p>A failure is awarded for work that exhibits a number of the following weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The topic researched is not relevant and does not have a management focus. • The literature review fails to provide a coherent rationale for the study or relies excessively on direct quotations or paraphrasing of published material while lacking in critical analysis of key issues raised. • The research objectives have not been articulated clearly or fail to address themes that are key to the investigation. • There is evidence of some acquisition of research skills but this is seriously flawed by the lack of clarity in the implementation of the study. • The research instruments need to be substantially redesigned for the research to reach an adequate standard of academic and professional competence.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The work is poorly expressed, poorly presented and the standard of bibliographic citation falls below an acceptable level.• The sources used are out of date or irrelevant to the topic examined.
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2.2 Length

The dissertation should ideally be 15000 - 18000 words in length, excluding the appendices and table of contents. You need to continuously check the words you write per page. A tolerance level of 5% is allowed for dissertations above the word count.

2.3 Formatting

- Use 12 point font, Times New Roman or Arial at 1.5 line spacing.
- 1.25 inches or 2.5cm margin.
- Justify right margin.
- Bold all headings and sub-headings.
- Tables and figures to be enclosed in frames with appropriate headings and numbers.

3. STRUCTURE FOR THE DISSERTATION

- Cover page
- Title page
- Abstract
- Declaration
- Acknowledgements
- Table of Contents
- List of Tables
- List of Figures
- List of Acronyms
- Chapter 1 – Introduction
- Chapter 2 – Literature Review
- Chapter 3 – Research Methodology
- Chapter 4 – Results, Discussion and Interpretation of Findings
- Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations
- Bibliography
- Appendices

3.1 Cover Page

You should have the following on the cover page:

- Regent Business School
- Title of dissertation
- Author's name
- MBA, year of submission

Follow the example presented in Annexure 1.

3.2 Title Page

The title page must include the:

- Title of dissertation
- Name of student
- Name of college
- "Dissertation Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration"
- Supervisor's name
- Year of submission

Follow the example presented in Annexure 2.

3.3 Abstract

The abstract should describe in one page what the dissertation is about and its central findings. This must include the research problem, research methods and procedure, research findings, conclusions, implications and recommendations. You need to highlight the key issues and findings.

The abstract should include the following key process elements:

- **Reason for writing:** What is the importance of the research? Why would a reader be interested in the larger work?
- **Problem:** What problem does this work attempt to solve? What is the scope of the project? What is the main argument/thesis/claim?
- **Methodology:** Detail the approach used in the study (qualitative or quantitative?? What sampling technique?? What was the sampling frame?).
- **Results:** Include specific data that indicates the results of the project.
- **Implications:** What changes should be implemented as a result of the findings of the work? How does this work add to the body of knowledge on the topic?

3.4 Declaration

- You should declare that the dissertation is an original piece of work produced by yourself.
- The declaration must be signed and dated.

Follow example presented in Annexure 3.

3.5 Acknowledgements

In the acknowledgements you are given the opportunity to thank individuals and institutions who have assisted you in the successful completion of the dissertation. This will also include acknowledging your supervisor who gave you endless hours of his/her time so that you could complete the dissertation.

3.6 Table of Contents

- All numbered headings and sub-headings must be included in the table of contents.
- A table of contents must also be included for tables and/or figures. These are called list of tables and list of figures and must appear on a separate page.
- You need to ensure that the page numbers on the table of contents matches the contents of the text.

Refer to Annexure 4 for an Example on the Table of Contents, List of Tables, List of Figures and List of Acronyms

4. WRITING THE CHAPTERS

- Please note that every chapter must start with an introduction and end with a conclusion.
- For each chapter follow the guidelines of the headings indicated below.

4.1 Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter 1 serves an important role in conveying information about the research (McDabe, 1999). It provides the reasons for your research and an overview of what the reader can expect to find in more detail in the succeeding chapters (Hart, 2005). The contents for this chapter will come from the research proposal except for the format of the study. The format of the study provides a brief outline on each chapter in the dissertation. Ensure that this chapter has an introduction and conclusion. The chapter needs to focus on the following headings:

- Introduction
- Background to the problem
- Problem statement
- Aim of the study
- Objectives of the study
- Research questions
- Significance of the study
- Format of the study
- Conclusion

4.2 Chapter 2 - Literature Review

4.2.1 What is the Literature Review?

The literature review is a critical analysis, evaluation of existing knowledge relevant to your own research problem. You are required to extract different kinds of information from what you read and also show the relationship between different studies and how these relate to your own research (Hart, 2005)

4.2.2 Searching for Literature

At MBA Level you are expected to be able to demonstrate the ability and capacity to undertake a systematic and precise search for relevant literature and be able to manage the large amounts of information you will find. You are required to take the following points into consideration:

- Consider the key aspects of your topic, aim and objectives when searching for literature.
- Consult historical and recent books that are relevant to your problem, as well as any other published materials, for example, in newspapers, journals and the Internet. It must become evident from the section that you have read widely and have been able to form a theoretical basis (or foundation, or framework) for the research (Tanner, 2005).
- Make sure that the literature that you do consult and write about in your research is *relevant* to your research problem.

4.2.3 Writing the Literature Review

You are expected to write the literature review based on the information you have obtained during your literature search. This is where the review is presented, synthesized and critiqued (Mcdabe, 1999). Consider the following when writing the literature review:

- The literature review must have an introduction and conclusion.

- You are required to use headings and sub-headings in the literature review. This must be well thought out before you proceed on writing the literature review. You are therefore required to take notes on the important headings that you are going to include in the literature review.
- Extract the relevant information from the material that you have collected. The literature review must not only be a descriptive account of theory but should also be critically analysed.
- You need to show relevance of the theory for your study at strategic points. You need to also apply theory and figures to your organization.
- Avoid being a plagiarist. Do not copy material from other authors/sources without acknowledging where you have got the information, and this applies especially when you make a statement of fact. This would require you to provide in-text references. You are advised to consult RBS's referencing guide to ensure that you reference correctly.
- You need to write in a professional and academic style.

Example on applying theory to organization:

Siegel and Shim (2000:110) indicate that at least two major factors should be considered in selecting cost drivers, being the cost of measurement and the degree of correlation between the cost driver and actual composition of overhead. The cost drivers are the basis for tariff setting. In the Ekurheleni Metropolitan Municipality, the cost management system is not optimally used for tariff setting indicating that improvement to the system is preferable.

4.3 Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

Selecting the research methodology involves decisions about the research paradigm, research approach and research method. In this chapter you will decide on the type of data needed, and selecting the data collection and data analysis strategies. This chapter must be written in the past tense. It must include an introduction and a conclusion. You need to consult your research methods module for further information.

4.3.1 Rationale for the Methodology

In this section, the rationale should identify your reasoning and justification for selecting your research methodology.

4.3.2 The Research Design

Research design is the structure that holds your research together and enables you to address the research questions in ways that are appropriate, efficient and effective.

Research designs may also be classified in terms of their purpose. Below are some of the common forms of research design. You will discuss the research design that you have chosen and then state the reasons for choosing a particular research design. The various designs are highlighted below:

- Causal-comparative research
- Correlational research
- Explanatory research
- Descriptive research
- Exploratory research

The research design also comprises:

4.3.3 The Research Philosophy

This will involve a discussion on the Research **paradigms which** incorporate the fundamental philosophical concepts and values about the nature of reality and the scientific pursuit of knowledge. Essentially there are two schools of thought about science and knowledge - positivism and phenomenology. You will discuss the **Positivist (quantitative) and Phenomenological (qualitative)** research or combined research approach and you **will motivate reasons for choosing a specific type.**

4.3.4 Research Strategies

Below is a list of some of the important research strategies available to business students. You will discuss each strategy and then **will state the reasons for choosing a particular strategy.**

4. 3.4.1 Positivist Research Strategy

- Surveys

4.3.4.2 Phenomenological Research Strategies

- Case Study
- Action research
- Grounded theory
- Ethnography

4.3.4.3 Combined Research Strategies

Often researchers may develop research designs that combine research strategies from those two paradigms in a single research design. **You are advised to select only one.**

4.3.5 Target Population

The process of selecting a fractional part of the whole relevant group or population is called sampling. The basic idea is that by selecting some of the elements in a population and focusing research attention on this finite group, we may apply the findings of the study to the whole population of interest. A population element is the single unit of the sample on which measurement and observations are taken. For example, each consumer questioned about his/her preference in a consumer study is a population element. A population is the full set of elements or cases from which a sample is taken.

For example, a population can be viewed as all students studying at RBS and the sample can be viewed as RBS's MBA research and dissertation students.

4.3.5.1 Sampling

There are two broad types of sampling – **probability** and **non-probability**. With **probability** sampling, the likelihood of any one member (or element) of the population being selected, is known. If there are a thousand rural schools and two hundred rural secondary schools, the odds of selecting one secondary school as part of the sample is 200:1000 or 0.20 (RBS, 2008)

In **non-probability** sample, the exact number of elements in the population is unknown with the result that the likelihood of selecting any one member of the population, is not known.

4.3.5.2 Kinds of Sampling

The two broad categories of sampling designs are **probability sampling** and **non-probability sampling**. You will discuss the different types of sampling and then state the reasons for choosing a particular type.

You will discuss the following types of sampling:

- **Probability Sampling**

Examples of probability sampling include the following:

Simple random	Each population element has an equal chance of being selected into the sample. Sample drawn using random number table/ generator
Systematic	Selects an element of the population at a beginning with a random start and following the sampling fraction selects every k th element.
Stratified	Divide population into sub-populations or strata and use simple random sample on each strata.
Cluster	Population is divided into internally heterogeneous sub-groups

- **Non Probability**

Examples of non probability sampling include the following:

Haphazard/convenience	The researcher selects a sample that is convenient.
Quota:	A sample in a predetermined group is selected.
Purposive/ judgemental	The researcher will select anyone in a hard-to-find target population
Snowball:	The researcher will select a sample that connected to one another.
Maximum variation	The researcher identifies the categories of interest in relation to the research topic and then intentionally seeks out subjects or settings which represent the greatest possible range of differences in the phenomena being studied

Source: RBS. (2008)

4.3.6 The Research Instrument

The research instrument should have been developed at the research proposal phase. However, should there be any changes to the objectives and the literature review; you need to ensure that the research instrument is adjusted accordingly.

There are many different measuring instruments that can be utilized by the student to quantify the variables in the research. Discussion should include why particular instruments were used over others and what is their appropriateness to the study. The most commonly chosen research instruments are questionnaires and interviews.

Should you select the questionnaire as the research instrument, then the following information is required.

4.3.6.1 Questionnaire Construction

Here you will discuss the number, question categories and the types of questions that will be asked, he/she should think about the actual structure and layout of the questionnaire – on the component sections and the sequence of the questions. The test items must be aligned to the objectives and have their foundation in the literature study. This will facilitate justification to primary findings

4.3.6.2 Interviews

You need to explain why you have selected the interview method and the type of questions used. According to Valenzuela and Shrivastava (2009), the following are the different types of interviews:

- Unstructured interviews: There are no pre-determined questions and is open and adaptable.
- Structured interview: There are a set of pre-determined questions. This provides more focus and still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting the information.
- Standardised open-ended interviews: The same open-ended questions are asked to all interviewees.
- Closed fixed-response interviews: All interviewees are asked the same questions and asked to choose questions from the same set of alternatives.

4.3.7 Pilot Study

Before administering the questionnaire to participants in the study, the researcher must test it on a small sample. The analysis of the pilot survey will reveal flaws in some questions suggest possible improvements and supply a range of possible answers to open-ended questions. Additionally, the pilot survey enables the student to:

- Make amendments necessary to maximize returns and minimize the error rate on answers.
- Categorize the open-ended questions to a reasonable degree.
- Perform the analysis on the pilot sample and test out all the computational procedures and produce some initial hypotheses.
- Evaluate the adequacy of the data for the research questions.
- All findings and amendments made to the original instrument must be explained

4.3.8 Administration of Questionnaires

In this section the student will describe the method that was used to administer the questionnaires. The questionnaires can be administered by:

- Postage

- Telephone
- Face to face
- Email

Each of these methods have advantages and disadvantages. You need to focus and develop the method you used and explain why it was the best option

4.3.8.1 Collection of Questionnaires

The collection of questionnaires will include time frames, collection points and storage of questionnaires.

4.3.9 Data Analysis

This section involves a description of the statistical tests that will be used to address the hypotheses or research questions. Examples will include descriptive and inferential statistics. The data analytic process must be explained procedurally from the time of data entry. You need to also indicate whether you are going to use tables or figures to present findings.

In accordance with the proposed objectives, and based on the types of variables, the researcher must specify how the variables (Quantities that are measured on a continuous and infinite scale, such as distance, pressure, temperature) relate to each other and not in discrete units or yes/no options. Control charts based on variables data include average bar charts (X-bar chart), range charts (R-chart) and standard deviation charts (S-chart) will be measured and the researcher must state how they will be presented (qualitative and/or quantitative), indicating the analytical models and techniques (statistical, non statistical etc.). Specify the procedure you will use e.g. ANOVA, case study etc. depending on which type of research methodology you choose to apply.

4.3.10 Validity and Reliability

Validity addresses the issue of whether the researcher is actually measuring what he/ she have set out to do. There are four specific types of validity – each of which the researcher would ideally want to establish for the research instrument **prior** to administering it for the actual study. You will discuss how the four specific types of validity were used in their questionnaires.

These include:

- Face validity
- Content validity
- Criterion validity
- Concurrent validity

Source: RBS. (2008)

Reliability of a research instrument refers to the consistency or repeatability of the measurement of some phenomena. The observed score is one of the major components of reliability. There are three types of reliability. Students will discuss how these types of reliability were used in their questionnaires

- Parallel forms of reliability
- Test-retest reliability
- Inter-rater reliability

Source: RBS. (2008)

4.3.11 Limitations of the Study

In this section 'limitations and delimitations' should be addressed. Delimitations imply limitations on the research design that the student imposed deliberately. These delimitations may include a restriction on the population for which the results of the study can be generalized e.g. your population may include only males in a certain age group.

Limitations refer to restriction on your study which you have no control. For example you may be limited to a narrow segment of the total population you wish to study or you may be limited to the research method you have selected to use.

4.3.12 Elimination of Bias

This section will include a discussion of how the research remained objective throughout the study. The following areas may require explanation:

- Use of gender neutral words
- Identifying people by race or ethnic group unless it is relevant
- Avoid language that suggests evaluation or reinforces stereotypes
- Making assumptions about various age groups

4.3.13. Ethical Considerations

When conducting research, the researcher is ultimately responsible for the integrity of the research process and the dignity and well being of the research subjects. As such, it is the duty of the researcher to recognize and balance subjectivities, provide accurate research accounts and act within the law in order to develop the required expertise. You will thus need to give consideration to various issues, such as informed consent, power and confidentiality. You should ask yourself whether your study adheres to ethical guidelines.

A discussion on the following aspects should be considered:

4.3.13.1 Ensuring Participants have given Informed Consent

The concept of informed consent refers to the importance of informing participants of the nature of the research study. Participants of the study can only give informed consent provided they have a holistic understanding of the nature of the study and a full understanding of their requested involvement in the research project. This includes time commitments, type of activity, topics that will be covered and risks involved.

Informed consent implies the following:

- Participants have the intellectual capacity and psychological maturity necessary to understand their involvement in the study.
- Participants are making an autonomous decision to participate in the study.
- Involvement in the study is absolutely voluntary.
- Participants are aware of the nature and details of the research being conducted.
- Participants are aware of their right to discontinue in the research study.
- The researcher is honest to participants about the nature of the study.
- Participants are in no way coerced into participation in the study.

4.3.13.2 Ensuring no Harm Comes to Participants

Researchers should ensure that no harm is caused to participants of the research project.

4.3.13.3 Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity

The researcher should ensure that the identity of all participants is protected. Protection of confidentiality may involve restricting access to raw data, storing all data securely, reporting findings in a manner that does not allow for ready identification of participants, and obtaining permission for subsequent use of data.

4.3.13.4 Ensuring that Permission is Obtained

It is important that official channels are cleared by formally requesting permission to carry out a study. Negotiating access to respondents is an important aspect of your study. In some instances, a copy of the final research report may be required. Ensure that you get written permission from the selected organization/company.

4.4 Chapter 4 - Results, Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

In this chapter you will present your findings, analysis of results, discussion of findings. You need to ensure the following when writing this chapter:

4.4.1 Presentation

- Use tables or graphs to present findings.
- The tables and graphs must appear in the order that they appear in the research instrument. Ensure that tables or figures are numbered correctly.
- Use percentages to present data.
- You need to make reference to tables or figures when explaining the results obtained.
- All tables and figure must be on the same page. Tables cannot be continued on the next page.
- Explanation of tables and figures must appear directly below the table/figure. Interpretation, justification and discussion follow
- Refer to the guide on Basic introduction to statistics for further assistance on presentation and analysis of findings.

4.4.2 Interpretation and Discussion

Your analysis or interpretation must be based on the data that you have collected. You will be required to think hard and carefully, and argue persuasively, your interpretation of results and evaluate their implications for your organization.

- The results from each table or figure must be analysed and discussed in detail.
- Use theory from chapter 2 to justify your findings.
- New theory can be brought in to justify current findings.
- There is no right and wrong answer here. The emphasis is on sound, logical interpretation of the findings, justified by theory.

4.5 Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of chapter 5 is to demonstrate to your examiners that you have done research worthy of a MBA Degree. It is, therefore, part of your dissertation where you tell your reader what you have achieved and point to the places in your dissertation where the evidence of your achievement can be found (Hart, 2005).

The following must be considered when preparing this chapter:

- This chapter must have an introduction and conclusion.
- Findings must be presented first, thereafter; the conclusions must flow from the findings.

- It is important that the findings are in line with the objectives and answer the research questions.
- The recommendations must flow from the conclusions of the study.

4.5.1 Findings from the Study

This section deals with the overall conclusions of your study as a whole.

4.5.1.1 Findings from the Literature Review:

Here you will state how your research findings contribute to understanding and/or explaining the phenomenon. This may include a brief critique of the interpretation given in the literature, and the concepts or theories used in the frame of explanations (Hart, 2005). Also include findings from your research literature in chapter two with which this study agrees or disagrees and why.

4.5.1.2 Findings from the Primary Research:

A series of statements evaluating the degree to which the research objectives have been fulfilled are presented here. Present the findings as per the research questions.

4.5.1.3 Conclusions

This section highlights the conclusions obtained from the study and highlights the research questions and objectives. Your conclusions must satisfy your research aims and objectives which were outlined in chapter 1.

You may use subheadings and each section.

4.5.2 Recommendations

You should provide clear, feasible recommendations in keeping with your objectives. This may include constructing recommendations for an organization saying, on the basis of your research, what they could do to improve a practice or address a problem. Recommendations should state what could be done, what benefit it would bring to whom and what resources would be needed. You can make recommendations or observations about existing recommendations and about the research on which they are based (Hart, 2005). For example: new training systems, or new government policies/ organizational policies are often raised in this section.

4.5.3 Conclusion

This is the final conclusion for the study which makes mention of scope for further research. Further, research could refer to topics and methodologies or to both. Removing some of the limitations of the research [mentioned previously]

provides opportunities for further research e.g. different regions/sectors/industries and different levels of management.

4.6 Bibliography

You are required to use RBS's referencing guide when preparing the bibliography.

4.7 Appendices

The contents of the appendices are not included in the word count for a dissertation. This does not mean that you can insert a lot of material relating to your study. The covering letter, questionnaire and the permission letter from your organization must be included in the appendices.

5. FINAL REMARKS

This guide has sought to be comprehensive and useful and has provided clear instructions on drafting your dissertation.

On behalf of the management and staff of RBS, we wish you every success with your dissertation and the attainment of your MBA degree.

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ANNEXURE 1: EXAMPLE OF A COVER PAGE

Regent Business School

**A Critical Evaluation of Customer Health Care Services Between Fixed and
Satellite Clinics at Company A**

Jay Ngubane

MBA

2010

ANNEXURE 2: EXAMPLE OF A TITLE PAGE

**A Critical Evaluation of Customer Health Care Services Between Fixed and
Satellite Clinics at Company A**

by

Jay Ngubane

**Dissertation submitted to Regent Business School, South Africa
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Business Administration**

Supervisor: Prof N Bhana

2010

ANNEXURE 3: EXAMPLE OF A DECLARATION

DECLARATION

I, Jay Ngubane, do hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my investigation and research and that this has not been submitted in part or full for any degree or for any other degree to any other University.

J. Ngubane

Date

Please note:

YOUR ORIGINAL SIGNATURE MUST BE INCLUDED IN YOUR FINAL BOUND COPY WHEN YOU SUBMIT TO RBS.

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ANNEXURE 7: EXAMPLE OF LIST OF ACRONYMS

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- | | | |
|--------|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. ESD | – | Electrostatic Discharge |
| 2. BBC | – | British Broadcasting Corporation |
| 3. NGO | – | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| 4. WTO | – | World Trade Organisation |
| 5. WVI | – | World Vision International |