

An Introduction to Dissertation Writing

What is Dissertation Writing?

Dissertation writing is some of the most complex and difficult you will be asked to complete as a student. It is also usually amongst the most rewarding. Some features are shared by all dissertations, but each subject area has its own approaches, which derive from research practices, theoretical schools of thought, links with other subject areas and in some cases, tradition.

Dissertation writing is about recording your thinking, choices, interrogation of data/literature, conclusions and recommendations in a one-way conversation with your reader. Your writing therefore must be clear, concise, evidence-based, clearly convey your thinking and ultimately enable the reader to judge what you did, whilst clearly understanding each aspect.

Dissertation Writing is not Essay Writing

An essay answers a question, which means you are required to produce an argument, which is based on evidence you have found in the academic and other suitable literature. Due to it arguing for a particular conclusion, it is necessarily not a fully balanced piece of writing, and in most cases, you should be able to write an alternative essay that argues precisely the opposite point, often using the same evidence.

In contrast, a dissertation is an investigation with multiple sections. You are required to look at, read, and think about the existing literature to identify a question that needs to be answered. You are then tasked with using primary or secondary data, or literature, depending on the style of the dissertation, to answer the questions/hypotheses you have created.

In a dissertation, you are not arguing for a particular position, you are showing why your question should exist, then using evidence to produce a reasonable answer to the question. This should add something meaningful to the field of study and crucially, fulfil the requirements within the assessment scheme.

Is There More Than One Type of Dissertation?

Yes, is the short answer. The three main types are:

1. A dissertation based on primary data collection. In this type you use existing literature to identify a research question/hypothesis to test, then devise a methodology to collect primary data, which you analyse and discuss to produce a conclusion that addresses the question.
2. A dissertation based on secondary data collection. In this type you use existing literature to identify a research question and then devise a methodology to collect and analyse secondary data, which you then discuss to produce a conclusion that addresses the question.
3. A dissertation based entirely on academic literature (and other suitable literature). In this type you use existing literature to create a question, which you then investigate using academic and other suitable literature. This type is common in Arts and Humanities subjects and in many social sciences subjects also. The main difference with the first two types is that in this type you use literature to create a balanced argument that provides an evidence-based answer to the question, rather than using a methodology to collect and analyse data to provide the answer.

In all cases you work largely independently, under supervision, to produce a piece of thinking/writing that is unique to you, making use of clearly identified evidence. It is important to remember you are not going to produce a fully comprehensive conclusion, an ideal methodology, nor will you discover all the possible evidence. You are attempting to produce something that is defensible when judged against the assessment regime and the evidence you have used.

What are the Main Features of Dissertation Writing?

1. Evidence-based. All dissertation writing must be based on evidence that is suitable literature, your data, or another source specified in your module. You are not a source of evidence, unless there is a reflective element to your dissertation.
2. Concise. In dissertations concise writing is especially important because the reader is being asked to follow an elongated piece of thinking.
3. Show your choices. Dissertations involve many choices, from which literature to read, to the features of your methodology (where applicable), to the frameworks used to discuss your data (where applicable). A large proportion of the marks available are for making evidence-based choices, so it must be clear to the reader when and why choices were made.
4. It uses referencing systems accurately. [Each department uses a specified system](#). You must accurately use in-text citations, including page numbers where appropriate, and construct your reference list carefully, ensuring all information is in the correct order.
5. Clearly structured. Typically, dissertations have chapters, each of which contains clearly defined content, a clear purpose and links to the other sections. Details of which sections you are required to include will be found within your dissertation module VLE/handbook.
6. It is not an argument. Unlike an essay, you are not using evidence to produce an argument, you are using evidence to define a question, then to show a possible answer to that question, using data or literature, depending upon the type of dissertation.

Where Can I Find Help with My Dissertation Writing?

There are several sources of help available to you. The first is your previous studies, which will have taught you how to write academically, how to think critically and how to use evidence found in academic literature. If appropriate, you will also have been introduced to research methodologies.

Your main source of support in your dissertation is your supervisor and the information within the VLE of your dissertation module. You may also be able to draw upon other support in your department and the broader university. You also have access to the [Writing Centre](#), which provides one-to-one appointments to discuss developing your writing and of course, you have your fellow students.

How can you Prepare for Dissertation Writing?

1. Complete all formative writing opportunities in your modules as a way of improving your academic writing/thinking.
2. Access academic reading in the area you are likely to study, to discover the styles and key vocabulary/concepts, as well as the research methodologies used in your field of study.
3. Read [past theses](#), which are available through the library and which you may be able to access on your dissertation module VLE, if they are available.
4. Talk to fellow students who may have had experience of dissertation producing in the past.
5. Study the assessment scheme for your dissertation carefully, so you can see what is required.
6. Attend any taught opportunities within your dissertation module and any research methods teaching you have access to.
7. Act on all feedback related to academic writing tasks throughout your course so you can improve your skills before your dissertation begins. Academic writing is a skill that takes time to develop and perfect, this is why undergraduates typically complete dissertations in the final year of studies.