

Dissertations: A Basic Introduction

In your final year you are usually required to write a dissertation or research project. This is a major piece of work that typically runs to between 5,000 and 12,000 words and varies depending on your discipline. Without adequate preparation, both the research and writing processes can be overwhelming. Delaying any thought about this until after the end of your second year may lose you valuable time.

Formulating ideas should start before you leave University for the summer. This brief information sheet offers some general pointers to the dissertation as a written artefact.

You may ask yourself what the difference is between a dissertation and other written assignments you have already done on your course.

First of all let's look at similarities. Cottrell (2003, p. 201) describes these differences by comparing dissertations and reports.

A dissertation requires *continuous prose within most sections*. Both *require analytical and critical reading and writing*, and new material or approaches that you have devised to test out theories, hypotheses or methodologies from your subject area or discipline. A dissertation may also have many features of a report, including an abstract.

Secondly, Cottrell further explains the differences between dissertations and other academic assignments as:

1. Independence in respect of the nature and scope of the work.
2. Personal commitment and involvement in the task.
3. Time and task management to structure progress.
4. Self-management and motivation to keep going.
5. Literature searches are more extensive.
6. Presentation; grammar, punctuation, binding all need time and attention to detail.

Whilst these clearly apply to other forms of written assignment, it is the extent, scope and depth that characterise a typical dissertation.

What does the dissertation process typically include?

Barnes (1995, p. 117) offers a possible sequence of activities that encompass the production of a dissertation fit for submission:

1. A topic that interests you.
2. Try several working titles.
3. Formulate your main research question and working title.
4. Discuss the ethics and methodology of your research with a lecturer.
5. Set up the project; making appointments to interview (if appropriate).
6. Gather and analyse the data.
7. Construct a timeline for writing and editing a basic draft.

8. Check with a critical friend/colleague or supervisor.
9. Write final draft and proofread.
10. Print final copy and submit in time.

There are variations to this sequence, dependent on the exact nature of your subject and any specific decisions made by your department or faculty. It is useful to draw up a timeline based on your project. This could be in the form of a Gant chart, especially useful for business projects.

What help is available to me to undertake this task?

First to consider are the resources of your course or department. The published details of your dissertation requirements are likely to include guidance on structure, presentation, your academic teaching team and specific arrangements for dissertation supervision. Your faculty librarian can assist with a whole range of aspects of research sourcing primary literature, referencing: This is available online at: www.port.ac.uk/library/librarians.

The Academic Skills Unit (ASK) can offer you additional support through group and 1:1 tutorial sessions with processes such as critical thinking and writing, note-taking techniques and time-management.

References:

Cottrell, S. (2003). *The Study Skills Handbook* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave
Barnes, R. (1995). *Successful Study for Degrees* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge

If you would like an ASK tutorial, please contact us:

Email: academicskills@port.ac.uk

Phone: 02392 843462.

Visit: Third Floor, Nuffield Building.

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