Study Guide: The Dissertation

Introduction

What is a dissertation?

A dissertation is a scholarly document presenting research and findings. Within your dissertation you will be hoping to discover, demonstrate or prove something. It demonstrates the ability to:

- Study independently.
- Plan and undertake an in-depth piece of research.
- Select and evaluate the information.
- Develop a reasoned argument.
- Make informed judgments.
- Effectively communicate your findings.
- Advance a new point of view (if relevant).

Taking your research further

By this stage you should have some idea of your hypothesis and the argument you are going to develop. Be aware that these may change as your research deepens. Use tutor and peer feedback to develop your research.

Remember you can begin writing before you have completed all of your research.

Research methods

Research might include primary and secondary material. Secondary sources are concerned with information that has been already been gathered and interpreted by others and may include sources such as books, articles or documentary films concerning your topic.

- Widen your reading (consider cross-disciplinary sources).
- Begin to identify the theories that might be relevant to your argument.
- Read through your notes and identify key areas - this will help building a thorough knowledge of your material, which you need to plan.
- Try to relate the evidence you have found to possible hypotheses and arguments.
Try to make original links between the lines of research that you uncover.
Try to form interpretations based on your own understanding of the material.
Perhaps begin to refine your arguments and form judgements and draw conclusions.
Identify areas that need further research.

Once you have a broad understanding of the research that has already been done in your field, you might consider carrying out some primary research. Primary sources are concerned with original research and may include viewing artwork, visiting exhibitions, archives or interviews, questionnaires or email correspondence. If you intend to carry out primary research, allow yourself plenty of time to prepare and complete it.

Planning your dissertation

It is essential to spend time working out the structure of your dissertation before you start writing it. A good dissertation plan will make the writing easier.

You might start by constructing an overview of your dissertation research such as a mind-map or flowchart which you could keep updating as your research progresses. Using this you could extract a linear plan. This may take the form of a series of headings with bullet points or a more visual plan like a flowchart.

Start by grouping your notes. This could be done by colour-coding or numbering the different sections or even physically sorting the different sections into files, folders or boxes, for example.
Use these groupings to form the preliminary chapters/sections of your dissertation, then break down each section into a sequence of points leading to a possible conclusion.

Structure

Dissertations are built around an introduction, a main body and a conclusion. Please check with your course guidelines for specific requirements.

Introduction

Your introduction should immediately engage the reader and provide a 'trailer' for what is to follow:

You should clearly state your research question.
You could elaborate on what you are going to write about or investigate.

You could set your parameters.

You might want to define any terms or concepts you have mentioned in your research question.

You must indicate how you will go about answering your research question (methodologies).

You might give a brief overview on how your dissertation is structured (chapter by chapter).

Your course may require a literature review as part of your dissertation.

**Main body**

Your main body consists of a reasoned argument supported by evidence and constructed in a series of logical steps in order to lead to some sort of judgement or conclusion. It may be broken down into chapters that are organised into paragraphs.

**Paragraphs**

Paragraphs are organised in order to build your argument in a series of logical steps. A typical paragraph is concerned with a single step in your argument.

The first sentence of the paragraph is the topic sentence. It clearly sets out the step in your argument that you intend to deal with in the paragraph (the main idea).

Subsequent sentences explain, define and expand on the topic sentence. Evidence is offered and commented on and if appropriate, you could introduce further evidence to widen the discussion. A conclusion may be reached.

Try to make each paragraph arise out of the previous one and lead into the subsequent one.

**Using evidence**

You will need to strengthen your argument by referring to the ideas and findings of others, however, the main voice should be your own and it should be clear what you are trying to demonstrate.

By interpreting other people’s work and using it in your own way you can indicate the significance of these ideas to your own argument.
By commenting on or evaluating the work of others, you demonstrate your own understanding of the topic you are investigating and indicate how your contribution to the debate fits in.

Evidence could be using a quotation, paraphrasing or you may reference different sources to support your argument. These could include:

- Texts (any written document).
- Illustrations (including but not restricted to images from books, the Internet, films, videos and plans/architectural drawings/maps).
- Data (including but not restricted to facts and figures, graphs and questionnaires).
- Your appendix (where you may have collected transcripts of conversations or interviews by e-mail, tape, telephone, video or other detailed information that you wish to reference).
- Exhibitions.
- Archives.

**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism can be defined as the representation of all or part of other people's work/ideas as one's own. It can be avoided by making sure you attribute your sources correctly when making reference to the ideas of others (use the Harvard system unless your course recommends another referencing system). You can choose to do this by using a quotation or by paraphrasing.

**Quotations**

According to Godfrey (2009:23), “Quotations are exact phrases or sentences taken directly from your readings”. They should be used to underpin an idea or to support your argument and not as a substitute for it.

You should frame quotations within your argument. You may need to explain or elaborate their significance and use them to stimulate further discussion.

- Use “quotation marks” to identify the words of others.
- You must always attribute the source of your quotation by referencing (using the UCA Harvard system).
- Quotations should not constitute more than 25% of your word count.
- Show your understanding of the context you found your quotation in.
- Take care not to change its meaning when you make use of it.
Try to keep quotations concise. They are often more effective when they are short and to the point.

Keep the use relevant and consistent to the point you are making.

Validate your sources carefully (especially if using the Internet.)

**Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing (indirect citation) is when you explain another person's ideas in your own words. It should be used for the same reasons as direct quotations, to provide evidence for your discussion. You must attribute the source of the idea if it is not your own by referencing (using the UCA Harvard system).

Paraphrasing can be used to integrate others’ ideas smoothly and succinctly into your own discussion, and can be useful to summarise ideas. To do this, you need to:

- Interpret and precis what the original author is saying.
- Avoid just changing a word here and there, or changing the word order.
- Keep the original meaning.

**Illustrations**

Only include an illustration if you are going to make use of it, which could be by:

- Analysis
- Comparison
- Deconstruction
- Interpretation
- Extrapolation

All illustrations are given a figure number and included in a list of illustrations which is located before the bibliography.

**Conclusion**

Your conclusion will draw together the main strands of your argument and form some sort of judgement. Do not introduce any new ideas in your conclusion. It might be helpful to:

- Read back through the introduction identifying the key questions you were planning to answer.
- Read back through the main body to identify your key findings.
Demonstrate to your reader how your findings answer any questions posed. Be aware that your answers do not have to be definitive.

**Language & style**

Academic writing demonstrates your ability to present your ideas convincingly, with authority, accuracy and clarity.

**The basics**

- Use formal academic language. Avoid slang, colloquialisms or a conversational tone.
- Use objective language, for example rather than “I find it difficult to identify” use “It is often difficult to identify...” “It is evident that...” “There are a number of...”
- Adopt a cautious academic style. Avoid conclusive statements, for example, use “may”, “might”, “it seems that”, “appears to”, “possibly”, “probably”, “seemingly”, “the evidence suggests that”, “it could be argued that”, “research indicates...”
- Try to avoid assumptions and generalisations, for example, “everyone can see”, “everybody knows”, “public opinion is...”
- Avoid bullet points, lists and note form.
- Guide the reader through your writing by using words such as “therefore” or “however”. This is called signposting.

You may choose to define the way in which you use key words and concepts in order to demonstrate your understanding.

Explain your ideas fully and carefully and do not assume your reader will fill in any gaps.

If you encounter writer’s block you could try:

- Taking a short break.
- Saying what you are trying to write out loud (you could record this and play it back, or talk about it with someone).
- On a spare page give yourself three minutes to write whatever comes in to your head about the area you are stuck on.
- Move onto a different section
Editing

This may include:

- Cutting out the irrelevant parts.
- Re-wording clumsy sections.
- Re-working sections into a more appropriate structure.
- Putting sections into a better order so that it flows more smoothly
- Adding detail.

You must also make sure:

- You have acknowledged all your sources.
- Your bibliography is complete and meets the criteria set down by your School.
- Your references (citations) are complete and meet the system recommended by your School.

It is useful to go through your work several times. Ask yourself whether it makes sense - try reading it aloud or using peer review for feedback. Ask yourself whether your argument needs further clarification. Is it convincing?

Organisation and structure

- Do you need to rearrange the order of your paragraphs to make the argument flow more smoothly?
- Review smooth transitions between paragraphs.

Evidence

- Have you backed up your argument with evidence from your research?

References

- Make sure you have acknowledged all your sources to avoid plagiarism.
- Are your quotations accurate?
- Is your bibliography complete and does it meet the criteria set down by your course?
- Are your citations complete and do they meet the system recommended by your course?
Style

➤ Re-write awkward expressions or clumsy phrases.
➤ Split up sentences that are too long.
➤ Check for relevance.
➤ Check for consistency.
➤ Eliminate repetition.

Punctuation, spelling and grammar

➤ Check your text for spelling, grammar and punctuation.
➤ Do not just rely on the spell-check - proof read for errors.

Checklist for editing the final draft

Check that:

➤ The introduction introduces the main threads of your argument and defines any parameters you have set.
➤ The conclusion draws together the main threads of your argument and forms a judgement of some sort.
➤ Spelling, grammar and punctuation are correct.
➤ The referencing and bibliography are accurate and complete.
➤ You have taken account of feedback received.

Content and argument

➤ Does the text answer the central questions posed?
➤ Are any questions raised that are not answered?
➤ Is there a sense of an argument developing?
➤ Is the argument clear to the reader?
➤ Does the argument work?
➤ Have you signposted the main moves?
➤ Check for relevance.
➤ Check for consistency.
➤ Eliminate repetitions.

Research

➤ Is there enough credible evidence to illustrate your points?

Structure

➤ Are ideas suitably linked?
➤ Is each paragraph well structured?
• Are ideas presented in the right order?
• Is it clear how each paragraph links to the others?
• Do your sentences and paragraphs flow?

**Style**

Check that:

• The text is not too conversational.
• It is free of slang or colloquialisms.
• The words used are your own (there is no plagiarism).
• The text is not repetitive.

**Clarity**

Check that:

• The language is clear and concise.
• There is nothing the reader will find confusing.
• The reader can easily follow the line of reasoning.

**Presentation and format**

Check the criteria for layout and contents recommended by your course. This may be in the handbook or the dissertation briefing documents.

**General presentation**

Dissertations should be word-processed and bound, and their overall presentation and layout should be reader-friendly. It is a good idea to back your work up so that you have more than one copy - one to keep for yourself and one to hand in.

• Number your pages.
• Set it out on A4 paper.
• Use 1.5 or double-line spacing.
• Use a readable font (e.g. Times New Roman or Arial).
• Use at least a 12 point font.

Format may vary but might include any of the following:

**The front cover/title page**

• The full title
• Your full name
The qualification/course you are studying
The name of the Institution (UCA)
Year of submission
Name of your tutor/assessor
Word count

The contents page

- The introduction
- Titles of chapters
- The conclusion
- List of illustrations
- Bibliography
- Appendices

Bibliography

The bibliography contains all your sources in the UCA Harvard style:

- All written sources
- All internet references
- Film, video and photographic references