

Writing a Long Essay or Dissertation.

1 Introduction

An undergraduate long essay or dissertation is designed as an introduction to the kind of skills that will be involved in post-graduate research, as well as giving the student the opportunity to learn in depth within a subject area of their choice. It is normal for the student to choose their own topic and title, but in dialogue with a staff member who will act as the “supervisor” of the work. You will find that the experience of working on your own for several months, refining the scope of and contents of the work as you go along, keeping it focussed, and getting it finished on time will be rather different from a normal assignment, and will present you with rather different problems and demand rather different skills. The purpose of this document is to help you understand how it is different, and how you might best plan and pursue your work.

2. The Transition to the “dissertation phase”

In an undergraduate setting, there is usually no special transition to a dissertation phase. The long essay will be done in parallel with the normal assignments and examinations. However it may well be that there is a point during the academic year when you start on this piece of work in earnest. The success of this transition will often depend on how much ‘ground work’ you’ve been able to do already. The following will be helpful:

- A detailed proposal that clearly describes your project.
- Ensure your supervisor understands what you are trying to achieve with the dissertation
- Get to know what topics your fellow students are working on. Don’t underestimate the role of mutual encouragement and stimulation.
- Find out what resources are available to you and how you gain access to them.
- A more extended piece of work, such as a dissertation, may require a new work routine or new habits. Some people find it hard to “keep going” or to regularly review their own progress.

3. Using your proposal

The main purpose of a proposal is to show that the issue you propose to investigate is significant enough to warrant the investigation, the method you plan to use is suitable and feasible, and the results are likely to prove fruitful. In short, ‘will it work?’ However, writing a proposal also forces you to think about your topic and to review the suitability of your methodology. It should also give you a rough reminder of how you think the dissertation is going to work, including, **aims and objectives, significance, outline of existing literature, proposed methods, and expected outcomes** and the importance of these to your work.

4. Clarifying Expectations

It is a good idea to: clarify and negotiate with your supervisor as early as possible what are his or her expectations of you as a student as well as your expectations of him or her; this might reasonably include what frequency and degree of tutorial support can be provided.

The supervisor knows what standard your dissertation should meet and can assess the feasibility of your plans. Your supervisor can also play the role of sounding board for your ideas. In initial stages this involves helping you find your way through the literature, guidance in topic formulation, help with research design, and robust comment on appropriate writing style. In later stages this support can change to become more of a discussion of your ideas, results, and framework.

The other side of the coin is that your supervisor has reasonable expectations of you. These would include:

- that you get to know the theories and major concepts in your area, work on any weaknesses or acquire necessary skills.
- that you are able to express yourself both orally and in writing.
- that you keep your supervisor informed about the progress of your work and whether you're facing any problems. Too often supervisors say "If only I'd known that (the library had flooded, you've run out of money, broken your leg etc)".
- that you can organise yourself, meet deadlines, and in general not need to be told what to do and be 'supervised' all the time. **But** ... that you will ask for help if you need it.

5. Where you are heading

In many ways, the final dissertation will reflect the ideas of the proposal. A very good way of thinking about the entire argument of the resulting thesis is:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| • Once upon a time people believed that ... | (literature review). |
| • But then I thought that maybe ... | (aims), |
| • so, how I looked at it was ... | (method), |
| • and I've begun to think that ... | (findings), |
| • which changes the way we might ... | (contribution to knowledge). |

From the initial stages of getting underway, to the closing editing, one should have this model firmly fixed in one's mind. Is this the précis that a reader would be able to give off the top of their head with just one read through of the thesis?

6. Getting organised and getting underway

6.1 Time

You need to assess realistically how much time you can devote to your dissertation work. Within the *University of Chester* framework, the dissertation is scored at 40 credits which

means that in total, you will be putting in at least four-times as much work as all the lectures, reading and assignment writing that you would do for a conventional 10-credit module. The very extended nature of the work may also mean that you have to allocate time in a different way from exam revision or assignment writing. Dissertation work cannot be composed of lots of 10 minute fragments broken up by other activities. You may have other commitments, including family, friends and full or part time jobs (especially if you are a part-time student). You may need to make sure that your dissertation receives a full clear afternoon or day a week, and some good blocks of vacation time too.

6.2 *Progress and planning*

Now that you know where you are going and the broad tasks involved, you need to plan where you will be **ideally** by the end of each half-term. Once you have this overall structure, then there is a need to break down the tasks and the time further. Some people focus on time slots and then allot tasks to available time slots, whereas others operate from 'to do' lists put in order of priority and do the tasks as time becomes available. Within either approach, whatever you plan to do has to be quite specific. For some people, having a vision of what will happen over the next week is enough; others need to plan on a daily basis. You have to see what works for you and don't just adopt a plan that works for someone else. Be flexible enough to change the plan if it's not working.

7. **Making sense of the literature**

The first thing to do is fill in the background in a general way, getting a feel for the whole area, an idea of its scope, starting to appreciate the controversies, to see the high points, and to become more familiar with the major players. Some of this reading may already have been done for previous courses you've done.

As you cover the general area, you should keep your "question" in focus but also be open to change it.

As your reading progresses, it is more common to have to reduce the scope of your dissertation than expand it. If it is a historical study, you may realise that you should focus on just one century rather than three. In a Biblical studies area, maybe a smaller selection of texts.

It's possible if you can't seem to find much at all on your subject area, that there's nothing in the literature because it is not a worthwhile area of study. In this case, you need to look closely with your supervisor at reformulating the whole dissertation. However, you could be limiting yourself to too narrow an area and not appreciating that relevant material could be just around the corner in a closely related field. Finally, of course, you could be right at the cutting edge of something new. This can present problems for an undergraduate level dissertation, and again, you would be strongly advised to speak with your supervisor before continuing.

Once you have completed the first pass, you can return to very specific reading on issue that you will need to look at in the course of the dissertation. It is much more like that in this second phase, you are going to need to get hold of texts that are not in the college library but which you will have to look for elsewhere (other libraries or online).

Finally, when writing the introductory part of the dissertation, that necessarily reviews much of the basic reading, remember to really interact with your reading as you review it. You have to show that you've **thought** about it, can **synthesise** the work and can succinctly **pass judgement** on the relative merits of your sources. E.g.

"There seems to be general agreement on x,¹ but Green sees x as a consequence of y,² while Black puts x and y as³ While Green's work has some limitations in that it, its main value lies in"

1. For example, White 1987, Brown 1980, Black 1978, Green 1975

2. Green 1975

3. Black 1978

Approaching it in this way forces you to make judgements and, furthermore, to distinguish your thoughts from assessments made by others.

8. Methods to be used

Your chosen subject area will naturally be best investigated in certain ways. Topics within the Christian Leadership degree (mission, evangelism, church growth or pastoral studies) sometimes require survey based research, or interviews. In that case, you need to be clear about the form of survey, the intended respondents and their selection. Questions need to be designed carefully, as should response forms. Your supervisor can offer guidance if necessary, and any interview or survey would first need to be approved by the Board of Studies.

However, historical or text based studies will require different skills. Some dissertations will involve both practical observations and engagement with texts, and so stretch you in various different directions.

9. Writing the Dissertation

9.1 *Presentational Structure*

At top level, the recipe for a dissertation is simple!

- the title page;
- an abstract;
- a table of contents;
- a list of all illustrations and diagrams (if more than 10);
- **the main text;**
- bibliography;
- appendices.

However, this does not tell you how to write the main text. Here you need to conceive of its logical structure.

9.2 *The "plot"*

A dissertation has to have a "plot". In other words, it can be quite helpful to conceive of the main body of the dissertation in narrative terms. You could get the story by talking yourself through the process of putting it all together:

O.K., in my introduction, I will have to justify the selection of the question. This could be linked to the literature review where I will show that this research had to be done for such and such reasons and that it's important because This, in turn, would make my aims clear to the reader. Once I've got my aims stated, I can show in the next chapter that my methodology is best suited to my aims because In the next several chapters, I will use all my findings to argue, to prove, to challenge x, y, z. In doing so, I will make sure I show that I did indeed achieve the aims of my research. I will also show that my findings relate to the research within this specific field of knowledge in ...ways, and I will show how my work makes its contribution. In my conclusions, I will draw out and state clearly what the findings imply (theoretically, methodologically, substantively). If applicable, I will recommend that ... be done, and I will point to a, b, and c as worthwhile lines of research.

Remember, one of the most common faults examiners find with long essays is that they don't seem to have a main argument. In other words, **the dissertation doesn't have a thesis**. It looks like a collection of free-standing sections, not a purposeful, unified whole.

It often helps to consider each section of your dissertation with the following simple format:

Overall in this chapter/section/project I am trying to prove:

In order to prove that, I am trying to prove:

A. _____

How? What likely opposition is there to this stance? How does my argument avoid possible criticism?

B. _____

How? What likely opposition is there to this stance? How does my argument avoid possible criticism?

...(etc)

Assume you are trying to prove all these points to someone who shares none of your academic or theological assumptions.

9.3 *An Outline*

Next you need a general outline. This would give you an idea of how many chapters you would have and what each chapter would contain. Then, when you write section by section, the general outline would help you to fit each section to the whole. If necessary, you will produce more detailed outlines for smaller sections as you need them.

10. **Some writing tips**

Here is some practical advice about how to set up the writing of a long document such as a dissertation.

- Use a standard word-processing, database, spreadsheet and bibliographic program.

- If you know that your writing is bad, or if you are an English second-language user, then you may want to think about getting a friend to act as your editor and/or proof-reader (Not your supervisor!)

11. Seeking, receiving and handling feedback

Unlike course work, the dissertation phase doesn't provide regular contact and communication with lecturers and tutors. It is often up to you to organise meetings with your supervisor and to ensure that you get regular feedback on your work.

At different times throughout your dissertation, you will focus on different issues:

- **at the beginning stages** you will want to discuss your ideas, to 'try them out', to see if they will work, are feasible, etc.
- **during the middle stage** you will need to discuss the work you are beginning to do. This is the time when you are likely to discover that some things are not "working".
- **at all stages of writing** feedback is vital. No matter how many discussions you have had, it is only through written samples and drafts of your work that progress can be judged. However, remember that your supervisor can only assess one complete draft of your project before submission.

To get the best value from the feedback, go to each meeting with your supervisor with things to report, even if you are reporting not much progress, and particular issues you want to discuss and questions you want to ask, whether the general structure, the details of the discussion, the flow of ideas or the writing style.

The better the questions you ask, the better the feedback you get. For example, it is better to ask "Do you think the discussion of x fits better in section a or b?", rather than "Would you look at my writing?" Or you could say to your reader, "Don't bother at this stage with sentence structure, but tell me if the argument is logical and convincing."

Your supervisor is not your only possible source of feedback. You could ask fellow students for specific feedback (and of course reciprocate when asked). You could also ask other staff members, although please do this both respectfully and remember that they may give variant advice from that given by your supervisor.

12. Revising and editing

It is useful to think of revising and editing as separate processes. There is overlap, but basically we take **revision** to be a continual process of writing and re-writing, and **editing** to focus more on stylistic and grammatical points once you have an acceptable draft.

12.1 Revision

Here you pay attention to your overall argument, the logical flow of your ideas, the quality of your evidence. In the same way, you need to tackle each chapter, section, sub-section, paragraph and even certain sentences. It is pointless to become preoccupied with single paragraphs or sentences if the whole structure of the larger part is not firmly established. Always revise anything larger than a paragraph on a hard copy of the text. If

you do everything on the computer screen, you could have trouble seeing the whole structure, even of a section let alone a chapter.

12.2 Editing

Editing and proof reading attend to the detail and are better done after you've decided that you are basically happy with what you are saying. As it is done after you've done everything else, editing is often skimped. Time runs out. And probably you're absolutely sick of the dissertation and want to hand it in. However, you have to see editing as an integral part of demonstrating your standards, and, no matter how painful it is, you must take care and get the details right.

- Many people find that they do a better editing job on the hard copy rather than on a computer screen.
- Read the text aloud as your ear finds clumsy rhythms, repetitions, awkward and complex sentences, missing links, and the like that your eyes miss.
- Don't only rely on a spell check - a word which is spelled right may not be the right word.
- References need particular care. Keep a printed copy of your reference list and, while you are reading the text, make sure that each reference appearing in the text also is entered into the list of references. It is surprising how many references are missing in theses, or have inconsistent or wrong details recorded.

13. Taking Stock

It's good from time to time to stop and think where you are. The following simple questions might be helpful.

- Where am I now in the process of doing this dissertation?
- What is going well, and what is giving me problems?
- Do I need new skills or a different approach?
- Have I got stuck?
- Is the topic getting out of control or the focus becoming blurred?

14. Keeping motivated

This will always be a problem at some stage, and it is worth having more than one reason to keep you going! - You love the study; you want to explore a topic that has always interested you; it will be a big plus after college; it's a challenge!