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From proposal to thesis: writing an undergraduate dissertation

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from
PROPOSAL
to
THESIS

WRITING AN UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION



DENIS FEATHER

Introduction

I hope that this book will guide you through the process of preparing and writing your thesis – the DOs and DON'Ts, if you like. What I have written in this book is based on my experience of supervising students at all levels of study over the last decade. However, you must (in all instances) check that you are complying with your awarding institution's policies, procedures, and guidelines for the undertaking, writing, and submission of the dissertation. The purpose of this book is to walk you through some of the processes that need to be undertaken when writing an undergraduate dissertation.

I work in a business school within a university in the UK, but the route towards achieving a dissertation in other subjects is really no different.

The language, style, and formatting discussed in this book is very similar to the style required by the majority of universities, colleges, and other institutions. You may find the language I have used to be very formal on occasions. This has been done with good reason: to show you what your institution expects from you.

I hope you find this book useful.

Dr Denis Feather
The Business School
University of Huddersfield
January 2013

Chapter 1: Introduction to the dissertation

What is a dissertation?

When you first receive the written or oral instruction that you have to undertake a dissertation, your first thoughts might be ‘I’ve got to do what?’ However, of all the work that you have undertaken during your time at university, this piece is the most demanding, the most exciting, and the most important.

It is the most demanding because you will need to put in a lot of effort, work, time, and emotion into its preparation and construction. It is the most exciting because it allows *you* to show off all that you have learnt over the last three or four years of study, and because *you* get to pick the subject or topic *you* wish to research, rather than having the subject set for you. Finally, it is the most important, because it could influence the overall grade of your degree. Remember, dissertations can be weighted as a 40-credit module (or more, depending on your institution and its policies) and as such could be equal to two 20-credit modules.

What is the purpose of the dissertation?

This is a question I am often asked by students. I am also asked whether it has any value. The answer to the second question is easy: yes, it does have value. Why does it have value? First and foremost, it is a piece of work that you have ownership and control over. Most of my students are surprised by this and, in fact, often have some difficulty coming up with a subject. Don’t worry if this is where you feel you are now. It is from my years of supervising and listening, and I mean *really* listening to my students, that I wrote this book to help guide you through the process of producing a quality dissertation that you can be proud of. Your dissertation has additional value, in that it evidences to potential future employers that you have the ability and skills to undertake a research project, and manage it efficiently and effectively through to completion.

The dissertation has a number of purposes. From the university’s perspective, the purpose of the dissertation is a means of assessing your learning, skills, and abilities; for example, to not only read and write well but to also undertake research and follow instructions. As the saying goes, ‘the devil is in the detail’, and it is often here (the policies, processes, format, level of reading needed to be undertaken, time, layout, presentation, proofreading, and many other aspects this book covers) where students tend to lose marks. For example, during a discussion I had with a friend and colleague about dissertations and what he looks for, he said that he hates it when students do not conclude their thesis well; in other words, when the conclusions do not link to the research, he marks dissertations down for this poor attention to detail. I will cover this point in more detail later in the book. But it is these factors of assessment and criteria that you need to nail down, if you are to do well. Try to get into good research habits from the start.

To this end, the rest of this chapter sets the scene for the whole thesis and the processes that you will be going through, and what you need to attend to throughout the dissertation journey. Keep in mind that each chapter in the thesis should be written in an academic report format; that is, with numbered headings and sub-headings.

Headings and sub-headings in the first chapter

Below you will find the headings you need to include in the first chapter of your dissertation:

- Title
- Introduction to the study
- Background
- Aim and objectives
- Rationale for the study
- Précis of the following chapters

Let's discuss these in a little more detail.

Title

The first thing you will need to come up with is a workable title for your proposed study. This is probably one of the most difficult tasks you will ever be asked to do (Quinlan, 2011), primarily because in the past the titles for your assignments have been provided for you. However, here you will really need to put your thinking cap on, and reflect upon those areas that interest you. A good place to start is to list the areas of interest you have at home (for example: music, sport, films, fashion, computers, gaming, or whatever) for which you have a real passion. By this, I mean those hobbies or interests about which you collect material, artefacts, or information. I usually suggest to my students to select five different areas of interest, and then to consider how they can apply the different concepts and theories of their studied subject to these interests.

To provide you with a couple of examples, one of my business students was really interested in fishing and competed within the sport, but felt that it was viewed as an 'old man's sport'. To this end, he was looking at the perceptions of fishing as a sport, and how media could be used to change its image. Another student was very passionate about advertising and wished to look at how new media might be affecting advertising via traditional streams, such as television.

Whatever your title is, it needs to be short and to the point. Remember, this is only a working title, and will not become solid until you hand in your dissertation (see Chapter 3).

Introduction to the study

Here you should be identifying what it is you are wishing to study and why. In this section, there will be some repetitiveness, but do not be too concerned as you can tighten it up later. The main point is to get your ideas down on paper. Here you should have two or three sentences identifying the study and what it is you intend to address; in other words, the problem or question you wish to explore.

Background

This is like a mini literature review, and looks at the current thinking on the subject or topic you are interested in researching. In reality, this should be no more than 200-300 words in length as it is only the background – you will extend this in the literature review chapter.

Aim and objectives

The aim of the study is your research topic/question (as a norm, this usually comes from your research title) stretched out into a sentence or two; for example: ‘The aim of this study is to consider the effects of new media advertising on traditional media, such as television. This will be considered from the customers’/viewers’ perspective.’ See further information on this in Chapter 3.

The objectives should be drawn up to address any gaps or questions you have identified from your literature review (see Chapter 4) and in relation to your subject/topic goal. Five objectives are the norm; in Chapter 3 I have provided action words that you should use when writing your objectives.

When writing objectives you should be remembering the acronym of SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely (Robson, 2002; Saunders et al., 2007; Oliver, 2010; Quinlan, 2011). Initially focus on Specific and Measurable, then Achievable followed by Timely. Specific is the most important because objectives need to be short and to the point. Lastly they should be Realistic. This means that you can achieve them and as such they are not too ambitious. I would change this acronym to SMARTS, the last ‘S’ standing for Stretching. The objectives should stretch you so that you learn, but not overstretch you so that you cannot accomplish the task because the objectives become unrealistic and you cannot meet your goal.

Rationale for the study

This is relatively easy to produce and comprises of answering four questions:

1. Why are you undertaking this research?
2. What is the new knowledge that you will bring to the table?
3. What is the motivation behind you undertaking this study?
4. Who do you think will be interested in reading your research and its findings?

All the above should also appear in your proposal, most of which will then be incorporated and expanded upon in your main thesis. If you take a direct lift from your proposal to include in your dissertation, do not forget to ‘self reference’; you do not wish to be suspected of ‘self-plagiarising’. You will need to look at the referencing pack provided by your institution on how to do this.

Précis of the following chapters

This is where the first chapter in your dissertation changes from your proposal. At this point, you will offer a quick overview or précis of what the following chapters will be covering. For example: