# Undergraduate Dissertations

## Research

If you are reading this study guide, you may be preparing to undertake an extended piece of research. By now, you are likely to have completed at least two years of higher-level education already; therefore, you should be familiar with the process of breaking down an essay question to help you focus your research; find appropriate sources to explore a topic, and extend your research to seek evidence to support your arguments.

However, often in the final year before graduation you might well have to complete a longer dissertation. The purpose of this is threefold: to help you consolidate your learning; to give you a chance to show how you use your academic skills to explore a topic of your choosing, and to prepare the ground for later postgraduate work by getting you to extend your existing research skills.

The main difference between responding to an essay question and writing a dissertation (apart from the length) is that you are the one who sets the agenda, i.e., you must come up with the topic and focus for your research.

## Initial questions

Two initial questions are paramount:

* What is going to be the central focus of the study?
* What is the best method for gathering the information needed?

Many students come unstuck because they do not spend enough time thinking through these initial questions. It is normal for researchers to start out with just a hazy idea about their ‘research question’, or for the idea to evolve as you conduct your research. However, it is important that at the start of the process you have a clear and defined topic; too vast and the results will be vague and generalised; too narrow and you will find it difficult to find sources to evidence your research. Keep asking: what do you really want to find out?

Similarly, what is the best way of approaching the project? How will you get all the information you need to do the job properly? Do you have easy access to the sources or participants you will need to work with? Are there ethical concerns that might prevent you from working as you would like?

## Research methods

In many subjects, the main task will be reading – gathering as much information as possible from a wide range of current scholarly literature: journals, books, and, where appropriate, reliable internet or other electronic resources. You are expected to summarise this knowledge, analyse the key themes, ideas and theories running through the material, and apply this to the specific topic you’ve chosen for your project. Essentially, the key method here is ‘playing with the material’ – sifting through the relevant information to identify the salient points, testing and evaluating the arguments, looking for gaps and weaknesses in the theory, and using these ideas to form your own point of view.

Some projects may require an additional element of empirical data. This raises two key issues:

1. **What is the best method for gathering the kind of data you need?**

1. If you require statistical information, you need to use one of the quantitative methods – methods that count things, ideas, etc. Data of this type is often collected through questionnaires, but there are many other possible methods – for example, counting cars using a road, or counting people using a service.
2. If you require more detailed personal information – for example, information relating to attitudes, values or beliefs, you need to use a qualitative method – structured or semi-structured interviews, case studies, participant observation, and so on. As always, however, the method must be ‘fit for purpose’ – it must be an appropriate and valid way of collecting the data you require.

2. **Do you need clearance from the Research Ethics Committee?**

The answer is always ‘yes’ if your study involves ‘human subjects’ – that is, your study involves people rather than things. Often, all that is required at undergraduate level is completion of a simple online form, though more detailed information may be required.

Both of these issues raise important questions. Make sure you read some of the relevant literature and discuss these matters with your supervisor before you start work on your project.

## Getting started

You may have to submit an initial proposal before you start the research project. This is important because:

* Your supervisor has responsibility for checking that your proposal meets the module and/or course requirements, and it is better to find this out at the start rather than the end of the dissertation process.
* Your supervisor will want to know that the project is ‘do-able’ – that is, that you can achieve what you say you want to achieve in the time and with the resources available
* The Research Proposal is part of the process of refining your ideas; it helps to press home the question: what do you really want to find out?

Departmental procedures for Research Proposals vary. Always check the module/course handbook for precise information about the forms to be filled in and where/when a proposal has to be submitted. If in doubt, ask your supervisor.

## Research planning

Dissertations typically take a long time – usually longer than you think. Good planning and effective time management are thus essential.

A significant amount of time will be needed for the literature search and review, particularly if you are a slow reader. If your project involves empirical data you will need to allocate sufficient time to collect this. Similarly, allow plenty of time for analysis as, even with the help of computer programmes such as SPSS or Nvivo, the collation and analysis of empirical data is a long process and has to be done carefully. Build in ‘thinking time’ to gather your own thoughts on the data. Finally, allow enough time for drafting and editing the dissertation.

Work back from the final deadline and begin by drawing up a schedule of the different tasks you will need to complete and when they should be completed by.

Include ‘emergency time’: remember, whatever can go wrong will go wrong, so be prepared for illness, computer problems, family or work crises and so on. You will also need time to draft and edit the report. Valuable marks are often lost because students try to look for short cuts. Instead, take these eventualities into account as you draw up a schedule of your personal targets and goals.

A typical schedule of personal targets and goals may look something like this:

**I will finish the...** **by....**

Research proposal given deadline

Research Ethics submission given deadline

Literature search and reading so many weeks (set own realistic deadline)

Empirical data gathering so many weeks (set own realistic deadline)

Data analysis set own deadline

Processing the ideas and evidence set own deadline

Drafting the initial report set own deadline

Edit and revise initial draft set own deadline

Submit finished product given deadline

## Reading the literature

Remember the tricks of the trade: be ruthlessly targeted - what do you really need to read? Do you really need to read every word of every book, or do you only need part of a section or chapter? Look for the clues to narrow down the focus – the index or chapter introductions, for example. Use a similar approach with journal articles: use the abstract to check out whether the article will help with your specific project.

Keep clear notes of all your reading – partly as a way of starting to process the information, and partly as an aide-de-memoire. It is crucially important that you keep a record of all the bibliographic information and page numbers you will need for your references.

When you have collected as much background material as you can, make a list of the key points. What is directly relevant to your work, and what is merely secondary? Keep the focus.

The purpose of all this reading is to show that:

* you know your subject – you understand what is already known
* you can apply this existing knowledge to your specific research project

The aim is to set up a kind of dialogue between the theories and ideas you have read and the results of your own thinking: does your data confirm or challenge the ideas put forward in the literature? What are your own ideas? Where is the evidence to support your point of view?

## Drafting the dissertation

Prepare a dissertation plan, setting out the data in the required format for your project (ALWAYS go back and re-read the instructions given at the start of the project. ALWAYS do what it says). A fairly typical dissertation will probably follow a pattern something like this:

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| --- |
| **Introduction**  Set the scene for the research project, show why it is important and/or interesting and indicate any problems or gaps in the current knowledge.  **Set out a summary of your chosen method – and give a rationale**  Why did you choose this method, and can you justify its use in this particular project? What alternative methods might have been used, and why were they not chosen?  **Literature review**  A brief summary of the key points made in the books and journals consulted, and a critique of this material – what is missing, do these ideas or theories work, and why/why not? What kind of overall picture starts to emerge from this literature, and what is missing? See guides on conducting a literature review.  **Presentation of any empirical data**  This will vary a little, depending on the quantitative or qualitative method used.  **Analysis of the data**  Identifying the key themes, trends or patterns.  **Presentation of your findings**  What do you make of this material and (if appropriate) what evidence can you produce from the empirical data to justify your point of view?  **Discussion**  How what you’ve found relates to the literature.  **Conclusions**  And check: have you actually done what you said you would do in the introduction? |

Make sure your assignment is clearly structured, with good summaries at key points. There should be clear links between the sections, with everything set out in a logical order. Make sure the ‘flow of thought’ in the sequence of ideas is coherent and well evidenced by your research. The higher marks are awarded to dissertations that provide an insightful and considered approach to the field and that are persuasive and well presented.

## Using your supervisor

University education is about developing the skills required for independent learning. This means that students are expected to take a high degree of responsibility for their own work. The role of the supervisor, therefore, is not to direct your research, still less to ‘spoon feed’ you. They are there to guide and check that your work is on target. Your supervisor is essentially a mentor – a senior colleague who is able to offer helpful advice from their own experience and give some immediate feedback. They will advise, challenge, discuss and – if necessary – warn. But they will not do the work for you.

Normally, supervisors want to establish a kind of ‘contract’ which spells out mutual expectations as fully as possible: how often you will meet, what work the supervisor expects to be completed in advance of each session, how feedback will be arranged, and so on. Supervisors expect you to be self-disciplined and motivated enough to complete work by agreed deadlines. You should, therefore, contact them well in advance if you run into problems that will make it difficult to meet agreed deadlines. Supervisors expect – and have the right to expect – a fully professional approach from students. This means that you (and they) will:

* Keep appointments unless genuinely and unavoidably delayed.
* Keep in regular contact to check out how things are progressing.
* Complete agreed tasks on time.
* Check things out if you are uncertain about the correct process.
* Prepare a clear agenda for each meeting, outlining what you need to get from the session.
* Fix dates for your next supervision each time you meet.

Supervisors are extremely busy people, often engaged in demanding research of their own. This means that they can sometimes appear elusive or difficult to contact, please be patient and persevere. Email is often a better way of raising initial queries or questions, and they can then arrange an additional meeting if it is felt necessary.

Other S.A.S. guides that might help you prepare for your dissertation are:

* Effective reading
* Effective note-making
* How to write a research proposal
* Literature reviews
* Managing a research project

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