The Dissertation Writing Guide

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What is a dissertation?

A Dissertation is a major assessment task, sometimes labelled as an Honours Project, Independent Study Module or another module of 30 credits or more with a single assessment point. They typically involve researching a topic which has been agreed and approved by a programme tutor. Information on these will be found in your Programme and Module Handbooks (Extract taken from The Student Regulation Framework: Major Assessment Tasks).

Several elements distinguish a dissertation from other assignments you might have undertaken:

- **Independent** - A dissertation is an exercise in independent study. Previous assignments might have had a great deal of guidance on the topic beforehand. A dissertation puts you in the position of researcher and subject-expert and is used to assess your ability to produce an original, independent piece of research.
- **Focus** - The focus of your dissertation will be much narrower than any assignment you've had in the past. The purpose of a dissertation is to conduct a detailed examination of a topic in your discipline. You will need to consider multiple perspectives and demonstrate your understanding through the development of a new point of view.
- **Length** - A dissertation is substantially longer than other assignments, and for some students, it will be the longest piece of writing they compose in their whole life. An undergraduate dissertation can range from between 5,000 to 12,00 words depending on your discipline and your other modules.
- **Structure** - There are some components that will be present in every dissertation, and others will vary depending on the discipline or word count. A dissertation is typically structured by major chapters and other minor elements. Specifics will be detailed in your module handbook.
- **Weight** - A dissertation will have more module credits and therefore, will account for a larger percentage of your mark. You should be able to find specific details about this in your module handbook.

Before you do anything else

- **Word count** - Find out the word count for your dissertation. This will allow you to plan how many words should be dedicated to each section.
- **Academic writing in your discipline** - Clarify if your discipline has any specific conventions to adhere to during the writing process, for example, if the use of first person is permitted or if subject-specific terminology requires an explanation or a glossary.

- **When and how you must submit your dissertation** - Get the due date in your calendar! Find out exactly how you need to submit your dissertation. Typically, you should submit a copy via Turnitin and submit a printed and bound copy to the Student Admin Office. You can get your copy printed and bound via the University Copyshop.
- **Know who your supervisor is** - Every undergraduate conducting research will be assigned a dissertation supervisor. You will be assigned to an academic at Marjon with expertise in your chosen topic. Therefore, your supervisor might be someone you have never met before. Don't underestimate the value of your supervisor; make every effort to attend all meetings and take on board their feedback and advice.
- **Familiarise yourself with dissertations** - Make use of the Dissertation PCs in the Library to view other Marjon undergraduate dissertations. Getting acquainted with the style, content and structure of a dissertation early on will get you off to a good start and allow you to implement similar techniques in your own report.

Dissertation Timeline

Once you have a clear idea of what is expected of you for a dissertation, it's a good idea to plot how you are going to use the time between now and the hand-in deadline to complete your project. Appendix A has a blank dissertation timeline for you to use. Be realistic with your goals and consider them in conjunction with your other assignments. Your dissertation isn't the type of assignment that can be written in a week, so time management is key to success.

Developing your research question

What do we mean by a research question?

Put simply, a research question is a narrow focus or 'question' which you will plan and build your independent research around. It's important to note that your research question is by no means set in stone from the minute it is devised, but is used to guide your reading and research, in order to maintain focus and direction. A research question needs to be:

- **Clear –** It provides enough specific information for the audience to be aware of the nature and purpose of the research without requiring additional information.
- **Focused –** It is narrow enough to allow an adequate explanation within the confines of the word count.
- **Concise –** It is expressed in as few words as possible.
- **Complex –** It isn't answered by 'yes' or 'no' but rather through an examination of a number of influencing factors and perspectives.
- **Debateable –** It naturally lends itself to debate or argument and isn't determined simply by accepted facts.

- **Appropriate –** It is appropriately related to your discipline or field of study.

(The George Mason University Writing Center, 2018)

Where to start?

One of the hardest parts of a dissertation is forming a research question that is narrow in focus but isn't so narrow that it is impossible to find existing research! A dissertation should never be a demonstration of all you know about a topic. It should guide your reader through key argument. One piece of advice is to choose a topic that grabs your interest. A dissertation is a lengthy piece of work, so spend your time 'doing what you love', and you will have a much better outcome. Your dissertation supervisor is a great sounding board for these ideas. Here are some other things to ponder when considering your topic:

- **Overly ambitious or challenging topics** – You may want to change the world with your dissertation; but you probably want to graduate too! Your dissertation work will be governed by time constraints and your ability to be specific. There is no possible way you can write everything there is to know on a topic either, so be selective and realistic.
- **Emotional links to topics** – Sometimes, having an emotional link to a topic can make your research all the more meaningful, but in cases where it is likely to affect your well-being or stir up old memories, it is best to divert your focus. Dissertations by their very nature are meant to be objective pieces of research, so if you have an emotional connection to a topic, think how this might affect your research, your own ability and your own drive to complete the assignment.
- **Contentious topics** – If you feel particularly strongly or disgruntled by a topic, then it will be difficult to remain objective in your research. For instance, if your results challenge your expectations, then you might not be able to offer an impartial view or reflect on the research experience in full.
- **Originality** – If you are going to dedicate a great many hours to a piece of research, then you might as well make it worthy of that time and ensure that it is original. If you have an area where theorists or perspectives don't agree, then this might be a good point to explore. If you admire a particular piece of research, try not to simply 'replicate' it, but rather put your own spin on it by changing some of the variables.

(Rudestam & Newton, 2001)

Narrowing it down

Once you've identified your general area of interest, you will need to start narrowing this down. Your task is to find the sub-topic in a mass of information that is worth researching. *Chapter 10 – Problem Statement* in *How to Design, Write and Present a Successful Dissertation*

Proposal gives some excellent advice on this. You might also find the following suggestions useful:

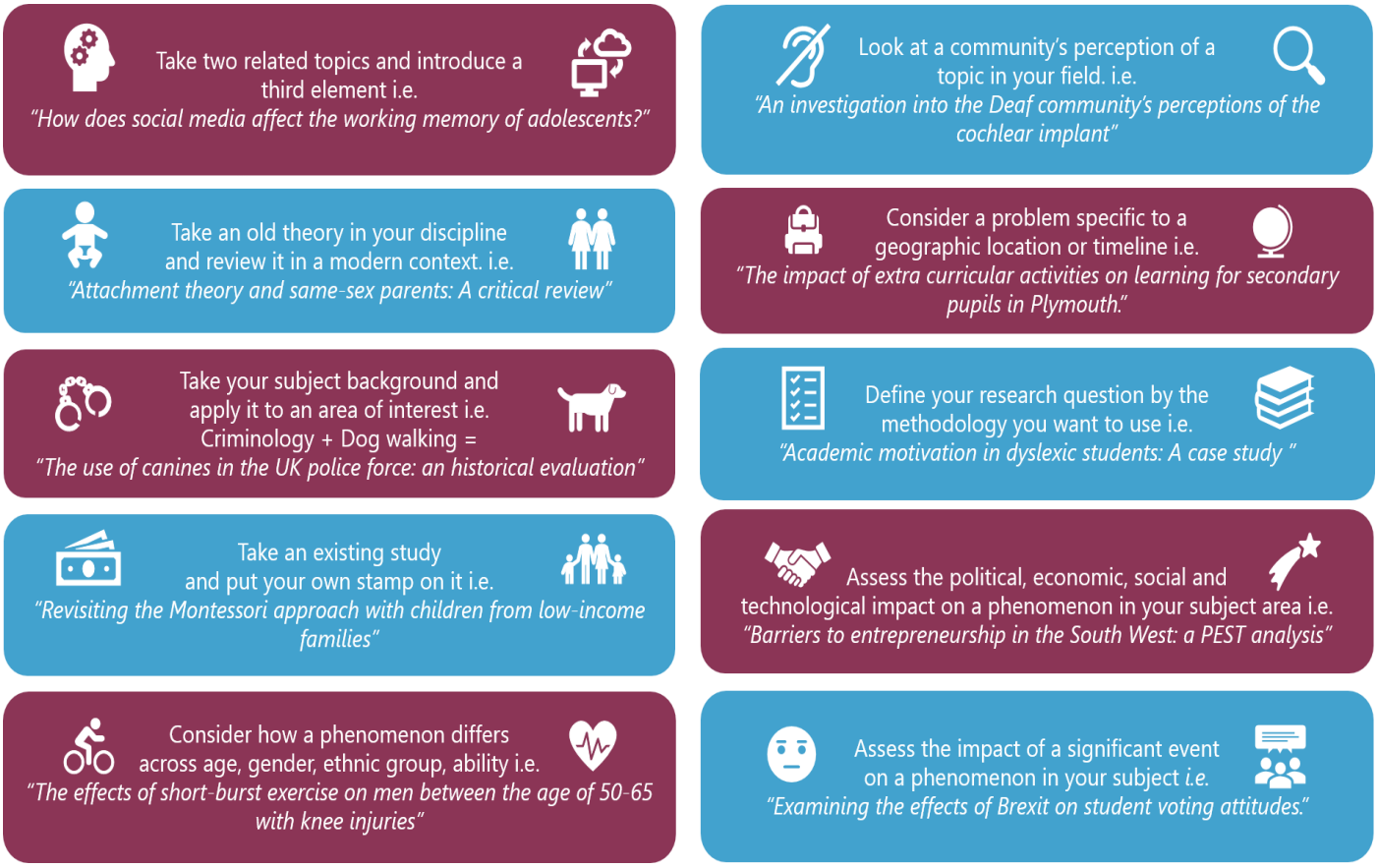


Figure 1: How to narrow down your research question

Finessing the research question

Once you've narrowed down your research question, you need to make sure that your research question is viable. Your dissertation supervisor will be able to advise you on these things, but it is a good idea for you to ponder these issues too and start reading.

Is there enough relevant literature for you to help define your research? Think of your dissertation as a piece of a puzzle. Research in the past has already been connected to form a bigger picture, but your contribution will add to the missing gaps. For that reason, you will need to read what is already out there. A lot. Formulate key words that are linked to your research question. Use Discovery, the Library Catalogue and online resources to look for readings around your proposed subject areas. CRAAP test your sources (for a full CRAAP test, see Appendix B).

Can you see a link between the literature and a method?

The research question is a bridge that connects a review of the literature to the methods sections; but this connection is dependent on the 'doability' of your research question. For example, the research question '*How do we improve reading in schools*?' has no clear link to a specific method, whereas '*Teacher's perceptions of how to improve reading in schools*', lends itself to a survey of attitudes, interviews with specific teachers, or even a case study of a particular school (Wentz, 2014, p. 145).

Is the problem adequately specific?

This guide has already mentioned focus as a key feature of a good research question. Once you have an idea of your research question, you might find that a search for literature reveals entirely too many reading options. Try flipping the question upside down, and state in one sentence what you want to solve. For example: *By using the _____ theory and _____ methods, my goal is to better understand how _____* (Wentz, 2014, p. 121).

Dissertation Tip #1

Don't panic if you can't get your research question perfect at first; you have time! It is typical for a research question to grow as your research occurs. Things will change naturally as part of the research process. It is important that you see the process as organic rather than static. It is very common for a dissertation title to change several times throughout the research and writing process.

The Dissertation Proposal

What is a dissertation proposal?

A dissertation proposal is "a careful description of what your dissertation will be about and how you intend to carry out the work involved until its completion" (Walliman, 2014, p. 67). You will be asked to submit a proposal for most courses, not only so your supervisor can check that your dissertation is within the realms of possibility and conforms to course requirements, but also so you can justify what you intend to do and why; how you intend to apply what you have learned over the course of your degree and how you will make a useful contribution to your discipline.

What should a dissertation proposal look like?

Each discipline will have specific guidelines on the structure of a dissertation proposal, so consult your module handbook or assessment guidelines. A proposal is typically no more than 2-3 sides of A4, to provide your reader with a snapshot of your planned dissertation. It will typically be divided into subheadings, which will vary according to word count and discipline, but typically, you will be expected to include aims and objectives, an introduction, a methods section, literature and research concepts or limitations.

The title problem

You will be expected to submit a dissertation title/ research question. Try to capture the main themes of your proposed research in the title so your reader is able to summarise what you will be doing from the title alone. If you are unsure where to start, try to identify themes by returning to your reading and picking out the key concepts that occur in the literature. Once you have these key concepts, illustrate the scope of your research with additional words that limit location or time. Remember, that this will be a working title: you are likely to tweak it as your research progresses.

Aims & objectives

You should aim to summarise the aims and objectives of your dissertation in no more than 3-4 bullet points. These should be a very focused summary of the reasons for your research and should lead your reader neatly into the subject background. You should also clearly set out the limitations of your dissertation here, so that the exact scope of the research is distinct.

Introduce the subject background

Your introduction needs to outline the current situation in terms of subject literature to your reader in a way that could be understood by anybody; not just subject specialists. Therefore, take extra care to make define any subject-specific terminology and any complex theories or concepts. Additionally, your introduction will need to convince your dissertation supervisor that you have undertaken adequate preparatory reading in the subject you intend to study. You can do this by:

- Introducing research conducted so far and what is has discovered
- Stating what has not been determined by research so far
- Introducing the need for research in this particular area in light of literature

The use of evidence from a wide range of sources will be crucial to your dissertation proposal. Don't dismiss literature if it isn't directly linked to your topic; look for any subtle, indirect links and pull these out to draw relationships between concepts. Your dissertation

supervisor will tell you if you have missed any critical readings and might be able to direct you towards helpful resources.

Dissertation Tip #2

The key to an excellent dissertation proposal is the ability to deliver your understanding, argument and research intentions succinctly. You will need to contextualise your research in a concise style. Be selective: you are not expected to deliver everything you know on the topic in your proposal; just enough to demonstrate that you have a clear understanding of the literature and how your research feeds into this.

Methods

You will need to detail how you intend to carry out your research and link your chosen methods to the research question. Be as clear as you possibly can, especially if you intend to use more than one method (triangulate). Stipulate clearly which aim a method intends to address. This may require a bit of background reading on research methods. If you are unsure where to start, Skills You Need is an excellent introductory resource on research methods. Here are a number of things you could address in your methods proposal:

- State a research design
- Identify the research population – lay out the situation
- Select a sample – size, location, number of people
- Collecting data – through interviews, surveys, observations etc.
- Analysing data – through coding statistical tests etc.

(Walliman, 2014, p. 74)

Expected outcomes

You should include a few sentences on what you expect the outcomes of your research to be and predict who might benefit from the findings. The outcomes should be linked closely to the aims and objectives of the research and should be relative to your timeframe and resources.

What do I do with a proposal once approved?

The proposal will be an excellent foundation for your dissertation in terms of research and write up, so expect to refer to it regularly to plan your research.

Major Dissertation Chapters

This section will look at the major chapters included in most undergraduate dissertations. Please consult your module handbook for any specific detail, for example, the order or merging of chapters (some disciplines have *Results* and *Discussion* as separate chapters; this guide considers them jointly).

Introduction

The purpose of the introduction

Mewburn, Firth and Lehmann (2019) liken a dissertation introduction to a map: your reader will never have encountered this exact piece of research, so the introduction needs to serve as guide to your reader on what's to follow throughout the rest of your report. (See this guide to using **signposts**). Additionally, your introduction should contextualise your research. You may find that broader background information is required to contextualise the literature referred to in your literature review, so the introduction would be the natural place for this to sit. However, don't release all details of your research in the introduction; your reader just needs a taste of your research, so they continue reading!

Introduction Checklist

Have I introduced the research question clearly?	
Have I stated my rationale? (What the research is and why it is important?)	
Have I clearly indicated what is going to be covered in the dissertation?	
Have I clearly stated which methods I am going to use?	
Have I ensured that all of my paraphrases, quotes and summaries are referenced?	

Dissertation Tip #3

Don't dismiss the value of a good introduction in a dissertation. You may find it easier to outline your introduction in the early stages of writing and then draft it thoroughly after you have completed the research and understand fully what you are introducing. This is because your ideas will develop over the writing and researching process and your introduction will need to reflect this process.

Further Sources on Introductions

- Skills You Need. (2019). Writing a dissertation: The introduction. Retrieved from https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/dissertation-introduction.html

- Warwick University. (2017). Writing an introduction. Retrieved from https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/academicenglishskills/writing/moreinfo/

Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review

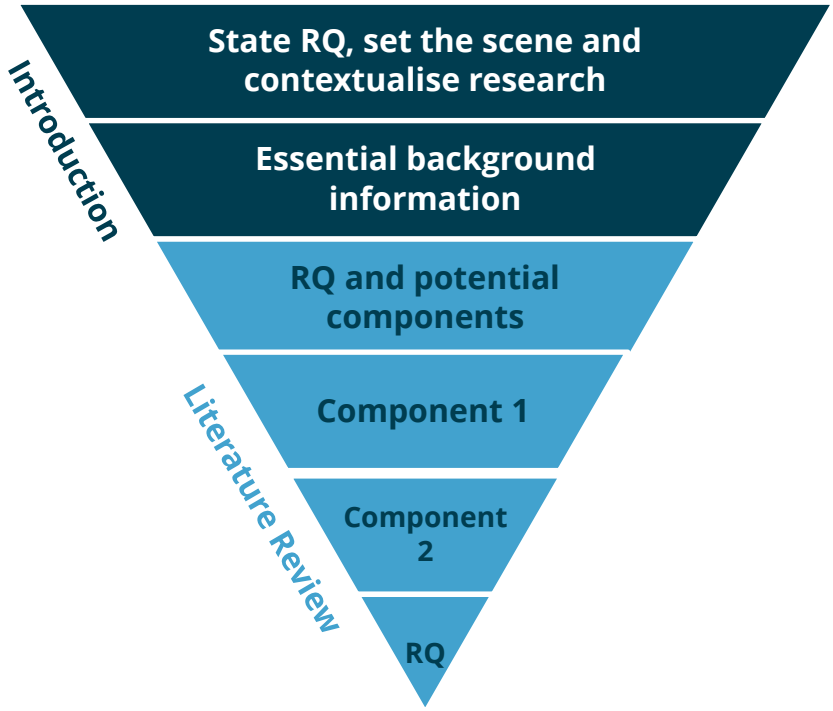


Figure 2: The difference between introduction and literature review

Your literature review is a major chapter in your dissertation and is your chance to present the current state of play for research in your chosen subject. You will need to consult the literature in your discipline to ensure that the research you are planning to conduct hasn't already been carried out, and to justify why your chosen subject is worth investigation. Your literature review is the section of your dissertation where you begin to narrow your focus too, so you can examine all the nitty-gritty details of the research problem.

Dissertation Tip #4

You will need to refer to several sources in your literature review; some of these might be hard to access or located in places you are unsure of. The University's AIM sessions offer informative sessions on using *Discovery,* so you can optimise your searches, locate information quickly and make the research process easier. You can view all sessions and book on Learning Space.

What should I cover in my lit review?

The clue is in the title! You should be consulting a range of sources related to your research question and collating this information to provide your reader with a current state of events in your chosen subject. Here are some of the things you can look for in your dissertation reading:

- Theory – A consideration of your topic from the perspective of multiple theories and how they explain certain phenomenon. Draw upon the strengths and weaknesses of theories and compare and contrast them.
- History – How have we arrived at the current situation in your discipline? Examine problems or phenomenon that has developed over time, examine their consequences and argue whether it has helped or hindered the situation.
- Developments – What are the current ways of thinking in your discipline? What are the current problems and how are they being tackled? What conflicts exist within the subject?
- Research methods – what techniques have been used to research the issues so far? How has data been collected and analysed? How have the outcomes been explained?

(Walliman, 2014, p. 101)

Remember that you won't be able to read absolutely everything that has ever been written in your field. The literature review is an iterative process; it will need to be drafted, adapted, edited and redrafted, so a source that is essential at the beginning of the process might be substituted for something more relevant at a later point.

Keeping a record

Throughout the dissertation process, it is vital that you keep a record of your reading so that you can easily refer back to material that you wish to include in your report and be able to track down details for citations. It can be difficult to know which parts of a source will be useful to your dissertation. For each source you read, write a summary in no more than 3 lines, so you will know the content at a glance. Create a standard way of noting themes, or papers that are essential. Appendix C has a reading chart as an example of how to standardise your notes, engage critically and make the most of your reading.

Literature Review Checklist

Have I divided my themes up into subheadings?	
Have I referred to relevant literature in each theme?	
Have I critically analysed the literature in each theme?	

Have I made appropriate links between the literature and the research question?	
Have I signposted my argument throughout?	
Have I ensured that all of my paraphrases, quotes and summaries are referenced?	
Have I ensured that my structure is accurate? (Refer to Figure 2)	

Further Sources for Literature Reviews

- *7.2 Turning an annotated bibliography on steroids in a proper literature review* (pp 138-144) in Mewburn, I., Firth, K. & Lehmann, S. (2019). *How to fix your academic writing trouble: A practical guide.*
- Skills You Need. (2019). Researching and writing a literature review. Retrieved from https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/literature-review.html

Methodology

Purpose of a methodology

The methodology chapter is a justification for your chosen research methods in terms of philosophy and your research question (Skills You Need, 2019a). It needs to demonstrate exactly how your research was conducted so that it can be replicated step-by-step and so that your reasons for using certain protocol or methods is clear (Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

What should I cover in my methodology?

What you cover and how you write about these elements in your methodology will be largely governed by your use of quantitative or qualitative research methods. Broadly speaking:

> Quantitative research tends to involve relatively large-scale and representative sets of data, and if often, … presented or perceived as being about the gathering of 'facts'. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is concerned with collecting and analysing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible … and aims to achieve 'depth' rather than 'breadth'.
>
> (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 65)

Your methodology needs to be written in the **past** or **present** tense so that you can reflect on what methods were used, what went well and what you amended. It also needs to distinguish your research methods and your data collection methods and discuss them in terms of their pros and cons for your research.

Research Approaches	Data Collection
Action research	Interviews/ Focus groups
Case studies	Questionnaires
Experiments	Observations

Surveys	Document analysis

You should also remember to include details on any equipment or procedures used, details about your participants and how you ensured the validity and reliability of your research. You should consult your module handbook for more information on the specific subheadings for inclusion in your methodology or consult texts on research methods to differentiate between the methodological details of qualitative and quantitative research.

Dissertation Tip #5

Marjon TELKit has a lot of tools you can use to facilitate your research methods such as online surveys, SPSS for statistical analysis and recording software for interviews. Ensure that any software you use can store data ethically and that you include the name of the software used in your methodology chapter for potential replication.

Ethics

Often, research is dependent on the involvement of other people. This means you must conduct your research in a way that adheres to ethical guidelines; whether this is guidelines within your discipline, or the guidelines set up by Plymouth Marjon University, you should design your research in a way that is ethical, safe and respectful. Your methodology should have a subheading for ethical considerations, so you can demonstrate how these ethical guidelines have been followed throughout the research process, for instance participant consent, anonymity and the right to withdraw. **Please be aware that you cannot carry out any research until you have received ethical approval.**

Methodology Checklist

Have I stated whether my research is qualitative or quantitative?	
Have I justified any philosophical underpinnings for the use of research methods?	
Have I stated where mixed methods were used, in what way and for what purpose?	
Have I detailed the ethical issues of my research and how these were resolved?	
Have I included a copy of the ethical clearance form in my appendices?	
Have I discussed my sample including size, sampling method and gatekeepers?	
Have I clearly stated the research design and data collection tools and justified their use?	
Have I clearly stated how my research was carried out and any pilot studies, problems or amendments made?	
Have I discussed the reliability and validity of my research?	

Have I ensured that all of my paraphrases, quotes and summaries are referenced?	
Is my methodology written in past or present tense?	
Have I included copies of appropriate documents in my appendices?	

Further Sources on Methodology

- *Chapter 5 – The method chapter: Describing your research plan* in Rudestam, K. E. and Newton, R. R. (2001). *Surviving your dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and process.* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- *Chapter 10 – What's all this about ethics?* In Walliman, N. (2014). *Your undergraduate dissertation: The essential guide for success.* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods.* (5th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Results & Discussion

Please note that this guide considers the results and discussion of your dissertation as one chapter. Some disciplines require separate chapters, so consult your module handbook for specific guidance.

Purpose of results

The results section of your dissertation is where you describe your results, or *what* has occurred. If you are using statistical tests, then this is the section where you would discuss statistical significance and whether it has been achieved or not. The results section should include charts, graphs and tables so that you can refer to them and 'state what you see'. You should include snapshots of your results here including overall results, instances of high or low phenomena, and any anomalies. Your raw data will need to go into your appendices and can be referred to for specifics, such as answers in interviews. Make sure you guide your reader through what you consider to be the most important observations.

Purpose of discussion

The discussion section is where you review and link the findings from your research to the existing literature and critically evaluate your contribution against other research. Put simply, your discussion section explains *why* and should perform four major functions:

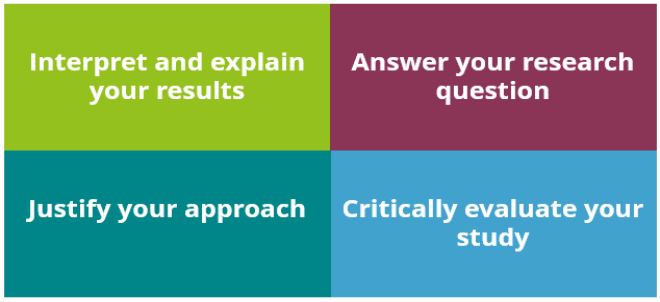


Figure 3: Skills You Need (2019b)

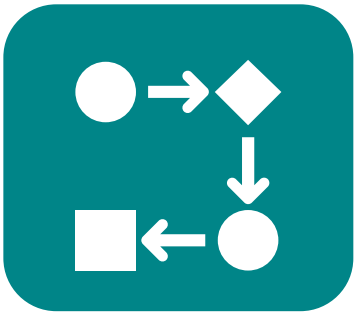
What should I cover in my results and discussion?

Think of your discussion section as a long, persuasive essay. It needs to refer to the readings in your literature review and any other sources you have deemed essential in light of your findings. It is important that your discussion is critical so that you can make appropriate links between your research question, the literature and your findings. This means building an argument to persuade your reader and using your results to construct an argument on multiple grounds:

- Agree with, defend or confirm a point of view you have found in the literature
- Propose a new point of view
- Concede on some facets of a theory, but use your results to warrant a re-examination of other facets
- Reformulate an existing point of view to provide a better explanation
- Dismiss another's point of view on the grounds of inadequacy or irrelevance
- Reject or rebut the argument of another on various grounds
- Reconcile two positions that may seem at odds, but are connected
- Retract or reject your previous position in light of evidence or arguments

(Taylor, 2009, p. 112-113)

You may find it easier to plan this section under subheadings to ensure that you cover all bases (see Appendix D for Discussion template).



Dissertation Tip #6

Your discussion section will need to create a strong argument. The University's AIM sessions include **Advanced Critical Thinking** which looks at how to create and write strong, persuasive arguments through the use of evidence, rejection of fallacies and evaluation of rhetoric.

Results and Discussion Checklist

Have I explained how I have analysed the data and indicated where the raw data can be found?	
Have I interpreted and clearly explained the results in a way that can be understood by non-specialists?	
Have I visually represented the results, so they can be considered at a glance?	
Have I made links between my results and the literature from the literature review and/or new literature?	
Have I compared my study to others in the literature?	
Have I used my discussion to answer my research question?	
Have I used my results and literature to justify my approach?	
Have I critically evaluated my study?	
Have I reasoned my argument so that the implications are clear?	
Have I linked my findings to real life practice or situations?	
Have I ensured that all of my paraphrases, quotes and summaries are referenced?	

Further Sources for Results and Discussion

- *Chapter 6 – Presenting the results of empirical studies* in Rudestam, K. E. and Newton, R. R. (2001). *Surviving your dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and process.* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- University of Leicester. (2019). Writing a dissertation. Retrieved from https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/writing-dissertation
- *'Where's your evidence for this?': using what you know to make a case* In Mewburn, I., Firth, K. & Lehmann, S. (2019). *How to fix your academic writing trouble: A practical guide.* London, UK: Open University Press.

Conclusion

The purpose of the conclusion

The conclusion is a chapter that should not be underestimated. The conclusion is your time to shine; your platform to state everything you have found out through your research and what this indicates. Furthermore, your conclusion is your chance to recommend as a practitioner in your field, so don't pass up this opportunity in your dissertation writing!

Your conclusion should include:

- A brief summary of your key findings and essential results (try to avoid repetition of your introduction)
- An explicit account of the conclusions you have drawn from your research in relation to your research question, separating the confident conclusions from the uncertain
- An indication of why your research is important (to other researchers, practitioners, policy etc.)
- Recommendations for future research or future practice (within the realms of possibility!)
- A final statement to round off your dissertation; typically, a hedged prediction of the future or any explicit conclusions

(Skills You Need, 2019c; Taylor, 2009)

Conclusion Checklist

Have I summarised the findings of my research?	
Have I stipulated my conclusions in relation to my research question?	
Have I stated what my research could be used for and why it's important?	
Have I made appropriate recommendations for future policy, practice or research?	
Have I made any predictions for the future of this subject area?	

Reference List

A reference list is an essential component of your dissertation. Every single work you mention in any chapter of your dissertation must be included in the reference list in the appropriate APA style. Whilst there is no official guidance on how many references will sufficiently aid a dissertation, you should be reading widely and consulting more than just books and webpages.

Dissertation Tip #7

Don't leave your reference list until last! Try using a referencing tool such as Mendeley to keep track of all your readings and automate citations for your dissertation report and the reference list. The University's AIM sessions include *Mendeley* training and *Organising Information*, which equips you with the tools to manage your sources more effectively.

Reference List Checklist

Have I included every cited work in my reference list?	
Have I included a page number for every direct quote?	

Have I cited every work in the reference list in the correct APA format?	
Have I arranged my reference list alphabetically?	
Have I formatted my reference list to include a hanging indent?	

Additional Dissertation Sections

Abstract

An abstract provides your reader with a 'map' to the structure of your dissertation and allows your reader to decide whether your dissertation is relevant to them (without reading the whole document). Your abstract should be written after you have completed your major chapters and therefore needs to be written in the past tense. It needs to describe the crucial elements of your dissertation in the fewest words possible (150-200 words), including:

- What the research question is and the aims and objectives
- Acknowledgement of a main theorist or theory (if applied)
- A short note on the main methods used
- A brief note on the major results
- Summary of the main conclusion and recommendations

An abstract should not include:

- Lengthy background information
- Waffle – be succinct and to the point
- Citations or references to other works
- Images, figures, tables
- Acronyms, abbreviations or subject-specific terminology

(University of Southern California, 2019)

Take a look at some of the journal articles you have read and note how they construct the abstract. These can act as a good model for this section of your dissertation.

Further reading: 7.4 *How to write an abstract* in Mewburn, Firth & Lehmann (2019)

Contents & tables

Reports as standard require contents pages. You will need to include a table of contents, a list of figures and a list of tables so that your dissertation can be easily navigated. You can learn how to create these elements in your dissertation document, and more in the AIM Dissertation Formatting session. Book on Learning Space to attend!

Statement of originality

You will need to include a statement of originality in a standard format towards the beginning of your dissertation. This statement confirms that you have cited all sources within your work and that any work outside of these citations is your own. Good research is underpinned by

academic integrity, including the acknowledgment of the work of others and having the confidence to undertake your own research and writing. Don't fall at the final hurdle! If you are concerned about something, speak to your dissertation supervisor.

I confirm that I have fully acknowledged all sources of information and help received and that where such acknowledgement is not made the work is my own.

Signed: .....

Dated: .....

Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements page is the part of your dissertation where you can thank anybody who has helped you during the research process. Typically, this should include your dissertation supervisor and any participants in your study; but be mindful of anonymity with the latter. The acknowledgements can extend to anyone you'd like to include and don't need to be written in an academic style, as they are personal to you. However, don't be unnecessarily offensive; your work will be viewed by many Marjon students in years to come, so set a good example!

Glossary

A glossary is a list of key terms used in a specific context or technical terminology that might require some description in order to aid your reader's understanding of the terms. A glossary is used to make your dissertation more available and accessible to a wider audience through clear explanations of words. You should only include a glossary if it is going to be of genuine use to your reader. A glossary should:

- Be alphabetical for easy look-up of terms
- Be restricted to words that your reader might need to clarify
- Not include acronyms – these should be included in a *List of Acronyms* if they are numerous

Further reading: *7.5 How to write a good glossary* in Mewburn, Firth & Lehmann (2019)

Bibliography/Dissertation Supervisor Log

A bibliography is a requirement for some disciplines, but not all. The same goes for a supervision log; this is a common requirement for teaching degrees. You should check your module handbook for any specific guidance. If you are required to include these, then they

should be included directly after your reference list and listed in your Table of Contents. Your bibliography should be formatted in APA, alphabetically and with a hanging indent.

Remember: if you cite something from your bibliography in your dissertation then it needs to be moved to your reference list!

Appendices

Think of your appendices as a filing location for any essential documents that need to be submitted in conjunction with or referred to within your dissertation. Anything that supports or extends the main body of the dissertation should be submitted as an appendix. Traditionally, appendices are labelled A, B, C… with a short description of the contents, for easy referral within the main body of your dissertation. Things that typically get included in appendices are:

- Ethical clearance forms
- Consent forms
- Examples of blank questionnaires/interview questions/datasets
- Raw data from results
- Transcriptions of interviews or focus groups
- Coded data from thematic analysis

Your appendices are not suitable for the inclusion of material that you can't fit into the allocated word count! If something is worth saying, then ensure you include it in the appropriate chapter of your dissertation and use artful editing to get within the word count limits.

Additional Guidance

Style

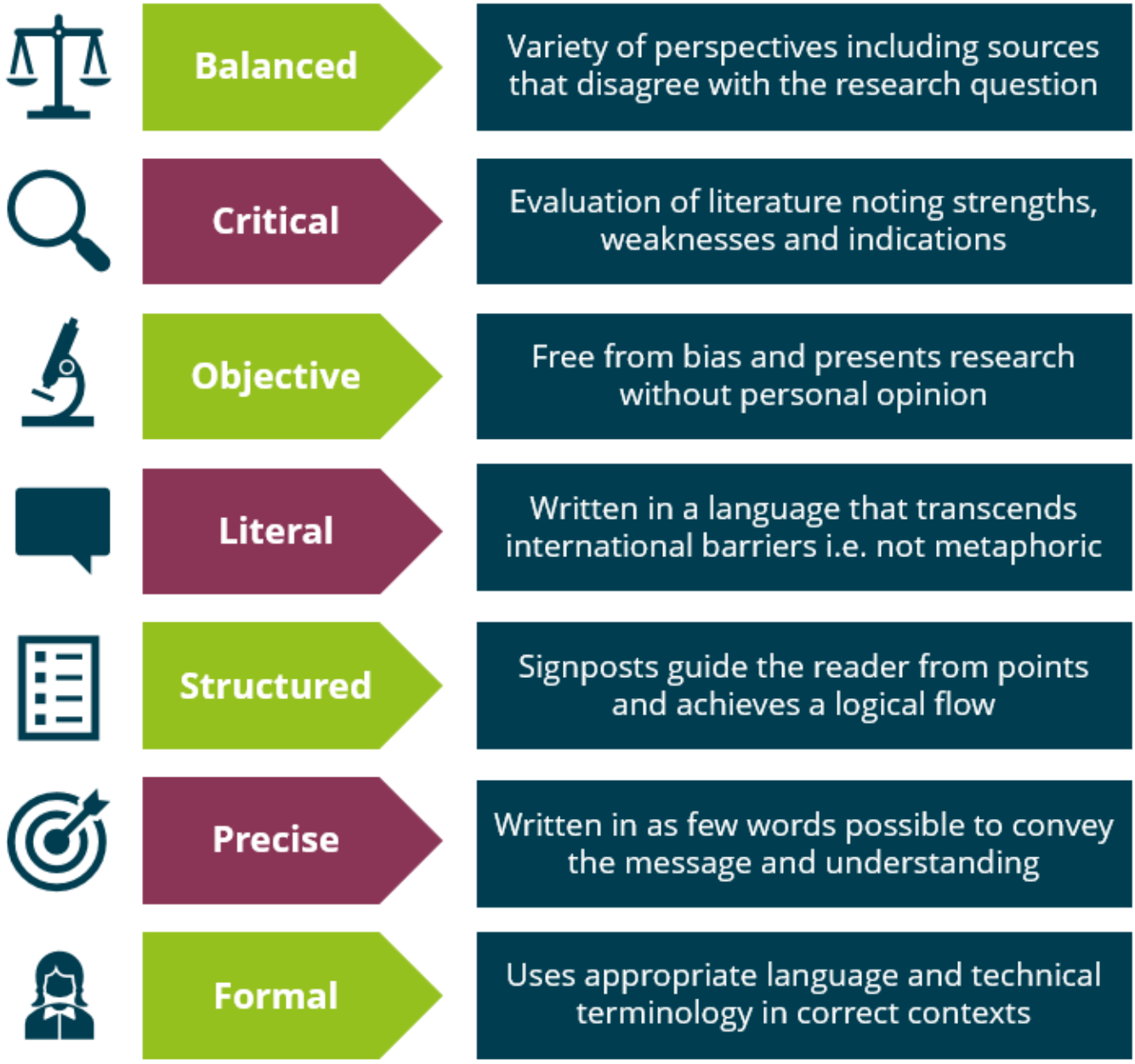


Figure 4: Elements of academic writing style

Your dissertation must be written in an academic style, but this should not be new to you! Your writing style has been developed over the course of two years and although your dissertation does not require you to learn anything new in terms of style, it will require you to *adapt* to the task at hand. For instance, if you are prone to wordiness, you will need to take extra care to write **concisely** so that you don't overshoot your word count. If you are quite

descriptive in your writing, you will need to **balance** your description with **criticality**. If you are quite succinct in your writing style, you will need to consider more **detail** to provide an appropriate amount of context to your reader.

However, it is important to note, that these are all things that can be fleshed out in the drafting process, as long as you leave yourself enough time to edit, redraft and proof-read:

- **First Draft -** For your eyes only! Can be written as informally or messily as you like; it's about getting the ideas and knowledge on paper in a loose structure. Formal structure and style come later.
- **Second Draft –** Paragraph level. Going through your work and reformulating into an academic style, focusing on achieving a formal style, a structured and logical argument, and a balance between background information and criticality.
- **Third Draft –** Sentence level. Looking at specific constructions and reformulating for clarity and flow. Linking ideas from one sentence to the next in terms of flow and considering if the information included is relevant to the research question. Ensuring that all references are accurate.
- **Fourth Draft** – Word level. Checking for spelling mistakes, incorrect tenses and punctuation. Ensuring that links between the main body and appendices are clear and correct. Making sure all headings are sequential and all graphs, tables and figures are labelled clearly.

Word count

The dissertation word count will vary depending on your discipline. It is essential that you find out the word count limit for your dissertation early on, so you can plan your writing process accordingly. The +/- 10% applies to your dissertation too, but you should try and write each section with the following guidance:

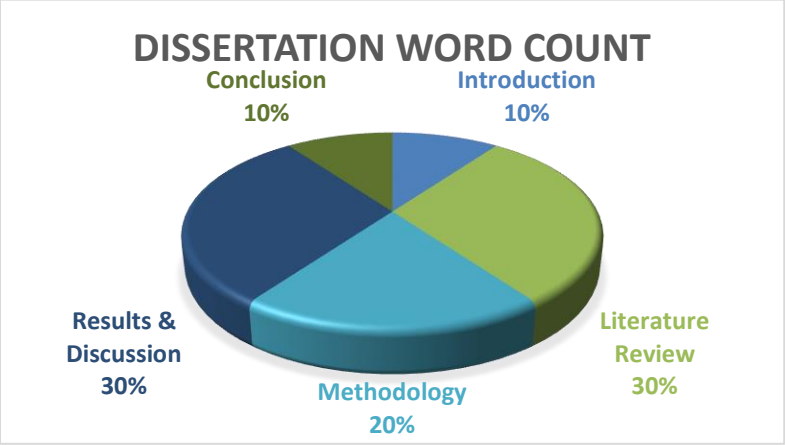


Figure 5: The recommended dissertation chapter word count

The following elements are traditionally excluded from the word count:

- Abstract
- Table of Contents
- Acknowledgements*
- Glossary
- Statement of Originality
- Reference List
- Bibliography
- Appendices
- Any quotes from sources or transcripts*

*Check your module handbook for disciplinary guidance

General advice

- Save yourself stress and back-up your work – keep your work in more than one place, not just on a USB stick! You can use cloud storage such as Office 365 or Google Drive to save versions of your dissertation.
- Take a few days off in between writing and editing – a fresh perspective will allow you to see small mistakes more clearly and allow you to reformulate writing.
- Book in with your dissertation supervisor regularly – your DS is the best placed person to offer you advice on how to conduct your research or generate ideas. Don't pass up opportunities to meet and get their feedback and insights!
- If your participants have asked for feedback on the outcome of the research, then make sure you follow this up. It might not be feasible to provide a detailed breakdown of results and implications to every participant, but you might want to provide a short summary to a participant 'gatekeeper' who can then disseminate this as required.
- Include section numbers with your headings i.e. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc. and include page numbers. This is covered as part of the AIM Dissertation Formatting session; attend this! It provides you with a working document that you can write your dissertation on right away!
- Get someone else to proofread your work! Spellchecker won't pick up on every single spelling mistake, especially homophones used in the wrong context and American spellings.
- Aim to hand-in your dissertation a few days before the deadline to avoid the queues in the Copyshop. Don't forget to take a photo of yourself with your printed and bound copy of your dissertation to commemorate a momentous occasion!

And finally....

... try to enjoy your dissertation! Although for many students the dissertation will be the biggest piece of writing they will ever do, try to experience the dissertation for what it is; it's your chance to enter the world of independent research and show off your knowledge and skills. Completing a dissertation is a major accomplishment, so don't downplay your achievements, seek help and guidance when you need it and maintain a can-do attitude. Let the celebrations commence!

Good luck!

For further support with writing your dissertation:

Study Skills Librarian

studyskills@marjon.ac.uk

OR

Studiosity

Fast and reliable feedback on your dissertation chapters

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Appendix A: Dissertation Timeline

	Number of Weeks (until hand-in)																						
Task	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix B: The CRAAP Test

Currency	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
When was the information published or posted online?			
Has the information been revised or updated?			
Does your topic require up to date information, or will older sources work too?			
Are all the links on the webpage functional?			
Relevance	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?			
Is the information at an appropriate level for your needs?			
Have you considered a variety of other resources before deciding to use this one?			
Would you be comfortable citing this source in your work?			
Authority	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
Who is the author/ publisher/ source/ sponsor?			
What are the author's credentials or affiliations?			
Is the author qualified to write on the topic?			
Is there contact information available?			
Does the URL reveal anything about the source?			
Accuracy	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
Is the information supported by evidence?			
Has the information been peer-reviewed, edited or refereed?			
Can you verify any of the information from your personal knowledge?			
Is the writing style unbiased and free of emotion?			
Are there any spelling or grammar errors?			
Purpose	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
Is the purpose of the information to inform, persuade, entertain, teach or sell?			
Does the author make their intention clear?			
Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda?			
Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?			
Are there any political, ideological, cultural, religious, personal or institutional biases?			

The CRAAP Test was developed by the Meriam Library at California State University, Chico.

Appendix C: Readings for Literature Review

	Theme 1		Theme 2		Theme 3	
References	😂	☹	😂	☹	😂	☹

Appendix D: Discussion Template

Paragraph Plan	Results	Literature	Comparison	Research question
Subheading:				
Paragraph 1				
Paragraph 2				
Paragraph 3				
Subheading:				
Paragraph 1				
Paragraph 2				
Paragraph 3				
Subheading:				
Paragraph 1				
Paragraph 2				
Paragraph 3				