

Formal requirements and arrangements

Before you start work on producing your dissertation, you *must* do your 'homework' to discover what is officially required of you and what arrangements have been made for supervision, etc. In a sense, this is your first research task, and it needs to be done thoroughly and systematically. Equip yourself with the answers to the questions below.

Documentation and formalities

What documents have been issued to you setting out the requirements to which your dissertation must conform, and what is the status of these documents: are they official university regulations, or guidance notes from your faculty or department? Regulations *must* be complied with – and you are likely to be penalized if

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you don't comply with them – but guidance notes may merely have the status of advice, with no automatic penalty if you don't follow it.

Purpose

Do the documents you've been given make clear the institution's purpose in requiring you to submit a dissertation? Is it merely a 'take-home' form of examination, one where you pose your own question, set your own time limit, and can write with your books by your side, but get no help from your teachers? Or is the purpose to give you a learning experience, where you have the opportunity to carry out a piece of original research or to delve into a subject more deeply than you have time for on your taught courses, and to get help from your teachers? If the purpose isn't clear, look at the documents you've been given. If they include some kind of statement of 'learning objectives', this suggests the latter purpose, and you should feel entitled to seek the help that is implied.

Marking scheme

In an ideal world, you would be given some guidance as to what the examiners are looking for. This could come in the form of a 'marking scheme', showing what is required for different levels of mark (e.g. pass, merit, distinction at master's level). Or it could be contained in guidance notes that you have received. However, the latter are more likely to specify matters that you should attend to – such as clarity of expression, breadth of literature review, critical appraisal – rather than standards. Where standards *are* implied – e.g. satisfactory abstract, complete and consistent referencing, appropriate research design – you may find them less than helpful in gauging precisely what they mean for you, what actually counts as satisfactory or appropriate. For more on examiners' expectations, see the next section (pages 14–16).

Practicalities

What is the word limit for the dissertation, and does it include or exclude tables, footnotes, appendices and bibliography? Is there any kind of 'format' to which the dissertation is expected to conform? This could cover information to be provided on the title page, page layout (margins, line spacing etc.), and the referencing system to be used.

Handing-in procedure

When and where does the dissertation have to be handed in (submitted): date, time, place? Should you be given a receipt? What are the penalties for handing in late? Examiners are obliged to treat all candidates the same, and this should rule out accepting a late hand-in without penalty unless there are medical or compassionate grounds.

Choice of subject

Are there any limitations as to your subject? Does it have to be one on which there is a substantial body of relevant literature? (And does this literature have to be in English?) Does the subject have to be one which is related to a taught course that you've been following, and/or one which a teacher in your department is willing to supervise? You need to know.

Choice of title

Are you required to submit your dissertation title in advance of the dissertation? If so, what is the procedure to follow? Does your title have to be agreed with your supervisor or anyone else? Does it have to be submitted before you have been assigned to a supervisor, as could be the case if supervisors are appointed on the basis of titles? Will you be able to change it later, or are you stuck with it? You need answers to these questions too.

Supervision

What arrangements are there for supervision? Have you a designated supervisor or tutor, and – if so – what help are you entitled to expect from him or her, and at what stages? If the dissertation is effectively a take-home examination, you may be entitled to expect your supervisor to give assistance in selecting a subject and finding reading matter but not to comment on drafts of your dissertation. If the dissertation is supposed to provide a learning experience, your supervisor may be able to provide guidance with methodology and to comment on early drafts of chapters or sections. Find out if there will be seminars or workshops at which methodology can be discussed and drafts presented.

Assistance

Are you allowed to seek help from other teachers or researchers in your department or elsewhere? This may be a question of what is normal practice in your department or faculty. Or it may be that there are no rules, either formal or informal, in which case ask and see what answer you get.

Access to dissertations written by past students

In some places and some departments you are allowed to see dissertations written by past students; in others you aren't. If you are able to see them, look at several, and make sure you know what grades they have been given: you don't want to take your cue from a poor example. You should treat other people's dissertations as offering you a starting point, no more. Following a past dissertation's treatment slavishly, however good it is, is definitely not a recipe for your success. Every dissertation needs its own, particular, tailor-made treatment.

Consistency

You might like to check that you and your fellow students have all been given the same information and advice. It may be that different supervisors put different interpretations on things, or exercise their discretion differently about how much help to give, or informally give different advice about procedure. There's no harm in satisfying yourself that the playing field is level.