

CHAPTER 13

Putting it all together: writing a dissertation

Here we are then, the final chapter. It's all going to come together now. You have learnt to manage your time, you have been a fantastic contributor to your seminars, you've survived group work and submitted your essays. You are a media and communications rock star! But now you need to prove that, once and for all, with the dreaded dissertation! In the last couple of chapters we have looked at some of the additional skills needed, question writing and research skills, but now it is time to bring these together with the skills from the first nine chapters and create something amazing – I mean, even more amazing than what you have done before.

A dissertation usually comes in two halves, a proposal, about what you will do, and a dissertation, about what you did do. This chapter focuses most of its attention on the dissertation, but you can't start a dissertation without a good plan of work, so we will also start by looking at what a good research proposal should look like.

Writing a proposal

A proposal is designed to help you justify and plan your research project, as well as showing how your project contributes to existing research. It is designed to show your lecturer and supervisor that you can conduct research within the time permitted. The main idea though is to help you explore your ideas, and to help you think practically about them. In many ways it is just like an introduction to your thesis, and it is something that will continue to be negotiated as

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you progress to the project. So, make it the best you can, but also remember it is just the start of the journey. Also, be aware that there might be differences in requirements depending on your course, so you should be sure to check these before getting started.



Avoid anxiety when starting a research project

- ✓ Establish a writing schedule.
- ✓ Begin by free writing.
- ✓ Keep a small notebook with you to write down ideas as you have them.
- ✓ If it is easier, record yourself speaking about ideas
- ✓ In a big project, try using different documents on your computer for different sections
- ✓ Start with more 'clear cut' sections first.

Parts of a proposal

Again, this may differ between courses, so you should check with those who run your degree, but in general a dissertation proposal contains many of the same elements as the dissertation itself. These are (in order);

- A (working) title
- Introduction/background
- Purpose/aims/rationale/research questions
- Review of literature
- Methodology
- Plan of work
- Reference list
- Proposed further reading

While many of these are the same as those in the full dissertation, they will of course be shorter than in the final thesis and your proposal will be in the future tense, because it is your plan. Here is a closer look at each of these parts.

Creating a working title

Your title should tell your readers your research topic and indicate the type of study you will conduct. At the proposal stage, it is a good idea to make your title the same as your research question, this will help you focus all your work

and give structure to the proposal. Better still, it will give those reading and marking your proposal an instant idea of what the research is going to be about.

Introduction/background

This is designed to establish the general territory of your work, and to describe the broad foundations of your study. You are now positioning yourself as the expert (yay!) in this field, so you need to provide sufficient background for readers. You should also be introducing the general scope of your project, this will also be in the title, but here you will expand on this much more and explain why you are examining those people or that region and why you have chosen that time-frame. Finally, your introduction should include some really good signposting (see chapter 7) and by this I mean giving an overview of the sections of the dissertation that are to come.



Example of a context paragraph

In a year in which the United States, under Trump, has scrapped their Internet Privacy Law (Lee, 2017), all the while decrying, in an ill-informed manner, wiretapping (MacAskill, 2017), when the UK's Home Secretary, Amber Rudd has called for an equally ill-informed backdoor to WhatsApp (Haynes, 2017), and German parents are told to destroy their children's dolls amid spying fears (Oltermann, 2017), it perhaps seems strange to turn to a book first published in 1964 to help understand the world around us. While it is important to recognize that the world is somewhat different to the 1960s, and that Snowden, in particular, shed a new light on the way in which the war on terror has driven securitization (Lyon, 2015). To really fully understand the modern surveillance state, it is imperative to examine the ongoing conditions of its birth (Jordan, 2015). Huxley, Orwell, and Foucault classically provide the foundation for much of the historical narratives in surveillance studies (Marx, 2016), but the 1960s provided a political climate that would ensure surveillance and privacy would become deeply embedded in our capitalist society and commercial social media platforms (Dwyer, 2016).

Specht (2017). In-text citations in reference list at end of chapter.

Purpose/aims/rationale/research questions

This is part of the introduction and background, but is so important it deserves its own space. Here you explain the goals and research objectives of the study, as well as show the original contributions of your study to the wider research community. Remember, as scary as it might seem, you are now moving towards being the expert in this field. You should also be providing a more detailed account of the points summarized in the introduction, as well as a well-informed rationale for the study. You can also help make your scope very clear by discussing what your study will not address. Here too, it is advised to restate the research question, make it clear and stand out, perhaps on a separate line – this is the most important sentence in the whole proposal/dissertation, make sure it isn't lost. You may also need to define some of the key words or concepts in this section to make it really clear to the reader what you mean, this is especially true of things like 'social media' or 'Web 2.0'.



Focusing on protests against the gold mining company La Colosa in Tolima Department, this article aims to contribute to this field by addressing the questions of (1) whether and how Colombian SMOs use digital and social media in protesting against adverse effects of the mining industry in Colombia, (2) whether these technologies create the critical mass to fight the mining company, and (3) whether they enhance horizontal leadership and knowledge structures. After presenting the contextual background and methodology employed, we address these questions in the 'Results' section. We then discuss the potential of digital and social media in mining protests. The conclusion answers the research questions and discusses the implications.

Specht and Ros-Tonen (2017)

Literature review

Many of your essays will be written a little like a literature review, but your proposal/dissertation will have a very specific part covering this. A literature review is really just focused reading, but the only way for you tutors to know you have done the specific reading is for you to write about it. A literature

review is based upon the ideas that other people have already had about the topic you are studying. These ideas are normally presented in books and journal articles, but can also be in films and other resources, and are normally based on research and on primary data or sources. Your job is to give an overview of what has already been published on a topic, but you are doing more than just providing a list of what is available, and you also need to do more than just give a set of summaries; instead you need to use all your skills as a reader, critic and synthesizer that we have learnt through the book thus far, to create a critical analysis of the field. And as American writer and novelist Lisa See reminds us:



Read a thousand books, and
your words will flow like a river

LISA SEE

The literature review helps you to enlarge your knowledge about the topic, and this is very important, but it also shows you have a number of skills, especially those involving looking for and selecting appropriate reading material. It also shows that you can apply your critical reading, and critical writing skills to the things you have read. The main thing to do in a literature review is to find all the articles related to your topic and then to use summarizing and synthesizing to show your knowledge of these texts and how they fit together as part of the bigger conversation around the topic, highlighting what is, and what isn't, already known about a topic.

You can write your literature review using one of the following approaches:

Chronological approach	Thematic approach
<p data-bbox="174 296 528 421"><i>Describe each work or idea in order of when they were written – starting with the earliest available information.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="174 440 571 534">✓ Good for showing how ideas or methodologies have changed over time. <li data-bbox="174 545 523 604">✓ Start by putting your sources/ readings in date order. <li data-bbox="174 614 567 739">✓ Group together ideas and sources from the same time period and examine if there are common themes. <li data-bbox="174 749 555 874">✓ Write about the commonalities and disputes at that time period, and then move to the next one, until you reach the modern day. 	<p data-bbox="587 296 939 355"><i>Write about themes or theoretical concepts related to your topic.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="587 374 957 499">✓ Group your readings by theme, making sure everything is relevant to the topic of your thesis. <li data-bbox="587 510 948 670">✓ Use your skills of synthesis to draw those ideas together, and to highlight disagreements (you need to do more than summarize). <li data-bbox="587 680 955 774">✓ Time might still be important, but isn't the key to the shape of the literature review. <li data-bbox="587 784 984 812">✓ Make new ideas clear to the reader. <li data-bbox="587 822 973 916">✓ Use subheadings to show you are moving to a new topic (but don't use too many).

To help you write the literature review, group different ideas and thoughts together into topics (see chapter 4), and use your skills in summarizing and synthesizing (chapter 8), and your knowledge of paragraph structures (chapter 7) to help you bring those ideas together in a critical way. Finally borrow the linking and connecting words from chapter 10, to join all the paragraphs together. And whatever you do, please, avoid writing 'author one says this, author two says that'. You can though tell the reader where research is lacking, but do be careful to ensure you have done sufficient reading before you claim that an idea is missing.

AVOID

- ✗ Do not just write a chronological catalogue of all of the sources – instead evaluate and integrate the previous research together.
- ✗ Don't be one sided, as all sides of an argument must be clearly explained, to avoid bias and areas of agreement and disagreement should be highlighted.
- ✗ The literature review should not just be a collection of quotes and paraphrasing from other sources.

Remember, you are entering a scholarly conversation already in progress. The literature review shows that you've been listening and that you have something valuable to say, and to this end you should also keep your language neutral, although you may hedge and use attributive verbs to show your strength of opinion (chapter 9), but you should avoid polemics, praise, and blame.



Knowledge is value-laden and constructed from interests (Hordijk and Baud, 2006: 672); ideas can never be seen as innocent but 'either reinforce or challenge existing social and economic arrangements' (Bryant, 1998: 87). These Foucauldian notions of 'knowledge as power' challenge the much-lauded ability of digital and social media to break down hierarchical structures, create horizontal power and increase political participation through an almost socialist management of knowledge (Castells, 2012; Juris, 2005). There is even 'the risk of furthering inequality if the population of social media users is skewed towards the technologically savvy and those with high human, social, and economic capital' (Valenzuela, 2013: 17). Political ecology has examined the 'politics of knowledge' (Bryant, 1998; Leach and Scoones, 2007; Peet and Watts, 2004) as strategies to construct and politically use multiple knowledges to frame problems and solutions in one's interests – by those in power to justify exclusion of particular groups from access to resources or by those engaged in social action to contest established knowledge and power relations.

Specht and Ros-Tonen (2017). In-text citations in reference list at end of chapter.

Methodology

The methodology means more than just the methods you will use; it is about why you chose those methods and about the details of how you will use them. It should introduce the overall methodological approach and show how this fits the overall research design (Here chapter 12 will be useful). You should also describe the specific methods of data collection and how you intend to analyze and interpret your results (i.e. statistical analysis). One key element often missed by students is making clear the limitations of your research – don't pretend you can do everything. Your time, money and other resources will limit your project, so explain this and give some rationale as to why this is OK.

Everything about your methodology should be explaining why; why is this a good method?; why is it good for your research?; why will you analyze it in that

way?; why are those limitations acceptable?; why will your results be significant?; why are you using that sample? Why? Why? Why?! Justify your approach by showing how benefits outweigh potential problems.

It is useful to break down your methodology into subsections. These sections may include selection of participants, interview process, profiles, interpretive and analytic framework, methods of qualitative analysis.



This research analyses journalism-related university curricula in the UK through a mixed methods approach. Firstly, a detailed content analysis was conducted in order to ascertain the extent to which vicarious trauma education features in UK universities. The content description of 63 journalism-related courses from of a total 61 universities were inspected with an examination of the specifications of the courses, the names and descriptions of all modules, coupled with reading specifications and prospects available for potential students... Interviews were used to supplement the content analysis data. Conducted face-to-face or via the phone, they took a semi-structured approach. A total of seven interviews were undertaken, chosen because of their position either as a someone who develops journalism curricula, or who works with recent graduates.

Specht and Tsilman (2018)

Timeline/plan of work

Here you should demonstrate that it is possible to carry out the planned work within the time limits set by the university and to show that you have taking into consideration dates set by the university, the time it takes to establish interviews or to set up surveys and that you have given yourself sufficient writing up and proof reading time.

References and proposed reading

You should of course include a reference list of all the texts cited in the proposals, and these should follow the referencing style of your institution. Following this, you should provide a list of texts that you haven't yet read, but which you plan to. This will help your supervisor see that your reading is heading in the right direction and they will be able to not only see how prepared you are, but will also be able to help guide you in the right direction. This list too should be in the formal style of your institutions referencing guide (See chapter 4).

Remember, a proposal is always just a working document, they are often graded so you need to make them the best they can be, but you will also change and adapt your project as you progress through your studies. You should consider them to be the beginning of the conversation with your supervisor, and something that will be continually negotiated as you progress through your full dissertation.

* * *

The dissertation

Now let's look at the dissertation more closely. For this project you will normally be working one-to-one with your supervisor, but it is you who will drive it forwards, and it will bring together all the skills in this book. The dissertation contains all the same things as a proposal, plus a few more, and is much more detailed about what you have been researching. Let's start by looking at the structure of a dissertation. At the start, it has a title page, acknowledgements, contents pages, lists of tables, and an abstract. At the end it will have appendices, references and a glossary. But we will deal with these later, they are the fancy bits – let's start with the main parts of the project. See figure 13.1 for an overview.

We have looked at the parts from introduction to methodology in the proposal section. In your dissertation you will expand on these significantly, but the gist of them is the same – of course now your methodology is in the past tense, about what you *have* done, rather than what you plan to do. For the full dissertation we need to add the following:

Results and discussion

The way that you display your results will depend a lot on how you collected your data. If you have carried out mostly quantitative work then you will need to use charts and tables to show what you have found, and beyond this you should employ some statistical analysis to show if your results are truly significant or not (eek, that's the hard maths... but it is the stuff that will get you the highest grades). If you have done qualitative research, then you might find that your results and discussion are written together as one section where you extract thoughts from interviews or other methods to support your ideas. The important thing though is that however you display your results, your discussion must go beyond describing them. Instead it should analyze them. Use the analytical reading and writing skills from earlier chapters to question your own results in relation to the literature from your literature review. You might like to think about your discussion section as a kind of advanced compare and contrast essay,

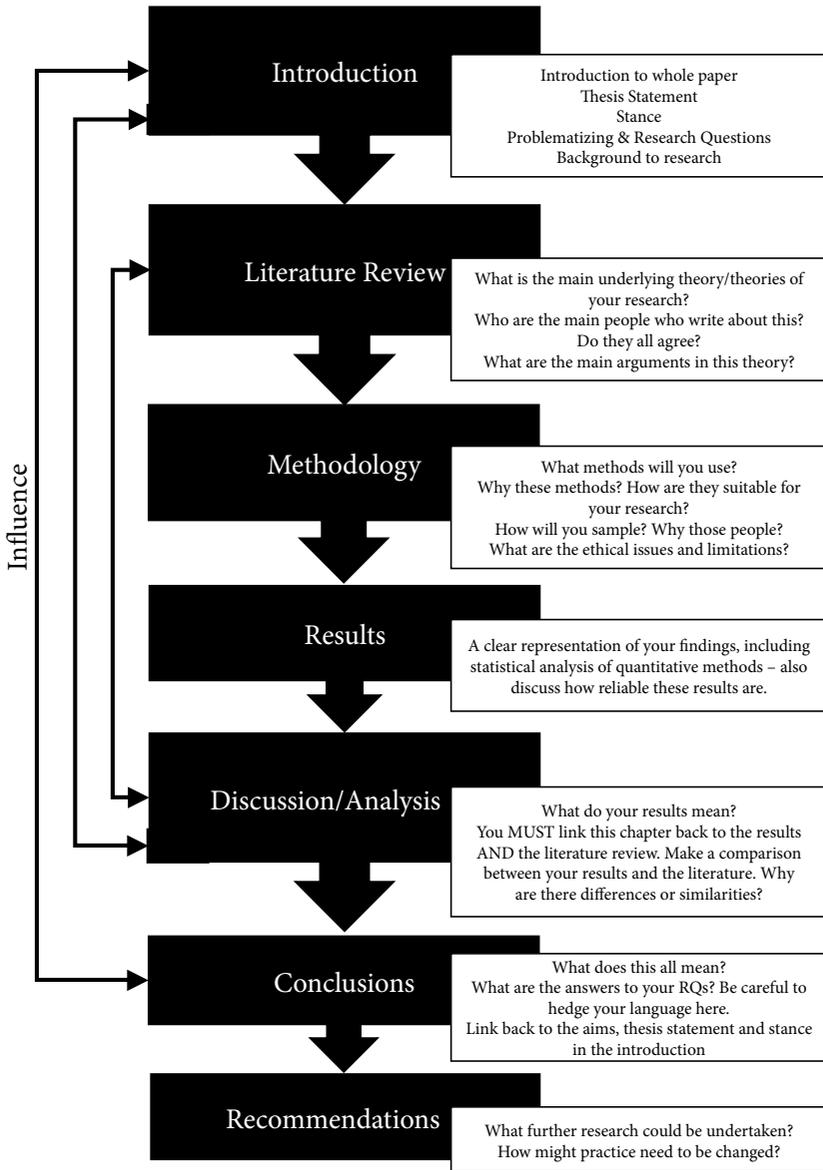


Figure 13.1: Essay template.

where you compare your results with what the literature suggested you would find. Remember though, you must address every research question (and sub question) and every hypothesis (if you have those) as you write your discussion.

Conclusion

The conclusion for your whole dissertation isn't much different to any other conclusion. You must make sure that you answer fully the main question of the thesis, making that really, really clear. Perhaps write something like 'This dissertation set out to ask _____. Your readers don't want to have to go hunting for the final answer, and there are normally lots of marks for having a strong conclusion, so make it super clear (if yours is the 20th paper your tutor has marked, they might be too tired to see a hidden answer). Remember too to ensure you include nothing new in the conclusion; everything should be a reflection on the work you have done in the pages (so many pages) beforehand.

The trimmings

Now you have the main bread and butter sorted, and wasn't that easy, you can now add the nice bits. Let's have a look at these, starting at the beginning:

Title page

Every university has pretty strict rules about what should be on the title page, and you should check with your institution to ensure you know what these are. It is really important to make a good first impression with the title page, so make sure you get this right.

Acknowledgements

You should include a page where you thank those who have supported your work. This might be family, friends or other people. You should always include your supervisor and other staff who have helped along the way, and also any institutions that have provided you with financial help during your studies.

Contents page

This is pretty self-explanatory, it should be a list of all the subsections of your dissertation along with their page numbers. You should add this last, and also take advantage of the tools included in packages like Word to make this easy.

List tables and illustrations

This, much like the contents page, should be done last, and with the aid of tools built into packages such as Word. It should be a list of all pictures, tables and charts in the dissertation along with their page numbers.

Abstract

This is a brief outline of your work, including what you are studying, how you are studying, and what the results were. Unlike a book blurb, an abstract gives away the ending and findings too. Someone reading your abstract should know everything about your work before they even get to the introductions.

And then at the end comes:

Appendices

Here you can include any supplementary materials from your research. This might include a copy of a survey, interview guides, or transcripts of interviews. Only include things that have been referred to in the main text. And don't put diagrams here that are better suited to being near their descriptions!

References

Don't forget you need to list all the sources you have cited, and you should do so using the preferred referencing methods. See chapter 4 for more on this.

Glossary

You may need to add a glossary of terms to your paper, particularly if it contains a great deal of specialist language or language that has contentious meanings. This might also appear near the front of the paper, just before the introduction.

* * *

Well done! You have reached the end! Your dissertation is beautifully bound, set in all the right fonts and line spacing and you have submitted it. It isn't until you look back after submission that you will fully realize how much you have achieved and how much you have progressed and changed. Submitting your work can sometimes leave a bit of an empty feeling, and once the initial celebration has passed you might be wondering where to go next, or if it was all worth it. I'm sure it was, but take one last look at the reflection chapter (6), and remind yourself why you started this process, and consider what were the highs and the lows. This final reflection process will help you take everything you have done forward to the next stages of your life. Good luck!

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