

 **SAGE Study Skills**

Writing Successful Reports and Dissertations

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Why a dissertation?

Looking up a quick definition of ‘dissertation’ in the Oxford English Dictionary, I am told that a dissertation is either a ‘discussion, debate’ or, with some more recent examples of usage offered, ‘a spoken or written discourse upon or treatment of a subject, in which it is discussed at length; a treatise, sermon, or the like’. So, we have some options here: it is clearly a term which can be used to put forward an argument, to support a case being made by its creator or to examine a topic from several angles at some length. The only word that many students would see in an initial glance at the previous part is the word ‘length’: that is the most important challenge they believe they face. How on earth are they supposed to write so many words, they often ask of me, in varying levels of despair. In reality, the length is only very rarely the problem they expected it to be: by the end of the process they are usually bemoaning the fact that the word count is too low. (I know this might seem unbelievable from where you are now, but it does happen very frequently, I promise.)

Having considered very briefly what a dissertation is, we need to think about why anyone would tackle what can, at first, seem like a daunting task. For many students, they have no choice: dissertations are becoming a far more common compulsory feature of courses in higher and further education. This is, in part, why so much mythology swirls around dissertations. You might have to do one, and it will be in your final year of study, and you do not want to think about it yet, and people have told you that it is the most difficult thing they have ever done, and you will have to write more words than you have written before. ... The list of negatives goes on and on, but when you approach it as we will be doing in this guide, you will see that none of this matters. It is simply another task to be undertaken as part of your academic development and, by its completion, you will surprise yourself by realising that you have produced a body of work which is unique to you and of which you can be inordinately proud.





Top Tip

If the descriptions given in this guide match what you are doing, do not be put off if the term 'dissertation' is not used in your institution. Sometimes what is essentially a dissertation is given another name such as a 'long essay' or 'summative year essay' or some such.

Dissertations are not always compulsory: many students choose to undertake a dissertation because they enjoy the chance to consider a topic in depth, to carry out some research which is more extensive than that required for an essay and to develop their writing skills in a new way. Especially for those undergraduates who hope to move on to a higher degree, a dissertation is their chance to begin to develop those necessary skills. For those who are already undertaking a higher degree (such as a Master's), a dissertation will be a required output; for those who have moved on to doctoral research, the dissertation will seem tiny compared to the mountain of a thesis which they are climbing.

In the commercial world, a lengthy piece of work might be very similar in principle to a dissertation, even though it would not be called by this name. A quick glance at Wikipedia© offers me this definition of a dissertation: 'Dissertations normally report on a research project or study, or an extended analysis of a topic. The structure of the thesis or dissertation explains the purpose, the previous research literature which impinges on the topic of the study, the methods used and the findings of the project.' This rather broader definition seems to me to relate as much to commercial activities as to academic pursuits. It is for this reason that, whilst the report writing sections of this guide will be of most obvious relevance in the commercial world, the guidance offered for dissertations would also be worth perusing by the professional reader. A huge bid document, for example, or an extended business case, may have far more in common with a dissertation than a report.



Top Tip

The advice offered in this guide will be relevant to both academic and commercial writers. As a professional, a lengthy and well-structured write-up of an investigation would not be called a dissertation, but the same principles apply and so the advice offered here is equally relevant to students and professionals. I might refer to one or the other group of writers, depending upon the context, but try to resist the temptation to skip over a section on the assumption that it is not 'for you'.

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What is distinctive about a dissertation?

Dispelling some fixed but erroneous ideas about dissertations might come in handy here:

It is hugely long: Yes, it is a lengthy piece of written work, but this does not mean that every dissertation is of the same length. Depending on its purpose it might be 8,000 words in length (which might be typical for a dissertation which reflects upon a student's placement learning experience), or 10,000–12,000 words (which could be fairly standard for an undergraduate dissertation in the final year of study) or up to 20,000 – 30,000 words, which would work well as a postgraduate dissertation.

What is important is not so much the length – the word count will have been set to be sufficient for what is required of you – as the fact that, in academia at least, there is a fairly rigid word count. Even if the lengthy piece of work you are producing commercially does not have a word count as such, we do tend to judge by length to some extent, so check if your boss/team/client is used to receiving written output of a certain length. There is no benefit to surprising people by an unexpected word count if there is no reason for it. If you are aiming to produce an academic dissertation, know your word count but also, just as importantly, find out if there is any leeway at all. A 10 per cent leeway might make little difference to a short essay, but it would be about 1,000 words for the average dissertation.

You will also need to assure yourself about what is included in the word count. Is it just the main body of the dissertation, or does it also include the table of contents, the abstract, summary or synopsis, your references section and so forth? You might also note here that word counts have changed slightly in recent years. Whereas there was once no word count, we then moved to a maximum word count and, more recently, it has become far more usual to have a minimum word count as well. The very fact that you are reading this guide suggests that you have the dedication to produce far more than the minimum number of words, but it is still a good idea to know what it is.



It looks like an essay: Yes and no is the rather confusing answer to this one. It is a continuous piece of prose but it is most commonly divided into sections. These sections are usually called chapters, but might be listed as sections instead. Whatever they are named, it does look and feel strange if one reads through a dissertation which has no section or chapter breaks, so make sure that you introduce these into your earliest stages of planning and preparing. Whenever I mark a dissertation which has no section or chapter breaks I always find myself wondering whether the student did not read the guidance notes, or whether he or she lacked confidence in the work to such an extent that chapter headings seemed too bold for what was being said, or whether, perhaps, there is a deeply artistic reason for the break with tradition of which I am unaware. You would not want your examiner to be distracted by any of these stray thoughts, so sticking to the structure you have been asked to produce works best.

Whilst most of the time you will be writing in the same style you would use in an essay, you will be conscious that you want the dissertation to stand as a whole and so you will make sure that it is edited and polished so that it does read through as one persuasive piece of work. Text will, of course, form the basis of a dissertation, but it differs from the traditional essay in that you may be more inclined to include textual options which would feel unfamiliar in an essay. Headings and subheadings, bullet-pointed lists, illustrations, graphs and charts: all of these might be useful additions to your dissertation and in this it can be more like a report than a standard essay.

It has to be divided into chapters: It will certainly be divided, but the divisions might be called sections or parts rather than chapters. Whatever you choose to call the divisions in your dissertation, whether they are parts, chapters or sections, or a combination of these, you need to demonstrate a logical development of both your argument and your material. This will rely on meticulous planning, and I will be helping you with that, but also on your ability to see it as a whole piece of work in and of itself, with a strong, logical thread running right through its centre. You might write as you prepare, making notes on the material you are studying and maybe suggesting where in your dissertation that material might fit, but you would probably avoid writing the actual dissertation until you know where you are going; that is, until it has been thought through thoroughly and planned sufficiently.

A dissertation is based only on original research: The answer to this is simple: no, it is not. Of course you will be carrying out your own investigations and drawing conclusions from the material on which you are working, so in this way it will be unique. A doctoral thesis might aim more firmly towards the goal of making an utterly ground-breaking contribution to the sum of human knowledge, but we are all standing on the shoulders of those who went before: much of your output will be reviewing the existing situation in your topic area, considering the research that has already been carried out, using this to guide your own activities and then coming to some conclusions about what you have witnessed or discovered.

For some dissertation writers, the notion that they have to be original at all points in their work can be a huge hindrance, freezing up their thinking and undermining their ability to produce anything much at all. It is important at this stage that you relax about this. You will find new things to say and you will be contributing to the sum of human knowledge (even synthesising

two previously dislocated observations from other pieces of research will do this), but you can feel confident that this will happen.

A dissertation must provide answers: It is only natural that you will want to offer your readers some answers and, of course, it is satisfying for a reader to be led through some interesting areas in which answers are offered, but this issue is the one which most fundamentally divides a dissertation from an essay or a report. In an essay, students are expected to answer questions, even if in some cases they have crafted the question themselves, whereas the main interest in a dissertation will lie not only in the answers, but in the research questions. It would be desirable to plan around research questions as soon as you find some, and it would not be expected that you will answer every question: you may well leave the reader with the exciting feeling that there is more to learn about your chosen topic.

Remember too that a dissertation may form the basis of a discussion at a viva voce examination (a 'viva') and so you will need to be able to defend your points not just in writing, in the dissertation, but also in discussion with experts. This should not deter you from including some discussion points (or research questions) for which you do not provide a firm or fully developed answer, as long as you are ready at your viva to explain to the examiners why you did not pursue that particular line of inquiry beyond the elementary stages of questioning or hypothesising.

Having cleared up some typical fallacies, there is one golden rule about dissertations which I want to share with you before we move on. A dissertation should always be something in which you can take pride. You will probably be dedicating long months of your life to it and it will stay with you as a permanent record of your achievement. I always feel sorry for those students who hand in a dissertation poorly printed out with just a staple holding it together, clearly having run out of time even to proofread it through. All of that work and the end result is something they will probably want to forget. So, let's agree on this now: a dissertation is elegantly written, suitably bound, of the right length and handed in on time. It is an object in which you can take pride for years to come.