



Library and Student Support

Dissertation Research and Writing: a brief guide

This guide is not a definitive document on writing a dissertation but a list of tips and ideas on how to proceed – always seek guidance and clarification on content and layout from your Supervisor.

Introduction.

A dissertation is the biggest academic project most students undertake. You may already have in mind a topic and perhaps feel a little daunted at the prospect of carrying out a major "independent" investigation. A dissertation is an opportunity for you to demonstrate that you know how to apply what you have learnt during your studies. It is a further development and synthesis of your existing skills rather than something new.

Finding information

Once you have chosen your topic or "problem" and formulated your draft research strategy in consultation with your supervisor, you will need to return to the LRC to carry out a systematic information or literature search, to discover what has already been published on the topic you have chosen. This helps:

1. increase your knowledge of the development and current state of the topic
2. identify gaps in existing knowledge and assess the significance of the topic
3. prompts you to theorize and comment on existing knowledge.

You will normally be expected to include a literature review or careful and critical synthesis of the results of your literature search in your dissertation. If you are unsure how to present this, have a look at a review article in a journal.

The Information Officer responsible for your particular subject areas will be happy to discuss your topic and advise you on resources. A list of Learning Services staff and their expertise is available on LJMU Web at <http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/lea/79443.htm>

You may find it useful to compile a search profile. This helps you to decide what you are searching for, focus your efforts and limit your topic to manageable proportions. First, define the subject and scope of your search. Use reference works, such as encyclopaedias and subject dictionaries, to gain some background information and draw up a list of relevant search terms. These keywords will be useful when conducting the search. As you become familiar with the

terminology make a note broader and narrower terms and differences between English and American usage and spellings.

The literature or information search

The following are general guidelines.

1. Subject Bibliographies

Bibliographies are lists of published material. An important first step will be to check if any bibliographies on your subject are available. If so, you may need to search only for recent materials published since the bibliography was compiled. Annual review journals are a useful place to check for a critical overview of the current state of a subject, particularly in the sciences, for example: *Annual review of microbiology* which is available both in print and electronic format.

2. Books

Start with the Library Catalogue, this provides details of all the materials available in LJMU's Learning Resource Centres. Use the title keyword or subject keyword options to check whether we have any bibliographies on your topic.

3. Journal Articles

Articles are an important source of up-to-date information and can be traced most efficiently via abstracting and indexing services, which are essentially lists of articles in subject order. An indexing service provides basic details of the contents of the journals it covers, whereas an abstracting service includes a useful short summary or abstract of each article's contents. Each one is published regularly, like the journals it covers.

An increasing number of abstracting and indexing services are now available electronically. LJMU's electronic abstracts, indexes and full-text journals can be accessed through the Electronic journals pages on LJMU Web at <http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/lea/77340.htm>

4. Statistics

Official Government statistics are available through a number of resources both in paper and electronic format, for example

Census Dissemination Unit: <http://census.ac.uk/cdu/>

National Statistics: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>

US Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov/>

5. Theses and Dissertations

LJMU has a collection of theses and dissertations produced by LJMU students. Dissertations produced by students from other colleges and universities can be obtained by Inter-Library Loan. They are indexed in:

- British National Bibliography for report literature (1998 – present)
- Index to Theses (ASLIB) <http://www.theses.com/> : an electronic version is available via the Electronic Journals pages.

6. Professional Bodies and other Organizations

It may be worth contacting learned societies or other specialist organisations, charities and voluntary organizations covering your subject area. Check the *Directory of British Associations and Associations in Ireland* or the *Directory of European Professional and Learned Societies*. To find out if there are any library collections specializing in your subject area, consult the *Aslib Directory of Information Sources in the United Kingdom*. Most organisations have a website which you can trace via Google (<http://www.google.co.uk>) or another general web search engine.

7. Other sources of information

These are only some of the information sources available. Learning Services staff can advise you on how to search for audio-visual material, Government publications, conference proceedings, trade literature and patents etc.

8. Obtaining material not available in LJMU's LRCs

Do not confine your search to material available in LJMU LRCs, use the major libraries in your area, their online catalogues are available: <http://www.nowal.ac.uk/>

You can also check the British Library catalogue for relevant resources: <http://blpc.bl.uk/>

Our Inter-Library Loans (ILL) Unit can obtain material, e.g. books, journal articles, dissertations on microfilm, from other libraries. Forms are available in each LRC, before submitting an ILL request for a journal article always check locally to save time. Please provide full details of any item you request. Items are usually received within two to three weeks. Further details of this service are available on our ILL page: <http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/lea/77482.htm>

Recording your search

As your search progresses, you are likely to discover many sources of information. Be sure to record somewhere on all photocopies you make, details of the source before you return the original to the shelves. Keep a record of each item including details of author, title, date of publication, journal title, etc..

The information sources set out references in a variety of styles. It is best to transcribe your references in a standard format. This makes compiling your bibliography more straightforward. The Harvard style, described in the Learning Services Study Skills guide and several books on writing essays and dissertations, is probably the most widely used at LJMU

Make sure all your references are CORRECT, CONSISTENT AND COMPLETE!

Recording your search strategy provides reassuring evidence of your progress and helps your Supervisor/Subject Specialist to see where you have looked and suggest other potentially useful avenues you might explore. Include the title and location of sources used, the year from which the search started, the search terms used (since different terminology is used by different indexing services), and the volumes you have searched.

Keeping up to date

To keep right up to date with new publications you will need to survey the journals covering your

area regularly. A number of publications known as Current Awareness Services or Alerts are also available. These reproduce the contents pages of a selection of journals in a subject area to provide a rough but ready indication of what has been published recently, e.g *Zetoc* - electronic current awareness services accessible from the Electronic journals pages on LJMU Web and from a page of links to alerting services at <http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/lea/77350.htm>

Quotations and Citation

It is standard practice in academic writing to cite, i.e. identify and acknowledge the source via a reference whenever you:

- quote the exact words of another author
- paraphrase a passage by another author
- use an idea or material based directly on the work of another author.

This helps you illustrate the range of your reading and prevents you being accused of plagiarism. Be sure that each quotation you include is relevant.

A quotation that occupies less than three lines is normally enclosed in quotation marks " " and included in the body of the text. Longer quotations should be indented and typed with single line-spacing without quotation marks. It is permissible to change the wording of the original quotation to ensure your reader's comprehension or to fit the quotation neatly into your sentence or paragraph providing your changes are clearly indicated. Anything you add should be enclosed in [square brackets] and words left out should be indicated by three dots.

The Bibliography

This normally comes at the very end of a dissertation, but it should not be an afterthought. A poorly presented bibliography can cast doubts on the soundness of your work. The Harvard style of reference and citation is probably the most widely used at LJMU.

Entries in a bibliography are normally presented in a single sequence arranged alphabetically by the author's last name.

It is usual to provide a list of the publications cited (referred to) in your dissertation and a separate list of items consulted but not cited. The second list should be selective. Including details of everything you found is likely to give the impression that you cannot discriminate between major contributions to the literature and less significant publications. Your subject or approach might make a chronological arrangement, a division into primary and secondary sources or perhaps by format, more appropriate. Your supervisor will be able to advise on the most suitable arrangement.

Writing your dissertation

The ideas, findings and conclusions you present are the most important features of your dissertation. When you are writing up your work you should aim for a lucid, academic style. Look at other dissertations submitted by students in previous years, if you are unsure how to present your work.

A dissertation is traditionally divided into the following sections:

1. Title page, which should include your name, the date of submission and the award for which it is submitted.

2. Abstract: a summary in typically 200 words of the topic researched, the methods used and an indication of the main conclusions.
3. List of acknowledgements, where appropriate.
4. Contents page listing chapter and sub-headings with relevant page numbers. This is usually best compiled at the very end.
5. List of tables and illustrations, if appropriate. Include number, caption and page number.
6. The body of the dissertation presented in logically ordered, numbered and titled chapters. Each chapter should start on a new page. The first chapter normally contains the literature review.
7. Conclusion.
8. Appendices, if appropriate
9. Glossary, if appropriate. Provide here definitions of any terms with which the reader may be unfamiliar and a key to any abbreviations used in your text.
10. Bibliography

Finally

A metal binding with a clear plastic front and card back is usually sufficient for an undergraduate dissertation. A binding machine and a selection of covers is available in each LRC. If you would prefer a more substantial binding, contact the print shops and bookbinders listed in the local yellow pages. Some of them offer discount rates for student dissertations.

- Be sure to follow any guidelines distributed by your School or Centre.
- Keep in mind the submission date and work to a realistic timetable.
- Keep your supervisor abreast of your progress and any major problems.
- Begin your information/literature search as soon as possible.
- Provide full details of any items you request via the Inter-Library Loans Unit and remember to allow 2 to 3 weeks for items to arrive.
- Begin writing up well before the submission date and allow yourself at least twice as long as you first think it will take to produce the final version.
- Take care over general presentation and don't forget the bibliography. Make sure that you include in the reference list all the items referred to in your text.
- Proof read your final version thoroughly before submitting it.

And finally good luck!

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