This short guide is based on the material gathered and adapted from the following publications:

Doing your Research Project – Judith Bell

How to Research – Lorraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight
(For UG and PG research students in social sciences and related subjects. Includes guidance on topic selection)

Managing Information for Research – Elizabeth Orna and Graham Stevens

Successful Study for Degrees – Rob Barnes
(Chapters 8 and 9)

The Hard Pressed Researcher – A Research handbook for the Caring Professions – Ann Edwards and Robin Talbot

The Research Student’s Guide to Success – Pat Cryer

Writing your Dissertation – Derek Swetnam

The guidelines provide a general introduction to planning and writing a dissertation. They should be read alongside any specific guidelines provided by your Faculty. There may be variations between Faculties as to requirements for the dissertation structure and submission of a preliminary proposal.

Part 1 covers the requirements of a good dissertation, advice on topic choice and structure. Part 2 gives advice on research methods and tools. More detailed information on these can be found in the text books mentioned above.

PART 1

A GOOD DISSERTATION SHOULD:

• Be original

• Demonstrate:

  • extensive, relevant reading
  • an understanding of underpinning themes
  • the ability to collect data and evidence systematically
  • the ability to interpret, analyse and evaluate data and evidence
  • an ability to present data and evidence accurately and appropriately
  • critical thinking – raise and discuss issues, not just present findings
  • an ability to report effectively

• Follow academic conventions – be objective, tentative, structured, consistent, clearly and concisely expressed, and correctly referenced.

PRACTICAL POINTS TO CHECK:
DISSEYATION ACTION PLAN

1. Decide on a possible focus/title and discuss with supervisor
2. Decide research methods
3. Draw up a schedule – include completion dates for different stages
4. Organise practicalities – equipment and access
5. Set up project and collect data
6. Sort/study data
7. Analyse/interpret data
8. Prepare outline structure for writing up
9. Write draft
10. Edit/check with supervisor and/or critical friend
11. Redraft
12. Submit final report

TIMESCALES

3 months: Reading, making notes, planning, setting up systems, writing introduction
2 months: Writing literature review
1 month: Refining/writing up research methods
1 month: Collecting/recording data
1 month: Analysing data
1 month: Writing conclusions and compiling bibliography and appendices
1 month: Proofreading, correcting, binding
CHOOSING THE SUBJECT

General guidance

- Choose something that **interests** you but without any pre-conceived ideas of what you’re likely to find out. Avoid subjects already widely researched – look for unanswered questions.

- Consider feasibility:
  - Access to sites
  - Tutorial support available
  - Equipment needed
  - Costs
  - “Life” of topic
  - Likely result/usefulness
  - Timescales
  - Literature available
  - Ethical/moral considerations
  - Anticipated problems

- Seek supervisor’s guidance:
  - Take a few possible titles for discussion.
  - Supervisor can help to refine and clarify, but not invent a title.

STUCK FOR IDEAS?

- Jot down possible areas of interest.
- Draw up a shortlist of topics.
- Check in library how much has been written about a topic.
- Ask about dissertations/articles written on similar topics.
- Read papers and articles to raise issues.
- Compare/contrast a couple of articles on a topic.
- Discuss with other students.

NARROW DOWN THE TOPIC:

- Process of refining and clarifying:
  1. Identify broad area of study
  2. Refine to aspect of particular interest
3. Decide purpose (to develop theory, monitor practice, evaluate, increase understanding, practical outcomes?)

4. Ask basic initial questions to narrow down to specific area (who, what, where, when, why, how?)

5. Refine questions to define precise focus.

6. Draft title - use positive terms in title to reflect purpose (e.g. evaluate, examine, measure, survey, assess)

**NARROWING DOWN THE TOPIC – EXAMPLE**

(from Rob Barnes)

**Broad area of study:** Unemployment

**Particular interest:**
Youth unemployment

**Initial questions:**
Who do I mean by youth?
Which young people in particular am I interested in?
What is the context?
What aspects of unemployment am I concerned about and why?

**Specific area:**
Unemployment among 16 to 25 year olds in Nowheresville.

**Purpose:**
To find out how many young people are unemployed and how this affects them and their community. To suggest ways of improving things.

**Precise focus:**
The effects of unemployment on 16-25 year olds in Nowheresville and on the local community.

**Draft title:**
An examination of the extent of unemployment in 16-25 year olds in Nowheresville and its effect on the young unemployed people themselves and on the local community, with a brief examination of possible solutions.
Dissertation – Classical Structure

- Title page
- Acknowledgements
- Contents page: chapters, appendices, tables, figures, illustrations
- Abstract
  Summary and outline of main findings
- Introduction
  Outline scope of study and what background material will be discussed.
  Define abstract concepts in the context
  Explain complex or technical words
  Describe how study conducted – data collection methods used.
  Outline and explain order of material.
  State major findings.
  Summarise conclusion.
- Literature Survey
  Put your own work into context.
  Move from general background/standard theoretical works to more precise, recent work relevant to your topic.
  Cover range of positions – not just those that agree with you.
  Show how existing theories/research findings illuminate your work.
- Methodology
  Explain approach taken and why particular methods and techniques used.
  Describe procedures, size of samples, methods of selection, choice of variables and controls, any tests of measurement etc.
  Mention deficiencies in methods.
- Results
  Present findings clearly.
  Use tables, charts, diagrams etc if appropriate.
Highlight significant aspects of findings in text. Avoid interpretation/conclusions.

- **Discussion**
  Interpret findings.
  Construct a logical, consistent argument based on findings.

- **Conclusion**
  Summarise main points and state any conclusions which can be drawn.
  Indicate how firm the conclusion is.
  Make any recommendations.

- **References**

- **Bibliography** – background reading but not cited

- **Appendices**
  e.g. blank questionnaire, transcript of interview, extended case studies, letter of invitation.
PART 2
CHOOSING THE RESEARCH METHODS

Select the method to suit the task!

What sort of data do you want?

How much data do you need for the purpose of analysis?
  What method will best generate the right type and amount of data?
  Where is the relevant literature held?
  How will you gather the data?
  How will you store the data?
  Is there enough time to use this method?
  Will there be enough time to analyse the data?

What sort of questions would you ask to analyse the data?
  Are interviewees likely to co-operate?
  How would you validate the evidence?

Quantity or Quality?

Quantitative -
  - **objective**
  - concerned with observable, objective, measurable facts, physical characteristics and the outside world
  - hypothesis indicated at beginning of research then tested through experiment
  - involves measurement and comparison of data at beginning and end of period
  - large samples involved
  - results presented as %s and in graphs
  - researcher remote from group

Qualitative -
  - **subjective**
  - often concerned with social aspects of lives of groups and individuals
  - concerned with immeasurable features – meanings and experience
  - data used to generate new hypothesis or theory
  - concerned with explanation and interpretation
  - involves techniques such as case study, informal discussion, self discovery
  - smaller samples involved
  - results analysed and reported
  - researcher more involved with group
MAIN RESEARCH STYLES

Traditional/Experimental

- Used especially in physical sciences, medicine and social science projects.
- Starts with hypothesis (i.e. expression of relationship between two variables) based on observation/theory
- Hypothesis tested by experiment and proved or refuted
- Quantitative. Collects facts and studies relationships between different sets of facts.
- Effective where large scale calculations and measurements involved.
- Precision/accurate measurement/careful duplication, using scientific techniques.
- Rational and objective.
- Exact prediction and generality.
- Results presented as %s, graphs etc.
- May involve before and after situations – matched groups (with control group) given different treatments and results compared.
- Researcher removed from group.
- Disadvantages – in some areas may need to know more about process, not just before and after measurements. Can’t test changes in behaviour – too many variations and ambiguities.

Action Research

- Can follow on from case study or survey study.
- Practitioner = researcher.
- Reflective, self evaluation involved.
- Tackles real problems and aims for increased knowledge and understanding and improved practice.
- Where are we now? Where do we want to get to? How will we get there? How will we know when we’ve got there?
- Intervenes, makes changes, monitors effects
- Subjects participate and implement interventions – leading to more changes.
- Continuous process.
- May involve use of reflective diary, detailed observation methods
- Evidence gathered by e.g. photos, audio/video tape, notes, interviews, questionnaires
- Advantages: scope for inventiveness and creativity
- Disadvantages: invasion of privacy (ground rules needed)

Ethnographic

- Study by integration with and observation of the group
- Qualitative-descriptive - seeking insight not statistical analysis
- Advantages:
  - shared experience can help to understand subjects’ actions;
  - can provide fresh perspectives on and valuable insights into what is taken for granted
- Disadvantages:
  - difficult to verify findings by repeating research;
- researcher’s personal involvement could make it difficult for him to step back and focus on observation;
- care needed to avoid affecting the action;
- time limitations;
- not representative or generalisable – but can be related to similar problems.

Case Study

- In depth, systematic examination of individual, group or focussed area/setting/institution
- Observes, questions, studies relationships between variables, interaction of factors and events
- Focus on describing the features of and understanding a particular case
- Case can be used to explain or illustrate wider themes
- Can stand alone or provide the starting point:
  - for an experimental study, clarifying the hypothesis
  - for a survey – identify key issues for further investigation
  - for action research
- Qualitative – commonly uses observation and interviews but can use quantitative techniques
- Advantages:
  - Can focus in depth on shifting relationships;
  - Can explore complex sets of inter relationships;
  - participants’ voices can be heard;
  - brings research to life – gives a 3D picture
- Disadvantages:
  - can intrude in lives of others;
  - situation and time bound;
  - requires carefully collected, high quality data; appropriate data collection takes time;
  - researcher’s close involvement – risk of distortion
  - generalisation not always possible – but still valid if can be related to similar situations

Survey

- Aims to obtain information from a representative selection/sample and present findings as representing population as a whole
- Describes situation/population and explores reasons
- Gives snapshot of setting/views/attitudes
- Identifies relationships, patterns
- Used e.g. for : demographic research; patient/client/use satisfaction surveys; market research; workload evaluation and human resource planning; monitoring standards
- May use questionnaires, attitude scales, archival data, interviews
- Advantages:
  - Can gather large amount of data quickly and easily
- Disadvantages:
  - difficult to make sample truly representative
  - difficult to get questions right
- can answer “who, what, where, when, how?” but not so easily “why?”
- can identify relationships but not prove cause and effect

**Historical/Documentary**

- Use of documents may sometimes be only available method
- May involve use of historical documents, e.g. parish records, population statistics
- May involve use of more recent records, e.g. minutes of meetings
- May involve primary or secondary sources (i.e interpretations of primary sources)
- Disadvantages –
  - documents may be missing/incomplete;
  - questions of authenticity, reliability, validity and purpose;
  - sampling often not possible
  - difficulties of making inferences

**Research Tools**

**Observation**

**Unstructured**

- No pre-conceived ideas about what to observe
- No checklists
- Written up immediately after

**Structured**

- Decide what to observe in advance – content? process? interaction?
- Decide appropriate recording system:
  - Checklists/charts
  - Event sampling
  - Video/audio tape
  - Photos
  - Field notes and analytic memos
- For further information on recording systems see: Bales, Flanders, OU

**Questionnaire**

**Administration**

- build in time for correspondence/travel/ analysis
- distribute personally (face to face/telephone)?
- post? accompanying letter – state return date
- note dates sent and returned
- chaser to non respondents (unless anonymous!)
- consider how you will classify/analyse responses
- pilot run (with similar group) and debug/revise

**Sample**

- know your subject group
• sample should be as representative as possible of study “population"
• random? Every 5th name?
• include representative sub-groups

Design

• make sure respondent sure what’s required
• use simple, direct, appropriate language
• make layout clear and user friendly
• questions should :
  - be relevant and appropriate to your objectives
    (Open or closed? Facts or beliefs?)
  - be precise to avoid confusion, ambiguity, hesitation
  - require consistent types of answer
  - not “lead” the respondent
  - not be hypothetical or offensive
  - carefully ordered – start with most straightforward

Types of response

- Verbal
- Structured: list, category, ranking, scales, quantity, grid

Interviews

Structured:

- Questionnaire/Checklist – same questions to each in same order
  - Can ensure all topics covered
  - Analysis quick and easy
  - Questions often “closed”

Unstructured:

- No set questions
- Skill in paraphrasing, probing, summarising, echoing, non verbal communication
- Analysis needs time and care
- Useful preliminary to gain overview and identify areas to explore further
- Record responses by notes/tape recording – verify “quotes”

Guided/focussed:

- Framework of selected topics
- Questions asked but interviewee also has chance to talk/give views
- Record responses under prepared headings

Be professional:

- Clear official channels
- Make appointments and stick to them
- Make your purpose clear
- Make it clear what you will do with the information
- Make no promises that you can’t keep
- Be polite and respectful
- Be objective/unbiased (no “leading” questions)

**Diaries, critical incident and problem portfolios**

**Diary**
- Records behaviour – make clear what behaviour
- Useful where observation difficult
- Could be preliminary to interview
- Time consuming and relies on honesty/accuracy of writer

**Critical Incident**
- Identify most “noteworthy” aspects of job behaviour
- Can show what particularly contributes to good performance
- Centres on specific events and effective behaviour
- Problem portfolio
- Record how problem arose, methods used to solve, difficulties encountered etc
- Raises questions re use of time, prioritising and approach to problems

**Vignette**
- a short scenario to give a context to a question(s)
- people reflect and give answers based on their view of the scenario
- useful to inquire into sensitive areas
- must be realistic and easy to understand
- stops people relating questions to themselves directly
- less threatening
- can help to focus on a particular aspect
- questions must be relevant to research objectives
- questions must be carefully worded

**ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**
- Not enough to present findings
- Need to show how findings support your argument
  - what light do they shed on the topic?
  - what significance do they have for the topic?
  - what weight can be given to them?
  - how do they relate to other views?
- Need to interpret, analyse, criticise
- Look for similarities, groupings, patterns, items of particular significance
• Need to raise/discuss issues
• What is fact and what opinion?
• Any weaknesses, errors, omissions? Other explanations possible?
• Don’t claim more for the results than they provide – are they reliable and valid?
• Don’t attempt generalisations based on insufficient data