

The final year dissertation provides an opportunity to apply some of the principles and theories of social science that you have spent three years studying. It provides an initial exposure to the balance between creativity and discipline that is important for effective research, and develops the skills required for writing an extensive, coherent, logically structured and precise piece of material. These skills will most likely be essential in your future employment. Keep these general points in mind when approaching the dissertation.

1. A dissertation is not meant to be a cutting-edge and original piece of research. Equally, a dissertation is not just a list or a descriptive collation of summaries of some books or articles you have read.

Dissertations should try to answer a research question, so they must analyse, scrutinize, criticize or corroborate. In other words, they must have an ARGUMENT and where appropriate should present data to support your argument.

2. Read a lot. When you have a problem understanding an issue, read more to get edified; if you get stuck with your argument, read more to find a way to carry on; if words don't come out the way you want them, read more to learn the jargon of the discipline and the style of writing required at this level.

3. Organisation and structure will always be rewarded. Examiners do not want to spend a great deal of time trying to find out what your dissertation is about. Be clear on what you do, why you did it and why it is interesting. Be quick to tell the examiner this: don't leave such information for the conclusion!

4. Examiners can only mark what is there: don't expect them to read your mind. Show-off the skills and knowledge you have acquired and show how and why what you are writing is relevant.

5. Plagiarism is a very serious offence that can lead to severe sanctions, including expulsion from the university. Plagiarism means cheating.

Structure and Argument

Writing a relatively large piece of work requires careful planning, which will allow you to a) produce your dissertation by the required deadline; and b) produce a logically coherent, structured and convincing argument. When we talk about structure, we talk about the structure of the dissertation itself (chapters), and the structure of your argument. An external examiner once commented on dissertations: 'Structure is not quite all but it is a lot!' If your paper is well organised you stand a much better chance of getting the examiner on your side, and papers receive a just reward. Poorly structured dissertations are always penalised by the examiners.

Dissertation Structure

A dissertation may contain these key parts: Abstract; Introduction; (Review of relevant literature); Main body (with sub-sections for clarity); Conclusion; Bibliography.

N.B. – It is compulsory to include a bibliography and referencing system.

Each section should form a coherent element of the dissertation. Define and refine the best structure for your dissertation with your supervisor.

1. The abstract should say in about 100 words what your topic and your results are.
2. The introduction informs the reader about (a) the issues you will discuss, (b) the questions you will address, and (c) how the arguments will unfold in the following sections (i.e. 'in Section 1 I will...'). In other words, explain what you do, how you're going to do it, and why it is interesting. This should be the last thing you write in your dissertation. Don't underestimate the importance of the introduction.
3. Where do you start your work? Often it is fine not to worry too much at the beginning with the technicalities of the arguments – at first, just grab the essentials. Try to understand the main concepts and the main lines of the theoretical/empirical debates. Summarise what you have read. Describe the arguments put forward in critique/defence of a policy or theoretical position. Spell out your opinions on these issues, but always back your opinions with relevant literature.
4. You should construct the literature review on the basis of your initial findings. These should not be random descriptions of your reading; the literature review outlines the key debates of the topic you are studying, basically providing the 'ammo' for your own argument in the next sections of the dissertation. There is no standard length for a literature review.
5. It may be appropriate to precede the main body with a description of data. For example, if you have collected original indicators of GDP, unemployment, inflation, etc. from EBRD Transition Reports, which you then use to create graphs and tables to support your argument, it might be appropriate to describe and discuss the sources and nature of this data before moving into your analysis (rather than automatically leaving it for the appendices). Discuss this with your supervisor.
6. What goes in the main body will also depend on the nature of the dissertation. Here is where you construct the argument of your dissertation, and where you answer the research question. See more on this below.
7. Your conclusion should summarise the previous sections, drawing the threads of the argument together. The conclusion could offer some comments about unresolved problems: for example, how your research could be extended, or how do you see the resolution of the problems highlighted by your argument.
8. For information on referencing and bibliography, consult the additional documents provided. Remember that a dissertation must have a bibliography and a referencing apparatus. Footnotes can be used for short clarifications and extensions of your argument that would otherwise interrupt the flow of your paper. Try to keep them to a minimum. Appendices can be used for material of a detailed background or ancillary nature, too long for a footnote. Appendices are devoted to (a) descriptions of data sources and how the data have been transformed; (b) listing data (but only when the data have been obtained from non-standard sources).

Argument Structure

A good argument is the essential ingredient of a dissertation. This means a clear, coherent and logical way in which your ideas are presented. This does not necessarily mean an original argument, and it does not only mean your personal opinion on the topic. You can, for example, follow certain authors or criticise them; you can use an authors' view on a topic or problem, but you must always explain why, and provide evidence that you have read about and understood the topic and the debates that surround it, including issues of controversy.

☐ The argument must be carefully structured to answer the research question of the dissertation. Construct your argument as clearly as possible. Use subheadings to 'flag' the key steps of this structure; examiners will appreciate this, as it shows clarity of thought and confident handling of the knowledge acquired.

☐ Be careful and precise with the terms and concepts you use. Provide definitions for the central concepts; this shows your understanding of the topic and states clearly what perspective you use. This is important especially when there are (and there always are) competing approaches towards a problem.

☐ When you're dealing with concepts and theories, be careful to identify and distinguish between: what a theory claims; what its critics may argue that the theory claims; what the critics may claim instead; what you may claim about any of these. This demonstrates theoretical awareness and analytical skill, and will be adequately rewarded by all examiners.

☐ When you're dealing with policies and other empirical issues, show that you know what you're talking about, don't imagine that examiners will assume you know. State when a policy (say, macro-stabilisation or NATO enlargement) was enacted, in which country, and for what reasons. Identify the reason(s) why policy makers are interested in it. Most importantly, describe the social, political and economic aspects (e.g. poverty, inequality, inflation; or national security, ethnic integration, strategic stability) that the policy is meant to address.

☐ State what your findings are: e.g. was macro stabilisation a success, or did NATO enlargement have the expected effects? Do not fall into the trap of merely listing the reasons newspapers give, or of repeating what policy makers say. For instance, "The Russian government thought that macroeconomic stabilization would result in long term prosperity" is not a reasoned theoretical argument. You should evaluate if this claim has any basis in the relevant theories: e.g. what does economic theory say about such matters?

☐ In the conclusion, you should present your judgement – based on the material you have already presented – of the merits of the policy or theory you have analysed. If you are unable to say if a policy or theory is "good" or "bad", say what further information would be needed. For example, if there are multiple effects of a policy, say what further tests and analyses would be needed to identify which effect is the most important.