

MBA Research Methodology

Topic 9

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The most relevant parts of Blaxter *et al.* for this topic are chapters 8 and 9

Writing up your dissertation

It is worth pointing out from the outset that most people who have grown up speaking English are more fluent when they speak than when they write – so the advice in these notes applies to all of you, not just to those who speak and write English as a second (/ third/ fourth etc.) language.

Your dissertation mark is entirely based on your *written* performance

So even those of you doing more quantitative research still need to be able to express yourselves clearly in writing. What you know is invisible to your assessors unless you can communicate it satisfactorily in writing – there is no oral examination/ viva for MBA (MSc Marketing/ MSc Finance) dissertations at the University of Leicester.

Writing involves turning your ideas into a logical and credible argument – and as a form of communication it is very different from talking

When we talk to someone the other person can hear us but also has access to our expressions, gestures, tone, emphases etc. They can usually also ask for clarification. Readers cannot.

So you need to ensure that your dissertation is

Comprehensive, coherent and persuasive

In other words, it should include all the relevant material as discussed in the notes for Topic 1 and in the Project Guidelines for the Dissertation (making it comprehensive). It should also be clearly structured, well argued and evidenced and focused on its subject matter (making it coherent). Finally, it needs to be sufficiently detailed to allow your assessors to see how you arrived at your conclusions and recommendations, and therefore to judge them (making it persuasive). Also refer back to the Topic 1 notes on what makes a good dissertation, some of which will be repeated here.

Learning to write well involves

- reading others' work

Think about authors whose work you find easy to read and understand, because it is accessible and logically structured. Then consider the techniques and approaches they use. Writing well is all about communicating clearly so you should try and learn from others' successes (and indeed failures).

- observing academic codes and conventions

like structuring every chapter using an introduction, discussion and summary format (topping and tailing), referencing all your sources properly, explaining technical concepts and so on.

- and practising

The more you write – and the more notice you take of our suggestions and comments on your assignments in the interim – the more you will improve.

Write up as you go: “Writing is first and foremost analysing, revising and polishing the text. The idea that one can produce a ready-made text right away is just about as senseless as the cyclist who never had to restore his or her balance.” (Alasuutari, 1995: 178)

In other words, don't start writing up shortly before you are due to submit the dissertation proper. We suggested in the notes for Topic 6 that by the time you get to this stage you should already have a full draft version of the dissertation which you can then revisit, revise and proof read as necessary. Drafting parts of the dissertation as you go makes your life a lot easier when it comes to producing the final version.

A few ideas for overcoming writer's block
ie, what to do when you just can't get started!

- draft your contents page
- type out your bibliography
- type out the quotations you might use

All three of these tactics at least mean you have put fingers to keyboard as well as being useful tasks in and of themselves.

- draft a structure for the chapter you are trying to write

Then you can fill in the gaps under each section of the chapter.

- set a target for words per day, write up to it *then* edit

In other words, just write until you hit your target and try not to edit as you go. Leave the editing process until you've written the requisite number of words - otherwise you may find yourself endlessly editing the first sentence until you think you've got it right, and never getting any further!

- speak your ideas out loud, record and transcribe them

This allows you to get something down on paper to work with and edit.

- present your ideas to somebody else

Again you can record this presentation as well as getting feedback from the other person as to what makes sense, what doesn't, what is omitted, what probably doesn't need to be there and so on.

- try writing at a different time of day

One of the authors of these notes finds it easiest to write in the late afternoon and early evening. Other people are better at writing in the morning. Try different times of day to see when you tend to be most productive.

Keep your research questions in mind ...

As we have said with regard to taking notes for and writing up a literature review in the notes for Topic 3, when writing any part of your dissertation try to remember your research questions and therefore to ensure that everything that goes into the finished product has a direct bearing on those questions. In particular avoid packing an argument with material that is only tangentially relevant – the temptation is always to put in everything that you have read in the subject-specific or methodology literature or experienced whilst planning and carrying out your methodology, but this can lead to irrelevancies. Writing well is as much about what to leave out as what to include, especially as you only have 15 000 words.

... and remember that the dissertation is not just a literature review or a description of what is going on in the 'outside world'

Avoid simply writing up everything you know about organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, the efficient market hypothesis, the supply chain, auditing or whatever else, and/ or just describing what your findings were. Remember, as established in the introduction as well as the notes for Topics 1 and 8, research is about asking and answering questions via a combination of literature and primary/secondary data or a synthesis and/ or evaluation of (different bodies of) literature.

Some technical points

These refer to things to do, and not to do, in your dissertation to make sure it communicates as clearly as possible to the assessors.

- clear routemap/ topping and tailing

As suggested in the notes for Topic 1, a good dissertation should provide an chapter-by-chapter overview or routemap in the introduction so the assessors know what to expect. Each chapter should also begin with a short introduction telling the reader what the chapter will do, and then end with a short conclusion summarizing what has been done, as well as signalling what comes next (ie, reminding the assessors of the routemap).

- moving on/ signalling developments

*You need to ensure that each and every point you make follows from the previous point so your argument is clearly structured. When you need to move on to an entirely different topic area, try using constructions like 'Moving on' or 'On a different issue' at the start of the new point (which should also be the start of a new paragraph – see below). Also make sure you link the **sections** of your argument together, so that your dissertation is not just a series of unrelated observations. Linking points make writing flow better and signal the way your argument is developing – eg, 'having discussed the phenomenon of X, I will now move to analyse the possible explanations for this phenomenon'. Subheadings help to signal an unfolding structure and developments in that structure to an assessor as well – but don't over-use them as very short subsections are irritating and distracting. Overall, make sure your work is well structured in terms of the internal logic of each paragraph as well as the links between paragraphs.*

- paragraphing

Students often tend to make their paragraphs too short, which gives dissertations a 'bitty', 'fragmented' feel. It is difficult to be prescriptive about paragraphing but the usual guidance is to end a paragraph when you have finished discussing a particular point. If you feel that your paragraph is getting too long (say more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page as a rough guide – remembering that the dissertation should be at least 1.5 spaced – see the Project Guidelines), and you haven't come to the end of your point yet, then break off at a logical place and restart using a construction like 'Moreover', 'Furthermore', 'Additionally'

etc.. These sorts of constructions make it clear that you are still discussing the same issue.

- forms of language

*Certain forms of language may send unwitting or unintentional messages – eg, the use of gender-specific/ exclusive language like ‘he’, ‘him’, ‘his’ etc. This may be grammatically correct but it is often not empirically or politically correct! We prefer you to use gender-inclusive language like ‘he/ she’ or gender-neutral language **unless** you are referring to someone whose gender you know or quoting someone who uses gender-specific language. Insensitive or outdated language should also be avoided – eg, ‘person of colour’ is preferable to ‘coloured person’. Also consider the use of terms like ‘research subject’ when talking about those who took part in your research – might this not signal that you subjected them to something or that they are subordinate to you in some way? This connects back to our discussion of research ethics in the notes for Topic 6. We would recommend the use of less problematic terms like ‘respondent’, ‘informant’, ‘participant’ and so on.*

- first or third person?

Academic tradition dictates that research should be written up in the third person as it is assumed to sound more objective - as if the piece is more than just someone’s opinion (see also notes for Topic 8). But as social constructivist perspectives have developed in academic research, more and more of us use the first person. So we would suggest choosing the approach with which you are most comfortable. There are two additional things to remember here though – first, writing in the first person can sound more chatty, informal and colloquial if this approach is not used carefully. Your dissertation is a formal piece of academic work and needs to be presented as such. Second, we would recommend that you use either the first person or the third person throughout your dissertation as switching between them can be distracting for the assessors.

- footnotes and endnotes

*Notes are used to expand on an argument, to include material which might make the text seem unbalanced were it to be included in the main body of the argument. Most word-processing packages allow you to insert footnotes (which appear at the base of the relevant page) and endnotes (which appear at the end of the document) automatically. However, as with appendices (see the notes for Topic 1), try to keep them to a minimum – if the material is that important it probably belongs in the main body of the text - and always use **either** footnotes or endnotes throughout, not both.*

- past or present tense?

*One suggestion is to use the present tense throughout (eg ‘Weber claims that’ not ‘Weber claimed that’) **except** when writing up your methodology and data analysis where you should use the past tense (eg ‘I chose to use questionnaires’, ‘my data suggested that’). But these are not hard and fast rules, and it may be a matter of (a) what works for you; and (b) what makes the dissertation most ‘readable’. In any case, please try to avoid swapping between tenses within chapters.*

- cite all your sources

*Remember to cite the sources of all the indirect and direct quotations (see below) you have used in the main body of the text. You also need to provide a full list of references at the end of the dissertation, before any appendices - and don't try and pad this out! **Only** list sources you have actually consulted and remember that if the list seems excessively long then we might start asking questions! Students also sometimes ask whether they should include sources in the list of references which they haven't cited in the main text. Our answer to this would be if you **really** think that the source in question informed your thinking then include it in the list. If not, leave it out. And, again, remember that lots of sources that don't appear in the text but do appear in the list of references will be something which draws adverse comment from the assessors.*

- direct quotations

*Direct quotations – when you borrow someone else's words to make a particular point - prove you have read the source in question and allow assessors to see how competently you have used it. But don't over-use direct quotations and certainly try not to use very many long ones. The general rule is that, if you can say it just as well yourself, then don't use a direct quotation. In general we are interested in your interpretations of other people's ideas and lots of direct quotations don't really allow us to see how well you understand the material you have used. **In any case,, make sure that you provide an appropriate reference when you are quoting directly from a source text (as well as using quotation marks to denote the relevant passage) and remember that indirect quotations where you have rewritten someone else's ideas in your own words also need to be referenced (more on this issue below in the discussion of plagiarism).** You might also want to indent longer direct quotations (say 40 words or more) and/ or present them using single spacing to enhance readability.*

- cross-reference where necessary

In other words, you should do what we have been doing throughout these notes – signal to the reader where something will be discussed in more detail or from another angle later in the dissertation, and refer back to previous discussion to remind them of an argument where necessary.

Classic errors in dissertations

Most of these should be obvious from what we have already said. As with the do's and don'ts above, they also apply to other academic assignments.

- inadequate outline of research questions/ unclear focus
Make sure your dissertation clearly spells out your research questions and why you are asking them in the introduction, and makes appropriate reference to these questions and justifications in later chapters where necessary. If the assessors aren't clear on what your focus is from the outset, and why this focus has been chosen, this will have a negative impact on your mark.
- poor referencing/ plagiarism

Plagiarism can be from published texts of whatever sort (including Internet sources) or from other students' work. **Either way it will attract a failing mark. Make sure you reference properly and remember that, if you don't understand a particular text, then you need to put more effort into reading it and/ or to discuss it with a tutor – don't just copy chunks of it out.**

- 'jumping around'

This means writing in a series of disconnected points so the reader cannot see how the argument or the storyline of the dissertation builds – you should be telling a coherent narrative.

- making unsupported claims/ being too anecdotal

If you make a claim about something – eg 'Money is the best motivational tool managers have available' – then you need to be able to provide evidence of this claim. Evidence can be from theory, from empirical data (your own or someone else's) or your personal experience. However, don't over-rely on the last as this makes a dissertation sound overly anecdotal – ie, like a series of personal stories as opposed to a properly researched piece of academic work. Concrete, 'real life' examples of what you mean are also good – eg, a description of how a financial incentive scheme at Organization X raised productivity by 100% in less than six months to illustrate the above claim about money as a motivator. In general, when you make a claim, always ask yourself 'How do I know this is the case?' and provide the relevant evidence. Also make sure that the evidence you provide fits the claim you are making!

- overstating the case/ neglecting the other side of the argument/ ignoring critiques

Overstating the case or neglecting the other side of the argument are both problematic as most if not all topics in the management literature are characterized by controversy and disagreement – we touched on this issue in the notes for Topic 3. So try not to exaggerate the strength of one particular way of understanding an issue – avoid presenting it as definitive. Here is an example of what we mean:

Effective organizational learning is the most important source of corporate success *versus*

Effective organizational learning is widely regarded as an important source of corporate success

The first claim exaggerates the importance of organizational learning – the second is more accurate and nuanced. In terms of ignoring critiques, and again because of the discussion and debate that exist in nearly all areas of the academic literature on management, try not to present one author or one perspective as if they are in some way the 'Gold Standard'. An example here is the way in which a lot of postgraduate students we have come across use the work of Geert Hofstede on cross-cultural differences in organizational behaviour. As we suggested in the notes for Topic 3, Hofstede is one of the key authors in this area of the literature – but the mistake students often make is to present his work as if it is the be-all-and-end-all, as if there is nothing

else to say on the subject. There is no problem at all with a dissertation that makes a lot of use of Hofstede – but this kind of research does need to acknowledge that his ideas are very controversial and widely criticized, as well as to make a robust case as to why the student in question has chosen to use his work.

- not saying enough

This is often a function of trying to fit too much in so that you don't explain key points fully enough. Assessors then have to read between the lines and guess at what you mean, which will affect your mark. Don't leave arguments 'hanging in mid-air' – make sure all your points are appropriately developed so that they are clear. As we have said above, writing well means knowing what to leave out as well as what to include, and the key balance is between breadth and depth of coverage.

- including irrelevant material

Relatedly, everything that goes in should have some bearing on your research questions: it should be part of the unfolding story which we talked about in the notes for Topic 1. Make sure your assessors are never left wondering why you are talking about a specific issue.

- being too informal/ using inappropriate language

Avoid using slang or colloquialisms; avoid over-using contractions like 'don't' and 'didn't'; avoid writing in a chatty or informal way as if you were writing an e-mail or text to a friend; avoid using sexist, racist or homophobic language (etc.) – unless of course you are quoting another author or a respondent who uses these kinds of constructions.

- not defining the jargon you use

*If you are using technical terms or jargon which belong to a specific area of the academic literature and would not be understood by someone who is not familiar with this literature then you need to define these terms – otherwise we don't know whether you understand them or not. The trick here is to write for an intelligent layperson – ie, someone who is not an expert in the area but will understand the relevant issues if they are carefully explained. As assessors we will of course be familiar with the material you are discussing, but what we want to see is that **you** understand it.*

- over-writing

*Effective communication is about being clear, concise and crisp. Although some academics use very complex and lengthy sentences and extremely flowery and elaborate language, this does **not** mean that academic work **needs** to have these characteristics. An example of over-writing (and the same passage after corrections) follows:*

While it is true that researchers have illusions of academic grandeur when they sit down to write their project report, and who can blame them because they have had to demonstrate skills and resilience to get to this point in their studies, they nonetheless must consider that writing a project report is an exercise in communication and nobody likes reading lots of idea which are

expressed in such a confusing and pretentious way that nobody can understand them, let alone the poor tutor who has to plough through it all to try and make some sense of it.

Phew!! This is an instance of using sentences which are much too long.

Researchers have illusions of academic grandeur when they write their project report. This is understandable. They have demonstrated skill and resilience to reach this point in their studies. However, writing a project report is an exercise in communication. Nobody likes confusing and pretentious writing which is difficult to understand. We should pity the tutor who has to make sense of it.

This is a much clearer rendition of the same points – and cuts up one sentence into six. A tip to avoid very lengthy sentences is to read your work out loud – the points at which you need to breathe are usually where a full stop/ period is needed.

- lack of research

Not reading enough, whether it's subject-specific or methodological literature, makes your argument weak, as does over-relying on some sources – plus it looks lazy!

- conclusion versus discussion

Make sure your conclusion doesn't contradict the discussion in the preceding chapters – we've seen lots of examples where dissertation conclusions reflect what the student wanted to find as opposed to what their research actually found. Inappropriate generalizations from a non-representative sample are also to be avoided, as are sweeping and unrealistic recommendations which are not substantiated by your data (also refer back to the notes on Topics 1 and 8).

- typographical errors

An untidy dissertation with lots of errors will not achieve a good mark. Make sure your plan leaves time for you to proof read the dissertation yourself (again reading out loud helps) or to get someone else to do it (as long as this is all they are doing – they shouldn't be advising you on content). Also check to see that you have followed all the formatting instructions in the relevant Project Guidelines for the Dissertation; try to ensure your title is (a) relevant to the dissertation, (b) informative in terms of letting assessors know what to expect and (c) exciting/ attention grabbing; check your contents page to make sure it's comprehensive and accurate; check to make sure all the pages are in numerical order; do a spell check and a grammar check; and, finally, check your referencing.

- way too long or way too short ... and some *ballpark* figures

introduction: 1000-2000 words

literature review: 3000-4000 words

methodology: 3000-4000 words

data analysis: 3000-4000 words

conclusions, recommendations and reflections: 1000-2000 words

We mean what we say when we use the term 'ballpark'. Remember that a dissertation should be 12 000 - 15 000 words long, but that you are permitted 10% leeway above and below this figure (ie, from 10 800 words to 16 500 words as a minimum and maximum). So the ranges above should be seen from this point of view. Some dissertations will also look rather different from this set of figures for word count per chapter depending on their subject matter. However, very long or very short dissertations will always attract poor marks. If very short they are unlikely to contain the balance of academic depth and breadth that we look for in work accorded 60 M level credits. If very long then the assessors may only mark up to the word limit, because your work should be both concise and focused, as we have said several times before in these notes.

Also note that the three main/ substantive chapters are your literature review, your methodology and your data analysis and so these should be of roughly equal length, as should the introduction and the conclusions, recommendations and reflections.

You should now complete an exercise which assesses your understanding of one of the classic errors described above – ie, plagiarism. This is called 'Topic 9 exercise' and is available elsewhere on the Additional Notes section of this Blackboard site. Please note that the test feedback only provides details of the questions asked, your answers and our 'model'/ correct answers – because it is discursive in nature it cannot be scored using the available software. When you have finished the test you should return to these notes.

What follows is a very rough guide to what we regard as some of the major, medium, minor and trivial 'sins' in a dissertation. We will take account of any such sins in our marking, but obviously lots of major sins are likely to have a much more negative impact on your mark than a few minor sins.

Major: Reproduction of material without acknowledgement; dissertation not clearly focused; incoherent/ badly written and/ or structured; poor knowledge of relevant literature, both subject-specific and methodological; dogmatic/ one-sided; derivative/ uncritical; extremely poor or no referencing

Medium: Significant omissions from the references; not spell-checked - considerable number of incorrectly spelt words; poorly structured

Minor: Poor punctuation; some misspellings; omission of some references

Trivial: A few misspellings; some poor punctuation; *et al.* used in the list of references when all authors should be given at this stage

And finally

Four more sources of help with regard to writing your dissertation up

<http://www.le.ac.uk/ulmc/students/assignwritingguidelines.pdf>

Check out this URL for guidance on preparing, writing and referencing assignments (including the dissertation) correctly – some of it is material we have adapted for these notes, but some of it will be new to you.

<http://www.le.ac.uk/slc/index.html>

This is the home page of the University's Student Learning Centre. It provides links to a series of online guides to study skills, presentation skills, writing skills, maths skills and IT skills. Check these out – they may be useful for your dissertation or for other aspects of our MBA (/ MSc) course.

Project Guidelines for the Dissertation (naturally!)

The relevant Discussion Board/s on this Blackboard site

... and remember that all ULMC tutors mark several postgraduate dissertations every year

So the clearer, more enjoyable and more interesting your dissertation is, the better your mark will be. One tip in this regard is to ask a friend to read your executive summary or your introduction to see if it inspires them to read further ...

Summary

1. Writing well means being comprehensive, coherent and persuasive
2. You can learn to write well by reading others' work, following academic codes and practising
3. Write up your dissertation as you go
4. Keeping your research questions in mind is extremely important
5. Also pay attention to technicalities like paragraphing and forms of language
6. There is a long list of classic errors in dissertations such as not defining the jargon you use and over-writing
7. Don't forget to consult the ULMC Assignment Writing Guidelines, the Student Learning Centre resources and the Project Guidelines for the Dissertation, as well as posting any queries about writing up to the relevant Discussion Board/s ...
8. ... and remember to keep your assessors entertained!

We hope you have found these notes useful and informative. We would be very pleased to receive any feedback that you have in terms of what you thought was especially helpful (or not!) or any omissions which we could address in future revisions. Please post these to the Dissertation Support Discussion Board. And, finally, good luck with your dissertation!

References

The following are the sources which were used to compile these notes. Chapters or excerpts are specified to suggest material which should be especially relevant to issues covered in the notes.

Alasuutari, P. (1995) *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies*, London: Sage.

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2001) *How To Research*, second edition, Buckingham: Open University Press, chapter 8.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Lowe, A. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction*, second edition, London: Sage, chapter 7.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, second edition, Oxford: Blackwell, chapter 15.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2003) *Research Methods for Business Students*, third edition, Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall, chapter 13, appendix 5 (pp. 469-471).