

 **SAGE Study Skills**

Your Dissertation in Education

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2nd Edition

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What is a dissertation?

By the end of this chapter you will be able to answer the following:

- Why do I have to do a dissertation?
- What skills does the dissertation demonstrate?
- How is a dissertation structured?
- What will impress?
- What should I do now?

Why do I have to do a dissertation?

The dissertation is commonly the last component of a degree course, or a module of varying length, taken towards the end of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Throughout your degree you have been guided through modules and directed to various sources of information; the dissertation however is an exercise in independent study. The dissertation/independent study tests your abilities to educate yourself and to demonstrate your expertise in collecting, collating and analysing information, in order to develop conclusions based on reasoned argument.

The difference between the dissertation and your previous studies is that you will be completing the dissertation by yourself. You have probably received general guidance on the process through a research-based module and you will also have been allocated a supervisor to guide your work; however, most of the decisions about what you do, and how you do it, will be yours. This not only gives you freedom to pursue a particular interest but also enables you to ensure your academic strengths are fully utilised.



Despite the dissertation process enabling you to demonstrate your strengths, conversely it can highlight potential limitations. The core aspect of this book is to guide you through the process of completing a dissertation, and to explain and discuss the options you confront at each stage. It will help you to make informed decisions that you can build on in order to produce a successful dissertation that optimises your strengths. Through this approach, the dissertation should not be perceived as an obstacle; although the process will challenge you at times, such challenges will make you stronger in the same way that fitness is developed through working beyond the comfort zone. At the end of the process, having completed your dissertation, you will have a sense of satisfaction, a sense of completion, and indeed your well-earned degree.

What skills does the dissertation demonstrate?

Ultimately the dissertation demonstrates your ability to work independently, utilising a range of personal skills, something employers are only too eager to look for within their employees. Remember that a degree is a sheet of paper given to you at graduation, and what an expensive sheet of A4 it is! The time, the effort, and the financial sacrifices that you have invested over the years are condensed into a rather intricately designed certificate. The only thing differentiating your certificate from that of the person sitting next to you in the graduation ceremony, or in an interview context, is your name and degree classification. When compared with fellow students with similar degrees across the country, what enables an employer to ensure that you are the right person for the job? Consequently the dissertation synthesises your personal and academic attributes developed through your degree.

No doubt over the duration of your degree you have meticulously tracked and recorded how you have developed your graduate skills. Although there are specific frameworks of skills depending on your actual subject and the way your institution implements these, your skills will be a combination of attributes that employers want. Through your degree you would have developed a range of mechanical, personal and academic skills, united at the culmination of your degree through research, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

In relation to Figure 1.1, process skills relate to the processes used in studying: the specific skills that help to search for information and literature, accessing electronic databases and electronic journals, referencing skills and so forth. They may also relate to the practical skills required within the subject area. They are the 'building blocks' on which the other skills are developed.

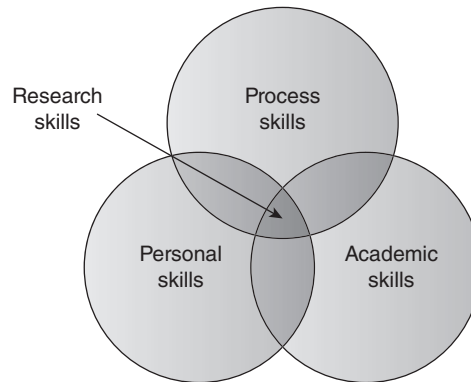


FIGURE 1.1 Study skills

Personal skills relate to your intrapersonal skills (understanding yourself) and interpersonal skills (working with others). They are the attributes required within lectures and seminars, for example, note taking, working in a group, participation in discussions, and similar skills. Personal skills also relate to the ability to identify and work to your strengths, being aware of your limitations, self-management, leadership, presentation skills, and so on.

Academic skills relate to those attributes required within your study where you produce an output, for example, assignments, presentations and portfolios. These skills include academic reading, in being able to understand and critique a wide range of information. This in turn links to reasoning skills in analytical thinking and developing arguments, and also in written or oral skills such as being able to communicate your arguments effectively.

The defining feature of a graduate career, and indeed anyone deemed as a 'professional', is the ability to continually reflect on developing and enhancing their practice. Indeed every graduate career involved aspects of independent work and independent research. Within education, such research may include everyday tasks of assessing performance of learners, through to reflecting how you could develop and progress your learners through trialling and implementing a new method. This research process has been summarised in Figure 1.2 where the different attributes of research are sequentially linked.

- Acquire: obtaining information through one of many processes, for example, reading for your literature review, or collecting data through a range of methods.
- Record: noting the information in a useable format, for example, comments a person makes during an interview, frequencies of an observed behaviour, or recording summaries of your reading, and so forth.

Your dissertation in education

- Organise: once the information has been noted, it needs to be structured into a useable format.
- Analyse: the information needs to be reviewed and analysed in order to establish if there are trends within the literature or your data.
- Synthesise: more than one source of information may have been collected from your data collection methods. This information needs to be compared to other information, for example, existing theories from literature, or compared to other results you have collected to establish themes.
- Apply: once collected and analysed, the information needs to be put into practice in some format, otherwise there is little point in having conducted the research in the first place.
- Evaluate: once the information has been applied, it is necessary to assess how effective this was in achieving a desired result.
- Reflect: finally, depending on the evaluation, what worked? What could have been improved? What is the next logical step to take?

Being aware of the skills you have developed and demonstrated through your dissertation will enable you to discuss these fully when applying for graduate careers. Such research skills demonstrate that you are a true professional, one who continually questions what they do on a daily basis.

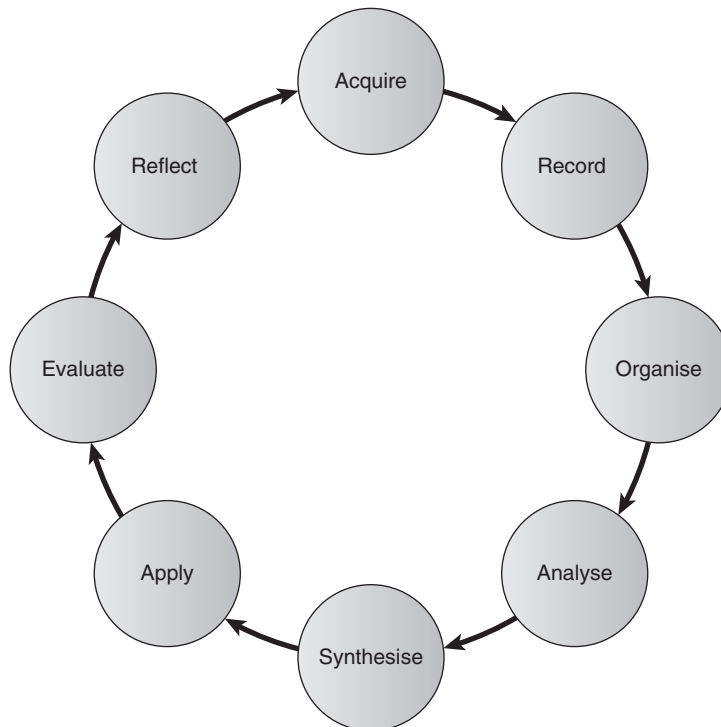


FIGURE 1.2 The research cycle

How is a dissertation structured?

The dissertation should be a journey both for you and for the reader. The final product could be related to a series of holiday photographs. As such, other people can get an insight of where you have been and what it was like. However, they will never be able to sense all that you have; they are unable to fully experience the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings that you experienced. In relation to the reader, the photographs should be in order and illustrate the ‘story’ of your holiday: it would look out of synchronisation if your photographs started with you arriving back at your home before you had been anywhere. Indeed, would anyone really be interested in seeing you loaded up with your suitcases, or would they prefer to spend more time looking at photos of the actual place you went? As such, the dissertation portrays to the reader your journey of discovery.

It must be noted however that the dissertation is unlikely to be completed in one smooth transition from chapter to chapter, where you write your chapters sequentially. Research is a messy process and you may be engaged with the actual research before you have written your methodology chapter, or you may be rewriting your introduction after you have written your conclusion. This is common with nearly all researchers; however, the key to a successful dissertation is to ensure that the final product makes logical sense in how it unfolds without making erratic jumps. Consequently there has to be a logical sense of ordering and progression, with additional weighting given to some parts and less to others. This is the secret of success for your dissertation.

An analogy of the dissertation process was once shared by Professor Colin Terrell and Dr John Hockey from the University of Gloucestershire: they clarified the research process through a simple diagram related to an hourglass. It is this model that has been elaborated on within this book and which will serve as a model for the various stages of the dissertation.

The basic idea behind the hourglass model is that you need to narrow a focus initially through your literature review, identifying gaps in existing knowledge, gaps that you intend to resolve through your dissertation. Once you have identified these gaps, the next aspect is to outline how you seek to resolve these gaps in knowledge through your methodology – the actual research approach you will take. From this, you collect your data, present your results, and then discuss how your findings relate to the literature in your discussion chapter. From the methodology onwards, you are broadening your research. Figure 1.3 illustrates the hourglass approach and the key chapters of the dissertation, specifically the way in which the focus is established, through writing the introduction and completing a literature review; in turn, this will help you narrow and refine your research focus. Once you have established your research focus, the second half is to expand the focus through

conducting your research, discussing the research activity in the methodology chapter, collecting the data and presenting your results, then discussing the results in relation to the literature and drawing conclusions. This 'hourglass' approach could be seen as the skeleton of the dissertation, from which everything is supported.

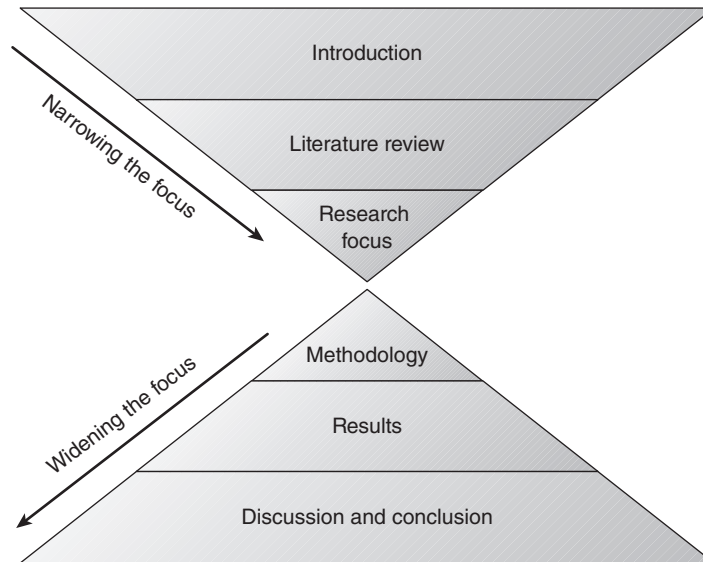


FIGURE 1.3 'Hourglass' research approach

A central feature of your dissertation is keeping to your research focus. Your research focus is portrayed as research questions, or the aim and objectives; these will be discussed in Chapter 6. As such, Figure 1.4 demonstrates the objectives (although equally this term could be replaced with 'research questions'), which serve as the 'spine' to your dissertation – the central feature on which the rest of the skeleton hangs.

There are a number of chapters that are generally expected in any dissertation. These may have different terms depending on your institution; however, they are generally applicable to the headings used throughout this book. Put simply these are:

- Introduction
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussion and conclusion.

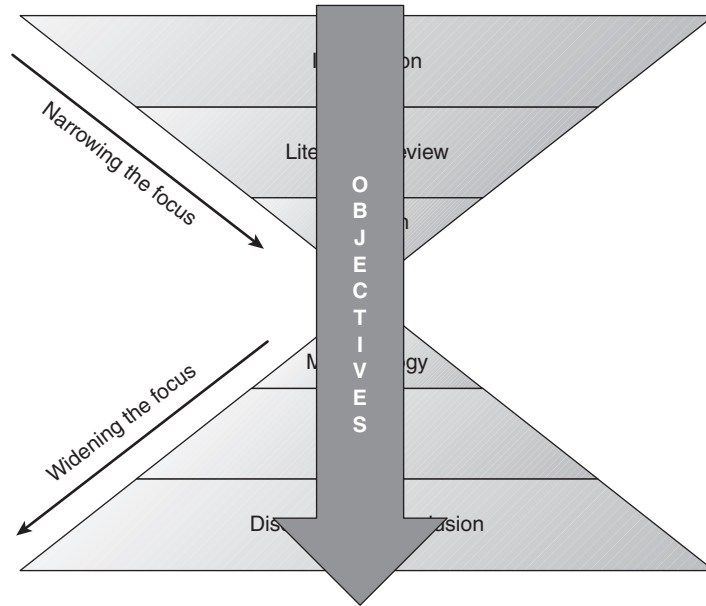


FIGURE 1.4 The ‘spine’ of your dissertation

This five-chapter dissertation structure is perhaps one of the most common. However, there are variations; for example the conclusion may be written as a separate chapter or the results and discussion are combined. Although the different components are discussed in the subsequent chapters, how you thread these together depends on the approach you have adopted, which in turn is contingent with your institution, your supervisor and what approach makes the most logical sense.

What will impress? Seeing it from the examiner’s perspective

Your dissertation, as with your other modules, will have a set of assignment criteria to ensure parity of grades across your course and institution. The marking criteria also conform to subject benchmarks and are scrutinised before the course is validated or approved, to ensure that the standards are equitable nationally.

Your dissertation will be marked by your supervisor and normally a second marker who similarly supervises dissertations. The first and second markers grade the dissertation independently, then discuss their grades and how these have been identified in relation to the marking criteria. If the markers cannot agree, a third marker is used to moderate the grade.

Once all of the dissertations have been assessed, they are made available for an external examiner. The external examiner is an experienced academic at a different higher education institution who works on the same or similar courses. Their role is to ensure that the range of dissertations conform to the assessment criteria, and also to the subject benchmarks that are set nationally. Potentially, your dissertation may be assessed and moderated by four academics.

In order to be awarded a really good grade, it is obviously useful to understand exactly what the examiner will be looking for when marking. The following list will indicate the main areas that gain marks in any dissertation. These areas will be discussed in detail in the following chapters of the book, with many handy hints to help you achieve the best possible result. The list is not presented in any order or priority and is separated into three areas. These areas are likely to be the way the examiner marks your dissertation, from the first impression of the work, through to a quick review in order to ascertain the focus and main findings of your work, and finally a detailed reading to assess how your dissertation is threaded.

First impressions count!

Presentation

Although your dissertation will be marked according to academic content, creating a favourable first impression to start with can only be of benefit. A neat cover, practical binding and well-designed page layout all contribute to creating such an impression. Furthermore, ensure that the font is easily readable, for example using a basic font (Arial, Times New Roman, etc.) that is of a clear size (size 12) with at least 1.5 line spacing. Your institution will detail specifically how they want your work to be submitted.

Organisation

A brief scan through the dissertation should give an immediate impression of how the work is organised. This means clearly headed sections, easily spotted chapter divisions, and a logical arrangement of the sections of the study. The examiner will feel much more comfortable with work that is easy to navigate. A clear structure is a strong indication of clear thinking.

Length

Your dissertation should conform to your institution's requirements.

Quick review

Abstract

Although this is not always a requirement, this is useful as a brief introduction for the reader. Summarise your dissertation in 150–200 words, including

the main conclusions. This is not an easy task although it is good practice, and again demonstrates clear thinking.

List of contents

Situated near the front of the dissertation, this gives a simple overview of not only what is in the text, but also how it is organised. It will also provide a useful navigation tool for later on to find the page numbers for the specific chapters.

Main conclusions

One of the main points for conducting a dissertation is to develop conclusions based on the research. The final chapter should highlight the conclusions extremely clearly so that they can be picked out by the examiner by simply scanning through the pages. They will also check that the conclusions relate exactly to the research problem or question.

Reference list

This will be a measure of your background reading, both in depth and in scope. You will impress your examiner if the relevant books and journals are cited accurately.

Detailed reading

Relevance and quality of background study

Whatever subject you are tackling, there will be numerous other writers and experts who have worked within the same area. The examiner will look to see if you have discovered the main ones relevant to your study and have understood what they have written. This will provide the context for your own research and will enable you to highlight the particular issue that you will tackle in your research. It will also provide precedents of how the research might be carried out.

Clarity of the aim, research problem or research question

It is essential to be clear, not only in your own mind but also in your writing, about the exact problem or question that you are tackling. This is the foundation of your dissertation and produces the main aim of the research. The research problem or research question will be elaborated and dissected during the course of your study, but your aim remains central to your research efforts. It should be possible throughout the dissertation for the examiner to relate the writing to the stated aim.

Objectives

The objectives specifically detail how you will address your aim, research problem or research question. The objectives detail not only what you intend to do but also how you intend to achieve this. The objectives therefore structure the dissertation and can be deemed to be the skeleton that holds the dissertation together. In your discussion chapter, you will be relating your research findings to the literature, in turn relating this to the specific objectives, detailing how the objectives have been satisfied.

Selection of methods for data collection and analysis

One of the main reasons for completing a dissertation is to discover and implement basic research methods. The choice of methods is extensive, so you will be marked both on the discussion about possible methods and on the appropriateness of your methods.

Use of research methods

Each method has its own rules and procedures, so you need to demonstrate that you have understood these and implemented them correctly.

Solidity of argument to support findings and conclusions

You could see the whole dissertation as a piece of detective work, with the report being the evidence and argument that leads to your conclusions. Do you have a strong case? The examiner will dissect the logic of your argument and weigh the strength of your conclusions based on the evidence you bring forward.

Quality of referencing

Your work will inevitably be based on the research and writings of others; after all, that is how we learn about most things. It is therefore essential that you acknowledge the source of your information and ideas through consistent use of a citing and referencing system. Marks are specifically allotted to this aspect of the work.

Quality of writing

The main form of your communication is the written word. Correct spelling and grammar are basic requirements (your word processor will help to some extent). Proper sentence and paragraph construction are also essential; these will be partly dependent on your personal style. You should aim at clarity throughout. The examiner will have limited time to read your work, so make

it easy for them; you will be rewarded for this. If you are not writing in your first language, it is a good idea to find a native English speaker to read through your work and correct it as necessary.

Marking criteria

As previously discussed, it is also important that you refer to any course handbooks in order to see the explicit criteria used for marking. This may mean that you will have to search for the handbooks provided to you in the induction week of your first year! Institutions are increasingly placing handbooks online, so again it may be worth locating these. If in any doubt, ask your supervisor for a copy of the marking criteria.

The criteria are likely to be subdivided into a number of different areas correlating with respective grades. These areas are unlikely to hold equal weighting but it should be clear which areas are of paramount importance; again, if in doubt, ask your supervisor. Remember: these criteria are there to ensure markers grade dissertations fairly.

Check your degree regulations

It is also worth remembering that the dissertation can significantly alter your grade profile. The final classification of your degree is generally worked out on either an aggregate score of your second and third year grades, or solely your third year grades, depending on which provides the higher grade. Recently, however, there has been a move to adopt grade point averages. Your dissertation may be worth a quarter of the grade weighting for your final year, perhaps more (you will be aware of the relative grades used within your institution). Some institutions place such significance on the overall grade, that even if you have averaged a high overall pass mark for most of your work, a poor dissertation can reduce the grade significantly. By this, some institutions have regulations on degree awards where the overall classification of a degree has to be in line with the dissertation. For example, if you average an A grade, yet your dissertation is awarded a D, the highest award you may possibly earn is a C.

A word of warning

The dissertation process should come with a health warning: you are likely to endure many variations of psychological states from elation through to severe frustration. Our intention is not to scare you from attempting and completing

the process this early on in the book; however if you know what to expect, you can be prepared for it. In other words, take it as advice from one who has gone through and continually goes through the 'research rollercoaster'.

If you like rollercoaster rides, then you will love research. The research rollercoaster has many highs, a few lows, and is both exhilarating and nerve-wracking at the same time. Indeed you may lose all sense of direction as you appear to go back on yourself and turn upside down. This is demonstrated by Figure 1.5.

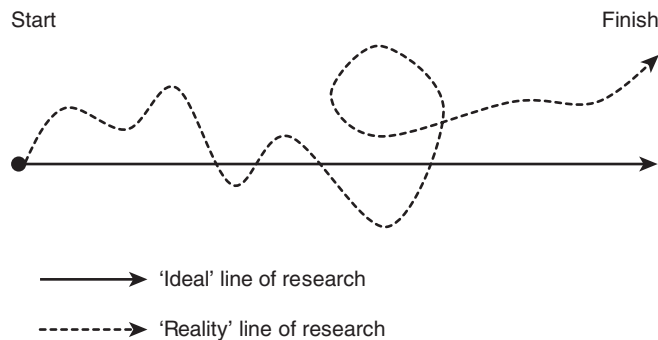


FIGURE 1.5 The research rollercoaster

From this illustration, you are unlikely to end up where you originally intended. As new information is acquired, whether through literature or through your research activities, you may head along a different route. If you ever find a person who says that they ended up exactly where they intended from the outset, they are either a) an extremely insightful and rare researcher, or b) not telling the whole truth.

One of the most important tips in this book is ...

Get a notepad and pen and keep these with you at all times!

From experience, you are likely to get your best ideas at the most inconvenient times. This is a fundamental law of research! We guarantee that your best ideas will surface when you have no way of recording them. Some people refer to this as their 'muse', others such as the author Richard Bach, 'thought fairies'. This next bit may make you think that we are slightly losing touch with reality; thank heavens we are writing a book for education students and not psychology students, as they may have a lengthy named condition for us.

Personally the garden fairy and the supermarket fairy are the most active, with the car fairy trailing slightly behind. These folk come to visit with their greatest ideas at the most inopportune times, no more so than when pondering which toothpaste may help prevent the most cavities in the supermarket aisle.

You could spend two weeks thinking about an important area on your dissertation and not be able to make sense of it, then when you least expect it, BANG! – the thought explodes into your mind with such clarity that it knocks you senseless. However, this only lasts for a fleeting moment so you need to try to capture this moment before it flees.

So in order to maximise the potential of these inspirational moments, a notepad and pen are your key research tools; they prevent you accruing a pile of supermarket receipts, bus tickets, chewing gum wrapper, and so forth, with your key ideas penned in a scrawl you can barely read.

Thankfully with technological advances, most mobile phones have some voice record mechanism, and it would be worth getting to know where this is on yours or downloading an appropriate app. Furthermore, if anyone is looking (or listening), it appears that you are just talking to someone on your phone and not muttering random thoughts to yourself.

Indeed, if you have previously studied psychology, you may be able to explain how and why these ideas come at inopportune times. It may be that the subconscious is actively working on the problem and can only surface when you are engaged with more mundane tasks.

Whether you use modern technology or trusted pen and paper, develop the habit of keeping these to hand and writing up your notes from the outset. This will make the dissertation process easier, and when you come to write up your closing chapters you will already have a stockpile of notes on which you can draw.

What should I do now?

Even if you do not know yet exactly what you are going to choose as a subject for your dissertation, it is a good idea to look at the work of students from previous years. Your department or your institution's library should keep copies of previous dissertations. Find out where these are located within the library and if they are in some kind of subject order, and choose four or five on the subject area that you are interested in. If not, any recent dissertations from your course will do. If you can only get them by request from the library catalogue, then choose some from the list. Ideally, choose dissertations that have been completed according to the regulations and instructions that you have to follow.

Your dissertation in education

Once you have obtained some previous dissertations, compare the following features:

- Format (size and shape)
- Design of cover
- Type of binding
- Design of page layouts
- Printing fonts and styles and text layout
- Number and type of illustrations.

Now that you have got a general impression of a range of designs it is time to look more carefully at the components and structure of the dissertation. Check each for the following:

- Title: length and clarity. Can you understand what it is about just by reading the title? Is it too long and complicated? Is it too short and general?
- Front matter: is this clearly labelled and set out? Check what they consist of: title page, acknowledgements, abstract, list of contents with page numbers, lists of figures and tables, anything else (for example, a statement of individual work or dedication). Look at the layout and design of each of these.
- Chapters or sections: how many, how long and in what sequence? Does the sequence of chapter titles show you how the dissertation is structured? One example might be: introduction, background, research problem, research methods used, data collection, data analysis, conclusions. There are, however, several different ways of structuring dissertations, depending on the type of research undertaken. Compare those that you have selected.

Now go to the end of each and compare the add-on sections. Note:

- Length and format of the list of references
- Number and type of appendices.

Now if you want to, you can read a few sections of the text to see what the written style is like. Note the use of technical words, the method of citing references, and the style of the writing. Check the length of paragraphs and sentence construction. Are they short and precise, or long and complex? Explore how the tables, charts or figures are used to complement the text. Do not aim to read the dissertation all of the way through: rather if you have the time, pick a few more examples of dissertations and repeat the exercise. You will soon get a feel of the difference in quality and style, which will help you to form your preferences on which to base your own work.

The length and complexity of the dissertations might be rather daunting, particularly when you consider that you will have to produce something similar within a few months. Although there will be a lot to learn and plenty

to write, if you can choose a subject in which you are really interested, despite the hard work it should be a pleasurable and rewarding exercise, and something to be proud of when you have finished.

References to more information

There are many books available on the dissertation process. Reading through a variety of books will provide you with different insights and perspectives on research and constructing a dissertation. Below are listed a few books that range from the very general (for example, Bell and Waters, 2014), through to the more advanced (Cohen et al., 2011).

Bell, J. and Waters, S. (2014) *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-Time Researchers* (6th edn). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education* (7th edn). Abingdon: Routledge.

Punch, K.F. (2009) *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*. London: Sage Publications.

Robson, C. and McCarten, K. (2016) *Real World Research* (4th edn). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Sharp, J. (2012) *Success with your Research Project* (2nd edn). London: Learning Matters/ Sage Publications.

Thomas, G. (2013) *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*. London: Sage Publications.