

Chapter 1

Sorting Out the Basics of a Dissertation

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding out what a dissertation is
- ▶ Discovering the different types of dissertation
- ▶ Sounding out some of the main social science subjects

Chances are you've picked up this book because you're embarking on a dissertation, or similar final-year project. This implies that you've successfully completed previous essays and exams and probably even presentations and portfolios as well. So, you're already a successful student and this book will help you build on your strengths whilst identifying ways to improve how you study.

If you're still quite far off from getting to your final year, thinking about it now is a great start - thorough preparation is going to help you succeed.

A dissertation is just an important sounding name for a long essay – based on your own research. Writing a dissertation is an exciting, challenging, rewarding and often wonderful experience. At the same time it can be exhausting, time-consuming, frustrating and exasperating.

Take heart! In this book I set out to tell you the ins and outs of writing a dissertation and give you all the help you need to make sure your dissertation is a success.

What Is Social Science, Exactly?

Broadly, the social sciences look at the state of society and the people that make up societies. By now you're sure to have

discovered that the social sciences cover an enormously wide range of subjects. Deciding what counts as social science is an ongoing area for debate – a topic that’s great for a dissertation in itself! For clarity in this book I’m going to rely on the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) definition of social sciences. The ESRC is the main government funding council for research in social science in England and Wales and so their ideas have currency. In the section ‘Pinpointing your field of study’ later in the chapter you can find a description of each of the areas the ESRC considers makes up the social sciences.

Here’s a mini A–Z rundown of the main social science disciplines; a refresher course that’s hopefully going to get your dissertation juices flowing. If the subject you’re studying is related to any of the disciplines in the list, with luck the book is going to be spot-on for your dissertation. Throughout this book I use examples from the more commonly studied social science subjects, such as education and sociology, but the ideas apply equally to other sub-disciplines of the social sciences like sociolinguistics, journalism, international relations, criminology and gender studies. These fields usually fall under a broader discipline, so gender studies form part of sociology while international relations constitute part of political science.

Anthropology

Anthropology is the scientific study of human beings and their way of life. The word anthropology comes from the Greek ‘anthropos’, meaning a ‘human being’ or ‘person’. The main research method in the science of anthropology is *ethnography*, which involves collecting raw data through field work and reviewing the data to get the whole picture of the society being studied and linking the data to other areas such as archaeology, biology, linguistics and the humanities.

Economics

The science of economics analyses and describes how wealth is produced, distributed and consumed. Economists use current thinking backed up by data to find ways of balancing people’s economic needs with the way the needs are going to be financed. The word economics comes from the Greek words ‘oikos’, meaning ‘family’ or ‘household’ and ‘nomos’ meaning ‘custom’ or ‘law’. Generally, economics is split into two branches: the study of individual households, companies, industries, and commodities (microeconomics) and the study of economics on a large scale such as national income and international trade (macroeconomics).

Over the last 20 years, the methods and reasoning underpinning economics are being applied to other social issues. For example, the economic principles of cause and effect, which tries to explain how the economy is affecting people's behaviour in areas such as businesses, families and relationships. Economics also takes in green economics, Marxist ideas, socialism, globalisation, institutional economics and economic sociology. Despite the many different areas that economics embraces, the science is above all concerned with getting value for money by way of human effort, or 'labour'.

Education

Education (also called pedagogy) is the science of teaching and learning. Educational science covers both theoretical and applied research and draws on a multitude of disciplines as well as taking into account other factors affecting learning: emotional, social, psychological, philosophical, historical and the physical setting. Hailing from the Latin verb 'educare', to educate meaning 'to draw out' education concerns acquiring knowledge and skills, and nurturing talents and potential abilities to give the individual the opportunity of leading a full life and making a positive contribution to society.

Much educational research is linked to schooling and the development of children and adolescents, but education isn't just confined to these areas. Educationalists claim that prebirth experiences affect education (and educational opportunity) and studies include a cradle-to-grave approach. Informal education through leisure activities is also getting more attention and educational practice, such as testing and examinations, are continually being questioned, evaluated and explored.

Geography (human)

Geography is made up of three sub-disciplines: human geography (people's relationship with the built environment); physical geography (the natural environment); and environmental geography (the interaction between people and their physical environment). Practical applications of geography include urban planning, transportation and studying the built environment. Geographers use a range of data including aerial photography and statistics in their research. Some geographers consider geography as a pure science, which is why you find that physical geography is separated from human geography in some universities.

History

History is more often thought of as being part of the humanities than of the social sciences. In the UK, history research is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The study of history particularly focuses on both continuity and change and mostly considers the development of humanity as continuous, providing a narrative of past events. Postmodernist theory is challenging the idea of continuity, but for most undergraduate dissertations taking the more traditional approach of continuity still holds good.

The main reason for including the study of history in the social sciences is backed up by the research methods being used when researching history, which includes using primary sources, secondary sources and other evidence. Data comes in the form of documents, public records, images, artefacts and personal memoirs.

Law

Law is all about being governed by established legal systems. The law plays an important and significant part in society, which is why the law is so important to social scientists. Taking a broader view, the law is part of international relations and can be more difficult to enforce. International law is more a study of what's ethically acceptable and of finding ways of using legal systems to work for the good of the majority. The study of law links closely with political science, economics and philosophy, blurring the boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences when it comes to deciding which academic discipline law fits into best.

Linguistics

The science of linguistics deals with language and includes both cognitive and social aspects of the use of language. Linguistics is divided into related subdivisions:

- ✓ **Phonetics and phonology:** Deals with pronunciation and speech production.
- ✓ **Neurolinguistics:** Explores the role of the brain in language development, and the processing and storage of language in the brain, the investigation of diseases or abnormalities and recovery from injuries and emotional shock.
- ✓ **Syntax:** Concerns the rules governing sentence structure.
- ✓ **Semantics:** Relates to the meaning of words.

Other social science subjects, such as history and anthropology, include evolution and the origins of language, and psychology looks at emotional and cognitive aspects to understanding and observing human language.

Political science

Political science is the theory and practice of government and politics, which involves exploring and analysing political systems and political behaviour. The study of political science includes international relations and law, foreign policy, comparative politics and studies of superpowers. At national levels political science includes civics, the notion of participation and democracy, political development, public administration and law, justice and public policy.

When studying political science, social science methods are frequently used: surveys, statistical analysis, case studies, and building conceptual models for exploring ideas. Primary sources (historical documents, official records) are used as well as secondary sources, like journal articles and government data.

Psychology (social)

Psychology is the study of the mind and human behaviour and is both a research and an applied discipline. Having knowledge of how people behave is used when treating mental illness and helping people cope with problems occurring in their daily lives. Close links exist between psychology and other fields such as neuroscience, biology and sociology, and specialisms including social psychology, neuropsychology, clinical psychology and educational psychology.

Sociology

Sociologists study the origin, development, structure and functioning of society and are interested in how society is organised, both on micro and macro levels. Sociology is a relatively new academic discipline, only reaching back to the early 19th century. Since then researchers and commentators have created a body of social theory and apply social science research methods to the discipline. Sociology has specialist areas such as: criminology (the study of deviant and criminal behaviour); demography (population studies); gender and race studies and issues to do with socioeconomic status. Sociology provides information about patterns of behaviour across society, influencing policy making.

Social work

Social workers are involved in the public sector, supporting individual people, families, communities and groups and helping people to deal with their social problems. The aim of social work is to make sure that social justice is being applied and to improve the lives of those people less able to make their needs and wishes known. Social workers are committed to enhancing the quality of life for all members of society by applying social theory and research findings to the everyday lives of people at every level of society.

All aspects of social science are included in social work. Social workers build up specialist knowledge from evidence they've collected using social science research methods, such as collecting empirical data through surveys, studying individuals through case-studies and using qualitative information.

Other areas of social science

There are also some other areas of the social sciences that you may like to think about:

- ✓ **Media studies** – involves the analysis of images, sounds and text you get via the media: TV, radio, newspapers and so on.
- ✓ **Development studies** – is about the developing world.
- ✓ **Information science** – looks at systems and methods of storing and retrieving information.
- ✓ **Sociobiology** – attempts to prove that social behaviour has a genetic basis influencing human development.

Pinpointing your field of study

If you didn't come across the subject you're studying in the A-Z list, a useful source for finding your subject is the ESRC website (www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/index.aspx) which describes social science in a way that you may find more helpful than a listing of subjects.

Social science is a wide-ranging discipline. For example, the kinds of jobs that social science students go on to do include teaching, policing, business, social work, health care, local government, urban planning, and many more.

Seeing what makes social science a distinct discipline

Although the social sciences include so many different disciplines what they all have in common is that they address the concerns of society and of people. As a result, many of the disciplines adopt similar theories and research methods. The overlap of disciplines can be subtle or overt.

Your reading and your degree course has likely been helping you make sense of the many subject areas in the social sciences and the theories and research methods that are being used. In Table 1-1 you can see a tiny sample of the kinds of social science questions you may meet but which are frequently presented in different forms. I've also noted some of the related theoretical standpoints and a brief summary of the research area.

Table 1-1 Meeting Social Science Questions

| <i>Question</i> | <i>Theory</i> | <i>Summary</i> |
|---|---|--|
| What is knowledge? | Positivist theory | Pursuing scientific method reveals all true knowledge. |
| How is power constructed? | Conflict theory | Change and order arise from social groups versus individuals struggling to maximise power. |
| What is society? | Cultural pluralism/ multiculturalism | Coexistence of different cultures within the same area. |
| How can we decide what is the right course of action? | Utilitarianism | Decisions based on what is best for the greatest number of people. |



The more you appreciate and are comfortable with the variety of approaches in the social sciences the easier it's going to be for you to excel in your dissertation. How to improve your knowledge? – by reading, thinking and discussing topics thoroughly with others.

In Table 1-1 you see just a fraction of the theories that abound in the social sciences – research is shifting and developing all the time. For example, you may have already come across critical theory; feminist theory; dialectic theory; materialism; rationalism; postmodernism; pragmatism; structuralism, to name but a few.

Researching social science

No matter which aspect of social science you're studying, you're likely to be faced with a range of research methodologies, some more favoured than others. In Table 1-2 you can see some examples of methods of research that you may meet in your reading.

Table 1-2 Examples of Research Methods

| <i>Research Method</i> | <i>Summary</i> |
|------------------------------|---|
| Ethnography | Getting an inside view of a cultural group and trying to understand the group's point of view. |
| Discourse analysis | Evaluating and analysing communication as a way of uncovering and exposing meaning, viewpoints, understanding and change. |
| Semiotics | Studying signs, symbols and sign systems to find out how signs and symbols reflect and represent people and communities (and meaning in general). |
| Hermeneutics (also a theory) | Methods for interpreting texts and examining how the texts link to the interpreter's personal and social context, and so affecting the interpreter's understanding. |

You're sure to come across the words *qualitative* and *quantitative* in connection with social science research. Here are the main differences between the two terms together with a brief description of each term:

- ✓ **Qualitative data** – usually takes the form of words, pictures and objects, and the data can be subjective because the researcher is personally involved in collecting rich data.
- ✓ **Quantitative data** – is numerical data and focuses on classification, statistical models and numerical information that's collected as objectively as possible using research tools.



I've given you a very simple introduction and summary of what social science research involves. You need to read on in this book to get a fuller picture of what social science research involves.

Understanding the Different Types of Dissertation

In social science research, both practical and theoretical considerations are of the utmost importance. In your dissertation, however, you're likely to be taking a practical *or* a theoretical approach. For an undergraduate dissertation, your examiner is going to expect you to choose a largely theoretical or a mainly practical look at your chosen subject. Any useful practical research you carry out requires a sound theoretical basis, and any theoretical study you do needs to link to what's happening in the world around you.

A theoretical study can be mainly abstract with an emphasis on the philosophical, ethical and cultural considerations of the subject, or your subject can be an applied theoretical study with an emphasis on political, social or economic issues, for example. More practical research studies in social science are usually about exploring issues through surveys, action research, observations, case-studies or a review of existing studies.

The type of dissertation you end up writing depends on the topic you're researching. In Table 1-3 I give you a few examples of different ways of approaching a topic just to get you thinking:

Table 1-3 Examples of Practical and Theoretical Approaches to Writing a Dissertation

| <i>Concern</i> | <i>Method</i> | <i>Type of Study</i> |
|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Theory/hypothesis | Analysis | Non-empirical |
| Strategy | Analysis | Non-empirical with examples |
| Issue | Question people | Empirical |
| Type of behaviour | Observation | Empirical |
| Personal viewpoint | Reporting / reflection | Narrative |

Empirical dissertations

An empirical dissertation involves collecting data. For example, to gather the views of patients at a GP's surgery, volunteers in a police service, children in a play centre or translators in a refugee centre, you have to find ways of asking the individuals involved what they think, or review what they're doing. You can collect your data in many ways: from questionnaires and observations to interviews and focus groups. Or, you may prefer to collect your data by taking another approach such as looking at and analysing existing data from new angles, making useful comparisons or drawing interesting parallels.



Even if the focus of your dissertation is on using data, don't forget that you're still going to need a sound theoretical basis for your work.

Non-empirical dissertations

Making the choice to do a non-empirical dissertation shouldn't be taken lightly. Sustaining an argument over the length of your whole dissertation is a distinct challenge. If you enjoy spending time in the library, reading, thinking and discussing theory, this is likely to be the right choice for you. If you know that making the university library your home for weeks on end is going to be difficult, you may be better off choosing a more empirical research question to explore.

Key theories in your discipline such as feminism or pragmatism can be the basis of an abstract discussion in your dissertation. Subjects such as sociology have this type of theory at their centre and so it's perfectly valid, for example, to discuss aspects of the theory of pragmatism as your dissertation topic. A dissertation that draws upon major theories, such as in education, more often takes an applied route, but can also be exclusively theoretical, for example, some work in the philosophy of education.

Narrative dissertations

You're more than likely to choose an empirical or a non-empirical dissertation. However, in other disciplines you may come across different methods of producing a dissertation.

Dissertations in many science subjects include or even focus around a laboratory report describing all the aspects of setting up, carrying out and analysing a complex experiment. In physical geography, time is spent somewhere wild and windswept collecting data needed for analysis. Laboratory work and field trips are a key part of the student experience of writing a dissertation. It's possible you may even use a passage from the classics or biography as an illustration or example in your dissertation.

Reading Other Students' Dissertations

A great way of getting a feel for what you're letting yourself in for by doing your dissertation is to look at some examples of previous students' work. Generally, undergraduate dissertations aren't held in the university library so you may have to ask your supervisor if you wish to look at a few undergraduate dissertations. The best way of going about reading the dissertations is to set aside a couple of hours and give yourself plenty of space to spread out. It's a really good idea to try to compare several dissertations at the same time because this gives you a sense of the range of acceptable formats and also discourages you from trying to read each dissertation from cover to cover – yes, you do have better ways of spending your valuable time.



I want to discourage you from the practice of reading large amounts of other students' work (unless your supervisor has specifically told you that there's a dissertation you simply must read) as you've no guarantee of the quality of the student's work – the dissertation may turn out to be a not very inspiring model.

Checking level and course

If the dissertation you're looking at is an MA dissertation, the format is likely to be similar to your undergraduate work, but the work itself is obviously at a higher level, so don't be overwhelmed or worried about what the MA student has achieved. MA dissertations can sometimes be very intimidating!

When you're sure you're looking at an undergraduate dissertation, take some time to check whether the dissertation is from the same programme as the one you're following. Remember that regulations change over the years, and the accepted format for the dissertation you're looking at may no longer be acceptable. In 'Fathoming the format and layout' there are some questions to ask yourself while you're flicking through the dissertations you've selected.

Fathoming format and layout

A well-laid-out dissertation needs to be clear and easy to navigate around, and be manageable in size and weight. Ask yourself:

- ✔ Is the student's name and/or identity number clearly displayed?
- ✔ Is the title obvious?
- ✔ Is the dissertation properly bound?
- ✔ Are the contents pages, appendixes, chapter headings eye-catching and easy to read?
- ✔ Are the abstract, acknowledgements and introduction in the right order?
- ✔ If the dissertation contains charts and graphs, are the charts and graphs clear, and do they make an effective use of colour?
- ✔ Has the student chosen a suitable font that's easy on the eye?

Considering content and argument

You're not going to have time to read the dissertations right through, but you can get a sense of the content by scanning through the chapter headings and subheadings displayed both on the contents pages and in the dissertation itself. If you can find a dissertation that deals with a topic close to your own, jot down some of the chapter headings to see if this dissertation has any links to your

own subject. (Don't use the dissertation as your one and only guide, however.)

If you see ideas that you can use in your own dissertation, make a note for future reference. At this stage, you're just getting an overall impression of what an undergraduate dissertation looks like, so concentrating on the introductory section or wherever the student introduces his research question is your best bet. Take note of how the most successful research questions are generally rather narrow, or at least firmly focused. With luck, the student has explained how he narrowed down his ideas from a formless idea to a workable question. Compare a few of the dissertation titles to find out which you think works the best.

You also need to take a good look at the research methodologies. If the student carried out an empirical dissertation using data and practical examples, keep a record of any ideas that strike you as particularly effective. If the dissertation is non-empirical and concerns analysis and interpretation of ideas, look at how the student has structured his chapters. For example, do subheadings relate to theorists or specific ideas, or are the subheadings thematic? If there are no subheadings in chapters, how has the student *sign-posted* their reader?

If you can find your way around the dissertation effectively, this is a piece of work that has been well signposted. Don't forget that the examiner is likely to have a pile of dissertations to get through, and the easier the dissertation is structured, the more likely that the examiner is going to be in a good mood when he's marking. From leafing through the dissertations, you should now have a good idea of what really works well. If you have any doubts about your judgement, ask your supervisor to check what you think is great is also something that your supervisor considers to be an appropriate model.

Examples of dissertation titles are thoroughly considered in Chapter 2 when you're invited to get to grips with your research question. Take the opportunity for now of jotting down any good (or awful) dissertation titles while you've got the dissertations in front of you.

Decoding bibliographies

Make sure you spend a little time looking at the bibliographies and references in the different dissertations. The way you have to compile your bibliography is set out in the dissertation guidelines, but it's still worth paying attention to the way that students use underlining, italics, spacing, alignment, capital letters, and so on. As you

compare the different bibliographies, make a note of which are the best set out and easiest to read – these are the models you want to take on board (as long as the model meets your dissertation guidelines, of course).

Also, look through the chapters, examining how students refer to books, journals, websites, reports and other sources in the body of their dissertations. Again, you're given guidelines to work to but it's a valuable exercise to see different referencing styles in practice.

Criticising constructively

Flicking through a dissertation and pulling it apart, picking on all the errors and focusing on what you think you can do better if the dissertation was your work, is all too easy. Of course the student who's written the dissertation is unlikely to be sitting next to you, waiting for feedback, but don't forget that there are likely to be some good bits in the dissertation (failed ones generally don't make it to the library). Before you get too smug, picking on the bits that need improvement, remember that this student has successfully completed the task that you're about to begin, and he's probably acutely aware of all the things that he could have done better!



Don't spend too long on looking over your fellow students' work – what you're aiming to do is come up with some great ideas for your own dissertation and discover a few things you want to avoid. And that's all.