



Your Research Project: A short guide

During your final year of study you are expected to undertake an extended, independent research project. The resulting report you submit is called your dissertation. It is the single most significant piece of assessed work you produce for your degree: it counts for a quarter of your overall mark for your final year. **It has a major influence on your overall degree classification.**

Your finished dissertation will be between 9000 and 12000 words depending on which course you study and at which level. This is about the same as most peer-reviewed journal articles.

Because your research project accounts for a quarter of your grade for your final year it is vital that you do well. To do well you need to think carefully and choose an appropriate research topic and question, design and conduct a project investigating your topic, and then produce a detailed, professional research report.

This guide is designed to help you produce a good dissertation or research report

Working independently means that you are expected to devise, execute and write-up the project yourself. However, you will be working under the supervision of expert staff who will support and guide you. You should maintain regular contact with your tutor. You may find the prospect of completing this assessment daunting, but if you participate fully in tutorials you will be giving yourself every chance of doing well.

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What your dissertation or research report should contain

Your dissertation or research report will consist of a number of chapters - probably between five and seven. There are a number of factors which will influence what chapters you have, how big they are, and what you put in them, but whatever your structure you must include the following:

- An introduction which gives an overview of the issue, problem or topic investigated
- A clearly defined research question
- Critical review of related research
- A description of the research approach and methods you have used
- Analysis and interpretation of the data* you have generated
- Conclusions and recommendations arising from your research

*In social science research, "data" does not just mean numbers and statistics. It also refers to information generated through, for example, interviews or textual analysis.

Structuring your work

Different types of research lend themselves to different types of writing, so the structure of your work should fit the kind of research you are doing. You might be uncertain about structure because you have never written anything this long before, but it need not be a mystery. The work you produce should resemble a journal article. Bear in mind that most published journal articles are 4,000-8,000 words long - and your work will be 9000- 12000 words long. So you should be able to devise an appropriate structure by looking at journal articles involving similar topics and/or methods. Pay attention to this aspect of research you review for your project. Your supervisor will also be able to advise you on structure.

One suggested structure is given overleaf, followed by an example from a dissertation about disability in children's books, but you should only use it if it fits well with the type of project you are doing. Consult your supervisor before committing to a structure.



Chapter 1: Aims & Objectives

- Introduction & Background Briefly introduces your topic and sets the scene.
- Rationale Why this topic is worthy of investigation (academic reasons).
- Your Research Questions and what you aim to achieve by addressing them.
- Outline Signposting – what will be in the rest of the report.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

- Synthesises and critically evaluates published research relevant to yours, and locates your research in relation to that body of work.
- A good project will use this chapter to set out the theoretical framework or key concepts underpinning the research, using them to critique the literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology

- Should explain the reasoning behind your choice of research approach and methods, including research ethics. A key section for your mark. Think about:
- Research Design What methodology you used to develop the design of your study, (e.g. case study) and what kinds of data collection methods you used.
- Why you did it this way and used those methods.
- Ethics: How you ensured your project did not cause harm. Material from your ethics form will form the basis of this but you may well wish to explore further issues regarding disability research in greater depth.

Chapter 4: Analysis

- In this chapter you present and interpret the data you have collected.
- There is considerable flexibility as to how you present this chapter. A thematic approach is generally best.
- Describes the procedures used to analyse the raw data.
- Discusses your findings (i.e. the products of your analysis), relating them to the research, theory and concepts you discussed in your Literature Review .
- Use figures, tables, graphs if you feel they will explain better than words alone - but they must help to tell the story, not be mere decoration.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

- This chapter summarises your findings but more importantly demonstrates what you have learned from doing the project – this is where you show you have reflected.
- Main Findings: state the "take-home" message from your investigation.
- Limitations and Recommendations: in relation to future research, policy and practice.
- Personal Reflection: What went well and why, and what didn't. For things that didn't go well, what could you do differently/better? What have you learned? How did you affect the



research? How did it affect you?

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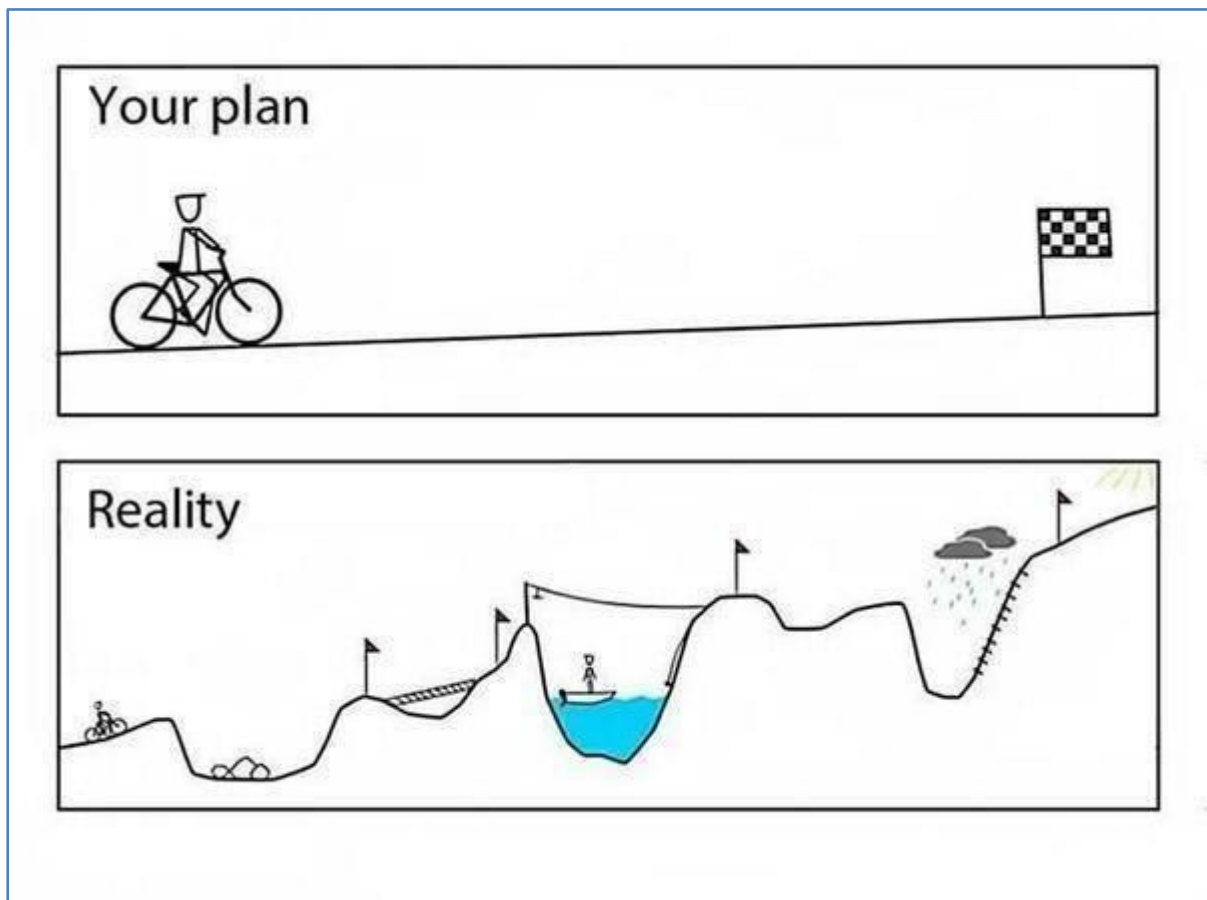
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You and Your Supervisor

Maintaining a good relationship and regular contact with your supervisor are key to doing well. To help you with this, you will have timetabled group sessions at the beginning of the year, with a few more at key points of the second semester. You will also have one-to-one tutorials with your supervisor for bespoke guidance on your project. Working independently does **not** mean going it alone or disappearing without trace for weeks on end; it means taking the initiative and being proactive in arranging and participating in these tutorials.



Practicalities



You need to start working on your project straight away and keep working on it right up until the deadline. You will have many competing priorities and deadlines, as well as unexpected things happening along the way (that's life). So plan accordingly. Set aside time every week to work on your project, and build some leeway into your timeline for completion to help take account of the unexpected. Remember that your dissertation is worth 30 credits, and that equates to 300 hours of study.



FAQ

- **What does the word count include?**

The word count applies to the main body of your text. It starts after your Contents page and stops at the end of your Conclusion. Quotes, whether from other authors or your own research participants, are included. Text in tables (most often used in the Analysis chapter) is not counted, but remember that your data presentation needs to be clear, not cluttered. Having too many words is a more common problem than not having enough. Remember that being precise and concise are hallmarks of good academic writing, and build in plenty time for editing your drafts.

- **What's an abstract?**

An abstract is a 250 word summary of your work. You include it after your title page. It should summarise the whole project. One way to create it is to write a couple of sentences with the key messages from each chapter. As with the overall structure, you could model your abstract on those given in published research - every journal article has an abstract.

- **Do I need an Appendix?**

Yes. You should have an appendix for your completed ethics paperwork. You may also wish to include supplementary material you didn't have room for in the main body, but don't go overboard. For example, you might include a short illustrative example showing the procedures used to analyse your data, rather than the whole dataset.

- **Where can I get help?**

Your...

- Supervisor
- Module Leader
- Handbook
- Library staff
- Academic Skills Tutors
- iLearn
- Study skills guides
- Fellow students

...are all potential sources of help.



Research texts

These texts MAY help you with your research project. How helpful and relevant they are will depend on what kind of research you do. Your supervisor will be able to advise you on specific texts.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education*. 6th Ed. London. Routledge.

Clough, P. and Nutbrown, C. (2007) *A Student's Guide to Methodology*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE

Denscombe, M. (2007) *The Good Research Guide: for small scale social research projects*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Goodley, D. Lawthom, R., Clough, P. & Moore, M. (Eds). (2004). *Researching Life Stories*. London: RoutledgeFalmer

Mertens, D.M. & McLaughlin, J. (2004). *Research and evaluation methods in special education*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin

Moore, M., Beazley, S. and Maelzer, J. (2008). *Researching Disability Issues*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Newby, P. (2014). *Research Methods for Education*. 2nd Edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

O'Leary, Z. (2014). *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project*. 2nd Edition. London: SAGE

Symeonidou, S., & Beauchamp-Pryor, K. (2013). *Purpose, Process and Future Direction of Disability Research*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

Wellington, J. (2000) *Educational research: contemporary issues and practical approaches* London : Continuum

