

Working with your supervisor

Your supervisor can give you expert guidance, but they can't formulate and plan your project for you. They can only work with what you give them – so it is useful to prepare for supervisions and have some idea of what you need help with:

- Have some questions to ask your supervisor: These can be general like “How can I narrow down my question?” or specific such as “Am I interpreting this result correctly?”
- If you are unsure of an idea or approach, don't be afraid to talk it through with your supervisor – that's what they're there for! Just explaining it to someone else can help sort out your own thinking.
- It is easier for supervisors to give advice on a specific piece of work, so bring your research proposal, or chapter draft, to the meetings – your supervisor might not have time to read it all, so highlight places you'd like feedback on.
- Take the advice of your supervisor seriously. You may have a strong idea of what you want to do in your dissertation, but your supervisor has academic experience and often knows what will and won't work.

If you explain your ideas and are polite and enthusiastic, your supervisor can be a great sounding board and source of expert information.

What does your department do...?

In your first meeting with your supervisor, find out about frequency and times of supervisions. Check whether they mind being contacted by email, and if they will be away at any time during your project.

For more information....

See **Dissertations 1. Generating ideas and forming a question**

See **Dissertations 3. Writing up your dissertation**

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Doing the research



Dissertations 2

This guide covers how to go about planning and conducting your research, including advice on:

- Doing your research
- Structuring your research
- Methodology
- Working with your supervisor

Doing your research

- Start small with one main text and build up.
- Once you have an overview, formulate some sub-questions which will help answer your main dissertation question.
- Look for the answers to these questions.
- Do more reading to fill in the gaps.
- Keep thinking, and analysing the relevance of the information as you go along.
- But be aware of your work schedule – you can't read everything, so be selective.

If you are doing qualitative or quantitative experiments start on these as soon as you can. Gathering data takes a lot of time. People are often too busy to participate in interviews or fill out questionnaires and you might

need to find extra participants to make up your sample. Scientific experiments may take longer than you anticipate especially if they require special equipment and learning new methods.

- Design and plan your data collection methods – check them with your supervisor and see if they fit with your methodology.
- Identify and plan for any ethical issues with collecting your data.
- Do a test or pilot questionnaire as soon as possible so you can make changes if necessary.
- Identify your sample size and control groups.
- Have a contingency plan if not everyone is willing to participate.
- Keep good records – number and store any evidence – don't throw anything out until you graduate!

Methodology

Methodology means being aware of the way in which you do something and being able to justify why you did it that way. Each academic discipline has a number of different sets of methods for conducting research.

For example: One method of conducting qualitative research is semi-structured interviews, another method is case studies – each are appropriate for finding different levels and types of information.

The method you choose will be the model for how you go about your research:

- Why is the method you chose the most appropriate way of finding an answer to your research question?
- Are there any other methods you might have used...why didn't you choose them?

Throughout your dissertation be aware of the decisions you make and note them down, explaining why you made them:

- Did you change your plans when you encountered a problem?
- Did you have to adjust sample size, questions, approach?

This awareness of why you did your research in a certain way and your ability to explain and justify these choices is a vital part of your dissertation.

Structuring your research

Dissertations based on qualitative or quantitative research are usually organised as follows:

Abstract
Chapter 1. Introduction
Chapter 2. Literature Review
Chapter 3. Methodology
Chapter 4. Results
Chapter 5. Discussion
Chapter 6. Conclusion
Bibliography & Appendices

Other dissertations may be based around discussions of themes or texts:

Chapter 1. Introduction
Chapter 2. (theme / text 1)
Chapter 3. (theme / text 2)
Chapter 4. (theme / text 3)
Chapter 5. Conclusion
Bibliography & Appendices

This kind of structure often can't be finalised until you've done some research and found out what themes or texts you want to focus on.

It's a good idea to write an overall plan outlining what you need to cover in each chapter. Think of a dissertation like **a series of linked essays**; each chapter is self-contained and has its own purpose, but they all connect together to contribute to the argument of your dissertation.

The chapters don't have to all be the same length – some can be longer because they are more detailed (like the literature review) and others can be shorter because they are summarising and finalising information (like the conclusion).