

Before settling on a question – ask yourself:

- Will it keep me interested for a long period?
- Can I answer it with the time and resources I have?
- Is there someone who can supervise me and can I get on with them?
- Do I have some idea of how to go about answering it?

What does your department do...?

Check what you will have to include in a dissertation proposal. It should contain a clear summary of what, why and how you are going to do your research.

## Presentations

You may be asked to give a presentation on your work in the early stages of your dissertation. Treat this as an opportunity to:

- explain why your chosen topic is interesting;
- show how it fits into the context of your course generally;
- try out your plan for how to tackle the research.

Include some questions to get your audience thinking and to encourage useful feedback. Also see our study guides on giving presentations.

For more information....

See **Dissertations 2. Doing your research.**

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](http://www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice)

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Study Advice and Maths Support

# Generating ideas & forming a question



## Dissertations 1

This guide covers the initial stages of your dissertation. It includes advice on:

- What does a dissertation look like?
- Finding a topic
- Going from a topic to a question

## What does a dissertation look like?

A dissertation is an extended piece of written work which communicates the results of independent research into a topic of your own choice.

At one level all dissertations ask you to do broadly the same things:

- Formulate a clear question that your dissertation seeks to answer
- Review the relevant literature in your field
- Engage in independent thought and research
- Explain and justify whatever methods you use
- Present your findings clearly and demonstrate how they relate to your original question.

What does your department do...?

Have a look at finished dissertations from your department to get an idea of how they look and what they should contain.

## Finding a topic

Finding the topic and question for your dissertation can take longer than you think. You shouldn't feel worried if you don't hit on the ideal topic straight away... you have enough time to be creative and enjoy exploring your subject. At this stage no ideas are barred!

Good sources of ideas are:

- Something you've always wondered about
- Lecture notes and old essays
- Flicking through current journals
- Media / news items
- Things you disagree with
- A hunch that you have...is it true?
- Controversies / new areas in your subject
- Talking with friends



Thinking outside your subject area may also help – are there any current affairs issues or controversies that you can apply your subject to?

It's never too early to start thinking of ideas. Keep them in one place - **start an ideas book or a box file** to keep any notes or articles you find that might be useful.

### What does your department do...?

At this early stage, find out the word length and deadline for your dissertation – note them down somewhere obvious – this will influence the size of project you undertake.

## Going from a topic to a question

A dissertation question is not the same as a topic...it has to be phrased so that it can be answered in a specific and focused way. There are various ways that you can get from your topic to a question:

- Do some reading around your topic – are there any gaps in current research that could provide a question?  
If you usually write too much – think smaller →◀ focus on one narrow aspect of your topic.  
If you usually don't write enough – think bigger ◀ → link some related areas of your topic together.
- Think of two factors that might influence your topic – could they be put together to make a question?  
e.g. Topic = representation of women in the media
  - ➔ Factor 1 = TV advertising
  - ➔ Factor 2 = Women's perception of their bodiesQuestion: Does the depiction of women in TV advertising influence women's perceptions of their bodies?
- Keep asking yourself “what in particular about this do I want to study?” until you get down to a question.  
e.g. Subject = sociology
  - ↓ Topic of interest = retired people
  - ↓ More specifically = retired people in care
  - ↓ Especially = retired people in residential care
  - ↓ Precisely = retired people in warden-controlled residential care homesQuestion: What do retired people think of the service they get in warden-controlled residential care homes?

Remember **your initial question isn't set in stone** at this stage – it can be modified over the course of your project to suit what you end up investigating.

It is a good idea before you make any final decisions to discuss your choice of question with your supervisor, as they will have the academic experience to know what kinds of questions will be manageable, and which will need more refining.