Aim of this factsheet

To provide an overview of why and how dissertations are written: these need to be both professionally and academically presented.

Please use in conjunction with the additional software support on heading styles, headers and footnotes, page numbers, graphic captions and contents pages.

Difference between reports and dissertations

You may have developed your report writing skills in previous years; if not, please refer to our Report Writing resources. The good news is that the format and presentation is almost identical, but you may have additional sections.

A report is usually an end of module assignment with very clear guidelines from your Tutor. A Dissertation is usually submitted for assessment at the end of your programme of study.

Features of dissertations, final year projects and extended reports:

- undertaken in your final year of undergraduate study, or in postgraduate education
- is linked to both current theory and practice
- you will have more choice on the topic and methodology; you will also decide on the aims and objectives of your study
- you will be required to undertake more independent research into subjects which may not have been taught or may have been covered in a range of modules throughout your programme of study
- the word count is usually much higher than for a standard report
- often requires a Project Proposal to gain approval for your key concepts before you start.

Example of different types of dissertation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Type of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theory/hypothesis</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Non-empirical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Non-empirical with examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Question people</td>
<td>Empirical (requires data collection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of behaviour</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Empirical (requires data collection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal viewpoint</td>
<td>Reporting / reflection</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why write dissertations?

Dissertations usually contain sections of writing to record the methodology, results and conclusions of an investigation. They are used to enable your lecturer to assess the way you have approached your investigation, collected your data and evaluated your results.

Dissertations demonstrate skills in: planning, organising, researching, problem solving and time management as well as oral and written communication skills. They also demonstrate in-depth subject knowledge.

Format of dissertations:

✓ Written using formal academic language
✓ Headings and sub-headings should be used
✓ Bullet points or numbers can be used to list points
✓ Written to be discussed by more than one person
✓ Show vigour in research
✓ Drawings, graphs and statistics can be included within the main body to save complicated discussion but should not be used instead of explanatory text. Additional raw data and other materials can be added as appendices where appropriate.

Sections of a dissertation:

Dissertations can be written in a variety of ways depending on your subject area, and whether you have undertaken primary or secondary research. However, the sections below are a general indication of what sections need to be included.

1. Title page
2. Abstract
3. Contents
4. Introduction
5. Aims and Objectives
6. Literature Review
7. Research Methodology
8. Ethical Issues
9. Results/Findings
10. Discussion/Analysis
11. Recommendations (if requested)
12. References
13. Appendices

PLEASE CHECK YOUR ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES
1. The Title Page

The title should provide a clear indication of what the dissertation is about: it should be accurate and concise. The title page should also include the date the report was written, who wrote the report (student number only) and who the report was for (module code).

2. Abstract (also known as Summary)

This is a summary of the whole report’s contents. Readers may decide whether to read the whole report based on the abstract and therefore it should be sufficient for them to understand what the report is about, including the results of the investigation.

The abstract is written after the rest of the report even though it is presented at the beginning. It should describe the work that has been carried out, not the work that will be carried out.

3 Contents

A list of contents is required and should be correctly formatted. See Student IT support on Managing Longer Pieces of Work.

4. Introduction

This gives the background to the investigation. It puts your investigation into context and gives the reader some idea of the value and importance of your work. It tells the reader why this is an important subject to investigate.

5. Aims and Objectives

You should have a clear statement about the purpose of your study (aim) and how you are going to achieve those aims (objectives). State what you are trying to achieve and how you will achieve it. This is a crucial part of the report as it will be judged on whether your aims and objectives have been achieved: ensure you are clear about the difference between these.

6. Literature Review

This informs the reader of the current thinking in your specific topic. It will place your research in context and show how you are building upon previous knowledge. This should also highlight any areas of contention. Ensure you cite your sources of information within the text and add an accurate reference list at the end of your work.

7. Research Methodologies

This section is important because if you undertake inappropriate methodology your results and findings will be disputed. The reader needs to know what you did to find out information so they can make a judgement about the suitability of your methodology.

In this section, you state what you have done to achieve your aims, what you did to find information you need and why you did it.
The methodology section can be sub-divided into the following sub-sections:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Include</th>
<th>What is it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Paradigm</strong>&lt;br&gt;(type of research)</td>
<td>A short section (one or two sentences) in which you make a clear and accurate statement outlining what sort of investigation you used. Justify your statements by referencing to best practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Sample Strategy**<br>(if used) | You should provide a brief description of who you used in your sample and why. The information should include the essential features of any respondents used.  
✓ Who were the subjects of the study?  
✓ How were they selected?  
✓ How many were there?  
Justify your decisions by referencing back to best practice. |
| **Materials/Apparatus**<br>(if necessary) | What sort of materials were used? For example, experimental stimuli, tests, questionnaires. If using established tests or materials, these should be fully referenced. Any apparatus used should be described accurately (you could use diagrams or photographs). |
| **Procedure** | This should be a description of exactly how you carried out the investigation: what exactly happened during the investigation, from start to finish in enough detail to allow replication. Remember to use the passive voice (third person), past tense; for example: “The questionnaire was given to all 1st year students.” “The responses to each question were recorded using simple tally charts”.  
The procedure does not have to take the form of an experiment; some reports document the findings of desk-based research and extended literature reviews. |
| **Method of Analysis** | As your analysis is part of what you did, you should include a statement of what methods of analysis were used and why they were chosen (do not panic if the methodology section becomes long – it is quite normal for this section to sometimes be the longest section of the report). |
8. Ethical Issues

All dissertations and investigations should consider ethical issues. You are expected to complete a Staffordshire University Ethical Approval form and have this signed off by your tutor. This should be included as an appendix. In your report you should make the reader aware of the possible ethical issues of your research and how you overcame these issues, for example: confidentiality, storage of data and so on.

9. Results/Findings (sometimes this section can be merged with Discussion and Analysis)

It tells the reader what you have found out and is objective. It states the findings of your research. You may include tables and graphs, but also explain the results in words. Any raw data should be included as an appendix.

10. Discussion/Analysis

This covers the interpretation of the results, evaluation of the theoretical significance of the findings and a general discussion of the investigation. It should answer questions such as:

• What has your investigation shown?
• Did it achieve its objectives?
• What theory/literature does it support or contradict?
• What are the most plausible explanations of your findings?
• Are there any possible criticisms of the investigation?

The discussion should also:

• Build on the material in the introduction and literature review
• Evaluate the adequacy of your methodology
• Suggest design features that may have affected the results
• Include whether the results would be different under different conditions

11. Recommendations

Use your findings and analysis to make recommendations. You may recommend that further investigation is undertaken if you realise that there were gaps in your methodology or anomalies in your findings. Alternatively, you may advise that some actions be considered.

12. References

Make sure references are given correctly. See Staffordshire University Refzone for more information.

13. Appendices (content usually not included in the word count)

Do not put results here: only the raw data should be presented in an Appendix. Some other materials may be usefully included in an Appendix (for example, blank questionnaires, copy of written tests used). Remember not to include anything in an appendix that has not been referred to in the text.
Remember
This factsheet provides guidance on how dissertations can be structured. However, your module may have specific requirements. If so, use the information on this factsheet and adapt it to ensure your work meets the marking criteria.

Assistive technology tools
These can help you to improve your work and further develop your academic skills. When planning you may consider:

- MindGenius (available on student PCs) – this mind mapping software can help you to capture ideas, work out a structure for an assignment or represent information in a visual format, which may particularly help you with revision.

For more information on assistive technologies go to our guidance page.

References and further reading

For an appointment or further advice:
Click: Academic Skills Online Resources
Call: 01785 353500
Email: academicskills@staffs.ac.uk
Visit: Skills Space, Thompson Library, Stoke / Blackheath Lane, Stafford / Shrewsbury Hospital

Please note that any information provided by the team is advisory only. No liability will be attached to the University, its employees or agents for any loss or detriment suffered by a student relying on the advice given.