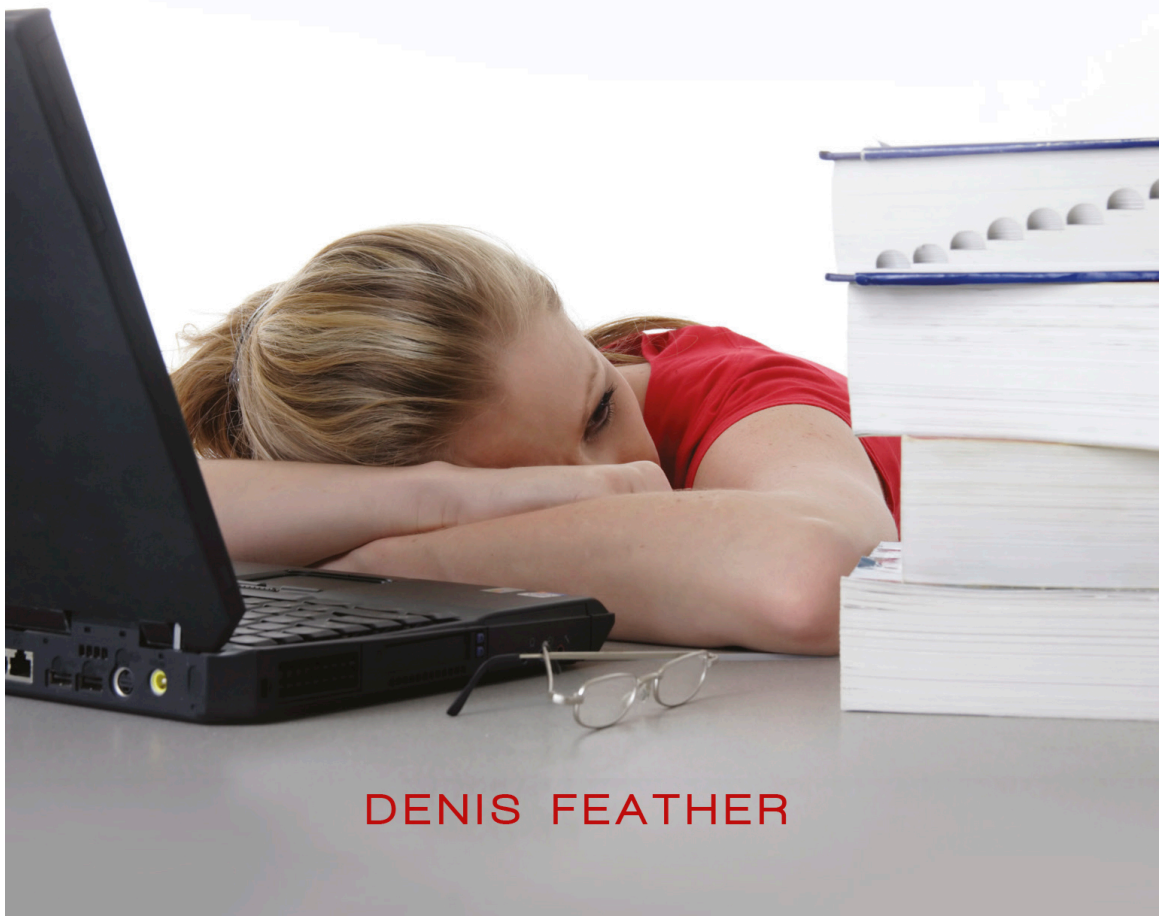


from
PROPOSAL
to
THESIS

WRITING AN UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION

REVISED EDITION



DENIS FEATHER

From proposal to thesis

WRITING AN UNDERGRADUATE
DISSERTATION

Revised edition

Denis Feather



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by White & MacLean Publishing

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List of Acronyms

CRM	customer relationship marketing
EOI	examination, observation, and interview
FE	further education
FGM	focus group member
HE	higher education

Introduction

I hope that this book will guide you through the process of preparing and writing your thesis – the DOs and DON'Ts if you like. What I have written in this book is based on my experience of supervising students at all levels of study over the last decade. However, you must (in all instances) check that you are complying with your awarding institution's policies, procedures, and guidelines for the undertaking, writing, and submission of the dissertation. The purpose of this book is to walk you through some of the processes that need to be undertaken when writing an undergraduate dissertation.

I work in a business school within a university in the UK, but the route towards achieving a dissertation in other subjects is no different.

The language, style, and formatting discussed in this book is very similar to the style required by the majority of universities, colleges and other institutions. However, once again, you need to cross-reference with the guidelines provided by your own institution, as I am aware that some institutions may have changed the way their dissertation is presented and the referencing style used. You may find the language I have used to be very formal on occasions. This has been done with good reason: to show you what your institution expects from you.

Finally, in this book I use contractions (e.g. don't, I'll, won't, and so on); I do this to keep the language interesting to the reader. However, you must not use contractions in your own academic

writing, as your supervisor and second marker may frown upon this style of writing.

I hope you find this book useful.

Dr Denis Feather
The Business School
University of Huddersfield
December 2014

Chapter 1: Introduction to the dissertation

What is a dissertation?

When you first receive the written or oral instruction that you have to undertake a dissertation, your first thoughts might be ‘I’ve got to do what?’ However, of all the work that you have undertaken during your time at university, this piece is the most demanding, the most exciting, and the most important.

It is the most demanding because you will need to put a lot of effort, work, time, and emotion into its preparation and construction. It is the most exciting because it allows you to show off all that you have learnt over the last three or four years of study, and because you get to pick the subject or topic you wish to research, rather than having the subject set for you. Finally, it is the most important, because it could influence the overall grade of your degree. Remember, dissertations can be weighted as a 40-credit module (or more, depending on your institution and its policies) and as such could be equal to two 20-credit modules.

What is the purpose of the dissertation?

This is a question that I am often asked by students; I am also asked whether it has any value. The answer to the second question is easy: yes, it does have value. Why does it have value? Primarily, because it is a unique piece of work, over which you have both ownership and control. Most of my students, when I

inform them of this, are surprised and display a degree of angst, so much so that, in fact, some often have difficulty coming up with an idea and subject on which to conduct research. Don't worry if this is where you feel you are now. It is, from my years of supervising and listening, and I mean *really* listening to my students, that I wrote this book to help guide you through the process of producing a research proposal and quality dissertation that you can be proud of. Your dissertation has additional value, in that it evidences to potential future employers that you have the ability and skills to undertake a research project, and manage it efficiently and effectively through to completion.

The dissertation has a number of purposes. From the university's perspective, the purpose of the dissertation is a means of assessing your learning, skills, and abilities: for example, to not only read and write well but to also undertake research and follow instructions. As the saying goes, 'the devil is in the detail', and it is often here (the policies, processes, format, level of reading needed to be undertaken, time, layout, presentation, proof-reading, and many other aspects that this book covers), where students tend to falter and lose marks. For example, during a discussion I had with a friend and colleague about dissertations and what he looks for, he said that he hates it when students do not conclude their thesis well; in other words, when the conclusions do not link to the research, he marks dissertations down for this poor attention to detail. I will cover this point in more detail later in the book. Nevertheless, it is these factors of assessment and criteria that you need to nail down, if you are to do well. Try to get into good research habits from the start.

To this end, the rest of this chapter sets the scene for the development of the thesis as a whole. It outlines the processes that you will be going through, and what it is you need to attend to throughout the dissertation journey. Keep in mind that each chapter in the thesis should be written in an academic report format; that is, with numbered headings and sub-headings.

Headings and sub-headings in the first chapter

Below you will find the headings you need to include in the first chapter of your dissertation:

- Title
- Introduction to the study
- Background
- Research question
- Aim and objectives
- Rationale for the study
- Précis of the following chapters

Let's discuss these in a little more detail.

Title

The first thing you will need to come up with is a workable title for your proposed study. This is probably one of the most difficult tasks you will ever be asked to do (Quinlan, 2011), primarily because in the past the titles for your assignments have been provided for you. However, here you will really need to put your thinking cap on, and reflect upon those areas that interest you. A good place to start is to list the areas of interest you have at home (for example, music, sport, films, fashion, computers, gaming, or whatever) for which you have a real passion. By this, I mean those hobbies or interests about which you collect material, artefacts, or information. I usually suggest to my students to select five different areas of interest, and then to consider how they can apply the different concepts and theories of their studied subject to these interests. Why do I do

this? It's simple. If your first idea bears no fruit, then you can revert to your second idea; in strategic management, this is what is often referred to as 'contingency planning'. This is apt here because you are thinking strategically about how you can undertake research on something that is of interest to you, and to your potential readership.

To provide you with a couple of examples, one of my business students was really interested in fishing and competed within the sport, but felt that it was viewed as an 'old man's sport'. To this end, he was looking at the perceptions of fishing as a sport, and how media could be used to change its image. Another student was very passionate about advertising and wished to look at how new media might be affecting advertising via traditional streams, such as television.

Whatever your title is, it needs to be short and to the point. Remember, this is only a working title, and will not become solid until you hand in your dissertation (see Chapter 3).

Introduction to the study

Here you should be identifying what it is you are wishing to study and why. In this section, there will be some repetitiveness, but do not be too concerned as you can tighten it up later. The main point is to get your ideas down on paper. Here you should have two or three sentences identifying the study and what it is you intend to address; in other words, the problem or question you wish to explore.

Background

This is like a mini literature review, and looks at the current thinking on the subject or topic you are interested in researching. In reality, this should be no more than 300-500

words in length as it is only the background – you will expand upon this in the literature review chapter.

Research question

It is important that you identify what your research question is, as this will then enable you to offer a tight aim and relevant objectives. Where does the research question come from? Well, it starts with an idea. The idea can come from reading around something you are interested in, an observation, or via conversations with your friends. As Roberts (2010: p.136) writes: “A question well stated is a question half answered.” To this end the research question should be succinct and to the point. I often ask my students to write their research question in 35 words or less. Remember what I wrote earlier: there is likely to be some overlap and possible repetition; this is expected.

If you are undertaking a quantitative study, you may instead develop a set of hypotheses you wish to test. However, although most authors on thesis writing infer that you have either a research question or hypotheses, I would suggest writing a research question, as this will enable you to keep focused on what it is you are endeavouring to understand. Roberts (2010) suggests that the research question becomes the ‘purpose statement’ in a quantitative study, and that it tends to be generic, whereas the hypotheses are built around this purpose statement. The two approaches could be worded as either:

- ‘This study aims to understand what is meant by the term “Academic Identity”... ’ (qualitative and mixed-method approach).

or

- ‘The purpose of this study is to determine what variables influence the definition of the term “Academic Identity” using a number of hypotheses.’

On hypotheses, Buckingham and Saunders (2004: p.4) write:

Hypotheses are statements about what our theoretical propositions lead us to expect to find. They enable theories to be tested by predicting patterns of observations that should occur. Hypotheses therefore predict patterns of association in observed data as a means for testing causal theories.

The point here is that you need to be clear in what it is you are wishing to understand, and how you are going to strategically bring about a successful conclusion to your findings via the use of different research philosophies, research paradigms, and research data collection methods.

Aim and objectives

The aim of the study is to rework your research topic/question so that it focuses more on what it is you are trying to understand (as a norm, this usually comes from your research title). It is usually stretched out into a sentence or two; for example: 'The aim of this study is to consider the effects of new media advertising on traditional media, such as television. This will be considered from the customers'/viewers' perspective.' See further information on this in Chapter 3.

The objectives should be drawn up to address any gaps or questions you have identified from your literature review (see Chapter 4) and in relation to your subject/topic goal. Five objectives are the norm; in Chapter 3 I have provided action words that you should use when writing your objectives.

When writing objectives you should be remembering the acronym of SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely (Robson, 2002; Saunders et al., 2007; Oliver, 2010; Quinlan, 2011). Initially focus on 'Specific' and 'Measurable', and then 'Achievable' followed by 'Timely'. Specific is the most important because objectives need to be short and to the point. Lastly, they should be 'Realistic'. This means that you can

achieve them and as such, they are not too ambitious. I would change this acronym to SMARTS, the last 'S' standing for 'Stretching'. The objectives should stretch you so that you learn, but not overstretch you so that you cannot accomplish the task because the objectives become unrealistic and you cannot meet your goal. Remember, at undergraduate level, you are not trying to reinvent the wheel, but you do want to offer research that can be added to the pot of knowledge in your subject.

Some universities are now encouraging their undergraduate students to publish from their dissertation work. You will need to check with your own institution if this is the case. But if they do, and your work is of a standard, I would strongly recommend that you consider this, as it will offer you a further competitive advantage when you come to look to securing a full-time position in the career of your choice, or if you wish to study further.

Rationale for the study

This is relatively easy to produce and comprises of answering four basic questions:

1. Why are you undertaking this research?
2. What is the new knowledge that you will bring to the table?
3. What is the motivation behind you undertaking this study?
4. Who do you think will be interested in reading your research and its findings?

The answers to these four bullet points should be no more than one sentence in length; I have seen pages written on this, and it really is not necessary.

All the above should also appear in your proposal, most of which will then be incorporated, rephrased and expanded upon in your main thesis. If you do take a direct lift from your

proposal to include in your dissertation, do not forget to '**self reference**'; you do not wish to be suspected of 'self-plagiarising'. You will need to look at the referencing pack and policy on academic integrity provided by your institution on how to self reference and subsequently how to avoid being brought up for the lack of academic integrity. With the current rise in the practice of plagiarism, academics and universities are now bringing into force more stringent penalties. So my advice is don't do it; it really isn't worth it.

Précis of the following chapters

This is where the first chapter in your dissertation changes from your proposal. At this point, you will offer a quick overview or précis of what the following chapters will be covering. For example:

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Here I will discuss the different concepts and theories I identified in my dissertation proposal, and will compare, contrast, and critique different authors' viewpoints on these concepts/theories.

Chapter 3: Methodology: Here I will outline the philosophies and methods I have employed in order to conduct the research that answers the aim and objectives of the study. It can be seen that I adopted a mixed-method approach to my research and a mixed-paradigm approach using interpretivism and positivism – interpretivism being the dominant philosophy as I wished to gain people's perceptions of how they saw new media impacting on the future of television advertising.

Chapter 4: Findings/results

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

This then concludes Chapter 1 of the thesis. Remember this chapter sets the scene for the following chapters and for your study. Do not forget to keep signposting back to this chapter (when relevant) to aid the reader in their understanding of what it is you are trying to accomplish with your work. Further, in Chapter 3, it might be prudent to present your aim and objectives once more, as it will have been some time since your reader first became aware of them in Chapter 1.

Now let's look at some of the processes that you need to keep in mind when writing your dissertation and its subsequent chapters. You may need to refer back to these from time to time, to ensure you are not drifting from the task you are currently working on.

Length of the dissertation

The standard length of an undergraduate dissertation is usually between 12,000 and 15,000 words. **'Oh my God!'** I hear you cry. Try not to think about the word count; instead, focus on the quality of your written work. Again, I hear you say, 'Easy for you to say'. That's fine. Instead, try to think of it as six assignments, each comprising of 2,000-2,500 words. Breaking it down into manageable chunks like this will make the task more achievable. However, not all chapters will be the same length; some chapters will be shorter than others and it is the total word count that matters. Where chapters (such as Chapter 1) might be shorter, the words you do not use there can be employed elsewhere, thus allowing you to drill deeper on a particular discussion.

What your institution requires

As I identified earlier, you will also need to familiarise yourself thoroughly with your institution's dissertation guidelines. Why

do I write this? Simply, it is so that you can start preparing the format of your dissertation in advance, and to familiarise yourself with the processes that they wish you to comply with. You should have been given these guidelines by the module leader for the dissertation, or by your supervisor. If you do not have them, ask for them; you need this important documentation to enable you to undertake the task. Also, ensure that you also have a copy of the marking criteria (if it is not included in the module booklet) as you need to know the standard and expectations that your institution is requiring you write to, and comply with. The last thing you want is to get to the end of the journey and find out that there is a section of the marking criteria where you have not obtained a grade, thus losing valuable points. You should be constantly referring back to these criteria throughout your time in writing up both your proposal and your dissertation.

Order of writing

The next thing you need to plan is the order of the writing you will have to undertake. I have provided you with the chapter order (see above), but it is unlikely you will write the chapters in this order.

The first thing to write is the 'research proposal'. In most institutions, this will be assessed and graded before you are allowed to start on the dissertation proper. Other institutions may not bother with a proposal. In either case, I think a proposal is essential. The proposal gives you the opportunity to test your idea, and provides your supervisor with a valuable insight to your capabilities, skills, and level of writing, and if any are found wanting, they can then recommend training programmes for you to attend. As such, the proposal is the plan of what you intend to research and why. It will help you clarify in your own mind exactly what it is you are trying to achieve.

Literature review

The literature review is the next piece of writing (and, to be truthful, is part of the first piece of writing) as it is from the literature that you read that you will acquire your ideas. Additionally, you will need to write a small review in your proposal that covers at least one theory or concept (as you cannot cover them all there), which, again, evidences the depth of reading you are currently working to, and will help your supervisor identify if you need to widen your reading.

When writing the literature review for the proposal, I suggest to students to commence with an introductory sentence that goes something like this:

For the purpose of the proposal, it is obvious that a full literature review cannot be undertaken. However, the concepts and theories one intends to cover in the main thesis are academic identity, professionalism, scholarship, identity, culture, and marketisation. From these concepts and theories, the subject of academic identity will be used to offer the reader a brief overview of what this concept is and how different authors suggest different views on this subject.

Today (and from my own experiences), students tend to look to the Internet for the information they require. This practice will not be sufficient to get you the depth of knowledge you need: you will need to read books and journal articles (which I cover in later chapters) in order to gain this knowledge. Many students use Wikipedia; this is poor practice and many institutions will not accept Wikipedia as an academically acceptable reference source. Of course, you can use this tool to give you an insight, but look to sources that are more credible when formulating your discussions and supporting the evidence you put forward. I for one (and I know from talking with other lecturers that they do too) start to question the strength of an argument in a student's work when they use this site to support their discussions.

Another trend I have noticed recently is the use of dictionaries creeping into the main body of text and in the bibliography. Although these are more credible than Wikipedia, they should not be really used as a principal reference within the main text at this level of study. One would expect this of A-level students, but not final-year students on a degree programme. When endeavouring to define something, look first to the textbooks, better still the journal articles, as it is here that you will obtain contemporary views, which will give you the opportunity to possibly critique a point. Remember I said that this assessment is probably one of the most important you will have to undertake in your time at university, therefore do not adopt a poor work ethos now. You have worked hard to get to this point.

Questionnaire

The next piece of writing you will undertake will be to develop your questionnaire or interview schedule, depending on whether the stance you are taking is quantitative or qualitative. If you are applying a mixed-method approach, you may have to develop both. The development and piloting of questionnaires are covered in Chapter 5 on methodology. However, it is advisable to study some questionnaires to get ideas about question formats and layout. Most students today tend to use an electronic questionnaire, which I would recommend, as the hard work is done for you: all you have to do is type the question and identify what type of question you wish to pose, that is, open-ended or closed questions, Likert scales, opinion questions, etc. You can also now add different themes to your questionnaire to make it more appealing to the respondent. Some useful sites to try are Google Docs, Toluna QuickSurveys, KwikSurveys, and there are many more. However, be careful, as some sites have a charge, or a limitation on how many you can send out, or have returned.

Remember, your supervisor may have to sign off your questionnaire before you can make it live and send it out to your target audience. There could be two reasons for this. One, you are seen as an ambassador of your university, so the university's reputation could come into disrepute if you send out a poor questionnaire that is not well thought through. Two, your university might have a research ethics form that you have to complete. This is where you may have to fill out sections and then sign the document to say you have, and intend to, comply with research ethical guidelines set by your university and/or professional body. A recommended book, seen by many academics as a must-read, is Oppenheim's book *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*; it is a heavy read, but invaluable in its insights.

Writing up the methodology

You can also commence writing up your methodology, once your proposal has been graded and approved and whilst working on other chapters. At this point you cannot write up the findings and results chapter, as you will not have your data collected yet. This means that the remaining chapters, Chapters 5 and 6, cannot be written at this time. Therefore, it is important that you start collecting your primary data as soon as practicably possible – and that means three to four months before the hand-in date.

Finally, the dissertation is your responsibility and ownership is yours. I can guide you if you let me, but I cannot make you sit down to read or write. If you are serious about obtaining a good grade, and wish to succeed, you will do this. However, you need to want this badly enough. The same goes for your supervisor: if you do not visit them, and obtain formative feedback on drafts, they cannot be held responsible. **You** are the driver of this, not your supervisor.

Your 30-second recap

I've provided you with an overview of what a dissertation is, its purpose, and what you need to accomplish in order to give yourself a chance at success.

I've introduced you to what must be present in the first chapter of your dissertation and provided you with key headings, under which all you need to do is write your research story.

I've indicated the importance of reading relevant and credible material in relation to your research idea. Reading has become a dirty word to some students, but it is the only way you are going to gain the knowledge you need to enable you to understand, which you then can apply to the problem at hand.