

Dissertation: Choosing a topic

This document seeks to explain in simple terms how you go about developing and choosing a specific, original and academically rigorous topic for a dissertation. This document is a generic, non-subject specific series of explanations; readers should bear in mind that there are subtle differences in each subject discipline. Your tutor is the subject specific expert in academic writing to whom ultimately you should defer. An indicative example is given below to highlight the importance of having a specific topic. This enables you to produce a dissertation which is original and has new research within it: and it is this that distinguishes a dissertation from an essay. The example should not be taken literally. To use the guide appropriately you will need to consider how you apply the below to your topic or subject discipline. If you have any doubts you should book a 1 to 1 with an Academic Skills Advisor at the 'Ask' desk in the University Library.

Specificity and Originality

A dissertation should avoid topic areas which are too broad; rather a dissertation should focus upon a gap in the literature: something which is under researched and has little written about it. Frequently students choose areas which are too broad and cannot be reasonably completed within their timeframe and word limit. The examples below are given to provide some generic guidance to avoid questions or topics which are not feasible for dissertations.

Some examples of bad titles

Here are some dissertations titles, all of which are too broad to be feasible. Though they might sound like the title of a textbook these are not the same as a good dissertation title.

- 'Unemployment and Poverty in the UK'
- 'Special Educational Needs in Secondary Schools'
- 'Representations of Disability in the Media in the Twentieth Century'

All three have a broad topic area but none are specific enough as the literature on this topic would be too large. You could never read this literature in the time allotted let alone produce a decent set of research questions or a workable literature review. Taking the last title as an example (*'Representations of Disability in the Media in the Twentieth Century'*) it is important to consider why this is an unfeasible topic.

Developing your topic focus

The dissertation title has two topic areas; disability and media which are both too broad and over too long a time frame; an entire century. These huge variables have to be narrowed further; in this example another topic area is added to narrow the focus. This may seem counter intuitive but three subjects have a narrower area of overlap than two (as indicated by the number 1 in a box below).

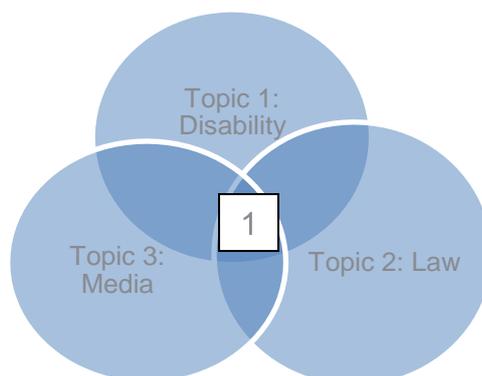


Figure 1: Disability, Media and the Law

Note the provisional research might look at where all three areas overlap, rather than disability, media and law as general subjects. For example; media related law, disability legislation and discussions of disability in the media would form three of the areas of overlap. The last area of overlap would be where all three of these topics converge, indicated by the number 1 in the box. This should be the focus of the dissertation as a whole, however currently it represents the entire literature review. The problem with the above is that it is still too broad: it could be narrowed further, as below in Figure 2.

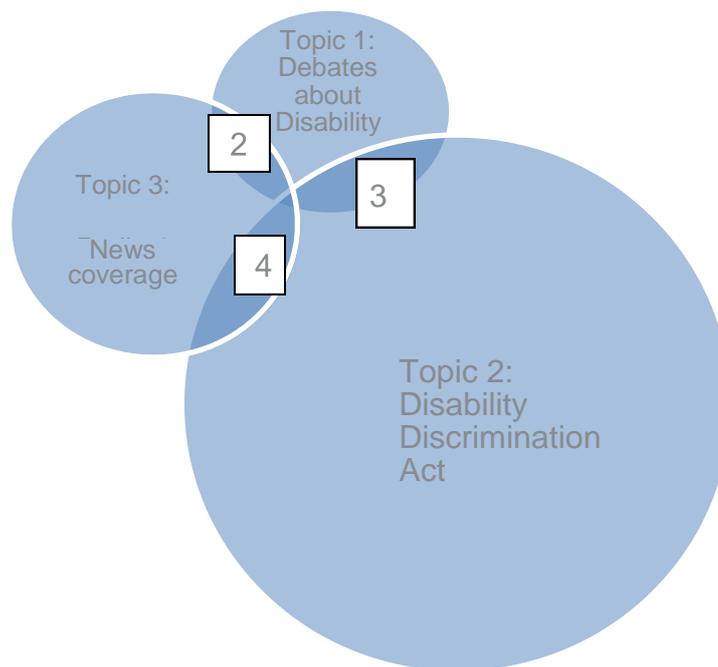


Figure 2: Radio 4 News Coverage, Debates about Disability and the Disability Discrimination Act.

The above Venn diagram shows how this topic has been narrowed further: a particular form of media, radio, was selected, and then a particular radio station which provides a further and tighter focus. 'Law' was narrowed down further to a particular Act related to disability. 'Disability' was narrowed to parliamentary debates on disability. The narrowing of the time frame is not represented in Figure 2, however it is implied to be the period in which the Disability Discrimination Bill was debated in Parliament before its passing into law and becoming an Act of Parliament. The area numbered 1, as indicated in the Figure 1, is now correspondingly much smaller and manageable as a focus for a dissertation topic. The literature review now focuses on key relevant texts from the numbered areas 2, 3 and 4: it does not need to cover every text from all three circled topic areas.

An example of a good title

The title of this dissertation therefore might become 'BBC Radio 4 News coverage of Parliamentary discussions of the Disability Discrimination Act'. As the dissertation is now so tightly focused there should be little previous literature on this specific gap: thus highlighting a gap in the literature suitable for a dissertation. However, there should be enough literature around this topic to provide context and material for discussion within a literature review.

The example above, it is hoped, highlights that the more specific something is the easier it is to be original. It will also be easier to write your literature review because there will be less to read and it will be of more relevance to the focus of the dissertation. This will make it easier to be critical and analytical. The example highlights the need to create a strategy for focusing your research to make it as original as possible: remember the purpose of a dissertation is to engage in original research.