

Dissertation: Choosing a topic

This guide offers some general advice on selecting your area of focus for a dissertation and coming up with a good title. A good title indicates a clearly defined research project that is workable within the limits of a dissertation.

The type of dissertation you produce will vary widely with level and discipline, and it is of course your tutor or supervisor who will provide subject specific information and advice. The below guide is designed to help you start thinking about what matters when it comes to choosing your topic.

What do I need to consider when picking a topic?

Originality, Specificity and Breadth

While it is good to be ambitious, the most common pitfall of picking a dissertation topic is coming up with an area that is far too broad.

A dissertation (even a PhD thesis) is not a great work that can include everything you have ever been interested in about your subject, but rather a clearly defined research project that must be completed within a word count and the time constraints given.

In many cases, a topic is selected after a preliminary literature review is undertaken. This allows you, the researcher, to see the bigger picture (or 'research context') and identify where the gaps are, so you might make a new and original contribution to an area that is under-researched, or which poses interesting questions and problems. Of what kind this contribution is will differ from subject to subject, so talk to your tutors about what the expectations are if you are unsure.

Some general considerations are outlined below.

Feasibility: Being realistic and practical

Make sure you understand the formal requirements and learning outcomes for your dissertation.

Consider the practicalities:

- What is the word count?
- What is the timeframe and when is the deadline? How does this fit with any other commitments?
- What equipment will you need and what resources are available to you?

If you can, look at some examples to see what scope is expected on your course. Be prepared to change your initial ideas, and whittle them down to a well-honed research question or topic that allows you to succeed by examining your topic in sufficient depth. You will often find that you can ‘hang’ your bigger and more ambitious ideas on a more precise and specific topic. You may even see new and further directions for future projects and discover new interests on the way.

Originality

Originality is a consequence of research into your area to work out where the gaps and points of interest are, whether that is a Jungian reading of a novel, a clinical intervention, or a fresh take on curriculum planning. Your supervisor or tutor will guide you in this regard and let you know what the expectations are.

Connection to the material

Have a think about what you really want to work on and why. What do you already know? How do you work? What will sustain your interest for the duration of the project? What do you want to find out more about?

It is often tempting to pick a topic we are familiar with, but this can sometimes cause problems if you end up re-treading previous work too heavily. At the same time, you will want to draw on existing interests. Some students know they will struggle if they pick a topic they are very passionate about, as confining it to the scope of a dissertation is frustrating. Try and strike a balance in deciding on your focus and make the most of support from your tutors in crafting your title.

Good titles and how to get there

Some examples of unworkable titles

Here are some example dissertation titles, all too broad to be feasible. They might be good titles for a textbook someday, but not for a dissertation.

- ‘Unemployment and Poverty in the UK’
- ‘Special Educational Needs in Secondary Schools’
- ‘Links between Social Class and Healthcare Outcomes’
- ‘Representations of Disability in the Media in the Twentieth Century’

Don’t let this put you off – many of us start off with a very vague idea of the areas we would like to research further. The important thing is to realise this is not the final stage of coming up with a good title! To cover the literature, come up with a research question, or write a literature review for the topics above would be an impossible task within the confines of a dissertation.

Let’s take a closer look of how you might move from the general and vague, to the specific and workable, using the last title above as an example.

Narrowing the focus

Title Idea: ‘Representations of Disability in the Media in the Twentieth Century’

At the moment, there are two enormous topic areas, ‘disability’ and ‘media’ which need to be narrowed further. The timeframe is also an entire century.

At this point, you may need to do some reading and thinking. How are ‘disability’ and ‘media’ to be defined? Will you narrow both or one of the topic variables? What are the key issues, problem areas, current debates that you know about already or have come across?

Another, somewhat surprising, way to narrow your topic may be to add another area in and focus on where all three areas converge (number 1 in the figure below). That is, ‘disability, media, and the law’ rather than disability, media and law as general subjects.

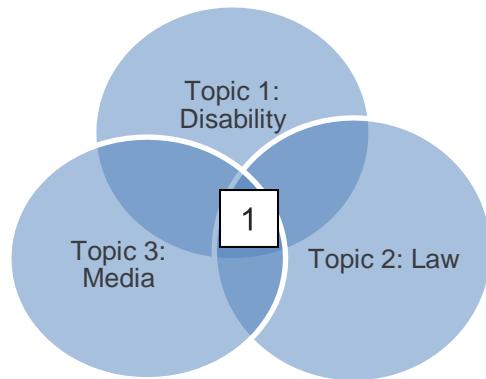


Figure 1: Disability, Media and the Law

For example:

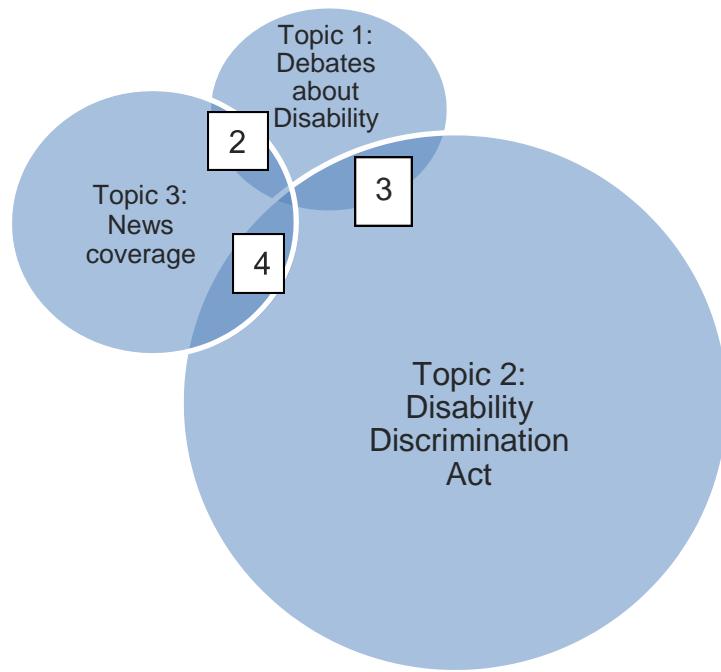
- Media-related law
- Disability legislation
- Discussions of disability in the media

This produces a slightly tighter focus overall for the project, but it still needs narrowing further for a good title and workable research pathway to emerge. Again, it’s time for a good think and to ask yourself a few more questions. For example:

- What debates are current in the media about disability?
- In what sort of media do these serious debates take place? How could I narrow this down further? Where do they happen most often – is there a particular source?
- What law is most relevant to questions about disability and representation?

Figure 2 (below) shows the beginnings of this next stage.

In the Venn diagram, the topics have become more specific. Media has now been narrowed down to 'news coverage', disability to 'debates about disability' and law to the 'Disability Discrimination Act'.



At the next stage, on the basis of further preliminary research, these topics were narrowed again to BBC4 radio news coverage, parliamentary debates about disability and the disability discrimination act. This also provides a clearly defined timeframe: the period in which the Disability Discrimination Bill was debated in the Houses of Parliament, before it passed into law and became an Act.

The literature review will now be focused on the converging areas shown in figure two (numbers 2, 3, and 4), rather than an unmanageable broad field as in figure 1, number 1.

Selecting a good title

The final title might now be:

'BBC Radio 4 News Coverage of Parliamentary Discussions of the Disability Discrimination Act'

OR: 'How did BBC Radio 4 News Represent Disability in its Coverage of the Disability Discrimination Act?'

Or something else! However, the topic now has a tight focus which makes the work manageable, with plenty of scope for originality, but also enough literature around the topic to provide context, theoretical underpinning, and critical discussion to engage with.

The more specific and focused something is, the easier it is to be original, analytical and to manage the project: both intellectual and practical advantages.