

# Dissertation: 12 Top Tips (Education)

Learning Services



## **Dissertations: 12 Top Tips**

**Please note that the following tips can be applied to most dissertations. However for more programme-specific advice, it is important to consult course and module guidance and/or your dissertation supervisor.**

### **Start Early**

Read through all module guidelines carefully and start thinking early about your choices for possible themes or topics. At the outset, do some reading and talking with others; this can often be the basis for your ideas. Importantly, the topic you choose should be something which you find interesting! Discuss your choice with your personal tutor who should be able to give you an indication of the feasibility of the study.

### **Find a focus**

One of the most common mistakes to make when writing a dissertation is to try to tackle a big theme or area for research. Rein in your ambitions and draw the focus in to one specific idea. This means that you will be able to give your chosen area the necessary depth and analysis that is required at this level. To help you focus your ideas and to formulate a research question or hypothesis, ask yourself this question: what would you like your readers to understand by the end of the dissertation?

### **Original thinking**

A dissertation differs from an essay at undergraduate level in that it will focus on a subject that you choose for yourself, as opposed to being told what to write about by somebody else. However, while original thinking may be called for this does not have to mean that your dissertation is based on a completely original topic; it may be that you take an original perspective on an existing topic.

### **Make sure you use a wide range of sources**

You will be expected to use a wide range of information sources that are as up to date as possible. This could include books, journals, official reports and documents, websites, television and radio broadcasts, DVDs etc. It is recommended that you use the Library Catalogue to find academic sources of information.

Further information about searching the library catalogue and using electronic databases can be obtained from the Learning Services website, at

[edgehill.ac.uk/ls/resources/education/#learner](http://edgehill.ac.uk/ls/resources/education/#learner)

A list of suggested websites can also be obtained from the Learning Services website, at [edgehill.ac.uk/ls/resources/education](http://edgehill.ac.uk/ls/resources/education)

### **Keep a note of your reading**

From the very beginning, keep a note of your reading. It is never too early to create a bibliography (or use software such as RefWorks) updating it as you go along. Remember that all sources (printed and otherwise) referred to in your text should be referenced using the Edge Hill University Harvard Referencing style guide at which can be found at:

[http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/documents/learningServices/Harvard\\_Referencing.pdf](http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/documents/learningServices/Harvard_Referencing.pdf)

For material which you find you don't use, simply delete from the reference list or bibliography before you submit the final version.

### **Timetable it**

A good dissertation tends to be carefully planned. To avoid last minute panics, prepare a rough time plan so that you can track your progress without putting yourself under too much pressure. Your timetable should consider the following factors: When is the submission date? How much time will you need to complete any primary research? When do you want to have each section completed? How long will you need for writing up, editing and proof reading? If binding is a requirement, how much time do you need to arrange this?

### **Writing it**

Plan the writing for each section so that you allow for the development of different themes or issues. Consider that each section should make sense if read on its own. You can write the sections in any order you choose, although quite often the introduction is left until last. A good introduction will make a clear statement of the topic and give an explanation of why the research is worthwhile. Importantly, it should also indicate the limitations of the study and summarise the sections to follow.

### **Writing the Literature Review**

As you write your literature review, keep in mind that the overall purpose is to give reasons why your topic is important enough to be researched. It is also to provide a brief account and discussion of the issues relevant to your topic. It should provide a theoretical context in which to place your topic and should discuss relevant research carried out on the same or similar topics. You should

demonstrate that you have read the relevant literature and can apply this reading to your research topic, rather than merely describing the reading (don't produce a shopping list!).

### **Decide on Methods and Analysis**

Once you are clear about the research objectives, choose appropriate methods to help you to meet them. Think carefully about a range of possible methods and how they could link to the objectives. Before you decide on the research methods, think about how you will get the results and meanings (i.e. the analysis) that you want from the data.

### **Be clear about why you did what you did**

Every choice you make in your dissertation should be justified to yourself and ultimately to your reader through your writing. There should be sound, academic reasons for your choice of focus, of reading, of methodology and of the techniques you use in the analysis.

### **Unanticipated results and outcomes**

Don't worry if you find that your dissertation throws up unanticipated results or outcomes. Unexpected results are just as valuable as those you anticipated and it is important to comment upon them.

### **Using appendices**

Use appendices appropriately. They are designed to let you include material which cannot be fitted easily into any section. For example, a large document would look awkward in the middle of a section; therefore it would be included as an appendix. Check with your tutor that appendices are acceptable and, if they are, check if the material included in your appendices count towards the final word count of the dissertation.