

Adapted from : 3rd year undergraduate dissertation guidance notes for geography related degrees 2005/2006, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh
[<http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/geography/undergraduate/ugdissguide05.html>]

Guidance Notes

This handout provides guidance for the preparation of undergraduate dissertations and sets out the regulations governing submission.

LEARNING AIMS

The dissertation allows you to pursue, in depth, a topic of your choice within your field of study. The process of selecting a topic, deciding how to go about investigating it, collecting material, analysing data and writing the dissertation are all essential ingredients of DOING research. Students generally find that preparing a dissertation gives them insight into the challenges and pitfalls of doing research, and that this helps them to develop a more critical and appreciative approach to other aspects of their studies.

The dissertation provides an opportunity to develop a range of skills including the ability to:

- work independently
- select and define a problem or question for research
- apply insights - substantive, methodological and philosophical - gained in other courses
- design an effective way of investigating the research problem
- review existing literature/research of relevance to the chosen topic
- collect relevant evidence from appropriate sources
- apply qualitative, quantitative and/or computing methods to analyse data
- interpret findings perceptively
- present a well-reasoned and lucidly-expressed argument
- write a research project fluently and succinctly
- prepare and use good quality illustrations where appropriate
- cite sources systematically within normal academic conventions

Many of these skills are highly transferable and are of great importance in a wide range of careers. In preparing your dissertation we also expect you to draw upon what you have learned in other courses.

GETTING STARTED

One of the most difficult aspects of preparing a dissertation is getting started! In this instance, we invite *you* to decide what to study, how to study it, and when to do what. Many students find all this considerably harder than writing to short deadlines on titles issued by teaching staff. So, give yourself some time to think about the field to which you want to devote a considerable amount of energy over the next few months. Come up with a *provisional* idea for a research topic and think about how you might investigate it. *The importance of early planning cannot be over-stated!*

Whatever topic is chosen, it must involve some *original* research. This might involve fieldwork of some kind, it might involve archival work, the use of data banks, experimental methods, textual or visual analysis, interviews, participant observation and/or focus groups (to name the most common). The range of options is wide and you are encouraged to think creatively and imaginatively.

SUPERVISION

The dissertation provides an opportunity to work independently. This does not mean that you should do absolutely everything on your own. Rather, you must make your own decisions about when and how to seek advice. The supervisor is an important person who is there to assist you in this process.

Your supervisor will be your 'first port of call' when seeking advice about your dissertation.. However,

you are also free to consult with anyone you choose, including other members of academic staff in (and outside) the Faculty..

Teaching staff are usually delighted to talk to enthusiastic students about exciting research projects. Most teaching staff advertise office hours, and all can be contacted via e-mail or pigeon-holes. You should have no difficulty arranging to see the staff with whom you wish to talk.

In the spirit of independent learning, **THE INITIATIVE IN CONTACTING SUPERVISORS LIES WITH THE STUDENT**. You are strongly encouraged to see your supervisor as soon as possible after allocation of supervisors. This meeting should allow you to discuss your topic and clarify the programme of research. After your initial meeting it is up to you and your supervisor to negotiate how to proceed.

Do not expect your supervisor to guide you through the preparation of the dissertation in the last few weeks before the submission deadline. It is up to *you* to get started in good time and to keep in touch with your supervisor throughout the months from the submission of a provisional research proposal to the final submission of a dissertation.

It is important that you use your supervisor wisely. Your supervisor is not there for a weekly chat about whatever is on your mind. So, before you meet with your supervisor make sure that you are clear about what you want to get out of the meeting. In many cases it will be useful to submit a written draft prior to the meeting, for example, a draft outline of your proposed methodology or a draft outline of the whole dissertation.

You should not expect your supervisor to provide line-by-line editing of a draft chapter, but he or she may be able to offer you some more general feedback.

ETHICS

The design of your research should, from the very outset, work to ensure that the human subjects involved are shown respect and have their well-being preserved.

Consideration of the following key principles in relation to your research:

1. Respect for free and informed participation. You must adopt an open and honest procedure for informing the people you are working with of who you are, what your research is about, and what the results will be used for. You must not deceive people in the pursuit of your research or coerce people to participate in your research by offering incentives or rewards. You must not steal information from anyone or acquire information about them without them knowing.
2. Respect for privacy and confidentiality. Not all people involved in research will want, or expect, their identity to be hidden (e.g. people in public office may want to be identified). There are, however, others who may wish to remain anonymous. If you promise people that their identity will remain anonymous you must know exactly how you will be able to ensure this in the preparation of your dissertation. Likewise, if you offer people confidentiality, you must be clear about the nature of that confidentiality and any limits to that offer.
3. Respect for vulnerable persons. Your research needs to take particular care if dealing with vulnerable persons, such as children, institutionalized persons or others entitled to protection and special procedures to protect their interests.

ASSESSMENT

Your dissertation will be marked by two members of staff, one of whom will be the supervisor. Each marker evaluates the dissertation independently; they both assign a grade to the dissertation. After the marking has been completed by both members of staff, the marks awarded are compared. If they differ, the markers are requested to discuss their evaluations with one another with a view to resolving this difference. In most cases, mark differences are small and can be resolved easily, in which case, the resolved marks are used in the classification of your degree. Occasionally, differences are not so easily resolved, in which case a third marker may be asked to give an opinion.

External examiners may request the opportunity to read any dissertation. In addition, they are asked to review the full body of examinable work of any student whose mark profile falls just below a class boundary. This provides another opportunity for evidence to emerge in support of the award of the higher class of degree.

Independent double-marking is an important guarantee of consistency in assessment. In addition, all markers are asked to work to a common framework of criteria, which corresponds to the learning aims set out above. Thus, markers evaluate dissertations relative to the following criteria:

- evidence of originality and independent thinking
- the definition of the problem or question for research
- understanding of the relevant research context
- the quality of the research design
- the quality of any review of existing research
- use of appropriate sources
- use of appropriate methods
- the quality of the analysis
- the quality of the interpretation advanced
- the quality of argument in the dissertation
- the quality of the written presentation of the dissertation
- the quality and appropriateness of illustrative materials
- proper acknowledgement of sources.

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Submission Deadline

The dissertation must be handed in to the Registry- no later than 12.00 noon on the 30th April 2007

The dissertation must conform to the specifications set below.

THREE copies of the dissertation must be submitted.

It is the student's responsibility to allow an adequate reserve of time that will enable them to cope with last-minute problems related to computing, printing and so on. This kind of problem does **not** constitute a sound basis for accepting late submissions without penalty. Deferred submission is allowed only in the most exceptional circumstances. If you consider that this might apply to you (for example, for serious medical reasons), contact your Programme Coordinator & Supervisor as far ahead of the deadline as possible.

Length

The text of the dissertation **MAY NOT EXCEED 10,000 words**, excluding appendices and references. Many prize-winning dissertations are considerably shorter: quality, not quantity, is the key.

Format

The dissertation must be presented in bound form on good quality A4 paper. There is no standard form of binding, but all forms of binding require ample margins. All pages must be secure, including figures and fold-outs.

The text of the dissertation should be typed, with double-spacing (no more than 40 lines per page), on one side of the paper only. It should be divided into chapters, each chapter starting on a new page.

Figures

Figures, which include maps, graphics, photographs and other visual materials, should be presented on

A4 paper as far as possible, preferably with the standard margins. A sufficient spine margin must be maintained in all cases to allow for binding. If it is impossible to accommodate illustrations within this format, it is permissible to use fold-outs.

Where appropriate, figures should be mounted on A4 cartridge paper using a non-waterbased glue to avoid cockling (puckering). Staples should not be used. Remember to allow wide margins for binding.

All illustrative material should be of good quality and well-presented. Sources of derived material must be acknowledged.

Figures should be explicitly referred to in the body of the text. The numbering system we recommend identifies each figure by chapter and by order within chapter, for example figure 3.12 refers to the twelfth illustration in chapter three. Each figure should have a caption and should be sufficiently annotated to allow the reader to grasp its significance.

Declaration of Originality

The dissertation gives you the opportunity to carry out an original piece of research. This does not mean attempting to do something totally unrelated to anything tackled in the past. Rather, it means evaluating and building upon the work of others to make an additional contribution to knowledge.

You will gain credit for using previous work thoroughly and creatively in the development of your own research. In so doing you should fully acknowledge your sources using standard academic conventions (see section on referencing below).

TO PRESENT OTHER PEOPLE'S WORK AS YOUR OWN CONSTITUTES PLAGIARISM AND IS A SERIOUS BREACH OF UNIVERSITY REGULATIONS. THOSE FOUND GUILTY OF PLAGIARISM STAND TO FORFEIT ANY CHANCE OF BEING AWARDED A DEGREE.

In the preliminary pages of the dissertation, you must include, and sign, a declaration of originality as follows.

I hereby declare that this dissertation has been composed by me and is based on my own work'

Signature: _____

The Abstract

The abstract is a short statement summarising the contents of the dissertation. It is intended to brief potential readers about the work in its entirety. It is likely to be used by future students and by other researchers. It should take the form of a short factual statement identifying the topic of your study, the approach adopted and the findings.

Appendices

Appendices may be used where original material is relevant to the dissertation but cannot appropriately be incorporated within the text. Everything that is vital to the argument of the dissertation should be included into the text; while data generated by the research but not essential to the argument may be better placed within appendices. For example, tables of original data from the research, interview schedules or excerpts from transcripts, might all constitute appendices. Appendices may not be used as a device for extending the main text.

References

An important practice in academic writing is the comprehensive and systematic acknowledgement of sources. This enables others to read your work in a fully informed manner.

Your dissertation must follow normal academic practice in terms of the citation of sources. Whenever you quote you should give details of the source including the page number. Whenever you draw on the ideas or research evidence presented in a book or article you should acknowledge the source (author and date of publication), although page numbers are not essential unless you quote directly or reproduce statistical information.

Two main methods are used to reference sources: namely, the Harvard system and footnotes. In your dissertation you should make sure that you use one or other method systematically and consistently. Full details are given in the appendix of this document.

Text Sequence

Dissertations should conform to the following sequence of contents (each number connotes a new, separate, page).

1. Title page bearing:
 - the title of the dissertation,
 - the degree for which it is submitted,
 - the anticipated year of graduation, and
 - the student's first name, initials and surname
 - an accurate word count
2. Declaration of originality
3. Abstract
4. Acknowledgements
5. Table of contents
6. List of figures
7. The body of the dissertation arranged in chapters
 - each chapter should begin on a new page
 - all pages must be numbered
8. Appendices, if required
9. List of references

APPENDIX: METHODS OF REFERENCING

1. The Harvard system

This system is used in most science publications and also in many social science publications. It involves placing minimum details of the sources cited in the text, with full details in a list of references at the end of the essay. Minimum details consist of the author or author's surname and the date of publication.

The following extract from Johnston (1983, p.79) exemplifies several aspects of this method.

There are strong links between such work, with its clear base in the humanistic approaches, and writing on landscape design and 'mental maps' in the behaviourist/positivist mould discussed in the previous chapter. This drew its inspiration from works such as that of the landscape architect Kevin Lynch (1960) in *The Image of the City* and on the creation of images (see Downs and Stea, 1977). Whereas such behaviourist investigations obtained their data from questionnaires and similar surveys, and manipulated these statistically, however, humanistic approaches have focused on texts and a presuppositionless approach. The nature of the texts varies widely. As already illustrated here, the landscape itself has been used by some as the repository of human meaning (see also Hugill, 1975). Literature, too has been used as 'a perspective for how people experience their world' (Tuan, 1978, p194). It can provide three forms of aid to the humanist geographer, according to Tuan: it is a thought experiment revealing modes of human experience; it is an artifact, illustrating the cultural perceptions of an environment; and it is a model of geographical synthesis and writing. According to Pocock (1981a, p346) 'it is of the essence of literature to reveal the universal while apparently concerned with the particular': literature is the work (as are all works of art) of artists with particular 'perceptive insight' (Pocock, 1981b p15) regarding contemporary situations.

Note that the author's name sometimes forms part of the sentence itself, in which case the date is placed in brackets next to it. Elsewhere both the name and the date are placed in brackets at the end of the sentence. Titles are not usually reproduced in the text; if they are, they form an integral part of the sentence. Where two sources published in the same year by the same author are cited they are differentiated with a lower case letter (a, b etc.) immediately after the date.

At the end of the dissertation you should provide a list of all the references cited in the text. These should not include any sources that are not cited in the text.

If you use the Harvard system you will not need footnotes to acknowledge your sources. Footnotes might still be used to make points tangential to the main argument.

The list of references should include the following details:

For books:

author's name, initials, date of publication, title, publisher, place of publication, edition (if not the first)

example:

Johnston, R J (1983) *Philosophy and Human Geography*. Edward Arnold, London.

For journal articles:

author's name, initials, date of publication, title of article, journal name, volume, pages

example:

Johnston, R J (1978) "Paradigms and revolution or evolution? Observations on human geography since the second world war", *Progress in Human Geography* 2, 189-206

For chapters from edited collections:

author's name, initials, date of publication, title of chapter, editor's name, title of book, publisher, place of publication, pages of chapter

example:

Burgess, Jacquie (1999) "Environmental Knowledges and Environmentalism", In: Paul Cloke, Philip Crang and Mark Goodwin (eds), *Introducing Human Geographies*, Edward Arnold: London, pp. 141-150.

2. Footnotes

This system is widely used in the humanities and also in the social sciences. It is sometimes preferred because it avoids cluttering the text with brackets. It entails placing a superscript numeral at the end of a quotation or sentence. This directs the reader to a footnote, either at the foot of the page, or at the end of the chapter. Footnotes should run in sequential order from the beginning to the end of each chapter of the dissertation.

The footnote contains details of the source. Here there are two possibilities. Either the footnote contains the same minimum details of the source as in the Harvard system. In this case, you will need a full list of references at the end of the dissertation. Alternatively, the footnotes include full details of the sources on their first occurrence, with the use of *ibid.* and *op. cit.* in later footnotes to refer back to details cited in earlier footnotes. Use *ibid.* (*ibidem* - in the same place) where consecutive footnotes refer to the same source. Use *op. cit.* (*opera citato* - in the work cited) after the author's name and date of publication if the source is fully described in a footnote earlier than the one immediately preceding it. In this case a list of references is not needed because full details of the sources cited are provided in the footnotes.