

# PLANNING YOUR DISSERTATION

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Planning and writing your dissertation can be overwhelming. This resource will provide you with some **practical tips to effectively plan, research, write and submit your final project.**

## The Goals of a Dissertation

It is important to remember what the point of dissertation is or to know what you are supposed to achieve because if you can easily get lost in the research. A dissertation is to:

- **showcase the research and writing skills** that you learned over the course of your study
- **show your project management skills** (incl. time management and independent work)

## Planning and Structuring

### **TOP TIP**

Planning is the most important step of the research and writing process. Without a good and realistic plan/ foundation, your project will not be as successful as it can be. You should be in contact with your lecturer at this point to get some guidance.

In the early stages of planning and structuring it is a good idea to think about the following guidelines:

- **Study your requirements** (department guidelines, format, citation style), remember: these can vary significantly, depending on your subject of study and your supervisor.
- **Know your work style** (when/ where/ how do you like to work?)
  - o Be realistic when planning out your schedule
  - o Breaking down the big project in monthly/weekly/daily to do lists
- **Planning backwards** ensures that you leave enough time for the editing process.
- **Know about your resources and limitations**

- **how much time do you have to work on the project** in between other assignments/lectures/work/private life?
- **Where do you write/research** (this is essential in terms of library and lab access)?
- **Do you need to plan in time** for inter-library loans/ transcribing/ interviews, etc.?

## Writing Stage

This stage incorporates various elements, and the following checklist is about those aspects. It is not simply just writing.

## Research

You should **find out about the relevant databases/ library resources** and how to use them.

- Initially, you can **read selectively**. One way of achieving this is to **focus on abstracts to save time and annotate your papers**.
- To **avoid unintentional plagiarism**, always indicate in your notes what is a quote and where you found it

## Topic

You should **spend time on finding the essential elements** of your dissertation:

- Topic - **what** are you talking about?
- Research Questions - **how** are you talking about it?
- Argument - **why** are you talking about it?

Make sure to **confirm those with your supervisor** before you start working. Students often consider this as time wasted, and simply want to write, but it can often be the case that it will save you time in the long run!

## Methodology

### TOP TIP

Reviewing other people's theses will help you understand what is expected. You should consult your lecturer about some suitable theses that relate to your dissertation. See the UCC Library Catalogue; 'Theses', in the useful links section below.

This does not come naturally, and you should **plan your methodology**. You can do this by asking the following question:

- Which is **best way to answer your research question**
  - o experiments
  - o questionnaires
  - o interviews
  - o focus groups
- **Does your methodology match your research aims?**

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## Writing-up

The writing process can be chaotic: **give yourself enough time and avoid all-nighters**. You should **ask yourself what your priorities are, but also, enjoy life with guilt-free free time!** You should try to **schedule a writing time only (not researching) on a day-to-day basis**.

### TOP TIP

Freewriting is the same process as when you talk to a friend about an idea and then you have realisations about it. The key to freewriting is that it undoes the editing side of the process. You should engage in freewriting as often as you can. Try taking 30 mins per day and 10 mins before bed to free write. It will then become a habit. You can look back and select the most significant aspects and then you can structure and edit it.

You should be **continually asking yourself, if you're writing relates to your research question and argument? If not, you probably need to cut it**. This is a difficult step, but a reality. It will improve the quality of your dissertation.

## TOP TIP

You should always keep your thesis questions/ aim of the section near you. It can be on a notebook, or a sticky note, or even a drafted heading to ensure that you stay on track.

**Having a detailed structure for each chapter and even paragraphs within that will keep you on track! This could be based on a timeline or logical themes.** Remember, this will likely change with advice from your lecturer - but that is normal and part of the process, in order to progress.

## Referencing

Often students do not realise how important it is to reference correctly until they take on a larger volume of work. **A reader and the person marking your dissertation needs to be able to track your research. It will also help you if you need to refer back to research sources again.** If this step is ignored, it might cost you time and more stress towards the end.

## TOP TIP

A table or excel sheet can help you to easily organise your research sources with headings such as, author, title, publications details, specific quote, page number, etc. This will also help you to create a bibliography containing sources that were relevant to understand the topic, but not necessarily used directly in the dissertation.

## Your Supervisor

You need to **make the most of meetings with your supervisor(s)!** They are the expert and this advice is valuable. **Consider how many meetings can you have and how regularly they should occur. Regular contact with your supervisor can both motivate and guide you.**

**You should always come prepared - organise an outline of what you want to talk about and questions that you need to address. It is important to review the advice and implement the changes.** You will be stalling your own progress if you choose to ignore them. **This should be completed within 24 hours, after the meeting,** while it is still fresh in your mind.

## TOP TIP

Be honest . . . are you struggling with planning, writing and understanding the material? Let them know and ask for help! The most important thing is to NEVER stop communicating.

# The Home Stretch

## Editing & Proofreading

It is important to **leave enough time** to edit and proofread your dissertation, **the first draft will not be the one you submit**. By planning ahead, you avoid becoming stressed.

### Editing involves the following:

- **structural**
- **textual**
  - o **macro-changes**
  - o **micro-changes**
- Ensure that you **check for consistency and coherence**

These **self-assessment questions** should help you with that process:

- **Does everything you write relate to your research question?**
- **Are your chapters in a logical order?**
- **Is your spelling and grammar correct?**
- **Is your writing style formal enough?**

## TOP TIP

Where possible, you might also get a friend to read over your paper before you submit it, to check for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. You might find it helpful to read the text aloud to yourself. Your ear will most likely pick up what tired eyes often miss, and you will be more alert to the clarity and flow of your assignment as it will sound to another, less familiar reader. You can also enable text to speech in your Microsoft Word Document (see the useful links below).

## Printing & Binding

Students often forget about this final step and it is especially **important for dissertations to leave enough time**. You should consider the following:

- Does your department have **special requirements**?
- What are the **opening times**?
- **Will the shop be busy and if so, how will it take?** It might be dissertation submission time for your departments or even other departments.

## What are Examiners Looking for?

Fundamentally, examiners are looking for the following elements:

- **Argument**
- **logical structure**
- **use of evidence/methodology to support your argument**
- **critical and reflective awareness of strengths and limitations**
- **clear conclusions and recommendations**

If you want a more in-depth description of the marking scheme, please see the NUI Band Marks, on the UCC Skills Centre resource page.

## Useful Links

- UCC Library, 'Academic Integrity: Referencing', Available at: <https://libguides.ucc.ie/academicintegrity/referencing>
- UCC Skills Centre, 'Additional Resources', Available at: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/skillscentre/additionalresources/>