

Successful Dissertations – Following formalities!

Facing the prospect of completing a 10,000 words (plus) dissertation, with very little structured support can be extremely daunting, even to the most confident student. Throughout the majority of your academic life, you will have followed teacher's orders, a government agreed syllabus, a well researched reading list. And now, for the very first time, you are being given the freedom to undertake your own research project, to explore areas no man has gone before, to learn and read and write and create within your own timescales and study structure. Great isn't it?! A breath of fresh air.....but scary!

The process under which your dissertation will be completed can be, and potentially should be, quite structured. It needs a planning stage, a literature review, an outline developed, a first draft, further development and a final draft. All of these stages make up the process for completing a dissertation, and all deserve an in-depth review of what work is involved to ensure the stage is completed successfully. But before you commence the planning stage of your dissertation, you must make sure you have got the preliminaries sussed! An excellent dissertation relies heavily on great planning, but if it doesn't conform with the formalities, if it doesn't tick the examiners boxes, then it has the potential to become a big fat flop! So, ensure that Step One of any dissertation you're going to be completing is, '**understand what is required of you!**' To do that, you need to answer the questions (helpfully posed by Peter Levin from the Open University Press) below:

- What requirements does your dissertation have to conform to? And what documents do you have that state these requirements?
- What type of dissertation are you being asked to complete? Are you able to use the advice and guidance of your tutors? Does the dissertation have to be based on subject-matter that has already been covered in your classes, or are you able to carry out a piece of original research?
- Is there any form of marking scheme that you can digest?!
- What is the word limit of the dissertation? And what is included and excluded from this word limit?
- What referencing system are you to use?
- Is there a specific layout preference? For example, do you need to use sub-headings and double spacing of lines?
- When and where does your dissertation need to be handed in? And to whom? And is there a specific 'handing-in' process?
- How much freedom do you have over your title choice? Does it have to be agreed by your tutor before you can commence your research?
- How much assistance are you entitled to access? Where will this assistance come from?
- Can you use, access, or pull on previous student's dissertations?
- Does everybody else in your class / group have the same answers to the questions posed above?! It's always best to clarify your understanding of the formalities with others in the same position as you! It is very easy to misinterpret guidance, or misread a deadline..., but easy mistakes can have awful consequences! So take the time to speak to your fellow students, and make sure there is a consistency of understanding, before you embark on your own, unique, dissertation journey!

Enjoy the ride!