Peter Levin's notes on

Planning and Writing Your Dissertation

for undergraduates and master's students

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THE PRELIMINARIES: FORMAL REQUIREMENTS AND ARRANGEMENTS

Before you start, it is absolutely crucial that you do some 'homework' to discover what is officially required of you and what arrangements have been made for supervision, submission of dissertations, etc. In a sense, this is your first research task, and it needs to be done thoroughly and systematically, so it's good practice for the real thing. (And if you don't make a good job of it, you will be storing up trouble for yourself.) Equip yourself with the answers to the questions below.

Documentation and formalities
What documents have been issued to you setting out the requirements to which your dissertation must conform, and what is the status of these documents (e.g. official university regulations, departmental guidance notes)?

Purpose
Do these documents make clear the institution's purpose in requiring you to submit a dissertation? Is it merely a 'take-home' form of examination, one where you pose your own question, set your own time limit, and can write with your books by your side, but get no help from your teachers? Or is the purpose to give you a learning experience, providing you with the opportunity to carry out a piece of original research or to delve into a topic more deeply than you have time for on your taught courses, and offering help from your teachers? If the purpose isn't clear, look at the documentation you've been given. If it includes some kind of statement of 'learning objectives', this suggests the latter purpose, and you should feel entitled to seek the help that is implied.

Practicalities
What is the word limit for the dissertation, and does it include or exclude appendices, footnotes and bibliography? Is there any kind of 'format' to which the dissertation is expected to conform? This could cover information to be provided on the title page, page layout (margins, line spacing etc.), the referencing system to be used.

Submission procedure
When and where does the dissertation have to be handed in (date, time, place)? Should you be given a receipt? What are the penalties for handing in late? Bear in mind the level playing field requirement: examiners are obliged to be fair to all students, and this should rule out accepting a late hand-in unless there are medical will probably

Dissertation title and procedure
Are you required to submit your dissertation title in advance of the dissertation? If so, when and were, and what is the procedure? (Does it need to be agreed with your supervisor or anyone else? Does it have to be submitted before you have been assigned to a supervisor, as could be the case if supervisors are appointed on the basis of titles. Will you be able to change it later, or are you stuck with it?)

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Choice of topic (subject)
Are there any limitations as to topic? Does it have to be one on which there is a substantial body of relevant literature? (And does this literature have to be in English?) Does the topic have to be one which is related to a taught course that you've been following, and/or one which a teacher in your department is willing to supervise?

Marking scheme
What other requirements are laid down in any guidance notes that you have received, e.g. from your department? Look in particular for guidance about the marking scheme and about what the examiners will be looking for. Are they looking for originality? for the ability to apply theory in making and drawing inferences from empirical observations? for the ability to marshal relevant evidence and draw reasoned conclusions from it? for a systematic, well-organized approach? for a 'clear argument'? You need to know.

Supervision
What arrangements are there for supervision? Have you a designated supervisor or tutor, and – if so – what help are you entitled to expect from him or her, and at what stages? If the dissertation is effectively a take-home examination, you may be entitled to expect your supervisor to assist on the selection of topics and on reading but not to comment on drafts of the dissertation. If the dissertation is supposed to be a learning experience, your supervisor may be able to provide guidance with methodology and to comment on early drafts of chapters or sections. Find out if it is the practice to hold seminars or workshops at which methodology can be discussed and drafts presented.

Assistance
Are you allowed to seek help from other teachers or researchers in your department or elsewhere? This may be a question of what is normal practice in your department or faculty, or it may be that there are no rules, either formal or informal, in which case ask and see what happens.

Access to dissertations written by past students
In some places and some departments you are allowed to see dissertations written by past students; in others you aren't. If you are able to see them, look at several, and make sure you know what grades they have been given: you don't want to take your cue from a poor example. You should treat other people's dissertations as offering you a starting point, no more. Following a past dissertation's treatment slavishly, however good it is, is definitely not a recipe for your success. Every dissertation needs its own, particular, tailor-made structure.

Consistency
You might like to check that you and your fellow-students have all been given the same information and advice. It may be that different supervisors put different interpretations on things, or exercise their discretion differently about how much help

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to give, or informally give different advice about procedure. There's no harm in satisfying yourself that the playing field is level.

THE PROCESS: PLANNING, THINKING, DOING, WRITING

You may find it helpful to think of creating a dissertation as comprising activities of four different kinds: planning, thinking, doing and writing.

'Planning' involves looking ahead, envisaging the tasks that you will be undertaking over the next few weeks or months, and deciding on a course of action and committing yourself to it.

'Thinking' is an on-going activity, of course. Every bit of mental conversation that you hold with yourself involves thinking: posing questions and ruminating on possible answers, considering the significance of material that you come across, having ideas pop into your head, learning from what you read: all these are thinking activities.

'Doing' will often incorporate a physical activity as well as use of your senses: tracking down books and articles in a library or on the internet, perhaps; making observations out in the field; bringing together materials from a range of original sources.

'Writing' comprises the activities of composing notes, sentences, paragraphs and committing them to paper or to screen and electronic medium. The end product, of course, is your dissertation itself, in which sentences and paragraphs are put together in a certain order.

In the following four sections I offer some suggestions for making a good job of your planning, thinking, doing and writing.

THE PROCESS (1): PLANNING

You have two kinds of planning to do: planning your programme of work, and planning the form – the outline, the structure – of your dissertation.

Be under no illusions: it is virtually impossible to draw up a programme of work when you start on a dissertation and not find yourself making changes to it as you learn more about your subject. Plans crystallize, dissolve, and then crystallize again. At one moment you can see clearly what you should do next, then that vision fades from view and you're saying to yourself: Hang on! Where am I going? To take a concrete example, you might start off with the intention of writing a dissertation on the topic 'Why did Bismarck resign his post as Imperial Chancellor in 1890?' and end up writing it on 'How is it that historians can disagree so widely about the explanation of a particular event?'. Metaphorically speaking, you could set off to find buried treasure and end up without the treasure but achieving the production of an excellent map of the island where it is buried.

So what should you do? Here are some suggestions to do with planning your work:

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1. Construct a ‘dissertation calendar’ for yourself. It should show the dates and days of the week between now and your deadline, ‘hand-in’ day. It’s important that you ‘have your eye on the clock’ the whole time.

2. Set yourself a ‘comfort deadline’. Aim to complete your dissertation a week before the deadline proper. This will make it easier to accommodate unforeseen contingencies, especially setbacks. If you don’t have any setbacks, and do actually meet your comfort deadline, it will allow you to put the dissertation to one side for a day or two, and then come back to it and read it through with a fresh eye before handing it in – always a good thing to be able to do.

3. Make a list of the tasks that you will have to carry out, and estimate the time that each will take. It might look something like this for a study that entails field interviews:

A Carry out internet search on subject of study: 1 day
B Draw up list of relevant books and articles on subject: 2 days
C Scan literature to identify researchable topics: 5 days
D Produce initial short-list of research questions: 4 days
E Develop alternative titles to show supervisor: 7 days
F Consult textbooks on survey research methods: 2 days
G Produce preliminary draft of questionnaire: 2 days
H Redraft questionnaire: 1 day
I Pilot questionnaire and revise if necessary: 7 days
J Carry out 100 questionnaire-based interviews: 14 days
K Transcribe quantitative data from interviews: 4 days
L Collate qualitative data from interviews: 8 days
M Analyse data and formulate findings: 7 days
N Check findings against literature on subject: 3 days
O Produce preliminary draft of literature review: 3 days
P Produce preliminary draft of discussion chapter: 6 days
Q Produce preliminary drafts of Introduction and Conclusions: 4 days
R Produce complete first draft of dissertation: 5 days
S Produce final version of dissertation: 5 days.

Add these times together. In the example above the total is 90 days – and that makes no allowance for a spare week at the end before handing in or for any time off. If you have only two months to work on your dissertation, and plan to undertake the activities one after the other, you’re in trouble. What to do?

The first thing to do is to see (a) which activities offer scope for compressing; (b) which activities can be carried out in parallel with others; and (c) which ones can’t be started until preceding ones have been completed. In the above example, you might be able to carry out C, D and E simultaneously, in five days rather than the seven that you initially allocated. Activities F-N have to be carried out in series (consecutively), but you might feel that you can’t afford seven days for activity I, and that its budget has to be reduced to three. Now you’ve reduced the 90 days to 75.

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At this point you might well feel that although it would be ideal to do 100 interviews, you simply haven't the time, and you will have to be content with 70. This will also reduce the time needed for K, L and M. You might also feel that you have to restrict the amount of qualitative data that you will collect and analyse. By this means you could bring J down to 10 days and the series K-L-M to 14. The 90 days are now down to 66.

Where can you make further savings? Some ingenuity is needed here. Consider making rough notes for your Introduction, Discussion and Conclusions sections from the very beginning. If you have these notes to help you, you might be able to reduce P, Q and R to 4, 3 and 4 days respectively, saving a further 4days. Your total budget now is 62 days.

If your target budget is 60 days, you could achieve that by allowing only 3 days for S, producing your final version. You don't need me to tell you that this is cutting things rather fine. Your comfort zone has almost disappeared. Your options now, it seems to me, are to reduce your interviews to 50 or even 40, or – better – to START SOONER!

4. Draw up a tentative outline, mk1, for your dissertation as soon as you can. Something simple like

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Work done
4. Findings
5. Discussion
6. Conclusions

will do at this stage. Keep it under review. Soon you'll want to flesh it out, or modify it, or both. Dissertation outlines *always* undergo change. It is helpful to have a draft outline from early in the process, but you could easily go through a dozen or more versions before arriving at the final one. As I say, this is normal: don't be discouraged if you find it happening to you. It shows that you are being flexible, not that you are producing a series of faulty outlines.

THE PROCESS (2): THINKING

Thinking is an inherently untidy process. Our thoughts go to and fro, ideas and questions pop into our heads, we turn the day's events over in our minds, we think laterally and we think about future possibilities. Thinking includes formulating and solving problems, digesting what we have seen or heard or read, trying to make sense of apparent inconsistencies. Out of this messy process we have to produce a dissertation that is essentially linear, that takes the reader through a logical progression from introduction to conclusion. Quite a challenge, in fact.

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My suggestion is simply that you keep track of your thoughts. Write them down. *Writing down contributes hugely to our thinking processes*. Write little memos to yourself. Write notes on your methodology, on interesting things you have read, on the 'sub-questions' into which your main question can be broken down, and so on. Some of these notes you will certainly discard later, but others will be prototypes of the building blocks out of which you will construct your dissertation. They will be invaluable as you approach your deadline.

THE PROCESS (3): DOING

Doing can be a mechanical process, but something more than that is required for a decent dissertation. Just making a précis of six books won't win you any prizes. You will need to do something more intellectually demanding: exploring, investigating, testing, analysing, explaining, evaluating, making a critique, and so on.

All such work requires you to operate with two things: (a) a methodology (a set of methods and principles); and (b) materials, to which you apply your methodology. Some examples are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Methodologies	Materials
Taking physical measurements and scrutinizing them for regularities and irregularities	The objects being measured, and the resultant data
Interviewing human subjects and sorting the responses into categories	The human subjects, and their responses both individual and in aggregate
Making a case study: collecting and marshalling relevant evidence and drawing reasoned conclusions from it.	The subject of the case study, the evidence
Reading publications looking for different conclusions about the same phenomenon or theme, or similar conclusions drawing on different phenomena or themes	The publications and the observations that are made
Statistical analysis	The data being analysed
Reasoning of all kinds	Observations, concepts, ideas, logical premises

My suggestion here is that you write two notes to yourself, one describing briefly the methodology that you are going to use and the other describing the materials to which you're going to apply your methodology. In due course, you will add further notes to these. On methodology, you might make notes on the merits of your preferred methodology compared to others, on problems in applying it, on the extent to which you can generalize from results, and so on. On materials, you might make notes on selections that you have made, on comparability, on the reliability of your sources, etc.

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After reflecting on how you are going to work, you might already feel like adopting a different outline for your dissertation:

1. Introduction
2. Methodology (including references to literature)
3. Materials (including references to literature)
4. Findings/observations/results
5. Discussion/analysis
6. Conclusions

Here's a suggestion: Why not get yourself some folders (pocket wallets) of different colours, label them with these headings, and start filing your notes to yourself in them?

You may find it helpful to think of your dissertation work as taking place in the space between the body of knowledge and empirical observation in your field on one hand, and the body of theory and concepts on the other. In effect, what you are doing is shuttling to and fro between the two. You use theory and concepts to 'interrogate' and make sense of knowledge and observations, and you use knowledge and observations to test the validity of theories and the usefulness of concepts.

This should help you to deal with some of the issues that you are likely to be faced with in determining your objectives and the work you will have to do to achieve them. For example, take the question that students often ask: How many case studies should I make? Consider the options: one, two or three. Tackling just one case study will allow you to go into greatest depth. This might be particularly good for testing the theory: it takes only one demonstration that the theory does not hold to invalidate it. It might also be particularly good for generating insights into the mechanisms, say, that the proponents of this theory seek to explain. Tackling two case studies must have the effect of reducing the depth that you can go into, because your time and the number of words allowed you are limited. On the other hand, it will allow you to make comparisons between the two, if they have some features in common, and you can explore the use of the theory in explaining the differences that you discover. Tackling three case studies will reduce your depth even more, although it could yield some more interesting comparisons: you will have to make your own judgment as to whether the loss of depth is outweighed by the gain in breadth.

In considering what you will actually do, there's another metaphor that might appeal to you. Think of your dissertation work as *detective* work. Whether you're using documentary sources, making case studies, doing fieldwork or whatever, you're looking for clues, putting two and two together, trying to make sense of observations, testing theories and hypotheses. Be a detective!

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THE PROCESS (4): WRITING

It is the experience of most academic writers that there are two kinds of writing: writing as thinking, and writing as assembly job. I'm sure you are familiar with both of these. Writing as thinking is usually laborious and slow for most of us; it involves drafting and redrafting; you write something down, look at it, you think something's not quite right, you have another go, you realise you need to look something up, you add a clarification, ask yourself if you need to make changes elsewhere as a result, and so on. Clearly writing of this kind resembles the thinking process itself: untidy, disjointed, spontaneous. Which is why short notes are the best way of recording your thoughts.

A dissertation has to be more than a collection of notes, however. It has to be 'linear' in form: chapter after chapter in a logical sequence that is easy for the reader to follow. You must be aware, therefore, that in writing a dissertation you are not giving an account of your work, with all the false starts and twists and turns that it entailed: you are in the business of *presentation*. You therefore have to *assemble* your dissertation.

Writing as assembly job can be fluent and speedy once you know what you want to say. For example, composing a letter to a friend or relative describing what you did today won't take you long and probably won't require any significant redrafting at all. So you do already have experience of writing as assembly job.

Your aim, I suggest, should be to make the 'writing up' of your dissertation as much of an assembly job as possible. This is where your little notes and memos to yourself will come into their own. Writing will be much, much easier once you have settled on your outline if it's a process of stringing a selection of your notes together – cut and paste, remove overlaps, fill in any gaps, smooth out the rough edges, and especially check for consistency – rather than a process in which you bash your brains out composing every sentence afresh as you go along.

A consequence of this approach is that you may well find that the various sections of your dissertation 'grow up together', so to speak. And this makes a great deal of sense. Do not spend time on perfecting your Introduction until you have at least a first draft of your Conclusions: it is crucial that these two sections are 'in sync'. You cannot afford to have an answer in your Conclusions that does not match the question posed in your Introduction, and this may mean changing the question!

Similarly it is only when you have made progress with your Discussion that you will know which bits of the literature you have used are relevant to your presentation, so do not spend time writing the perfect Literature Review until the structure and content of your Discussion are clear to you.

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CHOOSING YOUR TOPIC

You should already have found out what limitations the formal requirements for your dissertation impose on your choice of topic. Now think about what you would actually *like* to do. Creating a dissertation is hard work, and it's really helpful to have some enthusiasm to sustain you when the going gets tough.

So what grabs you? Is there something that you've come across in one of your taught courses that you didn't have time to explore properly but would like to know more about? Have you ever asked a teacher a question and not been satisfied with the answer? Now's your chance to see if you can put together a better one. Checking out past exam papers might give you an idea or two, about both subject matter and approach (compare and contrast, explain, evaluate, etc.).

What's currently happening in your field of study? In most fields there's usually something new or recent to be investigated. Is there a new book with new ideas the implications of which can be explored and evaluated? Has a new technique become available? Would it be interesting to apply it in combination with existing techniques?

Has a new data source of data become available, offering a rich vein of material for analysis? Do you have contacts outside university giving you access to materials to which you could apply methodologies that you have learned?

Has someone published a case study which you could replicate in a different context, allowing you to compare its findings with your own and to test – and possibly refine – their methodology?

If you're an overseas student in a social science field, would it be possible and interesting to make a comparative study between your home country and the UK, or to investigate a UK topic which would generate useful lessons that you could take home with you?

A word of warning. Avoid subjects set in the future, like 'What will happen if/when …?' The future is not susceptible of investigation, and you'll get very few if any marks for speculating about it.

Another word of warning. Students who are trying to choose a topic often say things like 'It would be interesting to look at …' or 'I'd like to write about …'. Notice how these expressions imply an approach: 'looking at' or 'writing about'. Notice too how lacking in focus – and consequently how intellectually sloppy – these terms are. Express yourself in a sloppy way and your thinking will be sloppy too. Creating a good dissertation involves much more than just looking at or writing about something. You must have a sharper, more focused, more structured approach: looking *for* rather than looking at, *investigating* rather than merely writing about. Whenever you catch yourself saying 'look at' or 'write about', say it again – repeat what you said – but this time substitute 'look for' or 'investigate' for those expressions. You'll find it easier to make progress.

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A very good way of sharpening up your approach is to *find your question or questions*. Some possible questions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

If you want to …	You might be asking …
Explain an empirical observation or finding, or a 'real-world' situation or event	Why did X … come about? … when it did? … in the form it did? Why did X happen when it did rather than at some other time? Why did X take the form it did rather than some other form? (The latter are 'counterfactual' questions)
Make a case study or a set of case studies	Why do I want to do this? What do I want to document? What will I do with my findings? What kinds of conclusion might I come to?
Test a theory, hypothesis or assertion about cause-and-effect mechanisms that you have found in the literature. (NB Avoid hypotheses that don't have a bearing on such mechanisms, otherwise the only thing that you will be able to say about what you have found is 'Fancy that!')	What experiment do I need to set up? What observations will provide me with evidence about cause-and-effect mechanisms? What information or other materials will I need? What does the theory etc. predict and how will I be able to test the accuracy of these predictions?
Evaluate policies, proposals, practices or particular actions of individuals, groups or organizations	What criteria can I use for such an evaluation? How can I identify and measure actual outcomes? How can I deal with projected outcomes without merely speculating about them? What basis can I use for value judgments (as to whether an outcome is good or bad, e.g.)?
Write a critique of one or more pieces of published work	Why do these publications merit a critique? What can I say that is new? What holes can I pick in their authors' reasoning?

Finally, a word of warning on choosing a topic: do not let your supervisor talk you into taking on a topic that you are not comfortable with. (Unless, of course, you want to find out at first-hand what it's like to have a nervous breakdown.) Students do sometimes think that their supervisor knows best, and take his or her advice despite their own misgivings, especially if they are taking a Master's in a field different from that of their Bachelor's degree. But supervisors often have their own agendas and some are not at all good at putting themselves in a student's shoes. Get as much informed advice as you can (or can accommodate: too much advice can be very inhibiting) but at the end of the day trust your own instincts and take your own decision.

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CHOOSING YOUR TITLE

Once you've begun thinking about your topic start to draw up a short list of alternative titles, especially if you are able or required to discuss your title with your supervisor. You will get a more useful reaction if you offer a selection than if you offer only one.

If you like the idea of a snazzy, eye-catching title, take advantage of the 'colon convention' that allows you to have a double title, with the two parts separated by a colon, e.g. 'Manners makyth man: a cross-cultural study of social etiquette at ballroom dances'.

If you have to submit your title at an early stage and won't have the opportunity later to change it, choose one that is not too restrictive, so that it can accommodate changes in direction or emphasis that you later find necessary. For example, 'Local democracy in the United Kingdom: a case study' offers more room for manoeuvre than 'Local byelections in the London Borough of Newham 1998-2000'.

DEVELOPING YOUR OUTLINE

Once you have settled on your topic and are reasonably clear about your research questions and the methodology and materials that you intend to use, think some more about your outline and try fleshing it out. Would it be appropriate to adopt one of the generic models shown in Table 3? Remember that no one size fits all, and that there's an infinite variety of possibilities. So start from the model that seems best suited to you and adapt it by inserting appropriate headings, e.g. India/China/Japan, or social development/ political development/economic development.

<u>Table 3</u>

<table>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction
    Why subject is interesting
    Research question
    Structure of remainder of dissertation
        ('In Chapter 2 …')
2. Methodology (inc. references to
        literature)
3. Materials (inc. references to literature)
4. Findings/observations/results
5. Discussion/analysis
    Synthesis of findings
    Significance of findings
    Critique of literature in light of findings
    Reflections on methodology and
        materials used
6. Conclusions
    Answer to research question, in brief
    Further implications of the study</td>
<td>1. Introduction
    Background/context
    Research question
    Materials
    Methodology
    Structure of remainder of dissertation
2. Literature review
3. Theme One
    Work done
    Findings
4. Theme Two
    Work done
    Findings
5. Theme Three
    Work done
    Findings
6. Discussion: Overview of themes
7. Conclusions</td>
</tr>
</table>

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Table 3 (continued)

1. Introduction Historical background Research questions Theoretical/conceptual framework Structure of remainder of dissertation 2. Literature review Current issues and debates Causal relationships Methodology Published case studies 3. Case study One Work done Findings 4. Case study Two Work done Findings 5. Discussion Overview of case studies Salient similarities and differences Explanation of similarities and differences Reflections on methodology & theory 7. Conclusions Light shed on research question, in brief Need for further research, in brief	1. Introduction Context of the study Personal interest in the subject Methodology and research questions Structure of remainder of dissertation 2. Overview of the literature Comparative studies (inc. criteria used) Evaluative studies (inc. criteria used) 3. Fieldwork Work done, obstacles encountered, etc. Results 4. Analysis (1): Comparison Application of comparative criteria Noteworthy findings 5. Analysis (2): Evaluation Application of evaluative criteria Noteworthy findings 6. Discussion Objectivity/subjectivity problems encountered Implications of findings, lessons learned Critique of the literature 7. Conclusions Where the investigation has led Value of the study

The best advice I can give you is, I think, that you should try to *elicit* – to *discover* – the structure that best suits your presentation, rather than *impose* a structure on it.

And remember too that your outline is unlikely to stay fixed: you will almost certainly want to modify it as your work progresses. Be reassured that there is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, it would be surprising if your outline did stay the same throughout your work.

THE 'ARGUMENT' TRAP

As you can see, all four generic outlines shown in Table 3 start with a question and progress in a reasonably logical and systematic way to an answer: the 'Q to A' model. In my experience, this model works well for dissertations and examiners appreciate it, not least because the list of contents and the final section of the Introduction provides 'signposts' that are straightforward and easy to follow. And for

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you as a writer, it provides a convenient way of transforming messy, untidy, jumping-about thinking into what has of necessity to be a linear presentation.

But some academics tell their students: 'I want to see a clear argument.' And so their students feel they have to say in their Introduction: 'In this dissertation I shall argue that …'

Consider the implications of this.

First, it requires you to say in your Introduction what your conclusions are. So you will have nothing fresh to say in your Conclusions section: you've already told the reader what your conclusions are. It's rather like starting to tell a joke and giving away the punch-line at the very beginning. Impact: zero!

Second, if your *thinking* started from a question and ended with an answer, a presentation that starts from the answer is positively obscuring the way in which your train of thought developed.

Third, while the Q-to-A model offers you as an outline a series of generic headings in a logical sequence, the 'argument' model does not. So you'll find yourself trying to identify 'themes' from your subject matter, and these will almost certainly overlap one on another rather than dividing your dissertation into the reasonably self-contained compartments that you need. (Try it out for yourself.)

Fourth, it casts doubt on your impartiality. 'In this dissertation I shall argue …' can be read as an indication that you embarked on your study not with an open mind but with your mind already made up.

Fifth, think about the lectures that you have been to where the lecturer has opened by saying 'In this lecture I shall argue …'. The chances are that he or she went on to criticize writers they disagree with, talk about others they do agree with, and bring in pieces of evidence they say support their point of view. This is opinionated stuff which academics can get away with – professors are paid to profess, are they not? – but this is not an example that it behoves you, a student, to follow.

Some academics thoroughly confuse students they're supervising by first asking what their research question is and then wanting to know what their argument is. 'Argument' is simply not compatible with the 'Q-to-A' model: they are two completely different modes of discourse – problem-solving and advocacy – and you will tie yourself in knots if you try to employ both at once.

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

You will need to find out early on in your dissertation work what literature there is on the topic you have chosen. Indeed, you may well have to do some literature searching and reading as part of the process of actually choosing your topic. This involves reviewing the literature.

Reviewing the literature is different from writing a literature review. Don't confuse the two. Reviewing the literature involves searching for sources, acquainting yourself with

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what is in them, looking for ideas, concepts, theories, information etc. that could have a bearing on your work. Writing a literature review involves writing a mini-essay that – for example – presents an overview of the literature that is relevant to your work, and highlights what is significant. (But there are different kinds of literature review: see below.)

When reviewing the literature, essentially you want to know what exists that might be useful to you. When you find something interesting, something potentially useful, make a photocopy and write a little memo to yourself. Collect these bits of paper in a folder marked 'literature'. Do be sure to write down full details of each source: it can be a frustrating business trying to recapture these details later.

At this early stage, do not spend valuable time starting to write your literature review. It's possible that your supervisor will ask you to show him or her a literature review early on, but try to get out of this. There are three reasons for avoiding this task. First, you don't know, when you're starting work, which pieces of literature will be significant for relevant to your future work and which ones will not be. Second, you are quite likely to uncover fresh sources as your work proceeds: it is not a good use of your time to redo work each time you find a new source. Third, it is only when you are well advanced that you will be able to be properly critical of the books and articles that you are using. Writing a literature review when you aren't on top of your material is one of the most mind-numbing, brain-deadening, sleep-inducing activities known to students. If your supervisor is insistent, try to get away with producing just a list of sources.

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

As you can see from Table 3, there are several different ways in which a literature review can be incorporated in a dissertation. You could have a dedicated chapter headed Literature Review, or you could incorporate literature review sections in chapters headed Methodology, Materials, Case Studies or whatever. You may also wish to include in your Discussion chapter one or more sections dealing with points arising from the literature in the light of the work you have been doing.

What should go into your literature review? This will depend on whether (a) your material actually *is* literature (as when your material is all garnered from what is written in books, pamphlets and/or articles that you find in the library); (b) the literature provides a 'springboard', a starting-point for your work; or (c) the literature simply provides background to a study involving the use of other kinds of material, such as data collected in fieldwork or from statistical records.

(a) If your material actually comprises literature, your literature review might take up as much as one-quarter or even one-third of your dissertation. It will certainly merit a chapter to itself. You could well be using a large number of sources – 30, 40 or even more. Clearly you have to be selective. You might choose to trace certain 'themes' that you can see coming up again and again; you might want to concentrate on current debates among academics, disagreements between writers, and unresolved

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issues; you might find, perhaps, that American writers consistently come to different conclusions from Europeans; you might be able to show how the conclusions that writers have come to have depended on the assumptions that they made at the outset, the particular data available to them, or their commitment to certain theories or beliefs. If you are able to operate at this kind of analytical level, you will be showing the examiners that you are able to read critically – looking *for* relevant material, not just gazing at the printed page – and you will earn their respect (and high marks).

Note that if your dissertation is literature-based, if your literature review is any good it will *not* take the form of a mere list of your sources with an abstract or summary of each one. If your literature review does take the form of such a list, it will give the examiners the (accurate) message that you have not 'got under the skin' of the literature, that you haven't got to grips with it, penetrated it and analysed it: that you haven't been able to read critically. You will be fortunate if your dissertation earns a pass mark.

(b) If the literature provides you with the starting-point for your dissertation but you are obtaining your material elsewhere, you will still have to provide an insightful, if not necessarily critical, literature review, but it will not need to be so intensive. If, for example, you are undertaking one or more case studies, you will need to review the existing case-study literature. You might draw out of it some lessons about methodology – e.g. methods of data-gathering and data analysis, dangers to beware of – and about the 'real world' subject matter of the case studies, such as features to look for. If you conclude your literature review chapter with these lessons, it will show the reader that you have actually made good use of the literature and lead on nicely to a chapter on your own investigation.

(c) If the literature provides no more than the context to and 'underpinnings' for your dissertation work – e.g. some historical background and a description of a well-known methodology that you are using for your fieldwork – there will be much less to be critical of and few if any lessons to be drawn. So a lengthy literature review will not be necessary, and you can allow yourself more words for your chapters on your fieldwork.

Four final points about your literature review:

1. It should be as comprehensive as you can make it. Don't run the risk of examiners saying that you have omitted to read something significant. If preparing a comprehensive literature review would require you to read hundreds of items, then almost certainly your topic (a) is too broad and should be narrowed down; and (b) has been 'done to death' by writers before you, leaving little or no scope for you to say anything new and interesting.

2. If your review as you have drafted it contains lengthy extracts from the literature, it is almost certainly a sign that you haven't fully digested what you have read. Now or later, take a fresh look at those extracts and for each one write down why it is significant. If your extracts consist largely of description, again, shorten them as

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much as you can. You earn marks for showing the examiners that you can appreciate significance, not for your ability to copy out extracts.

3. Some sources are more academically impressive than others when cited in a dissertation. In general, you would not be expected to present material that can be found in standard textbooks, certainly not to the extent of reproducing large chunks of text. Depending on the subject and your teachers' predilections, references to material appearing in broadsheet newspapers might be acceptable, more particularly factual records of recent events and the views of participants, and comment by reputable academics rather than journalists.

4. If your topic is one that is dealt with in several discipline-based literatures ('household formation' comes up in demography, sociology, economics and social policy; 'diaspora nationalism' in anthropology and international relations) your literature review will have to draw together the particular contributions of these diverse literatures. How to do this? First, get clear in your mind what the phenomenon is that you are concerned with (human behaviour and utterances, events, situations or whatever) and what observations have been made of it. (In your reading, ignore opinion, commentary, punditry: ask yourself 'What do I actually *know*?) If writers from disciplines notice different features of the phenomenon, you already have something interesting to write about. Second, identify the *questions* that writers from different disciplines use to 'interrogate' the phenomenon. Bringing these together could be rewarding for you. Third, identify the different ways of thinking that people in different disciplines employ. (Do demographers think differently from social policy academics? Yes. Do economists think differently from economic historians? Yes.) Fourth, identify the different conceptual frameworks that writers from different disciplines employ: the concepts, theories, etc., then make two lists: (a) a glossary of terms used in the various disciplinary languages; and (b) a multi-disciplinary list of concepts and theories. These should help you to gain an overview of the disciplines and how they fit together, or don't. Don't forget to include in your dissertation's Discussion and Conclusions a note on the problems that you have encountered in carrying out a multi-disciplinary study.

WRITING STYLE

Your dissertation will not get good marks if you write in an inappropriate style. Here are some hints:

AVOID writing in a polemical, pejorative and/or opinionated style. If your topic calls for you to make value judgments, save them for your Discussion section. In that section, first take your reasoning as far as you can without being judgmental. Only then should you apply your personal judgments. And when you do so, make it clear what criteria you are using, what the basis is for your judgments.

Your writing should so far as possible be objective. An academic dissertation is not the place for you to display anger, contempt or other 'negative' emotions, or to be sarcastic or abusive. Nor is it the place for 'positive' emotions such as pleasure or

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congratulation. Both of these cast doubt on your capacity for impartial investigation and sound judgment, especially if they find their way into early sections of your dissertation such as your Introduction or Literature Review.

AVOID writing in a chatty or journalistic style. ('Journalistic' tends to be used as a term of abuse among academics.) Try to use language in a rigorous and precise way.

AVOID writing like a textbook. There is no need to present yourself as an authority on your subject, and you run the risk that your writing will strike the reader as pretentious if you try.

AVOID long, complex sentences. Use short ones. Your meaning will be clearer. You know from your own experience of reading academic books and articles how infuriating it is when you have to translate every sentence into language that you can understand. Don't infuriate the examiners who will read your dissertation.

WORKING IN MICROSOFT WORD

Computer crashes and loss of work will earn you commiseration and sympathy but nothing else. Here are some suggestions based on my own experience.

BACK UP YOUR WORK FREQUENTLY AND PUT YOUR BACK-UP COPY SOMEWHERE SAFE! This is absolutely crucial. If you're going to be paranoid about anything, be paranoid about losing your work. Put it in your H-space, email it to your mother, put it on a floppy disk. If you're working on your own PC, you *must* put back-up copies elsewhere. Incidentally, if you're using floppy disks, work in Word 6.0/95 rather than Word 2000: your documents will take up only half as much space.

AT THE START OF EVERY DAY THAT YOU WORK ON YOUR DISSERTATION, CREATE A FRESH COPY OF YOUR WORK AND BEGIN FROM THAT. Click on [File], [Save as …] and then alter the file name from version 21 to version 22 or whatever. If you ever feel that you have gone down the wrong path, you'll be able to go back to an earlier version and start again.

SAVE YOUR WORK EVERY TIME YOU STOP TO THINK. Just click on [Ctrl] [S]. Get used to doing this automatically.

MAKE YOUR WORK EASIER TO READ, BOTH ON SCREEN AND ON PAPER. (1) Use a decent-sized font: I created this document in Arial 11.5 pt. (2) Use a line spacing of 1.2: Click on [Format], [Paragraph], then select 'Multiple' in the 'Line spacing' box and 1.2 in the 'At' box. (3) And you might find it helpful to use the character spacing feature: Click on [Format], [Font], [Character spacing], then select 'Expanded' in the 'Spacing' box and '0.3 pt' in the 'By' box.

There are more suggestions, on writing style, avoiding plagiarism, and citing your sources, in *Peter Levin's Guide to Reading and Writing, for undergraduates and Master's students*, which can be bought from the LSE Student Union shop or downloaded for a small charge from http://www.guides-for-students.com/

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