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Chapter 1

Examiners: What are they Looking for?

In this chapter you will learn …

- the key differences between an essay and a dissertation;
- exactly what examiners are looking for;
- what is meant by originality and how to achieve it;
- the range of abilities examiners are assessing.

A dissertation is quite different from anything you've been asked to do before. So your success will depend upon how well you make the adjustment.

The differences between essays and dissertations

The most obvious difference is size. Essays are relatively short, say, 2,000–3,000 words, whereas an undergraduate dissertation can be 8,000–12,000 words, perhaps more in some cases. This means we must analyse more extensively a larger body of material, critically evaluating it using more detailed and subtle arguments.

Genuine thinking

But along with its larger scope, a dissertation also affords us the opportunity to work more independently, so we can explore our own original ideas. This may sound odd, but it's designed as an opportunity to do some genuine thinking. Many of the courses in higher education allow students to slip into the comfortable, undemanding role as mere recyclers of received opinions, while teachers opt for the corresponding and easier task of teaching students *what* to think, rather than *how* to think.

After all, teachers are appointed for their research, so they are seen as the experts, the gold standard in ideas. Therefore, it seems sensible to reproduce their ideas, rather than think for yourself. Consequently, when many students are asked to express themselves they are not expressing

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their ideas, but what they think their teachers think they ought to think. They are not involved in what they are writing at a deeper level. They do not share the needs of a genuine thinker.

Genuine thinking

1 You're using *your* ideas.
2 You're not just recycling the ideas of others.
3 You are guided by the evidence whichever way it points.
4 You're thinking about your thinking.
5 You choose the focus, direction and organisation of your work.

Your dissertation may be the first time you've been asked to do some genuine thinking. It gives you the opportunity not only to choose the topic and questions you want to investigate, but also to develop your abilities to interpret texts, weigh up empirical evidence and come to your own measured judgement. You are not just setting out a simple catalogue of what you believe to be right answers, nor are you just laying down a thesis and defending it. A mature thinker is guided by the evidence, whichever way it points. She doesn't just decide what she believes to be the case and then search around for the evidence to support it.

The process, not just the product

Genuine thinking is also characterised by the ability to think about our thinking: to be aware of the process of thought, not just the product. So dissertations are equally concerned with showing how we validate our results; that we understand and can justify the research methods we've chosen in order to gather and evaluate our evidence. It must be possible for anyone else to read the same passages from the literary, philosophical or historical texts we have chosen as our material and come to their own interpretation to compare with ours, or conduct the same empirical research to see how their results compare with our own.

A dissertation will involve you thinking about your thinking.

You decide on the focus, direction and organisation of your work. You choose the questions for which you want answers or the hypothesis you want to test. It gives you the opportunity to produce a substantial piece of independent work, which reflects a wider range of your skills and abilities. In the process, you will show that you can manage a large research project, organise your own schedule, set targets, maintain your motivation throughout and produce a well reasoned and organised presentation of

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the results. In short, you will show yourself, your examiners and future employers that you have the personal resources to take on a large project and succeed.

If this sounds daunting, it is only because the demands are new. They are not beyond your grasp.

Dissertations

1 Work independently.
2 Original ideas.
3 Genuine thinking.
4 You choose the topic.
5 Justify your research methods.

Examiners

But, of course, in practical terms, if we're going to do something well, we need to know why we are doing it: we need to know what examiners are looking for. In each stage of producing the dissertation, examiners will be looking for evidence that we can do all of the following:

1 **Identify a problem** – that raises particularly interesting issues worth researching.
2 **Analyse it** – produce significant, interesting questions that are capable of sustaining an in-depth investigation.
3 **Explore the literature** – in an organised, systematic way to show that our research is underpinned by existing theory. In effect we are showing examiners that we can educate ourselves about the topic.
4 **Design a research strategy** – that uses the most appropriate research methods to gather the evidence that answers our questions.
5 **Devise the most effective data-collection tools** – instruments, like questionnaires and interview questions, which are valid and reliable in gathering the evidence we need.
6 **Process the material** – analyse the evidence we gather and critically assess it.
7 **Draw conclusions** – on the basis of this material.
8 **Write the dissertation** – present our findings in accordance with the established academic practices.

The main purpose of dissertations is not just to communicate the results of your research, but, equally important, to show examiners that the methods underpinning your research have been chosen well and used skilfully.

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The purpose of dissertations =

To communicate the results
+
To show you have chosen the most appropriate methods and used them skilfully.

Originality

However, your dissertation should show examiners not only that you have the abilities to convey complex ideas clearly and develop arguments consistently, but that you have come to new and interesting conclusions: you have broken new ground. For many students this is the most frightening of all their concerns. Your dissertation might not have the originality of a PhD thesis, but, still, it's assumed that it will advance, even in a small way, our knowledge and understanding of certain ideas, issues and methodology. It's a common feature of almost all research that progress is very often the cumulative effect of such small steps taken by many researchers.

If this seems daunting, it need not be. Although you're not just recycling the received opinions of those regarded as authorities in your subject, you will still need to show that your research builds on published research and uses established methods, so you don't have to start from nothing. And besides, there are many ways in which your work can be original: in terms of the subject you choose, in the way you approach it, the client group or material you focus on, and the particular data you collect. Remember, you don't have to show that what you plan to do has never been done before. In many cases what's original is that you have done it for yourself, rather than rely on other people's research.

Originality

1. The subject you choose.
2. Your approach.
3. The client group or material.
4. The data collected.

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- You might apply an existing theory to a new area, or test other people's findings and ideas for yourself using different subjects.

Intellectual history EXAMPLE

You might know of a number of studies that have compared the work of the nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill and the Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle, but you know of no studies that have compared their respective theories of history.

- Your research might build on existing studies to follow up new leads, or to refine or qualify the findings of earlier studies.

The media EXAMPLE

There are studies that have explored the way media representation of women has changed over the last two decades, so you might decide to explore this, focusing on one particular type of publication, say, women's magazines.

- The instruments you design might yield new, surprising evidence.

Questionnaires and interviews EXAMPLE

You might design a questionnaire that asks questions not posed before, or examines a group not previously examined. You might conduct interviews using a series of well-crafted questions that reveal new, fascinating insights into a problem.

- You might devise exercises for subjects to complete, which produce evidence of behaviour from a perspective not seen before.

Study skills EXAMPLE

You might decide to test the belief that the study skills problems experienced by most students at universities are due largely to the neglect of these skills in schools. So you design tests and a questionnaire from which you discover that there appears to be not one cause but a number.

Abilities

Beyond originality, of course, examiners are looking to see how well you have developed a certain range of abilities. To give you a clearer idea of this, look at the table below.

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Understanding	Show a clear grasp of the issues involved.
Analysis	Reveal the implications of the concepts used to define the problem and the possible causes that might explain it.
Creative abilities	Devise questions and hypotheses and the means of answering and testing them, respectively.
Problem solving	Recognise problems and their possible solutions.
Comparison	Identify differences and similarities.
Criticism	Critically assess evidence and arguments.
Inductive and deductive abilities	Come to conclusions based on relevant, consistent arguments and reliable evidence.
Self-organisation, self-motivation	Manage and sustain a large research project.
Writing skills	Present findings in clear, well planned written work.

Every research project uses these abilities, albeit in different measures. A certain range of abilities will dominate some projects, while they are less obvious in others. For example, projects like the following are philosophical and literary in nature:

'The Theories of History of J. S. Mill and Thomas Carlyle'
'Novelistic sympathy and distance in the novels of George Eliot'
'Literary influences on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood'

Although you would be using all the abilities in some measure, your work would be dominated by your analytic, comparative and deductive abilities.

In contrast, if you were working on projects like the following, which depend upon methods of gathering empirical evidence, your work would be largely taken up with your creative, problem-solving and inductive abilities.

'The main causes of the study skills problems of university students'
'The effects of the smoking ban on pubs and restaurants in Bolton'
'Young people's attitudes to, and experience of, racism'

In the following chapters you will see the importance of designing your project to ensure it not only interests you, but uses those abilities you enjoy using and are good at. To some extent the subject you're studying will dictate this, but a lot is left to your own preferences. At an early stage it's

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worth consulting your supervisor, whose experience will be invaluable in designing a project that matches perfectly your abilities and preferences.

Summary

1. A dissertation is your opportunity to show that you can genuinely think.
2. You have to think about the process as well as the product of your thought.
3. You can show your work is original in a number of simple ways.
4. Choose a project that matches your interests and abilities.

What next?

In designing such a large project that suits your particular abilities and sustains your interest you will have to draw upon the advice and experience of your supervisor. In the next chapter we will look at how you can get the best out of this important relationship.

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