Dissertation Writing

A Practical Guide

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The submission date for the M.Ed. dissertation is the 31st August in the year following registration for the dissertation year.

This is an excerpt from the full Dissertation Writing Guide downloadable from the School of Education website
Introduction

This guide to writing your M.Ed. dissertation gives some simple and practical advice on getting started, getting organised, dividing the huge task into less formidable pieces and working on those pieces. It includes a suggested structure and a guide to what should go in each section. This guide is designed to answer any of the practical questions that may arise in the course of your dissertation writing.

Getting Started - Writing a Dissertation Outline

Writing a dissertation seems a long and difficult task but it will be more manageable if broken down into smaller sections. Writing a dissertation outline will help you make such a start. A dissertation outline is several pages containing chapter headings, sub-headings and perhaps some other notes and comments. Once you have a list of chapters and under each chapter heading a reasonably complete list of things to be reported or explained you have struck a great blow against writer's block. When you sit down to type, your aim is no longer a dissertation but to write a paragraph or section about one of your subheadings. It helps to start with a manageable one; this gets you into the habit of writing and gives you self-confidence. Often the Methodology chapter is a good starting point: explain carefully what you did and how in a logical order.

Once you have made an outline of the entire dissertation you need to make an outline of each chapter. To do so assemble all the information or data that you will use in it and put them in the most logical order. Once you have found the most logical order, note down the key words and use these as sub-headings. These sub-headings provide a skeleton for your chapter outline. The way you structure your data (the headings you use, etc.) will also be informed by the theoretical framework that you have constructed from your literature review.

Once you have an outline, discuss it with your supervisor. This step is important as s/he will have useful suggestions. Once you and your supervisor have agreed on a logical structure, you will need a copy of this outline to hand when writing the chapters. This will help you keep to the agreed structure. Agree a timetable with your supervisor: a list of dates for when you will give the various drafts of each chapter to him/her. This structures your time and provides intermediate targets. If you merely aim to have the whole thing done by some distant date, you can deceive yourself and procrastinate more easily. Setting short-term targets will focus your attention.

Organising Your Dissertation Writing

To help organise your dissertation writing you will need some sort of filing system. Open a word file for each chapter and one for the references. You can put notes in these, as well as text. While doing something for Chapter n, you may think "Oh I must refer back to/discuss this in Chapter m" and so you put a note to do so in the Chapter m file. Or you may think of something interesting or relevant for that chapter. When you come to work on that chapter, the more such notes you have accumulated, the easier it will be to write. Make a back-up of these files at least every day.
You should also have a physical filing system: a collection of folders with chapter numbers on them. This again will help you to organise your information and data. Your files will contain notes, references, papers, journal articles and web references relevant to that chapter. If you have a collection of audio tapes you will need to have a storage system so that you know when it was recorded and who is being interviewed.

**Dissertation Drafting**

It would be nice if clear, precise prose leapt easily from the keyboard, but it usually does not. It is easier to improve something that is already written than to produce text from nothing. Start by putting down a draft (as rough as you like) for your own purposes, then clean it up for your supervisor to read. Word-processors are wonderful in this regard: in the first draft you do not have to start at the beginning, you can leave gaps, you can put in little notes to yourself, and then you can clean it all up later. Your supervisor will expect to read each chapter in draft form. S/he will then return it to you with suggestions and comments. As you write your dissertation, your writing is almost certain to improve. Often several drafts are required before a satisfactory end product is reached.

**Writing Style**

Obviously each individual has their own writing style. However the dissertation text should be clear and good grammar and thoughtful writing will make the dissertation easier to read. Slang and informal writing should be avoided. Short, simple phrases and words are often better than long ones. On the other hand, there will be times when you need a complicated sentence because the idea is complicated. Sometimes it is easier to present information and arguments as a series of numbered points, rather than as one or more long and awkward paragraphs. A list of points is usually easier to write. You should be careful not to use this presentation too much: your dissertation must be a connected, convincing argument, not just a list of facts and observations. Graphs and diagrams should be used where appropriate but be mindful of overuse. One important stylistic choice is between the active voice ("I interviewed the teacher...") and passive voice ("The teacher was interviewed..."). The passive voice makes it easier to write ungrammatical or awkward sentences and is the preferred choice for academic writing.

**Presentation**

Note: The following requirements are taken from the University Calendar (Part 2) and are mandatory.

The dissertation must be printed on good quality A4 white paper. The type must be black and not less than 10 point. A size 12 font with line-and-a-half or double spacing is recommended for the body of the dissertation. Margins at the binding edge should be not less than 35mm and other margins not less than 20mm.

The two copies of the dissertation for examination should be soft bound (not ring-bound) and printed on one side of the page only. A dissertation which has been examined and in
which all necessary corrections have been completed must be printed on both-sides of white paper (of a weight of at least 90 gsm) and securely bound in hard covers with dark blue cloth. The degree for which the dissertation has been submitted, the year, and the name of the candidate, in that order should be lettered in gold, in 24 pt or larger type, down the spine. The title must also appear in gold lettering on the front cover of the dissertation. The year on the spine should be the year of final submission (not the year of initial submission) where there is a difference.

Pages should be numbered consecutively throughout the text, including those pages incorporating photos or diagrams which are included as whole pages. Appendices should be named alphabetically. Page numbers should be located centrally at the bottom of the page and approximately 20mm above the edge of the page.

Where an acronym or abbreviation is used it should be spelt out the first time it occurs - e.g. "The ESAS (Educational Studies Association of Ireland)". Where used in text numbers should be spelt out - e.g. "twenty five percent". In tables numbers should be represented as figures - e.g. "25%". Centuries should be spelled out - e.g. "sixteenth century". Years should be represented in figures - e.g. "1994".

Title page

The title page of the dissertation should contain the following information:

1. The full title of the dissertation and the subtitle if any
2. The full name of the author
3. The award for which the dissertation is submitted to the University
4. The name of the University
5. The name of the supervisor of the research
6. As a last line the statement "Submitted to the University of Dublin, Trinity College, Month, Year"

Declaration

A declaration must be included on a single sheet following the title page. The required form is: "I hereby declare that this is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for the award of a degree at this or any other University. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation on request. (Signature/name/date)"

Summary

A summary of the methods used and the major findings of the dissertation must follow the declaration. It must not exceed two pages of typescript. The summary provides a synopsis of the dissertation and should state clearly the nature and scope of the research undertaken and the contribution made to knowledge of the subject treated. A brief statement of the method of investigation where appropriate, an outline of the major divisions or principal arguments of the work and a summary of any conclusions reached should be included.
Abstract

An abstract not exceeding 300 words or one page in length must be submitted loose with each copy of the dissertation. The abstract should be printed in single spacing and should indicate the author and title of the dissertation in the form of a heading. Two copies of the abstract must be submitted loose with the final hard-bound copy.

It is best written towards the end, but not at the very last minute because you will probably need several drafts. It should be a distillation of the dissertation: a concise description of the problem(s) addressed, your method of solving it/them, your results and conclusions. An abstract must be self-contained. Usually they do not contain references. When a reference is necessary, its details should be included in the text of the abstract. Check the word limit.

The abstract is often the most read part of a dissertation. Writing a good abstract is no easy task.

Acknowledgements

A formal statement of acknowledgements must be included in the dissertation, following the summary. This is a page of thanks to those who have helped in the course of the research.

Table of Contents

A table of contents is included after the acknowledgements. It helps to include the subheadings within each chapter, as well as the chapter titles as this makes it easier to find sections quickly.

The following are included if relevant, following the table of contents:

List of Appendices

Normally on a single sheet - in alphabetical order

List of tables and illustrations

All tables, photographs, diagrams etc., in the order in which they occur in the text, should be listed.

List of Abbreviations

Normally on a single sheet - in alphabetical order
Note: All of the above pages are numbered in roman numerals. Page 1 is the first page of Chapter 1. The page number is not normally printed on the title page. Examples of the above are included at the end of this document.

Dissertation Structure

The following is a suggested dissertation structure. The structure of your dissertation may vary according to the nature of your research work.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction should lay the foundations for the remainder of the dissertation. It outlines the broad field of study and then leads into the focus of the research problem. This section is short and aims to orient the readers and grasp their attention.

It should include the following:
- Background to the research - this may take a historical approach
- A brief overview of the research undertaken
- An introductory overview of the methodology
- An outline of the dissertation - each chapter is briefly described in this section

In the introduction it is important not to overestimate the reader's familiarity with your topic. Give an introduction that is appropriate for a person with a general background in the area. This section might go through several drafts to make it read well and logically, while keeping it short. For this section it is a good idea to ask someone who is not a specialist to read it and to comment. Is it an adequate introduction? Is it easy to follow? There is an argument for writing this section - or at least making a major revision of it - towards the end of the dissertation writing. Your introduction should tell the reader where the dissertation is going, and this may become clearer during the writing.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers and aims to build a theoretical foundation upon which the research is based. In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing). Depending on the scope of your literature review it may need to be divided into a number of sections. Ideally, if you have been keeping up with the literature over the course of your research, and if you have made notes about important papers you will already have much of the hard work done. If you have summarised those papers, then you have some good starting points for the review.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to collect the research data. It should include the following:

- Statement of the research objectives/goals/questions
- Rationale for the research approach taken
- Description of each instrument used to collect data and details of pilot studies carried out.
- Rational for each data collection instrument used
- Sampling and administration of research instruments (for example, when, where, who, response rates and time frame)
- Details of subjects and sources of data e.g. location, school size, teacher profiles etc. Ethical considerations must be borne in mind
- Triangulation
- Limitations of the methodology
- Computer programs used to analyse the data (if any), with justifications for their use.

The appendices should contain copies of the instruments used e.g. questionnaires. Transcriptions of interviews and computer printouts should also be included as appendices where appropriate.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Chapter 4 presents the research findings. Tables and figures of results may be necessary to illustrate patterns in the data presented in this chapter. This chapter should be clearly organised and may need to broken into clearly defined sections. Chapter 4 should be restricted to the presentation and analysis of the collected data, without drawing general conclusions or comparing results to those of other researchers, which were discussed, in the literature review. The following chapter (Chapter 5) will discuss the findings within the context of the literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Results

Chapter 5 discusses the research within the context of the literature and provides the 'link' between the research results and conclusions arising out of the research. The discussion should explore how the findings fit into the existing body of knowledge: Are they consistent with current theories? Or do they give new insights? The literature discussed in Chapter 2 should be addressed and 'new' relevant literature may be introduced. The implications of the research findings for educational policy and practice may be explored if appropriate. Suggestions for further research may be given.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter is usually reasonably short and may include a summary of findings. The implications and recommendations arising out of the research should be highlighted.
Bibliography

A bibliography containing references to all books, articles, journals, web sites etc. cited in the text is included following the final chapter. The citations must conform to the recommended standard as outlined in the M.Ed. Handbook.

Appendices

Any material that should be in the dissertation but which would break up the flow or bore the reader unbearably is included as an appendix. Some things that are typically included in appendices are interview transcripts, questionnaires, computer programs and data files that are too large to be represented simply in the main body of the dissertation.

Special Forms of Dissertations

Whilst this structure is applicable to the majority of dissertations, it may be altered in accordance with the research being undertaken. In the case of dissertations that involve the development of computer software the above structure may be amended as necessary in consultation with the project supervisor. The software will need to be presented as part of the dissertation assessment. Dissertations which take an ‘Action Research’ approach may also follow a slightly different format to that outlined above.

Referencing

Please see the M.Ed. Handbook for details of the APA referencing conventions which are used in the School of Education.

It is important that whenever you use the ideas of other writers, or quote directly from their works, that you acknowledge them in the text and in a list of references at the end. As others who read your work may wish to follow up on a particular author it is important that references are complete and accurate. Failure to acknowledge sources may be regarded as plagiarism. The University has established regulations in relation to plagiarism (section G of the University Calendar). It is important to understand what constitutes plagiarism as it is the action and not the intention that constitutes this offence.

Using the World Wide Web as an Information Source

All information resources should be critically evaluated no matter what their format. This is especially important for electronic resources as there is no quality control on the Internet and it is essential to verify the authenticity and accuracy of World Wide Web sites if you are using them for research or academic purposes.

Submission Date

The submission date for the M.Ed. dissertation is the 31st August in the year following registration for the dissertation year.
An Investigation of Students’ Use of IMS Software in Irish Second-Level Schools: A Case Study

John Williams

Master in Education

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Supervisor: Dr. John Murphy

Submitted to the University of Dublin, Trinity College, May 2008
ABSTRACT

John Williams

An Investigation of Students’ Use of IMS Software in Irish Second-Level Schools: A Case Study

The 1990's has seen a second coming of expectation for computers in education, and the World Wide Web would seem to have considerable potential for delivering education programmes. New computer software programmes, called Instructional Management Systems, have been developed to facilitate the management of instruction and communication among students and teachers who are involved with the delivery of Web-based course materials.

The case study investigates the use of an Instructional Management System, called TopClass, by students in two second-level Irish schools. The research is mainly qualitative in nature, although a quantitative element is employed in assessing the frequency and regularity of students' use of the system. The research data was collected from the systems' log of student activity, focus group interviews and questionnaires.

The research findings indicate varying levels of use by the different students in each school and mixed reactions to, and use of, the various TopClass features (email, discussion group, testing feature, structure and content). The students' use of TopClass was constrained by a number of technical problems. Students were motivated by the use of TopClass given the novelty factor involved, the opportunity to use computers, and the chance to be in direct control of their own learning.

The factors that impacted on students' use of the system are explored. Students' overall use was influenced by their motivation, as characterised by their willingness to expand the time and effort to use the system, and the availability of access, both in school and outside the formal school environment. The teaching implications of the findings are outlined, and appropriate roles for TopClass in the second level setting are suggested.

The findings of the case study underline the need for technical support, and provision for student access outside the formal school environment, to aid the implementation process. A shift in students' learning culture, from passive receptors of information and content to active participants in the learning process, is also required to facilitate the implementation of Web based components such as TopClass into the second-level environment.