**Teaching and Learning Centre podcasts: the DISSERTATION SERIES**

**A few basics**

My name is Helen Green and I’m from the LSE’s Teaching and Learning Centre. I’d like to start this special dissertation series, by going over a few basics. In this podcast, I’ll talk about some general features of the dissertation and go over the various sections that are usually part of a dissertation.

A dissertation is a particular kind of academic project. It’s an opportunity to study a specific topic or issue in depth. Usually, this is a topic that you choose, and it’s an opportunity for you to apply the knowledge and skills that you have developed over your course. Many dissertations feature empirical research – that is, they involve the direct or indirect observation of a phenomenon and some collection and analysis of data based on that observation. “Data” here can be numerical, textual, recent or archival, images, film. And they can be collected and analysed using a huge variety of research methods. Another form of the dissertation is a literature-based essay that provides a detailed, critical analysis of a specific research question, without the application of empirical research methods.

There are different disciplinary approaches and priorities when it comes to research. Each department has its own practices around the dissertation - including word counts and what is included in the word count, preferred formatting and referencing style. It’s important to check the specific requirements for your dissertation in your own department.

Every dissertation is unique! But there are academic conventions about presenting research. I’d like to go over the various sections you’re likely to find in most dissertations. Each section has its own particular function

**Abstract**

The abstract should give a clear, concise summary of the research. It succinctly presents the research questions, the research design and methods, and the key findings and main conclusion of the research.

It should make clear why and how you did what you did, and what the results and implications are. It is a very short text – probably not more than a page – and should be a text that can stand alone.

The abstract is short – but don’t underestimate how important this piece of text is. Usually it is the first thing your readers will read. If it is poorly written, they’re not likely to read any further (unless they’re a marker – in which case, they are starting with a poor impression!).

**Acknowledgements**

Many dissertations include an acknowledgements section. This is where students take the opportunity to mention individuals or organisations who have been helpful or who have supported the research. This could include professors, advisers, colleagues, funding bodies, family, and research participants.

**Table of contents**

Your dissertation will likely be at least a few dozen pages long. The table of contents gives your reader a quick picture of the overall structure of your work. Have a look at a few tables of contents in past dissertations and notice how specific section titles and subtitles can reveal what the research is about. Notice especially the difference between section headings like “literature review” or “part two” compared to more informative sub-titles that encapsulate a main idea in the section. When you glance at the table of contents, in addition to seeing how the sections are structured – you can also see whether they are balanced and flow in a logical way. This is another part of the dissertation that is prepared at the end of the writing process.

**Introduction**

The introduction presents the topic and the broad research question. It should expand on the abstract and go further to explain why the research is important. It might also include some background or inspiration behind the research, and can already begin to raise some potential contributions of your research – why is should be done. Importantly, the introduction gives the reader a plan or “map” to your dissertation – letting them know how you have organised the work in the various sections.

**The literature review**

In the literature review, you present the current state of research in around your topic. You explore debates around the relevant key concepts and ideas. You present what is understood currently. You might also show where there is a gap in what is known and argue that further research is needed in that particular area.

In the literature review you develop your particular approach to thinking about these issues – how you understand the issues and ideas: your conceptual framework. In many cases, the literature review section ends with the specific research questions to be addressed in the study. If you’d like to know more, keep an eye out for my podcast specifically about how to review the literature and how to write a literature review.

**Methods**

The next section I’d like to cover is the methods section. Of course, depending on what kind of project your doing – empirical or literature-based - the nature of this will vary. Here, you present how you went about the research, what sources or material you used, and if it is relevant to your study – what kind of people you worked with.

The methods section gives an overview of the research design – what you chose to do or use – and a justification for these choices. For empirical research, you should cover methods of collecting AND analysing your data. Whether you use primary data (that you collect) or secondary data (that has already been collected by someone else, but that you will analyse), you need to explain how you gathered it or selected it and why you made the choices you made.

Similarly for the methods of analysis, think of describing the process you followed in a way that is specific and reasoned enough so that readers could feasibly replicate the study themselves, following your method.

**Results / Findings**

Here again, there can be variations in how the results or findings of research is presented. You will need to check how it’s done in your field. For example, quantitative studies often have a clear separation between the results and the interpretation of what they show. Sometimes this is called “results” and “findings”, separately. Dissertations presenting qualitative research might have only one section that presents the overall findings as the results and their interpretation together. Mixed methods approaches are yet another possibility. Here again, it can be helpful to have a look at other dissertations in your department, and of course, ask your supervisor.

**Discussion**

This is where you reflect on how your own findings relate to the wider context in which it is located. You can refer back to the rationale that you gave for your research in the literature review, and discuss what your own research has added in this context.

For empirical research, the discussion is a sort of “counterpoint” to the literature review. In the literature review, you present the understanding around your topic “in theory”. In the “results” or “findings” sections, you report what you have observed and analysed empirically. Now, these two stories might match up well – or you might find discrepancies. This is the basis of the discussion.

It is important to show that you appreciate the limitations of your research, and how these may affect the validity or usefulness of your findings. Given the acknowledged limitations, you can report on the implications of your findings for theory, research, and practice.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion section of dissertations tends to be much shorter than the Discussion. You should re-iterate your research questions and your main findings, and highlight what you think are the key implications of what you have found. These implications could be theoretical ones – or methodological implications – or implications for practice.

You may want to reflect on broader questions, like you think you have learned from doing your dissertation. Or whether what you found what you might have expected, and what contribution your findings could potentially make.

**References**

Your references should follow the conventions of the referencing style you choose. All the works that are cited in the text should be listed in the references. It’s also important to check that all the works in your reference list are actually cited in the text.

**Appendices**

Check with your department whether or not the material included in the appendices count toward the word limit for your dissertation. Appendices include items that a reader might be interested in seeing, but which would disrupt the flow if you included them in the main text. This might include any research instruments or protocols that you used (surveys, questionnaires) or some examples of your data (interview transcripts, for example). If you include such items as appendices, be sure that refer to them within the main text where necessary.

Note that nothing that you consider crucial to your argument should be relegated to the appendices. If it is important, it should be in the main text. What I mean is, the appendices are not a handy way to circumvent the word limit!

In terms of how exactly to structure your dissertation – this is a decision that you will have to make. It has to do with the nature of your project, the academic discipline you’re working in, and how you want to go about your research. These are decisions that require much reflection, and ideally, discussion with your supervisor.

In the materials that are offered together with this podcast, you’ll see a compilation of suggestions for dissertation structures that I’ve gathered from different departments: which sections to include, and how to use the 10,000 words across the various sections. Let me make it very clear – there is no one formula. There is no single right way to structure your dissertation. As you can see different departments propose very different ideas.

The important thing to remember is that you should develop some ideas about how you’ll put your research story together early on. Thinking of the structure can help you think of how the various parts fit together and flow logically. This is the “narrative” aspect of your dissertation.

Research can be unpredictable. Over the months, the work on any research project starts and stops. There are quiet times, and there are periods of intense activity and productivity. You may choose a certain course of inquiry, only to decide later that it doesn't work very well – and then change your question, or change the way you investigate it. This is normal! We learn from doing research! We are more experienced, more learned researchers toward the end of the project than we were at the beginning! (And by the way, the research process is the topic of my next podcast.)

But just because the research process might seem somewhat chaotic – this doesn’t mean that the dissertation can be chaotic. Your final written product should be structured and orderly. It should have a clear focus, and it should tell a story. Alongside actually conducting the research, the telling of the story is one of principle challenges of the dissertation.

I hope this has given you some ideas. Please check back for my other podcasts in this special dissertation series. I’ll be talking more about the research process, reviewing the literature, and making the most of your resources. Feel free to get in touch with us with your comments about this podcast. You can use the feedback form we’ve put online, or send us your thoughts to tlc@lse.ac.uk.

Thanks for listening.