



How to plan and conduct research
for your dissertation? A step by step guide.

Contents

Section 1: Plan Your Research	1
Do you have your topic in hand?	4
Do you have any prior knowledge?	5
Do you have any questions or keywords in your mind at this point which you will need the	
Data for?	5
Section 2: LOOKING FOR THE INFORMATION?	2
You should know	6
• What you are not looking for?	6
• How would you use this information?	7
• Where will you need to go to get it?	7
Where to look	7
• Print sources	9
Books	9
• Articles/Journals	9
Online sources	8
• WebPages	9
• Blogs	9
EBooks	9
• Search Engines and The Hidden Web	10
• Where else?	10
Professional Bodies and Associations	11
Theses and Dissertations	11

Section 3: HOW TO KEEP TRACK OF EVER EXPANDING INFORMATION? 3

Several ways to do that	12
• Create checklists	12
• Bibliographic management software	13
• Always keep a note book and pen handy	13

Section 4: HOW TO EVALUATE THE INFORMATION? 4

Author	14
Date of Publication	14
Edition/Revision	14
Publisher	14
Objective Reasoning	15
Targeted Audience	15
Reviews	15

Section 5: Data Evaluation Criteria 15

Authority	16
Relevance	16
Completeness	16
Accuracy	16
Bias	16

PLANNING Your Research

Planning is the utmost important part of whatever you do in your life leave alone the most important part of your educational career, Dissertation Research. Prior planning of how you have to get through this strenuous task of conducting a thorough insightful research is detrimental to your success. You have to figure out all the possible factors which can help or subdue you during the process of research because if you don't plan you will be inadvertently halted at some point in the process which would further shake the roots of your research and your schedule which of course you don't want to happen.

Do You Have A Dissertation Research Topic?

A Dissertation Topic is like the birth stone of your research coming forth. If you have a clear and specific topic relating your ideas and research ambitions to the core of the work you are about to do, rest assured: you are going places.

There are two basic ways to select and finalize a dissertation topic.

1. The advisor gives you a couple of topics he thinks need to be investigated. You can choose a topic from within these but not without looking through the wall. What this means is that you have to see if the research is feasible for you to conduct or not.

There can be a lot of hurdles in the course of research and they can put shackle son your feet at any point. The major advantage of choosing atopic from within the advised topics is that your advisor is naturally obliged to help you with whatever you need. After all he is the one who tossed this topic.

2. The other way around to choosing a topic is to look for a topic by yourself. Taking this route you will need to conduct a detailed background research about the ideas of the topic in your head and you will need to toil through all the available material, be it published material or online.

This is a very time taking and demanding route and students usually avoid it in order to save the given time for the actual research itself. If taken, one has to be very patient and persistent in order to get to a point where you have all the matter you needed to write yourself a dissertation research topic.

Do you have any prior knowledge?

Even though most of the students know they would have to write a dissertation at some stage of their career and for that they will need a thorough research but seldom they plan it from the beginning and when they are asked for a dissertation they just fall upon themselves with an incomplete or rushed research.

This is where prior knowledge comes in to play. It's always an added advantage to be on your mark before the race starts to get to know the track better. This prior knowledge can come to you by several sources. All you have to do is start planning for the research a little earlier than it starts. You can just have a thought in your mind about any topic and just start looking for the answers to the questions it raises.

With relevant previous knowledge you are also making it easier for you to go out and find the resources for the research and collect the data. Usually the toughest part of a research is to look out and select credible resources for the data collection process and with prior knowledge this problem is somewhat resolved.

Also if you have some previous expertise on the topic you will be able to scan the document under consideration critically and you would know right away if it says something contradictory or factually unacceptable. On the other hand if you are writing your dissertation from the scratch you have all the possibilities of choosing and writing something which is not valid or holds a bad credibility. Doing this you will definitely put a bad mark on your dissertation and lose the credibility yourself which would result in lower grades in the end.

Do you have any questions or keywords in your mind at this point which you will need the data for?

A question is what keeps us going. If all the questions in the world were answered we would have been so still. Looking for an answer is what drives us towards a certain point which we consider success.

Before you start the whole big research if you have some amount of previous knowledge on the topic it's given that you will have some question in your mind which you need the answers for. These questions put

Your thoughts on a track which defines the methods you are going to use in order to find the answers for them. During the course of your planning phase whenever you find a potential question during a literature review always note it down.

Also during the course of background research you will come across some words which can be the torch bearers of your research and give your research another amazing stance every now and then. Note down these keywords as soon as you see them. These keywords will help you go out and search for the material especially on the web.

Doing this once you are ready to start the research you will have a list of questions and keywords to look the answers for which would be an immense help once you start searching.

Looking for the Information?

When you have to look for the information for your dissertation research you can't just go out and start reading all kinds of books and all kinds of web sources. This could sooner or later take you to the answers but still you will have a lot of time wasted.

The better way is to plan how you are going to look for the information before you start. There are 4 basic things which you need to be clear about before you start.

You should know:

What you are looking for?

Section 2: Looking for the Information? | What you are looking for?

It's very simple. Just like when you go out shopping and you need to buy a certain color garments. You end up buying the same color most often because you had made up your mind already which inadvertently takes your attention towards that color.

The same goes with your dissertation research. If you know what you are looking for you end up finding it sooner or later. You have to have some idea of what you are looking for, be it in the form of questions or keywords, anything which will make you specific about research.

The reason you should have a research outline made up in your mind is that you cannot search and look at everything and you have to find the relevant material. Doing this you will also be able to list down the places where you are supposed to go and look for the information as this is very important part of the research because you cannot afford to go to all the libraries in the town.

You should also be specifically oriented about the language and other specifications which can take you to an entirely different direction during the research if not taken care of. These minor arrangements can change the face of your research if considered saving you a lot of time and toil.

What you are not looking for?

Here again you have to be very specific about what you are looking for otherwise you will be wandering in alien territory all the time looking at the things which you are neither supposed nor need to see or analyze.

Imagine buying a green shirt when you went buying red and how bad would you feel when it doesn't fit you when you wear it in the end and then you will be thinking "I should have gone for the red one"

An easy way to do this is to make a checklist in which you list down all the things you need and the exact opposite of those things. Or you can list down all the required items and also the related stuff and check mark all those related materials which are not required or related. These associated reads are what leads one into wandering around in undesired territory.

Also sometimes the students just go around all the materials available only because they are interested in reading which of course is understandable but given the short period of time available it is already very hard to squeeze the relevant material in your schedule so these "interesting reads" should be left over for later on.

How would you use this information?

You wouldn't be wearing the same dress to a wedding and a college party. Would you? How awful would you look wearing a satin robe to a dance party? It's just that simple.

When you are collecting the information you have to be careful the data doesn't distract you away from the research methodology you are using. The reason you have to this is because there are certain specifications about the data which is collected by different methodologies otherwise there was no need for so many research methodologies. Once you have a certain research method decided you will have a clear picture of what shape you need the data in. You have to make sure you maintain the uniformity of the data all along your research.

Example: If you are researching on the performance of two cars analyzing their speed.

For a qualitative research you will need an objective assertion like "Car A is Faster than Car B"

For a Quantitative research you will need a calculated assertion like "Car A does 150 mph and Car B does 100 mph"

The idea is not to stop looking for the information around but to trim it according to your needs otherwise you would be spending a lot of time on searching the information which ends up being irrelevant to your work.

Where will you need to go to get it?

After you have decided everything else about your research you need to go out looking for it. Now where do you have to go? You can't find everything everywhere; you have to be specific if you are on a lookout for something or a lot of time would be wasted wandering around.

Now if you are working on ancient Christianity believes what is the best place to go looking? Yes the Vatican Archives. Not many people have access to those archives. Just imagine you didn't know that you would be denied access to the archives and you come to know of it when you are half way through your research

already. You are doomed and so is your research. Only if you had planned earlier this wouldn't have happened.

So what are you supposed to do?

Once you have outlined your research topic and proposal you have to measure and calculate how far you have to go for the data you need. You need to benchmark the places you need to go and the availability of access to certain information. It's always handy to meet up with the people who might take you in the places where no one else goes. Keeping a note of these people will also be helpful in defining your research destinations.

Also remember you cannot go to all the libraries in the town. You have to conduct a little research on what is available where by your own resources or maybe you can go to the libraries and see what is available for yourself. Sometimes you might be needed to go to another city or state to get the data, don't hesitate to. You have to finish the task at hand and excel in your career at any cost.

Where to look:

Print Sources

Before you start looking deep into any published resources it's a good idea to look into the subject bibliographies. Doing this you will know right away what and where is available on your research and then you can schedule your reading plan. With subject bibliographies available at all the libraries you will also be able to classify the material according to the date they were published. Of course the most recent books or journals would be your first read choice.

Books

Whichever library you go to don't just start looking at the bundles and bundles of books lying upside down on each other. Go to the Librarian or anyone who is in charge and ask for the library catalogue. This library catalogue will have the list of all the books available listed in an orderly manner. Scan through the catalogue using your title keywords or other significant words.

Articles and Journals

Articles and journals are an important source of up-to-date information and can be traced most effectively using abstract and index services which are arranged in subject order. An indexing service provides basic details about the contents of the journal and an abstracting service includes a useful short summary of the articles included.

Millions of articles are published in thousands of journals every day. You cannot check all of them for your research. These two options described above can help you wonders in gathering all the information from these articles and journals.

Online Sources

Online sources are the next best source for your research data and in some cases they might end up being on the top. Unlike the libraries looking up on the web is much easier if the right path is followed. You can have your peers help you with your research refining or you can always ask your advisor for advice of course.

WebPages

WebPages or websites directly related to or covering the whole span of your research are usually hard to find and most of the times you will have to settle for chunks of information collected from different websites.

Always search for the websites using all your keywords. Be it your title keywords or the minor keywords but following the keywords path is a must. This is the only way you can find the relevant information if you don't have any prior knowledge of the websites you are supposed to visit.

Blogs

This is one of the places out of bound for you. Yes you cannot rely on a personal comment for your dissertation research. The reason for this is that the credibility of your research depends more or less completely on the quality and the validity of the references you have used. If you end up using a reference of a personal blog you are actually throwing your credibility down the drain.

Blogs are usually the personal believes or views of a person most often not supported by evidence, rather being a mere translation of a certain aspect of an issue. No matter how authentic the source or the comments seems to you never rely on it if it lacks properly evident backing.

E-Books

These might be the most authentic and reliable sources for your dissertation research as they are properly organized books and you will be able to find them easily and manage across the topics easily. The only problem with these eBooks is that very often you will have to pay for them sometimes not even knowing if the book is completely relevant to your matter or not.

The Hidden Web and Search Engines?

While you are searching on the web for the information you will not find anything and everything at your desktop. There are basically two types of web "surface web" and "hidden web". When you are searching most of the times the search engines comes back with the surface web and not the hidden one which is password protected. These sites require login and only the registered members are allowed to get in.

Most of the Web's information is hidden far below on dynamically created sites, and search engines do not find it. These search engines cannot find or mark content in the deep Web – those pages do not exist until

They are created dynamically as the result of a precise search. The hidden Web is several times larger than the surface Web.

Use more and more search engines; Google is not the end of the world. There is countless number of search engines available for students to explore whatever information they are looking for and they are very specifically designed and maintained for the reason of maintenance of the same specification. For example if you are looking for any science based information you can use www.scirus.com or you can use `_subject`

Gateways like www.intute.ac.uk where you can find the information already sitting ducks for you to shoot. All you have to do is select the subject and give out your keywords and you have all the information in front of you.

Using these search engines you facilitate your search results coming at you to come faster and easier also because when you are searching for a medicine related topic or keyword on a medical search engine you actually cut down on the possibility of wayward results which are a trademark of most of the search engines because only the medicine related topics are ranked on that search engine.

You can use these search engines to get the results in a quicker and more specified manner. This will also help you manager your later projects (if any) and get back to the topic research whenever you want in a quick time.

Where Else and Who Else?

Other than these direct sources there are a number of indirect sources available for the students to use to their advantage with a little less ease though.

Professional Bodies and Associations

Imagine being in the middle of all the top professionals in the field of animal genetics when you are researching about the evolution of animal genetics over the last decade. Sounds great Right?

Whatever topic you are researching in your dissertation there has to be a professional body that enrolls and manages all major professionals in the field. These people are the best sources of information. They are like walking libraries who know almost everything about the past researches.

If you can get a chance to sit around with them and discuss your research and your research it's given that you wouldn't walk out without the answers or at least the pathway to your answers. They can advise you on anything and everything related to your research, be it your methodology or your proposals.

It's always good to have a sit within the professional circle before and during the research.

Theses and Dissertations

The department of your university where you are at the moment was here before you walked in. So there have to be relevant researches before on your topic by past students. These may be available in published form but most of the time they are not published and the University Library or the Archives hold them up for their records.

You can cross read and scan these past researches for some quick help. Moreover if they are not published works then the researchers will not have any objections in handing them over to you as this would seemingly give their work a facelift.

Most of such associations also have websites which they keep updating with the relevant articles and new information. Visiting their websites and leaving your mark one way or the other can work two ways for you.

1. You will be able to use any pertinent able information you find on their WebPages along with their reference which of course spikes your credibility sky high.
2. Once your dissertation is complete and approved and marked by the advisor their website can be the best place to get your work or some part of it published.

Keeping Track Of the Information

During the course of your dissertation research you will come across countless books and online resources which you will need to look at and use accordingly. you will be switching from books to books and webs to webs all the time exploring new information and reshaping the old one and it becomes a huge bundle of information which is hard to manage and keep a track of and by the time you reach to the end of your work you have a meshwork of information in your head.

At the end of your dissertation you have to present a list of all the citations and references which you have used all along your research and to do that you will need to have a properly arranged list of references which is called Bibliography. This Bibliography is the most important part of your dissertation when it comes to credibility and reliability. If you have used some ideas and you are unable to remember the details of the book or journal it belongs to you are actually adding the element of suspicion to your dissertation.

Recording your research history provides evidence of your progress and helps your supervisor/project co-ordinator to see where you have searched and what the potential useful search avenues are.

Now how are you supposed to do this? There are several ways to keep track of all the information.

Checklists

This option is valid for those students who have a working bibliography with them i.e. a list of resources which he/she has to use in the research before it starts.

If you have a working bibliography of your potential references you can put them in the shape of a checklist. The checklist is not supposed to be a simple checklist. You have to elaborate a little bit on the contents of the book you are putting on the paper. it can be the question you thin will be answered by this book or the keywords which will return you the desired data.

Every time you are done with a book you can mark it on the list. This will help you three ways.

1. You will know exactly what book has answered what question which will help you in remembering the reference details and preparing for the dissertation viva.
2. You will be able to skim the questions which were not answered and note them down for later on.

Bibliographic Management Software

Also known as “Bibliographic Management Softwares” or “Citation Management Softwares” these softwares are a really helpful ready to use tool. These tools will help u store, access, organize and manage the references you have found to articles, journals and books.

These softwares create a workable database which can produce bibliographies in range of formats allowing you to reformat the references anytime and in any style you want saving you a lot of stress and time at the same time. Using these softwares you will be able to avoid the worst in the end of your research thinking where you got this information from.

Nowadays, your University library can provide you with these softwares which are authorized by the university itself. You can also download these softwares from the web but sometimes you might need to pay to use one of these softwares.

Keep a Note Book and Paper Handy

This is the simplest way to constructing your list of references. All you need is a pen and a paper which you can keep in safe custody and get it back whenever you need to add a new reference to the list.

The biggest advantage of this method is that you can take your pen and paper anywhere unlike a computer. For Example: If you have to conduct an ethnographic research on a distant tribe somewhere in Africa your computer is not going there with you but you take as many pens and papers as you want.

Evaluating the Information

Evaluating the authority, value, and trustworthiness of the information you find is a vital step in the process of dissertation research. The questions you ask about books, articles or WebPages are similar whether you're looking at a citation to the item, a physical item or an electronic version.

You can begin evaluating a physical information source (a book for example) even before you have the physical item in hand. Evaluate a source by first examining the bibliographic citation. The bibliographic citation is the written narrative of a book, journal article, essay, or some other published material. Bibliographic citations mostly have three main components: author, title, and publication information. These components can help you determine the usefulness of this source for your paper.

Author

- First thing to note is the author's credentials i.e. his/her institutional affiliation, education history, any past writing and experience.
- How many citations he has added in his book?
- Has this work been cited by other writers?
- Is the author associated with the professional body or any other organization?

Date of Publication

The validity of the source is vital to its use in your dissertation. you have to identify the date of publication and see if it's too old. The date of publication is usually located underneath the authors name in the start of the book.

These dates are important because there is a lot of research going on around the globe and theories and ideas are improved or rejected every now and then. So if you are using an old reference you have to careful that you are not using an out-dated reference.

Edition/Revision

The books are more than often followed by revision with some extra amount of data which was missing in the last edition. Take a careful look at the date of publication and then see for any new editions. Referring an old version would take out the credibility of your work a bit.

Publisher

See the name of the publisher on the back of the book or in the beginning of the book. Good publishers have their own credibility to look after and they will never publish any materials which don't seem to maintain their market spot.

Objective Reasoning

See if the content is fact, opinion or propaganda. It's very hard to differentiate between facts and opinion. Facts can be verified but opinions being the interpretation of facts are much harder to verify. Skilled writers know how to make their own opinions look like facts. Make sure the page is not masked for advertisement because it might be biased then.

Targeted Audience

Who is the author addressing with his book or article? See if the argument is too specifically aimed at a certain group or population and does it apply on your research or not.

Reviews

Locate a reviewing source and see how other scholars have evaluated the book in question. Sometimes you may find different kind of opinion by different reviewers. See if their argument constructs a consensus or a controversy. Another advantage of seeing these reviews is that the scholar might give out some other reliable sources if he doesn't find these sources credible or good enough. You can use these proposed references for your dissertation research.

Data Evaluation Criteria

Whenever you have to check where the source of information stands try to weigh it under these criteria.

Authority: What is the credibility of the author and the publisher? Have they ever projected false information? Does the writer quote his correct qualification or not.

Relevance: Is the source directly or indirectly related to your work. Has the author mentioned anything which you can find conclusive or which can raise any more questions in your mind

Completeness: Does the source give you a complete picture of what it is advocating or is it just another argument on your topic. See if the author has included any interpretations of the data he has collected or is it just the raw data.

Accuracy: Is the work accurate in the sense of factual presentation or it has jumbled any facts or figures in order to compliment the argument. Also see that the author or publisher has provided any contact details; this being an indicator of the accuracy and veracity.

Bias: see for the ethnic, religious or professional background of the author. If he is commenting on something which he could be effected by then there is a chance of him being biased and you shouldn't include his arguments in your dissertation as this would automatically give your work a biased look.