

Quick guide to Dissertations and research projects

Dissertations or research projects can seem daunting but they give you a opportunity to explore something of interest to you, in more depth. Take a look at [What is a dissertation?](#)

This guide is an introduction to the process, signposting some of the resources available to you. These include a suite of tutorials available on our [dissertation page](#).

Before you start:

Be clear what type of research project you are being asked to do. Different subject areas have different requirements. Some courses require primary research and others don't allow it for ethical reasons. Check your guidance.

Know your deadlines and plan towards them.

Check what level of support you can expect from your supervisor and when, so that you can make appropriate use of their support.

Start a **Research Journal** to record the process.

Identify topic area

Review of literature

Define research
aims

Select methods

Perform research

Write up findings

1. Identify your topic area

This needs to be something that interests you as you need to stay motivated for a long time. It doesn't have to be focused at this stage as you are looking for a topic.

It could be:

- Something from your previous modules that interested you and you'd like to explore more. Follow your passion.
- Something from practice that caught your attention. For some courses practice based research is a requirement.
- A topic of recent debate in your field.
- Or something you'd like to take forward into your career.

It also needs to be *significant* e.g. worth doing. You will need to justify your choice to your supervisor.

Does it:

- Contribute to existing knowledge
- Have a real world application
- Resolve a problem in practice.

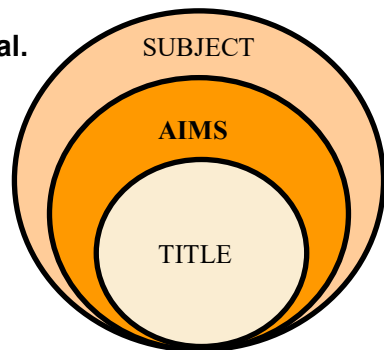
Discuss it with your peers, friends and family. Bouncing ideas can be surprisingly useful and helps you articulate your ideas.

Do this throughout the process.

Record your ideas in your journal.

Do this for every step. It will be useful when you come to write it up. Take time to reflect.

The next step is to do some preliminary reading to see if this topic is feasible before you focus it down.



Resources.

- **Tutorial on choosing your topic.** https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Dissertation_2023/Choosing_a_dissertation_topic/story.html
- **Choosing a dissertation topic worksheet.** [https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Choosing-a-dissertation-topic-worksheet-\(2\).docx](https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Choosing-a-dissertation-topic-worksheet-(2).docx)

2. Reviewing the literature

Your preliminary reading helps you to identify:

- Key themes
- Gaps in the existing knowledge / unanswered questions
- Possible ways to focus your research
- Possible methodologies.
- If your research project is going to be a Literature review, is there enough research out there for you to use?

You will be continuing your reading throughout the project, for different purposes:

- To provide an overview of the current knowledge on the topic.
- To justify your methodology
- To explain your results.
- Or to carry out a full Literature review.

Use academic and professional level resources but think about what kind of information will inform your topic. [Library Resources](#) page shows you all the different resources available to you.

OneSearch	Journal articles
Books	Electronic collections
Research resources; including example dissertations	Subject pages, which will direct you to the relevant resources for your topic.
Media	Grey literature

Don't forget to evaluate what you find. Check out the Finding information page and Literature Reviews for more on this.

Resources

- **Search tips:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Searching-tips.pdf>
- **Library resources:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Resources/>
- **Finding information:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Finding-Evaluating-Information/>
- **Literature reviews:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Dissertations/Literature-Review/>

3. Defining the research aims

Your research aims can be expressed as:

- A research question to be answered
- A proposal for a change to practice
- Testing a hypothesis.

You need to **focus down on a specific question or aim** to make the project more manageable and ensure you can cover it in the required depth to show [critical thinking](#).

For example: Looking at health inequalities in the UK is too broad and covers too many significant topics. Whereas looking at *the impact of environmental factors on health inequality in adults over 70 in West Cumbria* is more targeted.

Health students are sometimes expected to use PICO or other models to help focus their question in this way. See Resources section below.

You need to show **Originality**, particularly at Postgrad level. We aren't talking about big discoveries! It can be:

- Applying existing practice to a different setting
- Using a different methodology
- A new interpretation and synthesis of existing knowledge.

You should also take into account **ethical considerations**— e.g. is it safe or reasonable for participants to take part. For this reason primary research isn't always possible for health students, which might mean that your initial research question will need adapting.

Finally, is it **feasible** in the time, setting, word count and with the available resources?

Now is the time to check in with your supervisor. It has to be agreed with them before you proceed.

Resources

- **Tutorial on choosing and refining your topic.** https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Dissertation_2023/Dissertation_proposals/story.html
- **PICO and other models:** https://library.medschl.cam.ac.uk/files/2019/02/Guide-NHS-Lit_search_protocols_protocols_2019.pdf
- **Writing a research proposal.** https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Dissertation_2023/Dissertation_proposals/story.html

4. Selecting your method.

How you conduct your research depends on the topic, the question and the methodological approach of your field. You will have to consider this as part any [project proposal](#) and will need to read around the subject—see the Resources section. Methodology is too large and complex a topic to cover here but to start you off, you need to consider some basics.

Are you doing **primary** or **secondary** research?

- **Primary** research is the generation of new data i.e. not collected before. It can also include using previously collected data in a new and different way.
- **Secondary** research uses research that has already been conducted by someone else, e.g. a literature review.

Are you going to use **Quantitative** or **Qualitative** data or both?

- **Quantitative research (numbers)**
Uses numerical data, or data that can be transformed into useable statistics, ie. by quantifying responses to questionnaires. Tends to use larger samples and is often used to test a hypothesis or to generalise results from a sample to a larger population.

- **Qualitative research (words)**
Qualitative research is normally more exploratory and is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. This approach goes deeper into a problem by studying an individual or a smaller group. (from Sage Research methods)

- **Mixed methods** research uses both types of data.

Now you can chose your method of data collection, be that primary research or building a systematic search for a literature review.

Resources

- **Research methods tutorial**.- https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Dissertation_2023/Thinking_about_research_methods/story.html
- **Literature review tutorial**: https://stream.cumbria.ac.uk/ap/Skills/Dissertation_2023/Conducting_a_review_of_the_literature/story.html
- **SAGE Research methods** –The planner is a good starting point <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Resources/Eresources/Sage-Research-Methods-Core/>

5. Performing your research.

Conducting research is actually quite a practical task and needs some logistical planning. Your **Research plan** should take into account:

Time management

As a potentially larger piece of work it can seem overwhelming but breaking it into chunks can help. Set yourself some deadlines and put them into a calendar (along with your work/life commitments—be realistic.) It helps to start with the submission date and work backwards e.g. when do you need to have the data collection finished so that you have time to analyse. Build in some slippage, in case life gets in the way.

Data collection

There are tools that can help—check out the [Research resources](#) page.

Data management

What are you going to do with the data you have collected, be that articles or questionnaire results? Did you promise anonymity or to delete the data at a later date? Set up and organise files and give them clear titles. [Back up your files](#). See [Data management](#) for more guidance.

Data analysis

This can be as simple as a [literature matrix](#) or using available software such as SPSS or AtlasTi. See our Research resources page.

References

You will be dealing with a lot of sources, particularly if you are doing secondary research. Make sure you have a system in place for keeping and organising them. [RefWorks](#) is software that can help with this.

This [Research Mapper](#) may help with the planning but also record the process in your journal.

Resources

- **Time Management:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Learn-Well-at-Cumbria/Time-Management/>
- **Research mapper:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Research-mapper.docx>
- **Research resources:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Dissertations/Resources/>
- **RefWorks:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Resources/Eresources/RefWorks/>

6. Writing it up

Dissertations tend to have a specific structure, please read your module guide and/or check with your supervisor about the sections that are required for your particular dissertation or research project. The **Writing it up** section on the [Dissertation page](#) has more information on this, including two possible templates, identifying the key sections and what needs to go in each.

- [Primary research dissertation structure](#)
- [Review dissertation structure](#)

Use the Word functions to set up the [Headings](#) and generate the [Contents](#), if needed.

You don't have to write it up all at once at the end; again break it into chunks, starting with a section you feel most comfortable with. Perhaps that's the introduction, which your preliminary reading should have covered, or maybe your methodology. Do it as you go along and it is fresh in your mind.

The normal rules apply for academic writing at level 6 and 7. It needs to be well structured, with a good flow and a critical approach. Check out the resources on the [Academic writing](#) and [Being critical](#) pages.

You will normally have a chance for some feedback from your supervisor as part of this process. You can also get feedback from the Skills@cumbria team - 2 different 500 word sections.

Don't forget to leave time for editing, revisiting the sections you wrote at the beginning and implementing any feedback.

Resources

- **Academic writing:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Academic-Writing/>
- **Being critical :** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Critical-Writing/>
- **Research dissertation structure:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Research-Dissertation-structure.pdf>
- **Review dissertation structure:** <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Review-Dissertation-structure.pdf>

Useful resources

Doing your Dissertation	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Dissertations/
Literature review	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Dissertations/Literature-Review/
Library resources	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Resources/
Finding information	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Finding-Evaluating-Information/
Time management	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Learn-Well-at-Cumbria/Time-Management/
Research mapper	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Research-mapper.docx
RefWorks	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Resources/Eresources/RefWorks/
Primary research dissertation structure	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Research-Dissertation-structure.pdf
Review dissertation structure	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/Library/Review-Dissertation-structure.pdf
Academic writing	https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Learning/Skills-Cumbria/Academic-Writing/

Further support from Skills@cumbria

For dissertations you can get 2 pieces of feedback, either by email or appointment. NB. We are not methodology experts.

Feedback on 500 words

Send your assignments to Skills@cumbria.ac.uk or use the [Student Enquiry point](#) to submit. Identify which 500 words you want us to focus on and any particular aspect. See [Skills@Cumbria](#) for Terms and conditions.

Appointments

We provide 30 minute 121 appointments through Teams. Book here: <https://uoc-advocate.symlicity.com/>

This may be to help with your searching or to discuss a section of your writing.

Look after yourself

Check out our [Learn well](#) blog and webinars for ideas on how to manage stress and support your mental health.