



Planning an undergraduate dissertation

in the humanities
and social sciences

Many Oxford courses require submission of an extended piece of work in the final year of study. Usually this takes the form of a dissertation of 8000-15000 words which students must submit around Easter of the final year. This is a different kind of work from the usual tutorial essays and requires a different sort of planning.

Over the summer of the year preceding your deadline

Ideally, Trinity term is the time when you will decide on a topic, meet and secure supervisors, discuss and decide on the question you wish to research, and start to find resources.

You should plan to undertake much of the primary research in the summer vacation. If you will be conducting research outside of the UK, you will need to plan carefully to ensure that you return with all the information you will need. It is often not possible to return to the site of your research, because time and money do not permit, so it is also most important to know to whom you might apply if you find that you have omitted or mis-recorded something which turns out to be central to your work.

The Michaelmas before your deadline

You may not yet have many meetings with your supervisor, but you should have sorted out your research materials and narrowed down the question you wish to be the focus of your work.

Narrowing down the question

Generally, that question needs to arise out of your review of existing knowledge on your topic and be an area which will add to your newly-researched knowledge. Do not despair if you have not found a very fruitful or earth-shattering line of research: sometimes asking a question to which the answer is a negative can be a useful addition to scholarship. If you do need to change direction, do so with the approval of your supervisor and work out carefully what the effect of that will be on the quality of your finished work. It is often better to adapt what you have than to delete it all and start again in your final year.

Starting to write

Do not leave the writing up until the last minute but begin as soon as you can to put your ideas and information onto paper. Your first draft almost never ends up in the final work, but the work of committing your ideas to writing helps to formulate not only ideas but the method of structuring this piece of work to read well and conclude firmly.

Although many students and tutors will say that the introduction is often written last, it is a good idea to begin to think about what will go into it. The first draft of your introduction should set out your argument, the information you have, and your methods, and it should give a structure to the chapters you will write. Your introduction will probably change as time goes on but will stand as a guide to your entire essay and will keep you focused. It should include:

1. The background information to and context for your research. This often takes the form of a literature review.
2. Explanation of the focus of your work.
3. Explanation of the value of this work to scholarship on the topic.
4. List of the aims and objectives of the work and also the issues which will not be covered because they are outside its scope.

The main body of the dissertation will contain your methodology, the results of research, and your argument based on your findings.

The conclusion will summarise the value your research has added to the topic, and any further lines of research you would undertake given more time or resources. This part often looks forward to any post-graduate work you may wish to do.