



Writing up your dissertation: video tutorial

<http://www.screencast.com/t/PbmRbnhETTHI>

Transcript

Introduction: Welcome to this tutorial on Writing up your Dissertation from the University of Reading Study Advice team. It is designed for you to go through at your own pace and you can pause it at any time.

Slide 1: You may be used to writing your assignments quite quickly – maybe sometimes even in a single night. But this just isn't physically possible for a sustained piece of writing like a dissertation.

Slide 2: Your writing journey for your dissertation is not such a neat linear process – you will likely go through periods of not seeing 'the wood for the trees' or a clear way forwards, but this is normal and with some planning and perseverance you will pass through this and often gain a fresh perspective.

Slide 3: So when you start writing up, use your dissertation structure to guide you and make the task manageable. For a report style dissertation each section has a different role to play and this influences when and how you write it. For example, your literature review has an analytical style (you are analysing previous research to show how your research contributes to it) so it's often written near the start of your project to set up the main concepts and context but is often redrafted near the end once you have written the discussion section and know more clearly the role the literature needs to play.

Your methods and findings sections are descriptive – describing what you did and what you found. It is best to write these up as you go along whilst you remember. Although they may be more straightforward to write, it can be easy to waffle in these sections, so be ruthless – include only what's necessary for someone to repeat your process. Make sure you describe your findings in words (as well as presenting the data in relevant graphs and tables etc) – point out to your reader the key patterns and themes in the data.

The discussion section is discursive – meaning you are discussing and explaining your findings. It is written after you have got your findings and you need to refer back to the

concepts and past research in your literature review to help you interpret what you have found.

It is likely that you will have far more findings and things to say than you need – if you are not sure what to include, always go back to your research aims or questions as your guide. For everything you include ask yourself how is it helping you to answer these aims, if it isn't, cut it out, leaving you free to focus on the most relevant findings.

Slide 4: For an essay style structure, each of the main chapters will have an introduction, body, and conclusion just like an essay. It can help to think of your dissertation like a series of linked essays (and writing a few essays isn't all that bad). Make sure that you leave time at the end to redraft to tighten up the links between the chapters (which often come in the introduction and conclusion to each chapter) and to make sure your overall argument runs through consistently and clearly – it is far easier to do this in the redrafting stage when you can see your dissertation as a whole.

For more on how to structure your dissertation – follow this link to a separate tutorial.

Slide 5: It is important to find a space that helps you focus on writing – this might be on your favourite floor of the Library, a coffee shop, or that secret bunker on campus where none of your friends can find you to distract you.

Slide 6: It is also important to protect your writing time. Your dissertation time can quickly get eaten up by all those other things that seem more immediately urgent. Block off time during your week for writing, just as you would for fixed commitments such as going to lectures or paid work.

Despite all the best intentions in the world, sometimes we just don't feel like writing - but you need to use your precious writing time effectively, try 'free writing' – writing for a small fixed time, say 10 minutes, without editing, searching for references or criticising yourself. It gets you past the blank page or screen and you'll be surprised at how much you can produce in a limited time.

Have a list of more mundane tasks, such as sorting your headings or finding missing references that you can do when you are really struggling to be creative, then you are still making forward progress on those occasions when you are more brain-dead!

Slide 7: Keeping going is crucial in a longer project.

Writing your dissertation may seem like a mountainous task, but break it down into small, specific targets. It is far easier to do something defined like write 500 words than something nebulous and vague like 'write it all up'

Spending lots of time perfecting one section can get you bogged down – write a chapter, do a small redraft, and move on. You'll only really know what editing you need to do when you can see the first full draft.

We all get blocked in our writing at some point. Writer's block is often a sign that we haven't quite worked out our argument or what we want to say. Take a step back and go back to your plan – some thinking time and coming at it from another angle will often give you a break through.

It is easy to feel isolated or lose your way, but talking to other people who can ask questions, give you ideas, plus getting feedback from your supervisor can all help you get back on track.

And it's always good to give yourself rewards to look forward to!

Summary: So to summarise, writing up your dissertation is a marathon not a sprint.

Expect there to be some ups and downs along the way, but working steadily will soon add up.

Use your dissertation structure to break your writing down and make it manageable.

Protect your precious time and space to write.

And keep your forward momentum going by talking to your friends and supervisor, doing free-writing and having regular rewards.

If you do this you will soon have the finish in sight.