

Lecture five: the MA Dissertation Parts

The Master level dissertation is the final stage of the Master degree. It provides you with the opportunity to show that you have gained the necessary skills and knowledge for conducting a research project. A dissertation is a ‘formal’ document and there are ‘rules’ that govern the way in which it is presented. It must have chapters that provide an introduction, a literature review, a research methodology, analysis and discussion of the data and, finally, conclusions and recommendations. The most successful dissertations are those which are specific and narrowly focused. All dissertations must be presented in an appropriate academic style and format to ensure that the precise aims of the dissertation are met.

A dissertation or thesis will typically contain the following sections in the order they are listed:

<i>Preliminary sections:</i>	Title page
	Abstract
	Acknowledgements
	List of abbreviations
	List of contents
	List of tables, figures and illustrations
Body of the work:	Introduction
	Literature review
	Results
	Discussion
	Conclusion
<i>Supporting sections</i>	Bibliography
	Appendices

Each of these sections will now be discussed in more detail.

I. Title page

The title of your dissertation needs to indicate the nature and purpose of your research. It should be brief and to the point, and contain the key words or concepts underlying the work. The recommended length for a title is no more than 12 words. Capitalize the first letter of the first word and of all subsequent words (except for articles, prepositions of three letters or less, and conjunctions).

Below are some examples of dissertation titles:

Examples

1. A cross-cultural study of the smile in the Russian- and English-speaking world
2. Visual advertisements: a tool for English language teaching

3. Sociolinguistics in selected textbooks used for teaching Polish as a native language in a primary school

The APA style and the title page

The **title page** includes your running head and page number (on the title page remember to type the words “Running head” as part of the page’s running head [The running head is a shortened version of your title having no more than 50 characters (including punctuation and spaces)], the title of your paper, author name, and the author’s institutional affiliation . Place the title, author, and institutional affiliation information on the top half of the title page centered between the left and right margins.

II. The Abstract

The abstract offers a summary of the essential elements of your research project. It should serve as an overview, providing the reader with a good indication of what he or she will find in the pages that follow. This is important because the abstract is the most read part of any research report, for it is frequently on the basis of the abstract that people decide whether or not the report is relevant to their own research and therefore worth reading. An abstract will normally include:

- a statement of the main question or problem (i.e. the purpose of the research);
- the method(s) used to address it;
- the results obtained;
- the conclusions reached.

Sometimes the author may also give a brief account of any suggestions for future research.

key words

The purpose of keywords is to allow readers to search and find your report, or reference to your report, in both printed and electronic forms. Keywords should be placed after the abstract in alphabetical order.

Think about the words a person might type into a search engine to find the type of research you have done. The abstract and keywords should cover a single page only.

N.B.

Your abstract is the first substantive section of your paper. However, you typically write it *after* you have written the rest of your paper, when you will have a clearer idea about what must be included in the abstract.

Example of expressions used in an abstract

Highlighting the importance of topic	Reference to current literature	Identification of a knowledge gap	Aim of the current study	Indication of methods used	Statement of key findings	Implications of the current study
-X is vital for ... -X plays a key role in ... -X is a classic problem in ...	-Several studies have documented ... -Studies of	-However, X have yet to be understood. -Previous studies of X	-The aim of this study was to ... -This study set out to	-The research is based on four case studies -Contemporary source material	-Results showed that ... -This study identified ...	-The study implies that ... -The involvement of X implies that ...

-Xs were a major element of ... -Recently, there has been renewed interest in ...	X show the importance of ... -Several attempts have been made to ... and popular.	have not dealt with ... -Researchers have not treated X in much detail.	examine ... -This study set out to determine whether ... the role of ...	was used to examine ... -This study provides a novel approach to quantifying X using ...	-The findings show that ... indicated that there was a positive relationship between ...	-It is evidently clear from the findings that ...
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Instances of the APA style in an abstract

Type your abstract on a separate page, immediately after your title page and number it as page 2. Type the word “Abstract” centered on the line following your running head and page number. On the next line, begin your abstract. Do *not* indent the first line of the abstract. Include a list of keywords, centered immediately below your abstract.

III. Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements section is where you as the researcher and writer of the report thank those individuals and institutions that have assisted with or contributed to your research in some way. This may be through the provision of funding, facilities, services or data, or less directly via discussion and consultation, advice, motivation, and simply empathy and friendship during what can be a challenging time in your academic career. The one person who will almost certainly feature in the acknowledgements is your supervisor!

IV. List of contents

It is important that your list of contents is detailed and reflects accurately the structure of the research report. It should be arranged according to chapter/ section numbers, incorporating all headings and sub-headings as they appear in the text, along with the page numbers on which they start. In order to indicate the status of different sections of the text, it is common practice to use a decimal numbering system.

Heading Structure Headings within a manuscript identify different sections and subsections. In an APA-style manuscript, you can have anywhere from one to five levels of headings. The structure for these five levels is as follows (APA, 2010, p. 62):

Centered, boldface, upper and lowercase (Level 1)

Flush left, boldface, upper and lowercase (Level 2)

Indented, boldface lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period. (Level 3)

Indented, boldface italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period. (Level 4)

Indented, italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period. (Level 5)

V. List of acronyms and abbreviations

It is quite common to find a list of acronyms and abbreviations at the start of a research report, usually following the List of Contents. Not surprisingly, researchers will typically draw on many written sources during the course of their projects and will consequently find it necessary to make reference to

these in their writing. For the sake of convenience, rather than repeatedly writing out in full the names of source materials it is quicker and easier to refer to those materials using shortened forms – acronyms and abbreviations. Although the meaning of each acronym and abbreviation should be made clear after its first mention in the main text of the report, it is normal practice to provide a key to the meanings of these shortened forms in the first pages of the report. This allows for quick and easy reference on the part of the reader.

VI. List of tables

You use tables to present complex information that you cannot easily summarize in the body of your paper. For example, they can illustrate the design of your study or present summary data (e.g., tables of means and standard errors, correlation matrices). Tables are somewhat time consuming to make and expensive to reproduce. Use a table only when you cannot fully describe information in the text of your paper.

VII. List of figures

Use figures in your paper to provide graphic illustrations of complex material or relationships that cannot be adequately described in text. Although figures appear most often in the results section of your paper, they also can appear in any other section. For example, you could use a figure in your method section to illustrate the materials used in your study or in the introduction to show an important theoretical relationship. Because figures are difficult to prepare and are expensive to reproduce in journals, use them sparingly.

VIII. The introductory chapter

The key role of this chapter is to create a research space for the writer. It is in the introduction that the writer makes claims for the centrality or significance of the research in question and begins to outline the overall argument of the dissertation. A framework for the typical structure of thesis introductions is proposed by Swales and Feak (1994).

Move 1	Establishing a research territory a by showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional) b by providing background information about the topic (optional) c by introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area (obligatory) d by defining terms (optional)
Move 2	Establishing a niche a by indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question about it, or extending previous knowledge in some way (obligatory) b by identifying a problem/need (optional)
Move 3	Occupying the niche a by outlining purposes/aims, or stating the nature of the present research or research questions/hypotheses (obligatory) b by announcing principal findings/stating value of research (optional) c by indicating the structure of the thesis and providing mini-synopses (previews) of each subsequent chapter (obligatory) d by outlining the theoretical position (optional) e by describing the methods used in the study (optional)

In addition to understanding these three moves, you need to know that your introduction is a copy of an edited version of your proposal (means contains almost the same elements)

Formatting the Introduction according to the APA style

To follow APA style, begin the introduction on a new page with your running head and page number at the top of the page. Next, center the title of the paper at the top of the page and start the introduction immediately below the title. The title is the same one you used on the title page. Do *not* type the heading “Introduction.”

IX. The review of the literature chapter

The literature review typically follows the introduction to your research report and its importance cannot be overestimated. It is where you present, in summary form, other work (books, articles, documents etc.) the content of which relates in some way to your own research. The purpose of the review is:

- To show where your study fits into the broader scheme of things; how it connects with the existing body of knowledge on the subject or on other related issues. In doing so, it also shows how your own research is original and promises to contribute to that pool of knowledge. In other words, along with the introduction, it helps to contextualize or ‘position’ your research by placing it within a broader framework. This also helps you to avoid reinventing the wheel by needlessly repeating the work (and mistakes) of others.

- To help you locate information that may be relevant to your own research.
- To increase and display your knowledge of the subject – to the examiners in particular – and to convince them and your peers of the need, relevance and importance of your research and the suitability of the methodology you have adopted.
- to identify seminal (key, influential) works in your area of study.
- to identify methods, approaches and techniques that could be relevant to your own research.
- to familiarize yourself with different and/or opposing views and to demonstrate your ability to critique and evaluate the work of other scholars.

Organizing the literature search

To ensure that you are familiar with the relevant work of scholars in your field, you will need to do a literature search. This can seem a daunting task as there may be a very large body of published material. Your supervisor will be able to offer advice on the best way to approach the task, but here are a few tips to help guide you:

- Conduct a search for a limited number of key books and journal articles on your topic published over the last few years.
- As you read the articles, summarize the main points

- Do not check *only* books and articles that are directly relevant to your own research. Work that may seem a little peripheral to your own research topic can often include information that is very relevant.
- As you move backwards chronologically through the literature be sure to check out any sources widely cited by authors you have read and which appear relevant to your own research.
- As you read, try to organize the literature according to its importance or relevance to your topic area.

Structuring the literature review

the literature review is not simply a chronological list of previously published work. It plays an important role in creating a structure or framework that will allow you to display not only your *knowledge* of the relevant literature, but also your ability to summarize and critique the information and ideas it contains coherently. You can demonstrate this ability by:

- grouping texts (articles, chapters, books etc.) according to the similarity of their ideas or arguments;
- grouping studies that focus on similar phenomena or share similar methodologies;
- commenting on the main ideas that feature in each group of texts or studies, rather than simply quoting or paraphrasing them;
- comparing and contrasting the different studies, viewpoints, methodologies and so on, and identifying for the reader those which have the greatest bearing on your own research;
- indicating which articles, ideas, methodologies and so on will form the basis of your investigations. Some of the most important citations are those referring to articles in refereed journals and you should include these in your literature review.

-You should be very cautious about using internet sources as these are not peer reviewed and therefore do not carry the same weight.

X. The Methodology chapter

The methodology chapter describes how you conducted your study and the methods you used to collect and analyze the data. Regardless of the field in which you are conducting your research, the overall aim of the methodology section is the same: to provide the reader with an overview of the methods employed so that a judgments can be made as to how appropriate they are given the objectives of the research, and how valid the data is that they have generated. The methods section should be clear and detailed enough for another experienced person to repeat the research and reproduce the results. This chapter describes in detail the characteristics of your subjects, materials, and apparatus used, research design, as well as the procedures followed.

your methodology section should contain the following:

- A statement of the broad nature of the data you are seeking to obtain
- A description and explanation of your choice of methodology.
- A description of how, when and where you obtained your data.
- A rationale for your choice of certain methods and your rejection of others.
- The method(s) employed for analyzing data.
- An indication of some of the shortcomings or problems encountered with the methodology and the ways in which you solved them or sought to work around them.
- Mention of ethical considerations (in the case of human or animal subjects) where appropriate, and how these were dealt with .

Start this chapter by a small introduction showing mainly its purpose for your dissertation and the elements it includes. The verbs are written in the simple past tense and they are put in the passive form.

Example of expressions used in a methodology chapter

Describing previously used methods	Many researchers have utilized X to measure ... One of the most well-known tools for assessing ... Traditionally, X has been assessed by measuring ...
Giving reasons why a particular method was adopted	A major advantage of X is that ... X based methods provide a means of ... A case study approach was used to allow a ... This method is particularly useful in studying ...
Giving reasons why a particular method was rejected	A disadvantage of many cohort studies is that ... A major problem with the experimental method is that ... The main disadvantage of the experimental method is that ... However, there are certain drawbacks associated with the use of
Describing the characteristics of the sample	The cohort was divided into two groups according to ... A random sample of patients with ... was recruited from ... Articles were searched from January 1965 until April 2014.
Indicating criteria for selection or inclusion	Criteria for selecting the subjects were as follows: Publications were only included in the analysis if To identify X, the following parameters were used ... The area of study was chosen for its relatively small ...
Describing the process: infinitive of purpose	In order to investigate the effects of ... In order to identify ..., the participants were asked to ... In order to help familiarise participants with ..., they were asked to ... In order to address these ethical concerns, the following steps were taken: ... In order to understand how X regulates Y, a series of transfections was performed.
Indicating problems or limitations	In particular, the analysis of X was problematic. In observational studies, there is a potential for bias from ... The small size of the dataset meant that it was not possible to ... Further data collection is required to determine exactly how X affects Y. Another major source of uncertainty is in the method used to calculate X.

XI. The data Analysis chapter

The purpose this chapter is to report your findings. You should present all relevant data summaries and analyses. Your results section should be primarily a narrative where you describe what you found. The results of descriptive and inferential statistics also will appear in your results section. However, these statistics should support the narrative statements that you make.

N.B. Occasionally, the presentation of research results is incorporated into the ‘Discussion’ chapter of a dissertation, which is then headed ‘Results and Discussion’. This will tend to happen where it is felt that the results are likely to raise immediate questions or concerns in the mind of the reader which can be more effectively dealt with within the immediate context of the presentation of the results themselves rather than later, where they may feel more dislocated. In a qualitative study, for example, it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle results from their analysis/interpretation, and having one section where you can deal with both simultaneously may therefore be preferable. In general, however, the ‘Results’ section presents the findings of your research together with brief comments, particularly where statistical analysis is involved. More extensive comments appear later in the ‘Discussion’ section.

Styles of presentation

The way in which you present your data will depend in part on whether that data is qualitative or quantitative. Quantitative data is usually presented using figures set out in the form of tables, graphs, charts and diagrams. When you present information in this way, you must of course make reference to it in your text, adding commentary to highlight and explain key aspects of the data. A qualitative study may also present statistical data and employ graphs, charts and so on, but other types of data will likely also feature in such studies – data which, for example, record people’s behavior, attitudes, beliefs and opinions. This kind of data will often lend itself more to a fuller description written in normal prose, with figures being used to support and clarify points made in the text, as opposed to the text merely explaining the data presented in figures, such as in a quantitative study.

Expressions used to report the findings

When making reference to a table, figure, chart or diagram, the following expressions may be helpful:

The graph in Figure 2 illustrates this trend.

As can be seen in the graph below (Figure 8), there was a clear correlation between . . . and . . .

Figure 3 highlights this growth in income over the past decade.

The results obtained are presented as a bar chart in Figure 15. They clearly indicate . . .

The table in Figure 4 records . . .

The chart in figure 7 indicates/suggests . . .

The response times of subjects were recorded and plotted on a graph (see Figure 8).

Over 70% of respondents showed greater improvement in health as a result of taking the drug on a regular basis, as indicated in Figure 24.

As Figure 5 illustrates, observations over a 3-month period reinforced these initial perceptions.

Subjects’ responses to the questionnaire were carefully compiled and recorded in tabular form (Figure 16).

Tables, charts, graphs and diagrams

Tables

Data presented in a table are arranged in columns and rows. A computer spreadsheet (such as Excel) uses this pattern. Tables can be an effective method of presenting small sets of data as long as the table is well designed. Poorly designed tables can be confusing and act as barriers to comprehension. Give your table a title – this should be as short as possible but also meaningful, accurately reflecting the content of the table.

Tables prepared according to APA specifications include a title, a number, headings, a body, and, if necessary, notes. Create a separate page for each table. Place the title and number of the table at the top of the page. The headings of your table should clearly tell your reader what information is included in your table. In the body of the table, include the information that you want your reader to see. Finally, use notes to explain the meaning of symbols in the table or to provide information not included in the table itself.

Figures

Graphs, charts are commonly used types of figures. Use graphs to illustrate complex relationships among variables. You might use figures to convey aspects of results that you cannot adequately describe in the text of your paper. You must include a caption for your figure. The caption provides the title for your figure along with any other necessary explanatory information (e.g., the source of a figure, information about what specific numbers mean). Type the caption immediately below your figure.

The results section presents a summary of the data or other information you gathered. At this stage you just present and summarize the data or information without going into detailed discussion of the implications of your findings (this goes into the next section: ‘Discussion’).

XII. The Discussion Chapter

In the discussion chapter, you interpret your results, draw conclusions, and relate your findings to previous research or theory. This is the section of your research report where you comment on the results you have obtained from your investigations and assess their significance in light of your objectives, stated hypotheses and the state of the debate in the field as discussed in your literature review.

Begin your discussion section with a brief restatement of your hypotheses. Next, briefly indicate whether your data were consistent with your pre-experimental hypotheses. Use the remainder of the discussion section to integrate your findings with previous research and theory. Discuss how consistent your findings are with previous work in the area. If your study yielded results that are discrepant from previous work, you should speculate on why the discrepancies emerged. Also, point out any problems encountered during the course of your research that might temper any conclusions drawn from your study. You should report on any methodological problems that became evident when you actually ran your study. Finally, indicate what implications your research has for future research in the area. Point out any specific areas that need to be investigated further.

When results do not support your hypotheses

Of course, it is always possible that your results do not support your stated hypotheses; however, although it *may* be a disappointment, this is less a problem than an inconvenience. Provided your results are not a consequence of poor methodology, the fact that they run counter to your hypotheses is itself revealing and need not devalue the research. Indeed, the disconfirmation of hypotheses may often be more interesting and intriguing than confirmation as it raises further important questions that may form the basis of future research, to which you can make reference in your final section on ‘Suggestions for Future Research’

When presenting your analysis and discussion, there are three important guidelines to follow, each closely connected to the other two.

Avoid making claims your data cannot support

Be careful not to exaggerate your claims beyond what the data suggests. Making statements that are not justified by the data will make you look naïve and undisciplined and could critically undermine the credibility of your whole study, as well as your credibility as a precise and discriminating researcher.

If you do wish to make any questionable claims that are not categorically supported by your data, then it is imperative that you indicate the ‘insecure’ status of those claims. You can do this by using such expressions as:

This might suggest that . . .

It could perhaps be argued that . . .

This could be taken as limited evidence for . . .

One might wish to argue on this basis that . . .

This might be taken as (admittedly scant/frugal) evidence for . . .

Any claims that this might suggest . . . need to be qualified by the fact that . . .

These findings are ambiguous, but might indicate . . .

Acknowledge the limitations of your study

Very few, if any, research projects are without flaws of some kind or other. Despite the best efforts to construct a well-designed study and to take account of all possible confounding variables, it is almost impossible to cover all bases. This means that the inferences and deductions you are able to make may in some cases be less robust than you would ideally wish. What is important is that, where necessary, you clearly acknowledge this fact. All experienced researchers know that there is no such thing as a perfect study, but your readers will want to feel confident that you are insightful and experienced enough to have identified the weaknesses of your study. By recognizing and openly acknowledging any weaknesses, you instill in the reader a greater confidence in all other aspects of your research. Equally, of course, it is important that none of those weaknesses indicate a fundamental flaw in the conception or design of the study.

XIII. The Concluding Chapter

Although this section will have much the same form as any other conclusion, it will differ in some ways and will typically contain the following three closely connected elements:

- *A discussion of those inferences that can be drawn from your research:* any inferences you make must be supported by the evidence you have provided in previous sections through rational argument and/or the analysis of data.

- *A statement of the contribution your research has made to the field of inquiry:* the key requirement for a thesis is that it adds to the body of knowledge in a particular field by contributing something original. This section is therefore especially important, for in it you will be summarizing the contribution your own research has made, and it is essentially on that basis that it will be judged by the examiners and other scholars who read it.

- *Suggestions for future research:* the most common way to end a dissertation or thesis is to suggest new avenues of investigation based on your own research as documented in your report. In other words, this is where you indicate how future research might build upon your own methods of investigation and the findings they have produced. Part of this may involve highlighting problems that you had with your own approach and, based on your experience, suggesting alternatives to avoid similar

such problems recurring. Remember, no new information should appear in a conclusion, only inferences drawn from information that has already been presented elsewhere in the dissertation/thesis. Avoid unnecessary digressions and do not introduce new arguments.

Keep your concluding statements concise and to the point, present them in a logical order, and make sure they relate back to your research question(s).

XIV. Bibliography

A bibliography is a complete list of references to the works you have consulted during the course of your research. A comprehensive and well laid out bibliography will be an important factor in how positively your work is evaluated by your peers, examiners etc. A good bibliography will

- indicate that you have consulted others' work and are aware of the debate, arguments and practices in your field, particularly as they relate to the subject of your own research;
- add weight and credibility to your statements;
- enable others to check the accuracy of your information and interpretations;
- direct others to works you have found useful and to related publications;
- acknowledge other people's work and ideas (see 'Plagiarism', above);
- enable you and your readers to review the sources of your information;
- show that you are familiar with academic formatting conventions.

XV. Appendices

Appendices can be used to include material that is not directly relevant to the main content but needs to be referred to in the text. For instance, if your study is based on a questionnaire or (semi)structured interviews, the questionnaire or interview plan must be included in the appendices. Appendices must have a heading and they must be numbered.

What can be included in Appendices? — Copies of any questionnaires used — Source codes

— Technical documentation produced during the solution process, e.g. URD, SRD, DDD, or a User Manual — Lengthy tables of results or other data (you can include extracts from these in the body of the main report)

— Other information not absolutely necessary in the main body of the text, but which provides additional insights and information to the background, development or discussion stages of the report.