Dissertation planning: 10 steps to success

1. Choosing your topic

- Choose the topic you will investigate in consultation with your dissertation supervisor. It should be something you are interested in as you will be spending some time working on it. Is it feasible? Can you find information on this topic? Do you already have resources or articles about this subject? These can be especially useful in helping you to define your topic.

- Think about how much background information you need. Find background information in reference books, for example Oxford Reference Online which is available via Library Search under the A–Z databases heading.

- For your topic – are you interested in a global perspective or just one particular country? It can be easy to get overloaded by the number of books, articles and websites you find. Thinking in advance about the amount and type of information you need can help you to narrow down your search.

- You should also consider other issues about the scope of your topic. For example, are you investigating your topic from an economic, political, social, scientific or historical aspect, or are you looking at it from a current viewpoint?

- Define your research question. This should be agreed with your supervisor. It is important that you have a clear title/research question for your dissertation as this will make it easier to search for relevant literature.

2. Focusing on your topic

- You could capture your thoughts in a mind map – visualise both the overall picture and the fine detail, this is a great help when you are planning the structure of your dissertation. Mind maps can help in the creation of your keyword list – crucial when you start to search for information.

- Teach yourself how to mind map using MindGenius – a thinking tool. MindGenius is a mind mapping program that helps you to create concept maps. To find out more about mind mapping and MindGenius have a look at the guides on Skills Plus: https://library.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus/a-z.

3. Listing your keywords

- List all the keywords and alternative keywords which exactly describe your topic.

- Use a thesaurus to find alternative keywords and synonyms. There are a variety which you can access in the Library, including those available electronically from Oxford Reference Online, look under Subject – English Dictionaries and Thesauri.

  For example, with the keyword education some of the alternatives include: teaching, schooling, tuition, tutoring, coaching, instruction, training, learning, knowledge, literacy etc.
You could also try [http://www.thesaurus.com](http://www.thesaurus.com). Using education as an example, in addition to synonyms, this resource provides some related search concepts such as **History of education**, **Importance of education**, **Education issues** and poses questions including **Why do we need an education? What is an education?**

- Be aware of spelling variations with your keywords, for example, organisations and organizations, color and colour.
- Use all your keywords, and combinations of your keywords, each time you search.
- Save valuable time by using different search techniques:

  - **Boolean logic** Combine your keywords using AND, OR, NOT.
  - **Truncation** Type * after the stem of a word to retrieve all its variations, for example educat* will find educate, education, educational etc.
  - **Wildcards** Use ? in words such as wom?n to retrieve hits for woman and women.

To learn about Boolean logic and how to search more effectively have a look at the [Smart Searching](http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?55388379) guide: [http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?55388379](http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?55388379).

### 4: Searching systematically

- Plan a systematic literature search to find all the relevant information on your topic, have a look at the guides: [Systematic searching](http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?55388379), [Literature review](http://nuweb2.northumbria.ac.uk/library/skillsplus/loader.html?55388379).
- Use a wide variety of sources – books/ebooks, journal articles, newspaper articles, statistics, Internet sources, government publications, conference papers and theses.
- Use [Library Search](http://librarysearch.northumbria.ac.uk/) for resources available at Northumbria: [https://librarysearch.northumbria.ac.uk/](https://librarysearch.northumbria.ac.uk/). This search facility will link you to full text resources provided by Northumbria University Library as well as many other free resources. To search more widely, select **Widen your search to include resources outside our collections**.
- From Library Search select **Subject Resources** to view the key resources for your subject, for example, Business & Management, Health. Check to see if other subject categories may also be useful, for example, Company Information; Conferences; News Services and Newspapers; Statistics and Country Information.
- Search the individual databases suggested in **Core Resources** and **Additional Resources** to ensure a more comprehensive literature search. By searching these specialised databases, you can take advantage of their advanced search functionality. When you are searching look out for any help files or tips to help make your searches more effective.
- To find books in other libraries search [COPAC](http://www.copac.ac.uk). COPAC is the combined online catalogue of major UK academic and national libraries so you could find other key books and material on your topic and request them using the [Inter Library Loan Service](http://library.northumbria.ac.uk/ill).
- It is important to make sure that you keep notes of what and how you have searched. To do this you could use a diary or keep a table to record details such as which databases you have searched, keywords you have used together with the number of hits, and your personal reflections/evaluation. Another alternative would be to register on a database where you can save your searches. You may also be able to set up alerts so that you are notified when new results come in. For more information have a look at **Staying up-to-date** on Skills Plus which describes different tools you can use.
If you find you are struggling to find relevant information on your topic then request an appointment with a member of Library staff for additional support. Email Ask4Help: ask4help@northumbria.ac.uk.

To make this service more effective, when contacting us, please provide as much information as possible about your dissertation topic, the sources you have already searched and the keywords you have used.

5. Evaluating the relevance and quality of your sources

- Read and reflect on the sources you find, evaluating the **authority**, **currency**, **accuracy**, **bias** and **coverage**. In other words you need to think about the **Who? Why? What? and When?**
- For more advice and guidance on how to evaluate books and journal articles go to Skills Plus, have a look at the **Evaluating information** section.

6. Recording your sources / Referencing

- Note down the full bibliographical details of all the sources you consult as part of your research.
- Teach yourself how to use **EndNote** bibliographic software. EndNote can help you to manage your references, insert citations into your text, and at the same time create a reference list in your selected referencing style, APA for example, which could save you a great deal of time.
- Further instructions on referencing and using specific styles can be obtained from your tutor or by using one of the various manuals available in the University Library.
- Your tutor will also advise if you have access to **Turnitin** which is plagiarism detection software. This can help you to make sure you have referenced your work correctly.

For more information on EndNote, referencing and avoiding plagiarism, and Turnitin, have a look at the guides on Skills Plus.

7. Writing up

- You can read books on how to write dissertations – suitable titles may be listed in your **dissertation module guide**, use Library Search and search by keywords – **writing dissertations**. There may be some relevant to your subject, for instance, “Dissertation research and writing for construction students”.
- You will find instructions on **layout**, **spacing**, **font style**, **table of contents**, **margins** and **binding** etc. in your dissertation module handbook. The Formatting your assignment or dissertation guide will give you further help.
- A dissertation will usually have different chapters or sections with headings such as: abstract, analysis, synthesis, evaluation or method, results and discussion. Check your module guide for any specific requirements for your programme.
- Examples of theses/dissertations – have a look at past projects to give you some idea of what they look like, what research methods have been used etc. You may find print/electronic copies in various places:
  - Your Faculty administration offices and on the eLearning Portal.
  - There is a small selection at Coach Lane Library (Floor 2).
  - If you wish to consult theses, which are not available on the open shelves, contact Ask4Help.
  - **Northumbria Research Link** – [http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk](http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk). This will give you access to some of the University’s research outputs which are freely available to students and researchers worldwide.
  - **EThOS** – [http://ethos.bl.uk](http://ethos.bl.uk). Use this resource to search across 300,000+ theses for free and order the full text quickly and easily. Have a look at the **EThOS helpguide** for further information.
• Make sure you save your work to your U:drive or the hard disk on your home PC. Always have a backup copy saved in a different place and never save your work only to a USB memory stick.

You can purchase memory sticks from either the Basement Shop at City Campus Library or from the Ask4Help desk at Coach Lane Library.

8. Compiling your Reference List and Bibliography

• Allow plenty of time to compile your Reference List and Bibliography.
• Check with your tutor whether your Bibliography should also contain all the items on your Reference List.
• Check that all your references comply with the referencing style guidelines for your programme. These should be documented in your dissertation module handbook.

9. Proofreading, printing and binding

Allow plenty of time for these final stages – avoid leaving it all to the last minute!
• Take time to proofread your work – don't just rely on a spell check. Print out your work and go through it section by section. Ask a critical friend to proofread it for you.
• Allow time to print your dissertation as images, tables and charts all take longer to print. Colour, black and white, and double sided (duplex) printing is available in the Library.
• Check your handbook for the type of binding and covers required.

10. Further help

Throughout this guide we have made reference to Skills Plus. You will find lots of useful information on these pages including the “Your dissertation” section.

Access Skills Plus via University Library Online: http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus.