Planning your Dissertation

# Introduction

It’s impossible to produce a dissertation without doing some planning. Good planning using **effective tools** and **strategies** will support you in every stage of the process. It can make the difference between submitting a dissertation that’s ok and a dissertation that you can be really proud of!

In this resource we will take you through the **key elements** of a dissertation and highlight how **effective planning** can support you. We will also look at some tools which you can use to keep yourself on track.

# What is your word limit?

Dissertation word counts vary between subjects but will **typically** be between 9000 and 18000 words. Being clear about your word count is vital to the **planning process** as it will give you an indication of the amount of **time** you will need to spend **researching and writing** your dissertation and the level of detail you will be expected to go into in each chapter.

As your reading and research progresses, you will have a clearer picture of the **themes** for each chapter of your dissertation.

Keep the word count in mind as you take notes and **develop your ideas**as you will need to be sure that you have an approximate idea of the length of each chapter (including the introduction and conclusion).

# What are your key dates?

Your dissertation will be broken up by key dates; these could be dates for submitting parts of your work such as your proposal or literature review. There may also be compulsory lectures or supervision meetings. Make a list of these and plan around them accordingly.

**Late submission may mean marks are deducted.**

# What will you need to do between your submission dates?

Think about when you will start each stage of your dissertation, below are some examples of what this may include. Please note this list is not exhaustive.

1. Initial reading and research
2. Topic proposal
3. Supervision meetings
4. Literature review
5. Planning research
6. Reference management
7. Collecting data
8. Writing
9. Editing and re-writing
10. Proofreading, formatting and final changes
11. Printing and binding

# When will you be meeting your supervisor?

Meetings with your supervisor are a good opportunity to check that your dissertation is progressing along the right lines and to **identify and manage** any **problems** as they arise.

You may not need to arrange all your meetings in advance but it is **advisable** to look at your **deadline** and plan some ‘milestones’ along the way – meetings with your supervisor are an excellent way to check your progress.

Find out what you are entitled to in terms of face-to-face support and discuss the best approach with your **supervisor**. You may need more time in the early staged of your dissertation, followed by shorter ‘progress checks’ as you proceed, or you may want to factor in **time to discuss** potential problems during your research and data collection.

# How will you manage your references?

Make sure you have a system for keeping track of your **references** and you know which referencing **style** you are supposed to use in your work.

If you are adding your references manually, getting it wrong can be a painstaking **process** to correct once you’re halfway through your dissertation!

Using **referencing software** is a good way to keep track of what you have read and will also help you put your citations and bibliographies in the correct format.

# How will you manage your time?

Using an online planner can save you time and help you to stay on track. We will be looking at an online planning tool to manage your time later.

However, learning to use something new takes time so if your time management practices have worked well so far you may want to stick with them!

# Where can I find all this information?

Check with your lecturer as many subjects have a detailed dissertation handbook which included information about:

1. Word count
2. Layout and style guidelines
3. Supervision meetings
4. Compulsory lectures or workshops
5. Submission dates

# Managing your references

Your dissertation is set in the context of previous research and will be informed by ideas that you have read or heard about. Referencing is the way that you acknowledge your work that is not your own, ideas that have been informed from elsewhere and research that has previously been deducted.

In your dissertation you may be referencing hundreds of different sources, and it is recommended that you use reference management software to keep track of them.

The University of Manchester Library offers training and support in EndNote Desktop and Online. You can find further information on this and other referencing software on the libraries [Referencing Subject Guide](https://subjects.library.manchester.ac.uk/c.php?g=64326&p=413447).

For more information on how to reference take a look at our online resource, [Referring to other people’s ideas in your work](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/referring-to-other-peoples-ideas-in-your-work/#/).

## Software recommendations

### Referencing

[Evernote](https://evernote.com/) is a free online tool which can be downloaded as an app for Windows and Apple operating systems. Evernote will store and assist you in recording, organising and retrieving your notes.

You can save notes, images, word files or PDFs and easily organise them into notebooks (like folders) and search for keywords and tags.

### Managing your time

When it comes to a large piece of work like a dissertation, managing your time well is essential to stay on track.

Using a visual plan like a Gantt chart (with your tasks on the left and dates along the top) is a great way to see what you need to do at each stage.

Take a look at this [example dissertation plan](https://education.library.manchester.ac.uk/downloads/handouts/my-dissertation-plan-template.xls) which takes the format of a Gantt chart. Gantt charts can be created in Excel but there are some online tools that make it even easier.

When creating your own Gantt chart, bear in mind, each stage can take varying lengths of time. To give yourself a rough guide you may want to work backwards from the submission dates in your handbook.

[Tom’s Planner](https://www.tomsplanner.com/) is an online tool that you can use to create and share Gantt charts online. With a similar look and feel to Excel it has a quick learning curve, some of its features are:

* Drag and drop scheduling
* Free for personal use
* Track completion of tasks
* Print
* Online support provided through live chat, email and a blog
* Split tasks into sections
* Free populated examples and templates
* Include information such as resources needed next to relevant task

This is just one tool; there are many others out there such as [Wrike](https://www.wrike.com/features/gantt-chart/?gclid=CjwKEAiA58a1BRDw6Jan_PLapw8SJABJz-ZWIOkppd7HBzwcfvkF1u1Qf91U5Ulrz1zNqXibZ-tTTxoCXSLw_wcB) and [GANTTPRO](https://ganttpro.com/). Remember to have a look at the features and what you will need before deciding which is best for you.

# Expectations

In addition to the **information** in this guide, you must refer to the instructions and **guidance** given to you for your particular programme – different subject areas have **different expectations**, referencing conventions and **support mechanisms** for dissertations.

For example, in some areas you are able to define your own dissertation title, whilst in others you will be required to choose from a list. Some areas link the dissertation to a particular taught **course unit**; some require you to submit a research proposal in a particular format, etc.

Consult your **school intranet** or **Blackboard space** for more information.

# Summary

In this resource we have explored how to **plan effectively** and looked at some tools to help you with **time management** and **referencing**.

You should now **explore** the **tools** we have discussed and decide which would work for you amongst any you already use. Don’t feel you need to change anything that you think you do/know well already.

Use the **information** and guidance given by your academic supervisor and start to draft your dissertation plan.

**Remember:** effective planning can make all the difference to your final result.