Choosing a dissertation or research topic

How to decide on a theme for your investigation

The correct choice of dissertation topic or research project will improve the chances of a successful outcome. This chapter outlines the issues that you need to think about as you weigh up the possibilities.

Key topics

- Taking account of the options open to you
- Deciding on your personal research interests
- Other factors to take into account

Key terms

Action research  Dissertation  Qualitative  Quantitative  Supervisor

The topic you choose to research has a great influence on how well you succeed in carrying out the investigation and in writing up your work. A crucial factor is whether you have a genuine interest in the subject matter, as this will motivate you to complete the task to the best possible standard. In addition, many practical matters need to be taken into account, such as the availability of relevant resources, or the feasibility of the intended investigation.

Taking account of the options open to you

In many cases, you may find that the dissertation or project topics are prescribed or restricted. The decision is not so much one of what you would like to research, but more which topic you will choose from a list of options provided by academic staff. A variation on this closed option list is the semi-closed list, where academics provide a list of broad topics but leave the student to choose the detailed perspective that they wish to pursue.
Constraints such as these may feel restrictive, especially at first when you do not know the details of the topics outlined. However, they are generally designed to provide you with a degree of freedom within parameters controlled by those who will need to supervise and assess the finished work, and who will have carefully considered the practicalities of each option and the chances of obtaining a successful outcome.

A less restricted approach to the selection of dissertation topic or research project is also found. In this case, no list is provided and you are asked to choose not only the topic but the specific research question to be addressed. In this open-choice case, you will be expected to make a selection largely on the basis of your personal interests within the discipline. These might have developed from your personal experience or from previous detailed consideration of related topics arising from your course of study, for example, from reading carried out when studying for coursework.

*Your own topic*

If you have a specific topic in mind that is not on a prescribed list of dissertation or research project options, you could try approaching a potential supervisor and asking whether it might be considered. If you do this, be prepared to answer searching questions about its viability as a research theme. This may require some detailed research.

Where approval on the topic or perspective is required, you may need to present a written proposal that outlines the question and the method of approach to be adopted (Ch 3). This may involve presenting a reasoned argument justifying the research topic and approach. This then goes to the supervising academic or a panel of academics for consideration and approval.

*Make your decisions with speed but not haste*

If a list of dissertation or research options is presented, find out about it as quickly as possible, as there may be competition for specific topics or for particular supervisors. However, make sure you take all relevant factors into account in a deliberate decision-making process, rather than hastily choosing under pressure. You should give the matter high priority and allocate time and attention to activities that may help you make a decision, such as library or internet searches and discussions with potential supervisors.
Deciding on your personal research interests

It is essential that you find your study area interesting and that there is enough about the topic that is novel and challenging for you. If this is the case, then your levels of motivation will be high and may sustain you through any problems you encounter. If not, you will be liable to become bored or disillusioned, and this will hinder your ability to complete and write up your work.

By the time that you’re considering a potential research topic, you will almost certainly have an above-average interest in the broader field of study. However, you may never have thought rigorously about your true underlying interests. Now, when you are forced into making a decision, this will need to be considered quite deeply. For some, stating a primary interest might be easy, but for many, it will be quite difficult to commit their efforts to one highly focussed subject, or to settle on which option on a list interests them most. There may be a range of possibilities, each with a balance of attractions and negative aspects.

What, then, is the best way to arrive at a decision? This may depend on your personality, the discipline and the degree of choice you have been given:

- If you have an open choice, then one approach might be to brainstorm possible topics and sub-topics within your subject, then to rank these in order of your interest. You could do this in phases, moving sequentially from broader subject fields to more closely specified research areas, until a clear favourite emerges or you can narrow down the choices.

- If your choice is restricted or from a fixed menu of options, consider each option in turn. Do not reject any possibility out of hand until

Rewind your past experiences

Remind yourself about the issues that arose in debate in the lectures, tutorials, seminars or practicals. Reflect on those areas of your course where you found your curiosity and interest being fired. This may give you some direction in selecting a topic.
you know more about it. Obtain background information where necessary and, if a reading list is offered, consult this. Rank the options according to how they appeal to you.

With luck, you will now have created a shortlist of potential topics. The next phase, potentially of equal importance, is to think further about the practical matters that should influence your decision.

A simple way of ranking your choices

Consider each option in turn, and award it a mark out of 10. When you have completed a scan of all the options, look again at the ones which scored highly and reject the ones that scored weakly. Try explaining the reasons for your scores to someone else. This may force you to put into words how you feel, and thereby become more confident in your decision.

Other factors to take into account

Many factors will influence your ability to complete your studies to a high standard, and they should all be borne in mind as you arrive at a decision. You should also think about how useful the experience and end-product might be. Again, it will be beneficial to score these aspects in relation to the specific topics in your shortlist. You may wish to take into account the following:

Potential research approaches

While you may have distinct preferences for specific areas of study, you should still consider the options at a finer level before making a final decision. Is it possible for you to identify the approach that might be required? Is there a question to be answered, a problem to be solved or an issue to be debated? How will you restrict the potential areas to cover? How exactly will you set about researching the topic? You may alter this ‘research angle’ through time, but refining your thoughts might aid the decision-making process. Also, bear in mind that if you have a distinct direction to your work from the start, this will increase your chances of success.
Time aspects

In selecting a topic, it is particularly important to guard against being over-ambitious. Ensure that you will have enough time to be able to demonstrate, through your written work, that you have completed the task required. You need to factor in not only the time that you will need to read, analyse or present the material, but also the sometimes considerable period that it may take simply to obtain the material or data you need. If you spend too much time on project work and/or writing this may adversely affect your performance in other coursework.

In some cases, approval for your work will be required from an ethics committee, and this may also take time (see Ch 19). Remember too that the writing phase for a dissertation or a project report requires a lot of time. Where you can anticipate that simply identifying and obtaining the material, let alone reading and digesting it, is going to take an inordinate amount of time, then you may need to eliminate some of your first-choice possibilities.

Availability of resources or experimental material

Some dissertations or research projects run into difficulties because it is not possible to obtain the material required to carry out the work.

- **Obtaining printed material.** You will need to evidence your work by reference to the literature (Ch 7, Ch 17, Ch 18 and Ch 22). Thus, access to printed material is critical to the research process. You need to review the materials relevant to each potential topic that:
  - are available locally in hard copy in book and journal format within your own institution's library;
  - can be accessed electronically through your library's subscription to online journals;
- can be obtained through inter-library loan (taking into account any cost implications; and
- may require you to visit another library site for on-site access.

**How can I find out what sources are available?**

The best people to consult are the subject librarians in your library. They will know about:

- the resources already present in your library, including stored materials;
- the main routes for obtaining information, including advanced online searches;
- alternative approaches that you may not have thought about;
- obscure resources and how to access these;
- contacts at other institutions who can help; and
- professional organisations which may have exclusive databanks that you might be able to access through your department.

**Obtaining data.** You need to take into account the most realistic method of garnering data, recording and interpreting the findings within the time-frame that you have to do the work. If you need to analyse quantitative data, then you should also consider what statistical analysis software packages you may need to master. Where your data are qualitative in nature, then you should also consider with your supervisor the most appropriate methods for gathering and interpreting the information. For example, an action research approach might require different techniques to a questionnaire-based approach (Ch 12).

**Using new primary sources**

Research topics may focus on contemporary events and you may have to use recently published primary sources as the basis for your study. For example, you might consult material such as a recently produced *Royal Commission Report*, a new piece of legislation, or a newly published item of literature. Since the novelty of the topic would make it unlikely that there would be very little, if any, critical appraisal of such things in the public domain, then your research task would be to place your own interpretation on this material. If you encounter difficulty, then seek guidance from your supervisor.
**Depth**

Your dissertation or research topic will need to offer sufficient depth to allow you to show off your skills. These may depend on your discipline, but might include the ability to think critically through analysis and evaluation, or the ability to design an experiment or survey and report it professionally. Avoid choosing a well-worked area, or even one that you feel is likely to provide easy results, if it will not allow you to demonstrate advanced skills.

**Extent of support and supervision**

At all levels of study, the writing of the dissertation or project report is a major task and you will not be expected to do this alone. Incorporated into the process will be a level of support provided by an assigned supervisor. However, you need to be clear at the outset about what you can expect in terms of this support. In some institutions, supervision is mapped onto the research/writing process with regular student-supervisor meetings. In others, arrangements are agreed by the partners for meetings as required. Generally, the supervision will enable you to ask questions, seek guidance and debate some key issues. Be sure, however, that you reach an understanding with your supervisor about the extent to which you can expect them to review and provide feedback on your written work. Often this will not extend to reading the whole dissertation, or to proof-reading the text, as this is regarded as being the responsibility of the student.

**Choosing a supervisor**

If you have a choice, bear in mind that this should be a member of staff you feel comfortable talking to, who you feel will offer support and guidance, and inspire you to work hard and complete on time. Ask past students if you want the ‘inside track’ on different tutors, and, where appropriate, the environment where you will be expected to work.

**Impact on your CV and career options**

Although this is rarely the primary aspect to consider, it is a factor to bear in mind. It may already be that your subject interests are very closely aligned to your ideas for your future career. You may
also wish to take into account specific skills you might gain that will be of interest to an employer. If you are an undergraduate interested in further studies, your choice of topic may be valuable in giving you experience to take to a potential postgraduate supervisor.

**Weigh up the pros and cons of your options**

If you remain undecided after considering both your interest in potential topics and the practical aspects, try laying out your thoughts about the options in a set of simple tables with columns for advantages and disadvantages. This process may help order your thoughts and clarify the factors that are important to you.

**Practical tips for choosing your dissertation or research topic**

**Make sure that you are making an informed choice.** Do the necessary background reading. Discuss the topics with your course director or assigned supervisor so you avoid taking on a topic that is risky and understand fully the challenges of the topic area.

**Speak to students who have already completed this kind of study.** Postgraduates in your department might be useful contacts to ask. Discuss with them any aspects in the process that they felt were important to them when they were researching and writing their dissertations or project reports.

**Look at past work.** Dissertations and reports produced by students in previous years will help you gain a sense of the style and standard required. They will also enable you to look at a variety of approaches relevant to your discipline. But don’t be put off by apparently sophisticated structure and style in these completed examples. Remember that achieving this standard did not happen spontaneously. Your starting point may not be at this level, but the learning process will very likely result in a similarly high standard of report.

**Plan out a dissertation or report as part of the decision-making process.** Sketch out the structure at the macro-level and then, later, for selected options, think about a more detailed plan. In practice, you may not stick rigidly to the plan you create, but the process of
planning will help you to sort out the ideas and decide how appealing and feasible they are.

**Think for yourself.** When choosing a topic, try not to be influenced by other students' opinions. This is, and should be, a highly personal decision. Some of your peers may have their own reasons for liking or disliking certain topics or supervisors; you will need to distance yourself from their thoughts when considering your own options.

**Finding a topic for yourself.** If you are given the option to choose your own topic, but have difficulty identifying a theme, then you might find it stimulating to refer to some of the generic periodicals – such as *Nature, New Scientist, Time, The Economist,* or *The Spectator* – to identify emergent issues, new strands of research or possible controversies arising from contemporary developments in your field.

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**GO And now . . .**

2.1 Set aside time to make your decision. As indicated throughout this chapter, you should consider your options very carefully and carry out the necessary research to ensure your decision is informed. This will take time, but you must act quickly, or others may choose an option before you. Therefore, as soon as information is available, lay aside the necessary time to focus your attention on this issue.

2.2 Go back to basics. If the choices are bewildering, it may pay to revisit your old lecture notes and general texts to gain an overview of potential research areas. It may also be valuable to avoid the constraints of the booklists, if provided, and look at material that might be available online, for example, from writers and publishers in other countries. This can sometimes introduce a refreshingly different angle to a subject that might help you decide.

2.3 Visit your library and its website. Browse journals and books within your discipline shelving areas to obtain ideas; consult library staff or the online catalogue to find out about the availability of resources relevant to potential study areas.