

ADVICE ON HOW TO CHOOSE A DISSERTATION TOPIC

[HTTP://CUSTOMPAPERS.COM/ESSAYS-ARTICLES/DISSERTATION-TOPIC/](http://custompapers.com/essays-articles/dissertation-topic/)

Choose a Subject That You Are Interested In - Your dissertation will show your lack of interest if you are doing it just to pass your course rather than because you genuinely want to find out about it.

Make Up Your Own Mind - Get ideas straight in your head before you allow yourself to be influenced by authorities on the subject. Often it is best to form your own opinions first then look to experts who have proven research to back up your ideas. You can then perform your own quantitative and qualitative research to back up your findings.

Use a Mind Map - A mind map or skeleton diagram is a useful way of harnessing the thoughts and areas that you are interested in and the direction your research might take.

Ask Questions - The aim of your research should be to answer your questions and those of others. You are proposing an argument and will be justifying that argument with academic research methodologies.

Decide on the Scope of Your Research - The dissertation abstract and dissertation proposal should focus the parameters by which your research should be bound.

Methodologies - Do not let your fear of statistics disbar you from carrying out quantitative research. There are many statistical packages available now that will assist you with interpreting and performing statistical analysis and your tutor should be able to advise you of training courses available in for example SPSS. You may well find that qualitative research, in the form of interviews with primary sources, maybe considerably more time-consuming than performing quantitative analysis of existing research.

Set and Review a Timetable - Be realistic about how long each stage should take and draw up a realistic timetable to help you. This will also help you to decide on your thesis.

Research Interests of Your Professors - Do your college professors have a particular specialism in a research area and do you admire them because of it? Have you enjoyed their lectures more because of their enthusiasm for their subject area? If you are enthusiastic about their research, they will be the same about yours. It is flattering for an academic to feel that they have inspired their students.

Choose a Subject That You Can Readily Research - If a subject is difficult to get hard data on, then your dissertation may prove more difficult if not impossible.

Choose a Subject That You Have to Do Primary Research For - If there is little research material on the subject that you are interested in you will be a trailblazer if you have to perform your own primary quantitative or qualitative research. You may as a result of your very own ground breaking research be asked to present a paper on your research with a possibility of being offered further research work and a further career in academia.

What Career do You Intend to Follow - What Will You Specialize In? - Your research for your dissertation should reflect your special interest and should be a showcase for your knowledge and interest in a particular specialism. You should choose a broad topic area to research into and then narrow it down when you have carried out further research.

Do a Literature Review - Find out what materials are available on your possible areas of research. This will cut down on any duplication in your work.

Read Industry Magazines and Journals - Current popular journals in your area of study often indicate what the current thinking is and what research areas are popular. This means that if you are doing a meaningful piece of research, which is relevant to industry need, you will be more likely to use it to get a job at the end of your studies.

Listen to and Take Advice - From previous students, from tutors, family and people who are working in your chosen field. All advice helps to build up a picture of how your research could be applied in the employment arena which should ultimately be your main focus.

Be Wary of Being Too Ambitious - It is important to enlist your tutor's support early in the project. Many students fail to complete their dissertation because they have ignored their mentor's advice on their choice of dissertation topic. Tutors are there to help you and have vast experience in advising students and in their research field. If they tell you, you are going to have difficulties with your thesis because of its direction, Listen! No one likes a rookie who is over-confident. Remember Icarus had ambitious ideas too!

Get to Know Key Players - Familiarise yourself with experts in the fields that you are studying. Your university may even call upon these experts to examine you on your thesis if it is a particularly specialist area and there no appropriate academics at your university. If they are the leading light on pediatrics, you need to ensure that you have read their research or risk major insult!

Have Previous Students Carried Out Similar Research? - You need to get a copy of their dissertation. This can be useful starting point as it will also help you to do your initial literature review. Be wary of reading it and feeling overwhelmed by the task ahead, you are as capable as any other student (you wouldn't be on the course if you were not!) and you should set your standards high.

Showcase - Your dissertation should seek to demonstrate your skills as a researcher. It should showcase your knowledge and skills and be the swan song for the culmination of your course and what you have learned.

Schools of Thought - You will likely read sources which advocate opposing schools of thought. It is highly unlikely that at undergraduate level you will be proposing a radically new school of thought. Therefore, you will probably be using your dissertation to prove your argument about why you personally agree with a particular school of thought and the weaknesses of the opposition.

Take Your Time to Decide - Don't take the first suggested research topic that is offered to you. Your choice of dissertation may potentially have an influence on your career for years to come. One of the favourite questions for interviewers to ask is about your dissertation. If you feel that you do not want to talk about your research, the panel may conclude that you were not interested in it and merely did it to pass your course. In which case you would have missed a golden opportunity to impress and enthuse about your work.

Starting a PhD – Choosing and developing your research topic

<http://100thousandwords.wordpress.com/2010/10/18/starting-a-phd-%E2%80%93-choosing-and-developing-your-research-topic/>
Posted on [October 18, 2010](#) by [Monica Clua](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

There are two reasons why someone may want to start a PhD. On the one hand, there may be a passion for research, for developing understanding and knowledge. It may be due to a desire to be intellectually challenged and guided by a world expert in your field. On the other hand, there may be a particular topic, theory or issue that really appears to motivate your curiosity. For most people however both reasons are present. In some cases, there may even be the situation where the future PhD candidate has already been engaged in academic research (perhaps as a research assistant for a project) or where the candidate has already carried out extensive work on that topic. In such cases, choosing a topic appears as a straightforward matter with the ensuing complication of making it viable or finding a suitable theoretical and methodological framework.

Whatever the starting point, the first difficulty everyone appears to encounter is how to make sure that topic *X* will continue to motivate me in three or four years time. The answer is that on some days it certainly won't. There are days, even weeks, when most PhD students feel that they chose the wrong topic. That is inevitable and part of the process. Therefore, whilst **it is important that the topic you choose has been selected freely and out of your own interest, rather than your supervisor's**, there are many other issues that will impact as much on your ability to complete your thesis. The first issue to bear in mind when considering a topic is how viable it is for a PhD project. Generally speaking, most PhD students appear to start their PhDs with over-ambitious projects and find it difficult to focus their initial research question. **The key is to ensure that the *big* topic can be turned into a *manageable* research question.** That is what time and time again supervisors and other successful academics will tell the poor PhD candidate. And yet, **how do you *actually* do that?**

- Patience, humility and flexibility are key. **Patience to understand that your research question can, and probably will change during the initial stages of your research.** It is not written in stone (unless of course the research question has been set by your funding body) and the beauty of research is its ability to change things, including your very own research process.
- Humility to keep your chosen topic to a manageable level, even if that means that, at times, you are not being loyal to your initial ambitions. In fact you are more than likely not going to be. And that is not necessarily a bad thing. Humility also matters in realising that **although you already know a lot about your topic before you start, in fact, you know very little. That is what will allow you to grow and be challenged intellectually.** *What's the point of doing a thesis if you already know the answer?*
- Flexibility can be a very useful attribute to have during a research project, and even more during such a long project as a PhD. **You will find many obstacles during your thesis. Many will be unsolvable and you will need to be flexible with your topic.** Perhaps you planned to use a particular conceptual framework but you realise that it will not work with your particular case (or cases). A decision has to be made to either change the case or change the framework. You may have wanted to compare two or more cases and either time concerns prevent it (after all you want to finish your PhD!) or you may realise that such comparison may not make theoretical sense and therefore you will need to change your original research design. Being flexible in such cases will not be a reflection of weakness, but rather one of intellectual strength.

Your topic will not only change, it will also confuse you. That is natural. That confusion is the state that follows from being immersed in a topic for long periods of time. I often remember the start of the PhD, eager to tell everyone what my PhD was about. By the time I reached my second year, that was the topic I was hoping to avoid in any conversation. I was too confused to be able to offer a concise answer to the innocent question "*What is your PhD about?*" It helped to realise that many other PhD students also felt that way. It was the process of realisation that I was not yet an expert. **The point really is to get started and to be willing to develop your research throughout the process. By all means, try to be faithful to your initial topic and research question when they have been well designed and work well. But make sure you are able to act promptly when they don't without feeling that you are betraying your initial project.**

Plain talk about your dissertation proposal

http://www.ling.upenn.edu/advice/green_proposal.html

1. The purpose of the proposal is to convince your committee that there is a tractable question which is worth pursuing and that *you are in a position to do a good job of pursuing it*.
2. Therefore, the proposal should demonstrate that you:
 - o [a.] have defined and delimited an interesting research question
 - o [b.] can explain the importance of the question to a linguist not intimately familiar with it
 - o [c.] can formulate testable hypotheses
 - o [d.] have a detailed **plan** for testing the most promising hypotheses
3. You do not have to read everything that was ever written about anything that might conceivably be relevant to a full understanding of the phenomenon you are interested in addressing before you write the proposal, but you do need to be familiar with material that you know is germane to your approach to the problem. You are expected to make an effort to locate such material.
4. Whether your proposal contains a Literature Survey summarizing the history of relevant research on your topic, and if so, how extensive it must be, should be settled early between you and your advisor. In any case, you should **situate** your proposed dissertation within the context of what is known and/or generally believed about the phenomena you will investigate, and you should discuss both the lasting contributions and the shortcomings of previous research.
5. Do not attempt to satisfy (2a-d) by doing the dissertation research before you write the proposal. **Do not write the dissertation before the prelim.** If you do, you will be treating your hypotheses like conclusions, and your prelim will turn into a defense of those propositions. Since that is the role of the dissertation defense, scheduled after a year or so of testing, writing, reviewing, revising, retesting, and rewriting, you can expect to fail if you try to do it at this point. A proposal is supposed to describe what you **propose** to do, and why and how you propose to do it.
6. Questions your proposal should answer **directly**:
 - o What **problem** are you going to tackle?
 - o Why is it a problem?
 - o Why is it important to solve it?
 - o Where are you going to **look** for answers?
 - o Why are you going to look there?

Nothing in any of the above implies any particular structural format that a dissertation proposal must have. When you plan your proposal, it should be with the purpose of the proposal (as indicated above) in mind. For each section, it should be transparently clear what that section has to do with which purpose.

A note on exposition

1. Don't put the footnotes at the end of the document; put them at the foot of the page.
2. It is not enough to say what you believe to be true. You need to be clear and explicit about how your (tentative) conclusions follow from the assumptions you make, and then make a big deal of them.

How do I know whether my dissertation topic is achievable?

<http://dissertation.laerd.com/articles/how-do-i-know-whether-my-dissertation-topic-is-achievable.php>

When you first choose a dissertation topic that you are interested in, it can be very difficult to know whether it is going to be *achievable* to carry out. This is particularly the case if you are an undergraduate student, attempting a dissertation for the first time, but it is also common amongst postgraduate students. However, there are a number of factors that influence whether your dissertation topic is likely to be achievable in the 9-months (give or take a few months) that you have to complete your dissertation. This article sets out some of the questions you should ask yourself before settling on a particular topic.

Your ability to complete your proposed dissertation will depend on the specific topic. However, there are a number of common factors that will determine whether your dissertation topic will be achievable. These include issues of access (to people, organisations, data, facilities, and information), what skills you have and what you can learn, what intellectual support you can get, the nature of your dissertation topic (broad versus narrow), and how interested you are in your dissertation topic. Whilst not all of the issues of access will necessarily apply to you, the other factors mentioned certainly will. As such, when thinking about your own dissertation topic, ask yourself:

- Can I get the access I need?
- Do I have the right skills?
- Will I be able to get the intellectual help I need?
- Is my dissertation topic too broad or too narrow?
- Am I interested in this topic?

Can I get the access I need?

When thinking about issues of access, ask yourself: Can I get the access I need to:

- People
- Organizations
- Data
- Information
- Facilities

We address each of these in turn.

People

If the people you are trying to get access to are employees in an organisation, jump to the next major bullet point ([Organisation](#)). However, if these people are members of the public or some particular section of society (i.e. some specific social group), you need to think about two main issues: *sampling* and *ethics*.

- *Sampling* is a critical component of the *Research Methodology* chapter of your dissertation. A poorly designed *sampling strategy* will inevitably lead to significant weaknesses in your findings, as well as your ability to answer the research questions and/or hypotheses that you have set. The question arises: How do I know whether sampling is going to be a problem that affects the achievability of my dissertation?

If you have not yet completed your dissertation proposal, and only have a dissertation topic idea, you

may not yet know what research design you will use, or the appropriate sampling strategy that goes with it. In this case, it is worth reading the article, [Research design and sampling strategies \[coming soon\]](#) to get a better understand of these before reading on.

Assuming that you now know what *research design* you are using (i.e. either a *quantitative, qualitative* or *mixed-methods* research design), and the broad *sampling strategy* you will adopt (i.e. either *probability* or *non-probability* sampling strategy), we can come back to the question: How do I know whether sampling is going to be a problem that affects the achievability of my dissertation?

- If you *intend* to use a *probability sampling* technique, the main factor that could make this part of your dissertation unachievable is the inability to get hold of a *complete list of the population* you want to study [see the article: [Sampling: The basics coming soon](#)]. For example, imagine you were interested in the career choices of all students at your university (i.e. your *population* is the 20,000 students at your university). If Student Records or whichever department that is responsible for maintaining the list of all students at the university will not give you access to this list, you cannot use a probability sampling technique. In many cases, the list of the population you need will not be available. If using a probability sampling technique is critical to your choice of dissertation topic, clearly you may have to rethink or tweak the topic (or at least, the methodological components of your dissertation). Even if a complete list exists, try and get a sense early on how long it will take to get permission to access such a list. If possible, get *written permission* that you will be granted access to the list. After all, when it comes to releasing the list to you, the person who gave you *verbal permission* may not have the authority to give you access.

- If you plan to use a *non-probability sampling* technique, you need to think carefully about the population you are targeting. For example, if you are using *purposive sampling*, can you get access to the specific individuals that are important to the phenomenon you are researching? If you are using *snowball sampling*, do you think that enough people will come forward in time for your sample to be large enough? Think about the type of non-probability sampling technique you may need to use for your dissertation topic to see what potential challenges you may face [see the article: [Types of non-probability sampling coming soon](#)].

- *Ethics* should be taken into account in dissertation research, but ethics is only something that affects the achievability of your dissertation in a small number of cases. Ask yourself: Does my proposed dissertation topic involve:
 - Participants that are under 18 years of age?
 - Access to sensitive research environments?
 - Situations where participants may be caused stress, discomfort or harm?
 - Findings that identify individuals, groups and/or organisations?

If the answer to any of these questions is *YES*, you may need to complete an ethics proposal for your supervisor or perhaps even the Ethics Committee of your Academic Department or School. You may

also have to gain additional forms of approval, such as the formal approval of parents (or a legal guardian) if participants are under 18 years of age. There are two potential factors to consider here:

1. How much time it will take you to complete your ethics proposal and get permission from any of these groups (e.g. supervisors, Ethics Committees, parents, legal guardians, etc.).
2. What to do if your supervisor or the Ethics Committee rejects your ethics proposal. If this happens, how long it will take to re-submit your proposal; or worse case, whether you will have to come up with a completely new dissertation topic.

If you are keen on the dissertation topic that you have selected, it is worth jumping through these hurdles. However, bear in mind that they can slow down the dissertation process. Therefore, tweaking your dissertation topic idea to avoid obvious ethical issues (and barriers) may be worth considering.

□ Organisations

If your dissertation involves gaining access to a particular organisation, we would strongly advise contacting that organisation before deciding to go ahead with your dissertation topic. Even if there is more than one organisation that you could use, it is strongly advised to find out whether such access is going to be likely before finalising your dissertation topic. Unfortunately, many organisations are not open to student research, which can make primary data collection very difficult.

There are a number of common hurdles that students face when trying to gain access to organisations to conduct research:

1. It is not uncommon for organisations to grant access and then take it away at the last minute. Whilst this is a worst case scenario, we have seen this happen first hand. Often, access has been promised, but not guaranteed. It is important to get written confirmation from organisations as early as possible. Without *written permission*, there are really no guarantees that access will not be withdrawn.
2. The level of access granted can also become a problem. Without support from more senior people in the organisation(s) you are interested in, it may be very difficult to get the depth of access you need. Furthermore, some dissertations run into difficulties because key contacts leave or the internal projects associated with the dissertation are cancelled, so managers lose interest. This can result in two potentially significant problems down the line: First, you may be unable to employ the *sampling strategy* that you want [for more information, see the article: [Research design and sampling strategies coming soon](#)]. Second, it may be very difficult to get the *sample size* that you need, which can seriously undermine the *quality of your findings*, as well as your ability to answer your research questions and/or hypotheses [see the article: [Sampling: The basics coming soon](#)]. This will inevitably lead to a lower mark.

To see if these potential problems can be overcome, we suggest that you:

- Call the main number of a small organisation or the Press Department if you are contacting a large organisation. This will give you a sense of whether an organisation is open to student research. Since some organisations have a policy of not working with students in this way, it can be a quick way to find out if you need to change or tweak your dissertation topic to accommodate what access is and is not going to be possible.

- Follow up the initial call (either by phone or letter) to see if you can get support for your research by a senior person within the organisation. If this individual will act as a champion internally for the research, you will have a much better chance of gaining the level of access required to gather the data you need.

Data

If your dissertation topic requires a lot of secondary data, it is important to check whether you can get access to this before you settle on your topic idea. There are many advantages of using secondary data, but there are a number of potential disadvantages that can impede your ability to carry out your research, or at the very least, reduce its quality [see the articles, Secondary data: Advantages and disadvantages: *coming soon*]. Ask yourself?

- Is there sufficient data?
- Is the data publicly accessible?
- Can I get permission to use the data?
- Does the data include all the variables/information I need?

Sometimes, collecting secondary data can be even harder than conducting primary research, especially if the data you need is difficult to access or spread over many locations. If you can identify the data you need early on, try and get *written permission* to access the data before you decide on your dissertation topic.

Information

Since journal articles, books, and other such resources are so critical to a good literature review, which can act as a backbone for your dissertation research, it is worth checking that you have access to such information. It is best not to assume that your university has access to the research materials that you need. Your university may subscribe to hundreds, if not thousands of journals, but sometimes the odd journal, even major ones, is missed out. If your dissertation topic is all about international business, for example, you don't want to find out that you have no access to the *Journal of International Business Studies*; unless you are prepared to pay for access yourself! Therefore, when choosing a topic, ask yourself:

- Does my university have access to the journals I need?
- If not, can I get access to these journals from another source (e.g. Questia or BNET)?
- How much will inter-library loans cost me for journals or books that I need?

Purchasing access to a single journal article can range between \$10-30 (give or take), so if you need to purchase a lot of them yourself, the price can soon stack up.

Facilities

Access to facilities is only likely to become an achievability issue if:

- such facilities are critical to your dissertation topic success in a given field (e.g. access to science equipment, engineering tools, pharmacy labs, etc.)
- such facilities are difficult to book in advance, making it impossible to ensure you will get the amount of access time you need
- such facilities pose health and safety issues that you will have to address first

Therefore, ask yourself:

- How critical is access to certain facilities to my dissertation topic?
- Are there any health and safety hoops to jump through?
- Are the facilities open when I will be performing my research?
- Can I book these facilities in advance if access time is precious?

If any of these issues affect you, we would recommend that you check that you can get the access you need before deciding on your dissertation topic.

Do I have the right skills?

If you are particularly keen on a dissertation topic, it can be easy to overlook the specific skills you will need to complete it. Even if you have identified the skills you will need, it is tempting to think that because you have so many months to complete your dissertation, you can just learn these skills along the way. It may be that you are good at qualitative-based subjects, but want to do a dissertation topic that would involve a lot of quantitative (i.e. statistical) work. Alternately, you may need to do a lot of interviews in your dissertation, but you know you are a very shy person. Clearly, these sorts of things should not put you off doing the dissertation topic you are interested in. However, it is important to remember that the dissertation process is a hard one, especially if you are an undergraduate student that has not completed a dissertation before. Playing to your strengths is not a weakness.

When thinking about your dissertation topic and the skills it may require, ask yourself:

- Am I a quantitative or qualitative person (or both)?
- Will I feel comfortable talking with people or working with data/information?
- How good are my English-language skills?
- Will anyone be able to help me if I don't have the right skills?
- What resources does the university have to help me if I don't have the right skills?

These are obviously *crude* questions, but hopefully you get the point we are trying to make. Playing to your strengths will inevitably make the dissertation process go more smoothly and help you to achieve a higher mark.

Will I be able to get the intellectual help I need?

It is sad to say, but one of the biggest criticisms that students have of the dissertation process is the lack of support they had from their tutor(s) and/or supervisor(s). However, sometimes it is possible to get support from other academics within your Academic Department or School. This can be particularly useful when your supervisor is not an expert in the field you are interested in. Not all Academic Departments or Schools ensure that you have supervisors that are experts in your area. Therefore, when it comes to the achievability of your dissertation topic, we strongly recommend that you pass it by an academic in your Academic Department or School who is an expert in your field. Finding a sympathetic and interested academic can also be really important throughout the dissertation process, especially when it comes to giving guidance on your literature review. Whilst we would never recommend abandoning a dissertation topic because you don't think you will be able to get this kind of intellectual help, it certainly should be a consideration when choosing a dissertation topic. It is no coincidence that Doctoral students (i.e. those studying for PhDs) apply to do research under a supervisor that is an expert in their field of interest.

Is my dissertation topic too broad or too narrow?

If your dissertation topic is based on a *qualitative* research design (or even a *mixed-methods* research design), it will more likely start with a more broad perspective of whatever you are interested in, which narrows over time; especially when compared with a quantitative research design [see the article: [Types of research design coming soon](#)], if you unsure about the differences in these research designs]. However, irrespective of the *research design*

you adopt, or the *research philosophy* driving it [see the article: [Types of research philosophy coming soon](#)], your dissertation topic should not be either too broad or too narrow. If your dissertation topic is very narrow, it will certainly be more achievable, but it may be rejected at the proposal stage. If it is too broad, you may never be able to achieve the research aims or questions you set yourself. Since it can be very difficult to identify whether your dissertation topic is too broad (or too narrow) when you simply have an idea for a study, we have tried to explain what you should think about in our article: [Is my dissertation topic too broad?](#)

Am I interested in this topic?

This sounds like a stupid question. After all, you probably would not have come up with the topic in the first place if it was not of interest. However, we know of so many students that choose a dissertation topic because they are running out of time to submit their proposals. However, if there is one thing that past students will tell you about their dissertation experience, it would be that the whole process can be very stressful. The dissertation is a journey, as corny as that sounds, with some ups, and plenty of downs! It will most likely be the largest and most challenging piece of work you have done to date. Having a strong interest in the topic will be one of the most important factors helping you through the lows, as well as encouraging you to spend extra time reviewing the literature, which is essential, but also very time consuming. After all, you would not want to read a book that you had no interest in. However, doing a literature review is just like reading a big book (or lots of books); it's just that the book is more likely to be a whole bunch of journal articles. If you don't have a strong interest in the topic you are doing, it will make reading these articles very difficult, and even more time consuming than it already is. So choose a topic that you are really interested in.

Now that you have read this article, you may find the following article helpful: [Is my dissertation topic too broad?](#) Whilst we touched on dissertation topics being *too broad* as an issue of *achievability* in this article, it is such a common problem that we have devoted an entire article to it (i.e. [Is my dissertation topic too broad?](#)). Alternately, if you are still trying to come up with a dissertation topic, you may find the following article helpful: [Our top tip for finding a dissertation topic.](#)