

Mastering Your Business Dissertation

How to conceive, research and
write a good business
dissertation

Robert Lomas



0-3
39



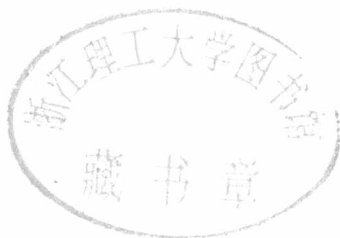
30807602

MASTERING YOUR BUSINESS DISSERTATION

How to conceive, research, and
write a good business dissertation

Robert Lomas

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK



First published 2011

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

© 2011 Robert Lomas

The right of Robert Lomas to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Typeset in Aldus and Gill Sans by

Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon

Printed and bound by

the MPG Books Group in the UK

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Lomas, Robert, 1947–

Mastering your business dissertation : conceiving, research, and writing for a masters degree / Robert Lomas.

p. cm.

1. Business—Research. 2. Dissertations, Academic.

3. Business writing. I. Title.

HD30.4.L66 2010

650.072—dc22 2010021064

ISBN: 978-0-415-59678-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-59679-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-09314-6 (ebk)

FOREWORD

I met Robert Lomas in 2000 when I made an offer to publish *The Hiram Key*, his first book, co-written with Christopher Knight.

The first thing that impressed me about him was his courage. Here was an academic and a Freemason saying things that were bound to outrage many in both communities.

The second thing was his determination to be clear. *The Hiram Key* is packed with new research and original ideas emerging from that research. The sheer volume of information the reader is asked to absorb threatens to be overwhelming, and many of the ideas are new and quite hard. In the hands of a lesser writer, the effect on the reader might have been like trying to walk head-on into a snowstorm.

But where some writers might have been tempted to hide behind deliberate obfuscation, or to enjoy mystifying the reader, Robert was evidently determined to lay out these ideas and these facts in as plain a way as possible.

He had also taken care to organize his ideas in a way that shows a progression. There was an unfolding of understanding that pulled the reader through some four hundred pages at a spanking pace. By the end of the book the reader had taken in much that was new, hard, even abstruse – without being conscious of having made an effort. This is why *The Hiram Key*, as well as being a best-seller all around the world upon publication, continues to sell and sell.

The Hiram Key has an historical narrative, but that is not true of all Robert's books. Even where there isn't an obvious chronological narrative around which to weave the development of his ideas, Robert is a master of the art of making people want to know What happens next? This art lies in asking questions, posing problems to be solved,

pointing out inconsistencies in the commonly accepted view, and drawing attention to the fact that there is treasure to be discovered.

The aim is always to bring the reader to a clear understanding, and the digital revolution makes clarity all the more important. When I started in publishing some twenty years ago, I might have received a handful of submissions per week through the post. Perhaps a couple of internal memos would flutter down into my in-tray per week. 'Those can simmer for a while,' I used to think, as I went back to staring out of the window and making grand plans.

These days I receive anywhere between a hundred and two hundred emails per day, many of them business propositions and most of them expecting a quick response. I receive about thirty submissions per week. God does not send enough hours to read all this stuff. The propositions that have the boldness and clarity that Robert Lomas teaches in this book are the ones I make the time to read. I suspect the same is true in other businesses.

Whether we are talking about ideas for best-selling books or any other business proposition, there is, I believe, a magic in clarity. Clarity helps ideas become real.

The British philosophical tradition lays much more emphasis on clarity than, say, the French or the German. Is this because in Britain philosophy has been more closely tied to the growth of scientific thinking? As a scientist Robert probably knows the answer.

Why is it that if a scientific theory is clear and simple, even elegantly so, it is more likely to be right?

Is the cosmos – no less than Robert Lomas – trying to tell us something?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As a young physicist, I was fortunate to have Prof. Michael Hampshire of Salford University as my PhD supervisor. Mike taught me how important it was to be curious and to ask the right sort of questions, and I am grateful to him for providing me with this useful skill, which I have cultivated and now try to pass on to my own students.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Mark Booth for teaching me how to write. Mark is one of the publishing industry's most successful players. After university he started out as a bookseller with Waterstones, where Tim Waterstone spotted his talent and invited him to devise a new imprint. Going from total publishing inexperience to running his own list in a matter of months, he was an immediate success as a commissioning editor. Over the last twenty years or so he has produced two or three top-ten best-sellers every year and has invented at least two new publishing genres: the SAS thrillers of Chris Ryan and the 'chav-lit' novels of Katie Price. And Mark has an uncanny nose for unlikely bestsellers – a skill he puts down to being a good listener. He's published Banksy, the graffiti artist; Valentino Rossi, the motorcycle champion; Marti Caine, the comedian; and Boyzone pop-singer Stephen Gately's posthumous novel *Tree of Seasons*.

He has also published me. When I first ventured beyond academic textbook-writing into the hard commercial world of trade books, Mark Booth was commissioning editor at Century (a Random House imprint). He took the rather muddled manuscript of *The Hiram Key*, which I had written with my friend Chris Knight, and showed me how to improve it, focus its message and cut the waffle out. It was an immediate best-seller and remains an evergreen. Since then I have

written many other successful books, and still enjoy working with Mark at his new imprint.

From our first meeting Mark has encouraged me to ask the sort of interesting questions Mike Hampshire would have approved of, to provide good evidence to support my answers and to write a good story telling how it happened. I want to thank Mark for all he has taught me about the art of writing. It is his message about the joy of asking a good question and the pleasure of composing a clear answer which inspired me to pass his ideas about writing on to the students whose dissertations I was supervising. The result was a whole string of distinctions.

This was spotted by Prof. James Powell of Salford University, then external examiner for the Bradford MBA in Engineering Management. James found my students' dissertations amazingly readable and consistent in standard, and he asked me what I was doing. When I explained, he encouraged me to share these good writing concepts more widely, both with my colleagues and with my students. I am grateful to James for his friendship, our fascinating discussions and his academic encouragement to tackle an issue often neglected in dissertation supervision: teaching your students to write well and to think clearly about what they should write.

I would also like to thank Terry Clague of Routledge, who dropped in for a chat just when I was developing the material for a course at Bradford School of Management. He looked at my lecture outlines and course objectives and suggested the concept would make a textbook rather different from most existing ones. He encouraged and guided me to write this, my first textbook since 1985, and I have enjoyed doing it.

Finally I am grateful to Dr Roger Beach and Prof. Kevin Barber – my academic colleagues at Bradford School of Management, who incited me to be ambitious in setting high targets for my MBA students, and to John Wheelwright, my long-time copy-editor and a stalwart guardian of the art of clear writing, for providing a second pair of eyes and a sense of clarity. But most of all I want to thank my students, who worked so hard, and contributed so many useful thoughts, during the 2009 Business Research Course where I formally piloted the ideas set out here.

ROBERT LOMAS

Bradford University School of Management, 2010

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The chapters of this book were written as a series of weekly lectures for a part-time MBA evening course in Research Methods for students at Bradford University School of Management.

Its aim was to give an oversight of all the skills students would need in order to produce an acceptable dissertation in Business or Management, and also to motivate them to approach the dissertation as a chance to learn about the subject, about their roles in their company and about themselves. In any postgraduate business degree it is the dissertation that provides the greatest opportunity for learning and bringing together all the subjects studied. However, students often see dissertation-writing as a necessary evil – something they try to dash off as quickly as possible in order to finish the course and get a pass. I set out to try to transform this view, so that my students would look forward to the chance to research a topic that fascinated them and would help them establish themselves in a future career.

My method of delivery was first to deliver the material here contained in a chapter as a lecture, then divide the students into groups. (I took care to categorize all students according to two basic viewpoints about research, which I called Platonist and Aristotelian. I then allocated them into groups that contained representatives of each viewpoint, to ensure balance in discussion.)

After the lecture, lasting about an hour, we would break for dinner, then return refreshed to spend the next hour debating the topics put forward in the lecture. The students were split into groups of five or six, and each group went to a separate syndicate room to discuss a set topic relating to the lecture material (these topics are included

at the end of each chapter of this book). I circulated among the groups asking questions, provoking thought and generally stirring up each group to really question what it meant to research and write a dissertation.

Finally the groups would reassemble in the lecture theatre, and each would summarize its views on the topic before I facilitated a final plenary discussion to reinforce the findings. The whole process took about three hours.

After the initial group session I asked them to think about the motives of the main stakeholders and set them an individual task of writing to a deadline. The topic is shown at the end of Chapter 1, and the report they produced formed the beginning of the Learning Log I encouraged each student to keep to create a personal record of each of the discussions. The aim of the Learning Log was to capture, not only what they were learning but also how they felt about being challenged, and how hard it sometimes was to face up to difficult issues of motivation and time-management.

The first written assignment served three purposes.

- It showed it was quite possible to write text of a set length, on a set topic, to be delivered to a tight deadline. In other words, you don't need to wait for inspiration to strike. You can sit down in front of a blank page and write to order. The writing may not be perfect, or even as good as you would like, but, once you have something written, it becomes possible to edit and improve what you have, and your thoughts become much clearer.
- It forced each individual to write down their own motives, and the motives they ascribed to the other key stakeholders in the dissertation.
- It provided basic material, to be used in later group discussions to conceive a good research question – one that could satisfy all the criteria for planning a dissertation that would be interesting to all stakeholders, that it would be possible to answer within the assigned word count and time limit, and that would get a good mark when submitted for examination.

Over the following weeks the groups explored all the key issues in the process of dissertation creation. And they built up Learning

Logs that were relevant to the problems they would address when working on their own dissertations.

The final learning took place during the final exam, which was an open book – meaning students could take any material they wished into the exam. During the two hours of the exam the students were asked to use their Learning Logs to produce a dissertation proposal and a plan of implementation.

When the course began all the students were nervous and fearful about trying to write what seemed to them a long document on a boring topic. When it ended I had a group of keen researchers eager to seize the chance to study and learn about something that interested them and offered them the prospect of becoming an expert on a topic they could use to advance their career.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If this book is used as a textbook, then all the tasks are set. If you are using this book as an individual, I suggest that, after reading each chapter and before reading on, you take time to write out your own answers to the discussion topics in a Learning Log. By thinking, and writing, about each topic before reading further you will find you have prepared your mind to learn more from the next chapter/lecture.

Writing a business dissertation can be a joyful learning experience. The aim of this little book is to show how to approach this happy state.

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	xiv
<i>List of Tables</i>	xv
<i>Foreword</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
<i>The Purpose of This Book</i>	xxi
<i>How to Use This Book</i>	xxiii
1 UNDERSTANDING BUSINESS RESEARCH	1
Why Research?	1
How Do You Think?	4
<i>Sorting the Sheep from the Goats</i>	4
Platonism	4
Aristotelianism	7
Working To Your Strengths	10
Forming a Study Group and Keeping a Learning Log	12
GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 1	13
2 WHERE DO YOU START?	14
Stakeholders, Problems and Choices	14
A Simple Taxonomy of Business Problems	18
<i>An Aristotelian Approach</i>	19
<i>A Platonist Approach</i>	21
<i>Problems of Observation</i>	25
<i>Problems of Prediction</i>	25
<i>Problems of Planning</i>	25
<i>Problems of Business Theory</i>	26
GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 2	26

3	HAS SOMEBODY ANSWERED MY QUESTION BEFORE?	27
	Tapping the Cornucopia of Information and Possibilities	27
	Untangling the Fuzzy Ball of Knowledge	32
	By Relevance	33
	By Date of Publication	33
	Using Amazon	34
	Using the British Library Catalogue	35
	Using Metalib to Search for Data on Specific Problems	35
	Organizing Your Data and Theories	39
	Using Word Outline	39
	Keeping Track of What You Find	40
	Using EndNote	41
	Knowing When To Stop Searching	42
	GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 3	42
4	DIFFERENT QUESTIONS NEED DIFFERENT ANSWERS	43
	Taking the Measure of an Answer	43
	How To Answer Your Question	44
	The Nature of Data	44
	What is Acceptable Error in Data?	45
	Dependent and Independent Variables	46
	Problems of Observation	47
	Problems of Prediction	48
	Based on Past Behaviour Patterns	48
	Horizontal or stationary patterns	49
	Trend patterns	49
	Seasonal patterns	49
	Did it fit past events?	51
	Can it reliably estimate future developments?	51
	Problems of Planning	52
	Showing the Plan is Appropriate	52
	Showing How the Plan Can Ameliorate the Problem	52
	Showing How Implementing the Plan Worked as Predicted	52

Problems of Business Theory	53
<i>Developing a New Theory From Scratch</i>	53
<i>Showing How an Existing Theory Can Be Adapted to a New Situation</i>	53
<i>Testing If an Existing Theory Remains Applicable in New Circumstances</i>	53
Sources of Data	54
<i>How to Find Appropriate Data</i>	54
Internal Data From Your Organization	55
<i>Internal Data From a Marketing Department</i>	57
Sales volume by product and product group	57
Sales volume by area	57
Sales volume by market segment	58
Sales volume by type of distribution channel	58
Sales volume over time	58
Pricing information	58
Communication mix information	59
Sales promotion data	59
Sales representatives' records and reports	59
Inquiries received and quotations dispatched	59
<i>Internal Data From Other Departments</i>	60
Finance Department	60
Purchasing Department	60
Transport Department	60
Production Department	60
<i>Using Departmental Plans</i>	62
External Secondary Data	62
<i>Government Statistics</i>	63
<i>Non-government Statistics</i>	64
Data from Original Research	65
<i>Using Marketing Research to Gather Primary Data</i>	65
Market	66
Packaging	66
Sales	66
Communications	66
Pricing	67
Customer	67
Distribution	67

Product	68
Other specialist areas	68
How to Collect Primary Data	68
<i>Observation</i>	68
Mechanical or electronic devices	69
The audit technique	69
Human observation	70
<i>Experiment</i>	70
<i>Surveys</i>	72
<i>Methods of Inquiry</i>	73
Postal surveys	73
Telephone surveys	73
Personal interview surveys	74
Focus groups and depth interviews	74
GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 4	75
 5 HOW TO USE STATISTICS	 76
Rummaging in the Statistician's Toolbox	76
<i>Statistical Definitions</i>	77
Sampling	77
Population	77
Census	77
Sample	77
Elementary sampling unit (ESU)	78
Sampling frame	78
Statistic	78
Parameter	78
Sampling variability	78
Sampling distribution	78
Stratified sample	78
How to Take a Sample	79
<i>Probability Sampling (Random Sampling)</i>	79
Simple random sampling	79
Systematic or quasi-random sampling	79
Cluster sampling	79
Multi-stage sampling	80
Master samples	80
<i>Non-probability Sampling</i>	80

Quota sampling	80
Characteristics of samples	81
Accuracy of estimation v. sample size	81
The Scope of Statistical Analysis	81
<i>Understanding Your Project Data Set</i>	81
Data types	81
<i>How to Capture Categorical Data</i>	83
Likert scaling	83
Semantic differential scale	83
Descriptive Statistics	84
<i>Tables</i>	84
Frequency table	84
Relative frequency table	84
Cross-tabulation table	84
<i>Graphs and Charts</i>	84
Line graph	84
Line chart	85
Bar chart	85
Histogram	85
Frequency polygon	85
Cumulative frequency charts	85
Pie charts	86
Pictograms	86
Logarithmic graphs	86
Scatter graphs	86
Summary Measures	87
<i>Measures of Location</i>	87
Arithmetic mean	87
Mode	87
Median	87
Geometric mean	88
Measures of Spread	88
<i>Range</i>	88
Quartiles	88
Interquartile range	89
Semi-interquartile range	89
Deciles	89
Interdecile range	89

Interpercentile range	89
<i>Mean Deviation</i>	90
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	90
<i>Variance</i>	90
<i>Coefficient of Variation</i>	90
Index Numbers	91
Analytic Statistics	91
<i>What is Probability?</i>	91
<i>The Algebra of Probabilities</i>	92
Addition rule of probabilities	92
Conditional probability	92
Multiplication rule of probability	93
Bayes' rule for conditional probabilities	94
<i>Subjective Probability</i>	94
Probability by experiment	95
Probability by logic	96
Probability Distributions	98
<i>Binomial Distribution</i>	99
<i>Poisson Distribution</i>	100
<i>Normal Distribution</i>	101
Time Series Analysis	103
<i>Time as a Proxy</i>	103
Identifying the historical data pattern	104
How to Analyse Stationary Data	105
<i>Moving Averages</i>	105
<i>Exponential Smoothing</i>	105
<i>How to Calculate Trends</i>	107
Seasonality	109
Statistical Inference	109
Estimating and Predicting	110
<i>How Reliable Are Estimates Based on Limited-size Samples?</i>	110
<i>The Limits of Uncertainty</i>	111
Hypothesis Testing	113
<i>How to Test for Relationships</i>	114
Goodness of fit and independence	115
Correlation and regression	116
GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 5	117

6	PLANNING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT	118
	How Do You Know That?	118
	<i>The Use of Evidence</i>	118
	<i>Building an Historical Sequence Using Dated Events</i>	120
	<i>Building a Chain of Logic</i>	121
	<i>Planning Your Work</i>	124
	Getting to a first draft	125
	GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 6	126
7	CREATING A NARRATIVE THREAD FOR YOUR DISSERTATION	127
	The Serious Business of Fairy Stories	127
	The Power of Myth	131
	Applying Narrative Structure to Business Writing	137
	Draft 1	137
	Draft 2	139
	Draft 3	140
	GROUP DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR CHAPTER 7	141
8	THE MECHANICS OF WRITING	142
	Make the Reading Easy	142
	Writing Style and Readability	144
	Copy-editing	147
	<i>Hitting the Word Count</i>	150
	Layout	151
	<i>Further Reading</i>	153
	<i>Index</i>	155