

Writing your

MBA

DISSERTATION

Brian White

Writing Your MBA Dissertation

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Preface

This book is based on my previous book *Dissertation Skills for Business and Management Students* which was written for undergraduates. Since publication, a number of MBA, Masters and postgraduate students have asked if it would be relevant for them. The answer is 'Yes', as the problems faced when producing a dissertation are the same irrespective of level. The publishers therefore decided to produce a special Masters version. The original text has been revised and updated with the MBA and Masters student in mind. For example, Chapter 7 (Using the literature) gives more detail on the Internet as a research information source for business and management, and Chapter 10 (The role of supervisors and the assessment of dissertations) includes advice on oral examinations.

The text is based on my experience in teaching research methods and dissertation skills workshops to many students over the years. The approach has been deliberately pragmatic, and emphasis has been placed on the skills needed to produce a successful dissertation. I hope the book will guide and support the student to produce a valuable and useful piece of work.

Brian White
October 2001

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1 What this book is about

Introduction

The MBA (Master of Business Administration) is regarded as an important international business qualification for anyone looking to a career in management. Originally started in the US, most large universities and institutes of higher education world-wide now have business and management schools which offer the degree. There is no universal blueprint as to what constitutes an MBA. Students may, for example, be full-time, part-time or enrolled on an Executive MBA (EMBA). There has also been an increase in flexible and distance learning programmes with students able to study at home as well as at the university. Distance learning MBAs have increased in number with the development of the Internet and new technologies. Students can now access, from their home, course materials, faculty staff and fellow classmates, by using e-mail, computer conferencing, dedicated websites, etc. In addition, many off-campus programmes are supported by short residential study blocks, recommended key texts and especially written study guides provided by the university. It is now possible to study with a university in a different country from your own.

Over time the MBA itself has changed and now, in addition to a general management programme, students can choose more specialist MBAs including e-business, information technology, technology management, education management and leisure management. The number of named awards is increasing all the time to satisfy student demand and need. Sometimes two universities, each in a different country, work in partnership to provide the degree. The students are enrolled at both institutions, and the MBA awarded is validated by both universities. This type of qualification is very useful for people who work at an international level. It means their degree is recognized in a number of different countries.

The subject content of the different programmes varies. The majority begin with a core curriculum which includes the generic areas of business, for example, accounting, marketing, human resource management or strategic management. In the final part of most MBA programmes students can elect for more independent study, and are usually required to research a particular area of business and management. This independent study element is known by a number of different terms. For example, elective study, research thesis, management project, consultancy project, major project or more commonly, dissertation. The term dissertation will be used throughout this book. The final length of the dissertation can be between 10,000–25,000 words. The time allowed to complete the dissertation varies depending on your programme, from 4 to 12 months. Because the dissertation comes at the end of the programme it often plays an important part in the final assessment. It can be the largest piece of assessed work on any Masters programme and, with some degrees, makes up 40% of the final mark. It can determine whether or not the degree is awarded at distinction level.

In summary, the dissertation is an important phase of a Masters programme, in that it allows you to individualize your programme and research an area of business and management that interests you. It allows you to demonstrate in a positive way the business and professional skills you have acquired to date.

However, the thought of having to write up to a 25,000 word dissertation often causes the most able student to feel undue pressure and anxiety. In fact, the first word which comes to mind for many students when faced with the task of starting a dissertation is *HELP!*

This book has been written to provide the positive and practical help you need. It covers all the main stages you go through when preparing a dissertation and includes topics such as:

- choosing an area to study and deciding on the title;
- deciding what is research and how it is applied to business and management;
- writing a research proposal;
- selecting the best methodology to use;
- using libraries and collecting information;
- collecting your own information and data;
- evaluating and analysing the information and data you collect;
- writing up the dissertation and choosing the layout;
- working with your supervisor;
- the assessment of dissertations.

In addition, certain basic questions like 'What is a dissertation?' and 'What is the value of a dissertation?' are answered, together with advice about the necessary skills. Consideration is given to the ethical issues you may need to think about with some business and management research topics and, at the end, an annotated bibliography is included in case you should need extra help in a particular area.

Although the book takes you through the stages of preparing and writing a dissertation it does not cover the administrative and organizational requirements of individual universities. Each university should provide this sort of detail in course handbooks, via noticeboards, e-mail, etc. Most Masters degree programmes have course leaders, year tutors or dissertation supervisors who provide information about hand-in dates, regulations and other information about your course. It's worth noting that most universities run research methods workshops to help students with their dissertation. This book will supplement these and provide you with additional support.

How to use this book

Quickly scan the whole book and get an overall impression of what dissertations are about. After reading it, go back to the beginning and start to work through it, chapter by chapter. When you actually begin your dissertation keep the book handy and use it as a guide.

What is a dissertation?

Let's start by asking the very basic but important question. What is a dissertation?

Different authors provide varying definitions, but for our purpose a dissertation can be defined as a long piece of academic writing, divided into headed sections or chapters, which researches, in detail, a particular business or management subject. This you will normally choose yourself. On your own, you will investigate areas which, in some respects, may be entirely new and unfamiliar to you. You will be expected to critique your work with that of other researchers and discuss the various theories involved. To do this successfully you will need to collect a lot of information. You will use libraries and, depending on your topic, may carry out your own research to collect new material. Having collected the information and data, you then have to interpret what it all means, and write it up in an accepted

academic format. The final dissertation must demonstrate originality and evidence of academic criticism and analysis.

Not surprisingly, even the most able student can find the dissertation a daunting experience. Don't be put off. A dissertation provides you with a unique opportunity to demonstrate your academic skills. It gives you the chance to study in some detail a subject in which you have a genuine interest, and this in itself can give a great sense of personal satisfaction. It does mean, however, that you must have effective study and research skills. Before the skills you need are discussed it may help to explain the characteristic features of a dissertation. This will give you a better idea of exactly what is involved.

The characteristic features of a dissertation

- *A dissertation is an independent piece of work.* Although all your assignments on your course are independent pieces of work, in that you do them on your own and without plagiarism, a dissertation is truly independent because usually no other student is working on the same title. With other assignments many students may be working on the same title. This means that a dissertation gives you a chance to show how good you really are. A dissertation is an excellent indicator of a student's true ability.
- *A dissertation shows detailed knowledge and understanding.* Dissertations require a lot of information – facts and figures are needed. This means you have to spend a long time collecting and searching out relevant material. You need to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the literature and be able to discuss the theoretical concepts of the topic.
- *A dissertation needs organization and good planning.* Because a dissertation is long, it takes time to complete and you need to be able to organize and plan the work over an extended period, sometimes between 4 and 12 months. Many MBA students on part-time and distance learning programmes need to balance the workload of both their course and their job. Your ability to plan work independently over such a long period again demonstrates why dissertations are often included in courses. It shows that you can be responsible for your own learning.
- *A dissertation shows critical and analytical thinking.* Too many dissertations are spoilt because students simply describe

situations. You must be prepared to question, identify trends and provide evidence to support your ideas. You have to relate theory to practice. If you have carried out research, you must defend your research design and data collection techniques. In summary, you must subject your work and that of others to serious questioning, rather than just accepting it at face value.

- *A dissertation illustrates the context of existing knowledge.* It is important that a literature review is included that collates previously published work in the same field. Your dissertation is not an isolated investigation. You need to show how it relates to what other people have done. Again, other people's work must not simply be described. It is the relationship between your work and theirs which demonstrates criticism and analysis.
- *A dissertation has a high standard of communication and presentation.* Good English, correct spelling and grammar are essential. Moreover, the work must look neat on the page. Sloppy, untidy and inaccurate work can make a dissertation fail. A dissertation must also be prepared according to an accepted format, so check your course regulations.
- *A dissertation demonstrates original work and research.* Students often think that their work must be as original as Einstein's theory of relativity. Unfortunately, very few of us have the flair and intellect of Einstein. By original work and research, we mean that you should put forward your own ideas and back them up with appropriate evidence. This might be generated as a result of a questionnaire or interview. Alternatively, you might use published information and present it in a different and new manner, which in itself is original. The emphasis again is on critical and analytical thinking; a description of either your own or other people's work without some analysis is not enough.
- *A dissertation has an academic approach.* A dissertation presents a well-evidenced argument. The evidence cited is the research of others, your own, or usually a combination of both. The evidence needs to be sound, and collected in an ordered logical fashion. A dissertation is an academic document and must have an appropriate format following accepted traditions of referencing styles. It should always include a bibliography. Normally it is written in a very formal style using the third person.

Value of a dissertation

Academic value

For many students the dissertation is the first independent piece of work they complete. Although all your MBA work should be your own in terms of academic integrity and the absence of plagiarism, with the present-day emphasis on group work and everyone in large classes doing the same assignments, students get few chances to work completely on their own. The value of a dissertation is that it allows you to demonstrate, in a very positive way, that you can work alone. It gives you, the student, an opportunity to show your true worth.

The dissertation is an important part of the final phase of your degree. On some courses the dissertation can contribute up to 40% of your assessment, and many lecturers would argue that it reflects, more than anything else you do on a course, your true intellectual ability. A number of Masters programmes are graded at pass, merit or distinction. Certain universities require the dissertation mark for distinction level to be 70% or over. It makes sense, therefore, to give the dissertation your best shot!

Personal and career value

In addition to being of academic importance, dissertations help with your personal and career development. As the dissertation comes towards the end of a degree programme it assesses a whole range of skills and competencies. The process of producing and writing a dissertation develops some very important skills that potential employers always require. These are termed 'personal transferable skills' and include things like planning, organizing, analysing, criticizing, information gathering, identifying and solving problems, logical thinking, time management, data interpretation, research methods, and communication skills like writing. A dissertation is something you can take with you to an interview to show to a prospective employer. It indicates that you can work independently to produce a substantial piece of work. In summary, it is a piece of tangible evidence of the sort of work of which you are capable.

Many MBA students are part-time and already in management positions. For these students a dissertation gives the opportunity to study a real-life problem at work. You may, for example, be able to produce an in-company dissertation, which may lead to better informed business decisions in your organization. This will give you a sharper insight into what's happening. It may also help you personally when viewed from your line or senior manager's position if promotions are being discussed.

Producing a dissertation – the stages involved

There are a number of stages involved in the production of a dissertation and these are summarized in Figure 1.1. In reality, once you start a dissertation several things seem to happen at once – you may be designing a questionnaire, reading some recent articles, waiting for an inter-library loan order, seeing your supervisor, and so on. Good and effective time management and organization skills are essential.

Depending on your topic, the time spent on each stage will vary. The way you plan your work should take into account your complete workload. Remember there may be other assignments to complete, in addition to the dissertation, alongside family and personal commitments.

The skills you need

It is important to remember that a good dissertation is not written overnight. It takes time, considerable planning and effort. Mention has already been made of some of the intellectual and practical skills needed and these are further discussed below.

- *Library and information retrieval skills* (see Chapter 7). Dissertations require a great deal of information so be sure you know how to use libraries to search for the material you need. Be aware of the information services (e.g. inter-library loans) that may be available. Keep detailed citation records of everything you read. Either use cards or set up a computer database. Associated with the collection of library material is the way you use and evaluate it to inform the literature review and the overall research design of the dissertation. See details of exactly what to record on pages 153–5.
- *Writing and note-taking skills* (see Chapter 9). Dissertations involve a lot of writing. Before you start, decide on the required format and the method of acknowledging and referencing other people's work. Decide how to lay out the bibliography of the finished dissertation. Certain universities provide style manuals and handbooks – always follow their advice. When making notes, be sure you are doing just that and not simply copying out large chunks of text. You will only have to sort it out later. You may as well do it at the start.

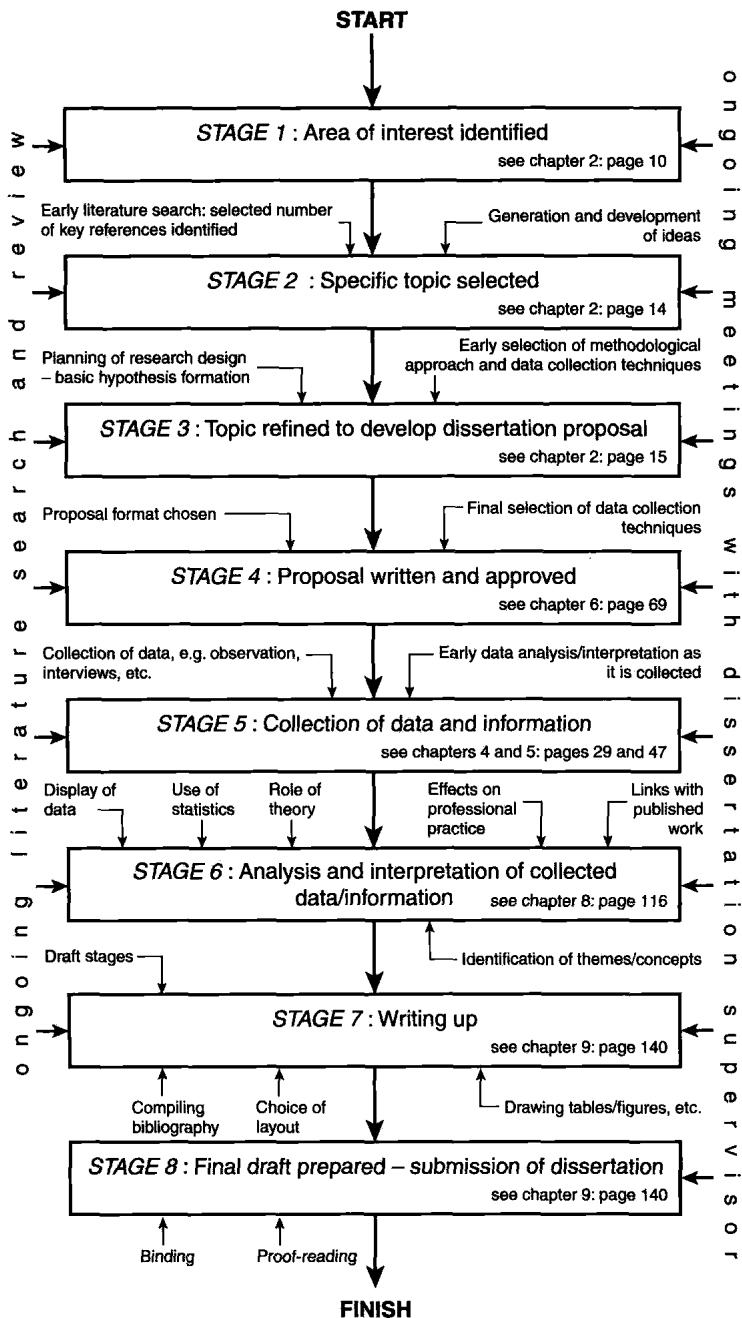


Figure 1.1 The stages involved in producing a dissertation

- *Research skills* (see Chapters 4 and 5). Dissertations need new information and data. The approach you take and the methods you select to collect information are as important as the material you collect. A sound methodology explained with reasons gives your work credibility. It means the results collected and conclusions arrived at are more valid and academically sound. Research skills also include data handling and interpretation. If you think you are going to need, and use, special software packages like SPSS, NUDIST, etc., practise using them early.
- *Personal skills*. These include self-motivation, self-discipline, time management, and the ability to plan and organize. In short, these skills are all about being independent and taking responsibility for your own work and decisions. The majority of MBA students already possess an undergraduate degree or equivalent and have some work experience. Use this to your advantage. Reflect back and decide what your particular academic strengths are. What are you good at, and what do you find especially satisfying and motivating? Use this experience to the full at the dissertation stage.

A final word

Hopefully by now you will have a good idea of what dissertations are all about and the processes involved in producing one. The rest of the book gives more advice with respect to the different stages concerned.

2 Choosing and developing a subject to investigate

Introduction

This chapter looks at the mechanics and processes of completing a dissertation. In particular, it will focus on two aspects: the choice of a topic to study, and how that topic may be refined and developed to form a framework for the dissertation. The proposal is then written which covers in some detail exactly what you want to do. From experience, the initial choice of subject often causes students a great deal of concern and seems to present a lot of problems. As highlighted earlier, the dissertation is probably the most important piece of written work carried out towards the end of the MBA. It is essential to choose a subject that you can handle with confidence and interest. In fact, the correct choice of subject is the first step towards a successful dissertation.

In the early stages don't worry about the exact wording of a title for the dissertation as this can be finalized later. The initial emphasis should be on selecting the general area and seeing if it is suitable (via some of the techniques described below) to develop into a proposal.

This chapter, therefore, considers a number of issues which are all inter-related. Don't consider each in isolation; always relate one to another to get the overall picture.

The issues discussed include:

- a discussion of the factors which may influence your choice;
- a list of sources you can use to generate early ideas;
- a summary of the techniques you can use to establish the parameters of the dissertation.

Factors which may influence your choice of subject

There are a number of factors which may influence the choice of a dissertation topic. It may be an interest, something connected with