

SMARTER STUDY SKILLS

HOW TO

WRITE

DISSERTATIONS

&

PROJECT

REPORTS

KATHLEEN McMILLAN & JONATHAN WEYERS

**HOW TO
WRITE
DISSERTATIONS
& PROJECT
REPORTS**

**HOW TO
WRITE
DISSERTATIONS
& PROJECT
REPORTS** **SECOND
EDITION**

**KATHLEEN McMILLAN &
JONATHAN WEYERS**

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Harlow
Essex CM20 2JE
England

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Visit us on the World Wide Web at:
www.pearsoned.co.uk

First published 2007
Rejacketed edition published 2010
Second edition published 2011

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ISBN: 978-0-273-74383-5

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McMillan, Kathleen.

How to write dissertations and project reports / Kathleen McMillan and Jonathan Weyers. – 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-273-74383-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Report writing.

2. Dissertations, Academic. I. Weyers, Jonathan. II. Title.

LB1047.3M45 2011

808'.02–dc22

2011001778

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
15 14 13 12 11

Typeset in 9.5/13pt Interstate by 35

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

Smarter Study Skills

Instant answers to your most pressing university skills problems.

Are there any secrets to successful study?

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Contents

Preface and acknowledgements	xi
How to use this book	xii

Introduction

1 Tackling a dissertation or project report: how to make the best possible start	3
2 Choosing a dissertation or research topic: how to decide on a theme for your investigation	10

Planning your research

3 Writing a proposal: how to structure a successful dissertation or research proposal	21
4 Time management: how to write your dissertation or project while balancing family, work and leisure	29
5 Planning for dissertations: how to begin your research and evolve a model for your writing	40
6 Planning for experimental projects: how to organise your efforts effectively	51

Finding and filtering information

7 Information literacy: how to make best use of the library resources	61
8 Effective academic reading: how to read efficiently and with understanding	71
9 Analysing and evaluating source material: how to filter and select relevant material as part of the research process	85
10 Note-making from source material: how to create effective notes to support your dissertation and project research	94

Applying research techniques

- 11 **Principles of quantitative research:** how to obtain and analyse numerical information 109
- 12 **Principles of qualitative research:** how to obtain and analyse descriptive information 123
- 13 **Experimental research and field visits:** how to develop and apply your skills 135
- 14 **Thinking critically:** how to develop a logical approach to analysis and problem-solving 143

Working with data and numbers

- 15 **Number crunching:** how to solve problems in arithmetic and algebra 157
- 16 **Interpreting and presenting data:** how to understand and produce graphs, tables and basic statistics 170

Addressing issues of plagiarism, referencing and ethics

- 17 **Plagiarism and copyright infringement:** how to avoid being accused of 'stealing' the ideas and work of others 185
- 18 **Citing and listing references:** how to refer appropriately to the work of others 194
- 19 **Ethics in researching and reporting:** how to follow good research practice 211

Writing a first draft

- 20 **Structuring a dissertation:** how to organise your writing within a standard framework 221
- 21 **Structuring a project report:** how to select and shape your content appropriately 227
- 22 **Academic writing style:** how to adopt the appropriate language conventions 235

Editing, revising and presenting

- 23 **Reviewing, editing and proof-reading:** how to make sure your writing is concise and correct 249

24 Exploiting feedback: how to understand and learn from what your supervisor writes on your work	259
25 Presentation of dissertations and reports: how to follow the appropriate academic conventions	265
References and further reading	279
Glossary	280

Preface and acknowledgements

Welcome to *How to Write Dissertations and Project Reports*.

We're pleased you have chosen this book and hope it will help you compose and present high-quality work that reveals your academic skills in the best possible light. Our aim has been to provide practical tips to guide you from planning to submission, so that your work is well developed and meets academic requirements. We've tried to remain faithful to the philosophy of our earlier book, *The Smarter Study Skills Companion*, by creating a quickly accessible resource that you can dip into in time of need. We had many kinds of students in mind when we decided to write this text and we hope that it will meet your personal needs – regardless of your experience and background.

We would like to offer sincere thanks to many people who have influenced us and contributed to the development and production of this book. Countless students over the years have helped us to test our ideas, especially those whose writing we have supervised or guided. We are grateful to the following colleagues and collaborators who have helped us directly or indirectly: Margaret Adamson, the late John Berridge, Margaret Forrest, Alan Grant, Neale Laker, Fiona O'Donnell, Neil Paterson, Anne Scott and Gordon Spark. Also, we acknowledge those at other universities who have helped frame our thoughts, particularly our good friends Rob Reed, Nicki Hedge and Esther Daborn. We owe a special debt to the senior colleagues who encouraged various projects that contributed to this book, and who allowed us the freedom to pursue this avenue of scholarship, especially Robin Adamson, Ian Francis, Rod Herbert and David Swinfen. At Pearson Education, we have had excellent advice and support from Steve Temblett, Katy Robinson, Lauren Hayward and Joan Dale Lace. Finally, we would like to say thanks to our long-suffering but nevertheless enthusiastic families: Derek, Keith, Fiona and Tom; and Mary, Paul and James, all of whom helped in various capacities.

We'd be delighted to hear your opinion of the book and receive any suggestions you have for additions and improvements.

Kathleen McMillan and Jonathan Weyers
University of Dundee
April 2011

How to use this book

How to Write Dissertations & Project Reports has been organised and designed to be as user-friendly as possible. Each chapter is self-contained and deals with a particular aspect of its subject matter, so that you can read the book through from end-to-end, or in sections, or dip into specific chapters as and when you think you need them.

At the start of each chapter you'll find a brief paragraph and a **Key topics** list, which lets you know what's included. There is also a list of **Key terms** at this point, and, should you be uncertain about the meaning of any of these, you will find definitions in the **Glossary** at the end of the book.

Within each chapter, the text is laid out to help you absorb the key concepts easily, using headings and bulleted lists to help you find what you need as efficiently as possible. Relevant examples are contained in figures, tables and boxes, which can be consulted independently, if necessary. The inset boxes are of three types:



Smart tip boxes emphasise key advice to ensure you adopt a successful approach.



Information boxes provide additional information, such as useful definitions or examples.



Query boxes raise questions for you to consider about your personal approach to the topic.



At the end of each chapter, there's a **Practical tips** section with additional tips. You should regard this as a menu from which to select the ideas that appeal to you and your learning personality.



Finally, the **And now** box provides three suggestions that you could consider as ideas to take further.

INTRODUCTION

How to make the best possible start

Dissertations and project reports are extensive exercises in researching and writing and they usually contribute significantly to module and degree classification grades. It makes sense, therefore, to tackle them professionally and with energy. This chapter offers strategies that will help you to start off well and demonstrate your full potential by producing an excellent submission.

Key topics

- Starting off well
- Making sure you work efficiently and effectively
- Avoiding the common pitfalls

Key terms

Effectiveness Efficiency Learning objective Learning outcome Perfectionism

Looking proudly at the finished version of your dissertation or project report will probably be one of the highlights of your undergraduate academic career. In most cases, its production will be the result of many months of serious work. The final document will represent the pinnacle of your achievements at university and provide concrete evidence of your advanced academic skills in your discipline.

In carrying out the necessary research, thinking, writing and presentation, you will be delving deep into the subject material of your chosen discipline and stretching yourself in the production of a piece of original work. In some cases, the skills involved may be very closely allied to those you will use in the workplace: employers will be interested in seeing your work because it represents your full potential in the working environment. Your university tutors will demonstrate the perceived importance of dissertations and reports by allocating a high proportion of marks from them towards your final grade.

These are all good reasons for trying to produce the best possible product and, to do well, you will need to be focussed from the start and disciplined in your effort.



Taking account of the task you have been set

While there are many similarities in the production of dissertations and project reports, there are also some key differences. Throughout this book, we have tried to provide generic material wherever possible, but have also written chapters and sections that focus on tasks and outcomes relevant to specific types of document. You should select the material of relevance both to your personal needs and the approach required in your discipline.

● Starting off well

In this chapter, the emphasis is on starting as you mean to go on, and establishing good working habits. Many students drift aimlessly at the start of their project or research-based studies, so one of the most important things you can do is to become focussed on the task right from the beginning. To ensure this happens you should:

- **Make sure you understand precisely what you are being asked to produce, and how.** You can do this by reading the supporting material in the course handbook or regulations (particularly the learning objectives or outcomes), or by speaking to your supervisor or a potential supervisor.
- **Try to make the initial connection with your research or source material.** Sometimes this will appear bewildering in its breadth, obscure in its jargon or genuinely difficult to master. The best way to overcome this is to immerse yourself in the topic, read background material and ask questions. The sooner you take this step, the better.
- **Try not to luxuriate in the comfort of having a deadline many months away.** Graduates will tell you that every part of the process took longer than they estimated, and that, if they had to do it all again, they would try to organise themselves better.

The time will quickly evaporate, and the earlier you start the more likely you will be to avoid stress near to the end. Details of the component elements of any extensive writing task, and advice for good timetabling and project management, are provided in **Ch 4** and **Ch 6**.

- **Do something active to kickstart your work.** Appropriate actions will depend on your subject, but will probably include taking notes of your background reading, or creating a plan of action or timetable. In some research projects it will involve making initial observations or setting up a pilot experiment; in others getting your hands on the right textbooks and references.

How motivated are you?



Getting started and maintaining momentum depend on your motivation to succeed. It may be assumed by friends, family and tutors that you are highly motivated. If this is indeed true, use this feeling to energise your start to work, and tap into your motivation whenever things get difficult. If you feel that you lack motivation, you should speak to someone about this: some supervisors are excellent at motivating students; staff in support services such as counselling and the careers service will also be able to help. Sometimes all it takes to rekindle an interest in a subject is to immerse yourself in it. Recognise this fact and use it to push yourself over any initial barriers.

Starting off well also means understanding what constitutes good working practice and avoiding common pitfalls. There follows a quick summary of these aspects, as they apply to the research and writing phases of your dissertation or project.

● Making sure you work efficiently and effectively

Efficient working means using your time well. If you can do this, it will mean you have more time available for thinking and relaxing, creating a virtuous cycle that will result in a better end product.

The keys to working efficiently are:

- thinking and planning ahead for each day or part of a day;
- understanding what you are trying to achieve during each day or part of a day;
- getting down to work as quickly as possible;
- prioritising tasks appropriately;
- avoiding distractions;
- keeping your papers and workplace well organised; and
- taking breaks when you need to rest.



Efficient working in a nutshell

This means cutting out wasteful or unproductive effort, and focussing on using your time to maximise productivity.

Effective working is effort that brings meaningful results. It involves having a continual focus on the end product and making sure that for each subsidiary task undertaken you keep this in mind. The keys to working effectively are:

- getting started;
- focussing on the end product;
- minimising unproductive work;
- identifying things that are barriers to progress;
- finding ways to overcome obstacles to progress; and
- making sure you complete each component, even if this means some loss of quality.



Effective working in a nutshell

This involves smart working, rather than putting in extra effort. This means identifying **SMART** goals, that is, those that are:

Specific (What am I aiming to achieve in this work episode?)

Measurable (What milestones can I set myself for this period?)

Attainable (What can I achieve in the time available?)

Realistic (Have I created a goal that is achievable?)

Tangible (Will I be able to see the progress I'm making?)

● Avoiding the common pitfalls

Your dissertation or project report will probably be the most extensive piece of writing you will have to complete on your course. In addition, it will require and test some demanding skills, in relation to both research and presentation. Because of this, you should be aware of potential risks so that you can take steps to avoid them:

- you may underestimate the time it takes to carry out the research;
- your initial reading may be aimless;
- your writing skills may be rusty;
- you will need to organise large amounts of information;
- you will need to keep records of research sources so you can cite them properly;
- you may need to carry out advanced forms of data analysis;
- you may need to adopt a professional approach to data presentation;
- you may underestimate the time it takes to write, or you may suffer from writer's block;
- you will need to be aware of copyright infringement and plagiarism; and employ strategies to avoid them;
- you may need to allow time for your supervisor to provide feedback;
- you may need to allow time to take your supervisor's feedback into account; or
- for longer pieces of work, you will need to allow time for your dissertation or report to be typed, or, if you need this service, for graphics to be produced or printed, and for binding, if this is required by your department.

Suggestions on how to avoid most of the common problem areas are provided in subsequent chapters.

Try not to be a perfectionist



Many projects never get started, stall or fail to be completed because the people involved are aiming for perfection, when this is either impossible or impractical. Often, achieving perfection would be a waste of resources. If you identify this as a potential characteristic in yourself, try to accept that fact, and focus on minimising the larger flaws in your work and on completing the task despite any minor faults you believe are present.



Practical tips for starting your dissertation or report

Engage with the subject as soon as possible. Read a basic text to gain background; create a personal glossary of specialist terms; ask questions of your supervisor or tutors; find out about current research in your area; explore online databases to begin your literature search.

Allocate a substantial period of time to carry out initial reading around your subject. Try to distance yourself from distractions and make sure you take notes as you go. Keep a meticulous record of all material you consult because you will need this for citations in your text and for compiling your reference list.

Clear the decks. Finish other tasks that are outstanding; tidy your work area; make it clear to others that you may not be available for socialising as frequently as before; make sure you have a good stock of all your stationery and other study requirements.

Start note-making. This is a form of writing that ensures that your reading has a purpose. Research into academic writing has shown that the act of writing is part of the thinking process, so creating isolated paragraphs on the basis of what you have read or on what you think about what you have read can help you to clarify your thoughts. These short pieces of writing can form the basis for further development once you have undertaken further reading and may fit within a structure that is decided later. However, even if you are unable to use what you have written, as an exercise it will probably have contributed to your understanding of your topic, so the effort will not have been wasted. There is the added advantage of providing you with the opportunity to find your own writing 'voice', that is, where you position yourself in relation to the topic, and this signals your development as an academic author.

Work through the rough patches. Some days go well; some just do not. Accept that this is simply part of the research process. Once you start writing, you'll find that sometimes the words will flow almost effortlessly. At other times, every paragraph, sentence or even word is a struggle. That's all part of the thinking process and will eventually contribute to a fresh stream of high-quality writing.

Make sure that you are keeping on track. Review each day as it passes. Ask yourself:

- What have I achieved?
- What went well?
- What could have gone better?
- Am I keeping up with my timetable?
- What do I need to do next?
- What do I need to do to ensure the next session is better?

GO

And now . . .

1.1 Reflect on your previous experience in research and writing. What limited your progress and ability to start and to complete the task? Were these factors under your control or the outcome of other influences? What were the good and bad aspects of your work or study practices? What aspects of your approach would you change? Try to continue good practice and reduce or eliminate poor approaches.

1.2 Make lists. There are two important lists: those things you need to do before you can start properly and those things that can safely be put to one side to tackle once the project is finished. Focus all your efforts on making sure that the preliminary tasks are achieved and be self-disciplined about not undertaking the post-project tasks as a displacement activity that distracts you from working on the project.

1.3 Make an appointment to meet with your allocated supervisor or a potential supervisor. Discuss what might be achievable goals for your work, and what might be profitable avenues to pursue. You might also want to consider, with your supervisor, the order in which you should do things and also ask for guidance about the first directions.

2

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.



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.

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

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.



Finding out more about a research option

If the answers to questions about the practicalities or relevance of a topic are not immediately evident, ask around. Discuss options with a potential supervisor or other academic contact. Sometimes it is useful to get more than one perspective on the issue, so try to find several people who can give you an opinion.

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