

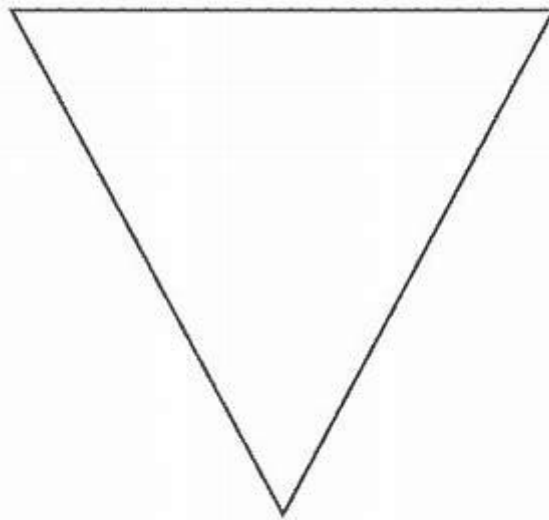
# TIPS FOR WRITING YOUR DISSERTATION

## CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

Below are some tips and advice for how to write a strong dissertation, whether undergraduate, MA or even a PhD. Students come from all kinds of academic backgrounds of course, from Chemistry to Literature, and while research might look different from one department to another, such as conducting experiments in Biology, to interpreting poetry in Literature, the approach to being critical is the same: **interpret what you read/study**. And being critical is the main aspect of good academic writing.

### Chapter One: Introduction

Think of the introduction chapter in terms of an inverted triangle:



In other words, move from broad to narrow in terms of your content:

**Start broad:** Provide your reader with a summary of what is already known about your chosen subject – define the subject and/or explain what it is; show evidence of past research on the subject; bring your readers up to date. Basically, this is all **background information**.

**Rationale:** This deserves its own section. This is where you tell the readers what is unique about your study. What is its contribution to

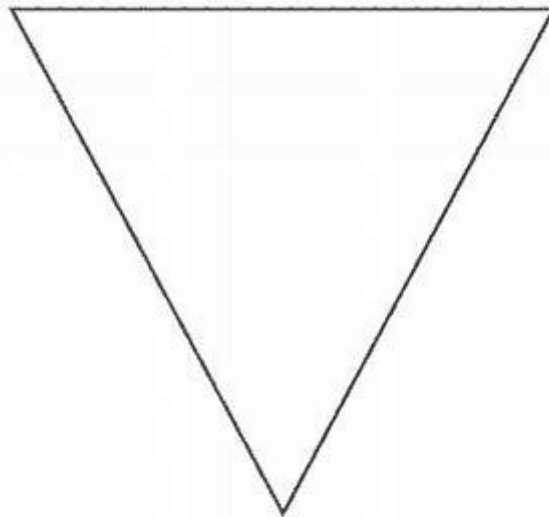
knowledge? WHY SHOULD WE CARE? The rationale is essentially a **justification** for why your study needs to be conducted. The rationale should grow naturally from the background. In other words, once you've spent some time discussing what we already know about your chosen topic within the opening background, then **tell the reader what we don't know or what we need to know more about** – this is the basis for your study.

The rationale, then, is the WHAT and WHY of your study – 'here is what I am researching and here is why it *needs* to be researched'. Basically, how will knowledge/your field of study/society/teaching/etc. be better off with the completion of your study?

**Research questions:** Here is the most narrow level – what are the questions which derive from the purpose of your study? Two-three questions are enough here.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Again, use the inverted triangle approach:



Once again, start broad and get progressively more narrow:

2.0 Introduction (A short intro to the content of this chapter)

2.1 Identity in Education

2.2. Identity in teachers

### 2.2.1. Identity in trainee teachers

### 2.3 Identity in UK trainee teachers

### 2.4 Summary

As you can see, the focus gets more narrow until you end up at the most relevant and specific aspect of your study – how UK trainee teachers take on a professional identity. This is merely one example taken from one area of study, but you get the idea.

### **Mistakes to avoid #1: Students don't illustrate their ideas enough!**

Whenever you use a broad word (e.g. culture, communication, solution, infrastructure, etc.) or technical words (e.g. scaffolded learning, Nurture, behaviourism, etc.) don't just mention these words and move on!

Instead, give an illustration – an example. Make sure the examples are your own, not from the lecture notes/handouts, and this will prove you understand what you're writing about.

### **Mistakes to avoid #2: Do something with your quotes!**

Students often choose quotes which might be very good, but then the students move on. They leave the quote all alone and say nothing about it. Instead, do something with the quote. If you agree, say why. If you disagree, say why. Give an illustration. Give an explanation. Do one of these four things for most of your quotes and your writing will become more critical and less descriptive. **The bigger picture is about interpreting the literature and not merely summarising it – and this is crucial for a literature review!**

### **Examples:**

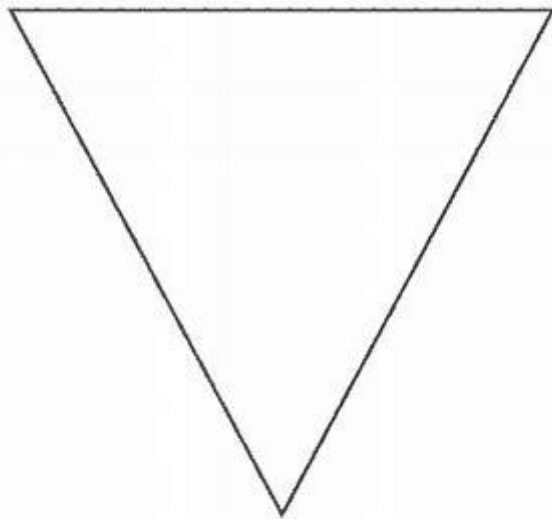
There are many cultures within Europe. Some cultures are based on religion (e.g. Judaism), national origin (e.g. Spanish) and race (e.g. black), to name but a few.

*The word 'cultures' is very broad, but the writer has provided an original example to help illustrate. Yes, your readers probably know what you mean, but we're not mind readers! Tell us what you mean!*

There are many cultures within Europe. Some are based on religion (e.g. Judaism), national origin (e.g. Spanish) and race (e.g. black), to name but a few. As Smith (2010:12) states, 'culture can be realised on multiple levels'. This suggests that what might seem obvious to some, might not be to others, as culture can involve many things, from clothing to country, language to literature.

*The illustration is followed by a quote, which is then followed by an interpretation of the quote – this shows the student's understanding.*

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**



Again, the triangle works well. Go from broad to narrow in terms of the topics you cover. Below is merely a suggested possibility – each methods chapter will look different, of course. Even if two students are researching the same topic, their methods need not look the same.

#### **3.0 Introduction**

**3.1 Sample** – Explain the criteria for participants to be involved in your research – who is the sample (e.g. Chinese MA students? UK university students? Overseas Engineering students?)?

**3.2 Obtaining the sample** – Explain how you found the sample – how did you recruit them?

3.3 Data collection – What approach will you take? Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods?

3.3.1 Interviews – Explain why you chose interviews and what kind did you choose (e.g. semi-structured)?

3.4 Ethics – Explain the main ethical issues involved with your research

3.5 Summary

### **Mistakes to avoid #3: Justify your methodological choices!**

Don't just tell the reader that 'I chose interviews' – instead, explain **WHY** you chose interviews, ideally in reference to what the literature says on the subject. Explain perhaps why you didn't choose other methods, such as questionnaires. Explain how you will deal with the potential negative aspects of your methodological choices. The point here: **JUSTIFY** your choices for your methods, tell your readers why they are the best, most appropriate choices that you could make for your research.

## **Chapter Four: Results and Discussion**

This can be two separate chapters or one – it's up to you. Again, **it's all about explaining and justifying your choices**. Want to put the results and discussion together in one chapter? Tell the reader why. Want to put them in two separate chapters? Tell the reader why.

The key for your results is simply to present them – tables are a good idea to show the results. But don't interpret them yet! That is for the discussion chapter/section.

So, a table might show the raw figures for the various responses participants gave for the questions you asked them.

For the discussion, you might want to present the RESEARCH QUESTIONS and answer them one at a time. In this case, the answers come from the participants' responses to the interview/questionnaire.

You don't need to add a great deal of literature here – most of the content is based on your interpretation of the results you have.

#### **Mistakes to avoid #4: Don't worry about the results you get!**

Students worry about their results, sometimes believing they're not the 'right' results because they provide unexpected answers to the questions, for example. Truthfully, in exploratory research, you don't know what results you're going to get anyway. As long as the participants were 100% clear about what they were being asked, their answers are valid. Remember – **you will not be scored based on the results you get. You will be scored based on how well you interpret your results.**

#### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

Here you can start with your overall opinion based on your findings, such as *this dissertation has shown that girls tend to value Literature more than boys*. You can follow this with a summary of the answers to your research questions – this can be about two paragraphs.

Then, follow with the final two sections, each a paragraph long:

**Limitations** – what are the limitations of your research? Perhaps it's not generalisable because you have a small sample. Perhaps it was conducted with only one group of students from one department, or conducted in one country and not an entire region. These are not weaknesses, however. Instead, such admission is evidence that you have thought clearly about your research and you are being critical.

**Future** – Here you can discuss the direction(s) your future research could take. Also, what are the overall implications for your results in terms of how they relate to society or certainly the target/focus group within your study?

There's a lot more that could be said, but hopefully this guide gives you some hands-on advice to use. If in doubt, consult with your supervisor and don't forget to access the Writing Centre – you can email Alex Baratta about this: [alex.baratta@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:alex.baratta@manchester.ac.uk)

Alex also offers study skills sessions on various topics, including how to write a dissertation.