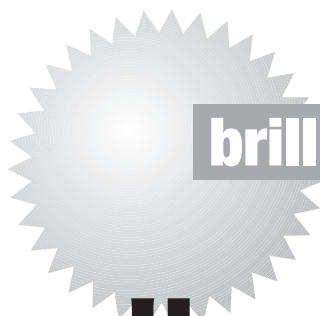


Bill Kirton

brilliant

Dissertation

What you need to  
know and how to  
do it



**brilliant**

# **dissertation**

What you need to know and how to do it

Bill Kirton



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# About the author

Before taking early retirement to become a full-time writer, **Bill Kirton** was a lecturer in French at the University of Aberdeen. He has also been a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at the RGU in Aberdeen, and the universities of Dundee and St Andrews. His radio plays have been broadcast by the BBC and on the Australian BC. His crime novels and a historical novel have been published in the UK and USA and his short stories have appeared in several anthologies. He lives in Aberdeen with his wife, Carolyn.

His website is [www.bill-kirton.co.uk](http://www.bill-kirton.co.uk) and his blog is at <http://livingwritingandotherstuff.blogspot.com/>

# Acknowledgements

I owe a lot to the students I've worked with over the years. I hope I taught them some things; I know they taught me many. So let me acknowledge at the start my appreciation of the interesting and stimulating discussions I shared with them. More specifically in the context of this volume, I'd like to thank Steve Cook and others at the Royal Literary Fund who initiated and ran the imaginative scheme which funded Writing Fellowships in universities throughout the UK. It was through that scheme that I met Kathleen McMillan and Jonathan Weyers, who became friends as well as colleagues. My thanks to them for their expertise, knowledge, experience and friendship and to Dr Steve Lakin for his helpful mathematical advice. Finally, Steve Temblett, Katy Robinson and Natasha Whelan at Pearson Education have been unfailingly kind and cooperative and I'm truly grateful to them for all their help.

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# Introduction: Do as we say not as we do

To explain why we chose that heading for the introduction, let's start with a question. What's wrong with these sentences (all of which you'll find in this book)?

- 1 Another obvious format.
- 2 But dissertations and reports are long-term affairs and that brings its own problems.
- 3 And yet, in a few months, you'll be handing in a substantial document on it which is all your own work.
- 4 After you've told them what's involved ...
- 5 The main thing to consider is who you're writing them for.

The main answer is that they all break rules (of grammar, punctuation and style) which we'll be saying must *never* be broken. (As does that sentence, too, because we're not 'saying' anything, we're 'writing' it.) More specifically, 1 isn't a sentence because there's no verb in it; 2 and 3 begin with conjunctions, i.e. words which should join two parts of a sentence, not start it; 4 uses contractions ('you've' and 'what's'); and 5 ends with a preposition and 'who' should be 'whom'.

Another question – this time about the whole problem of political correctness and gender-specific language. When we give examples involving a student or lecturer, do we say he or she? Or do we stay correct, use the either/or form and write sentences such as 'The student must ensure that he or she conducts his or

her research in a style that suits himself or herself'? We hope the answer to that one is self-evident.

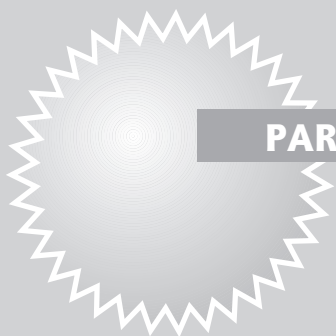
The reason we're starting with these questions is to warn you against copying the style of this book in your academic writing; it breaks lots of the rules which you'll need to respect. Why? Because our aim here isn't to be academic or formal; we want our style to be personal, conversational, direct and easy to read. So we don't mind starting paragraphs with 'OK', or sentences with 'And', 'But' or 'Because'. We'll be using the sort of contractions familiar in everyday speech, such as 'you'll', 'we've' and 'don't'. We don't want the writing to be sloppy or give you examples of 'bad' English but nor do we want to be constrained by the formality of conventional academic style.

So that's why we've used the 'incorrect' formulae in the sentences we quoted. And the way we'll overcome the gender-specific issue is by using 'he' or 'she' at random. Students and lecturers alike will sometimes be male, sometimes female. There'll be no attempt to make sure there's a fifty-fifty split to guarantee political correctness either. Our intention throughout isn't to be 'correct' but to communicate.

The book's organised in eight parts. The first is a general introduction on getting started and choosing a topic. Part 2 is about planning your research, while Part 3 deals with finding and filtering information. In Part 4 we look at research techniques, Part 5 deals with issues arising from data and numbers and Part 6 addresses the important topics of plagiarism, referencing and ethics. Part 7 focuses on the actual writing of your dissertation or project report and the last part is devoted to editing and presenting the final work.

You'll find that some points, such as those concerning referencing and plagiarism, the need to stay objective and the importance of using evidence to support your arguments are repeated quite frequently. We've done this deliberately whenever we feel something needs to be stressed or re-stressed.

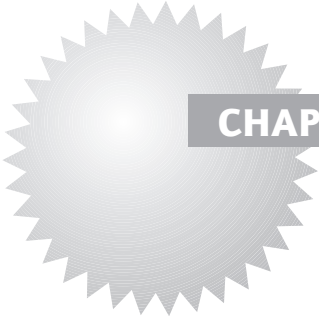
When you've read the book, if it's helped you to feel more confident about things, we've achieved our goal. University is a great foundation for your future and completing a research project is an excellent way of developing and demonstrating your abilities and finding out more about yourself in the process.



## PART 1

# Getting ready





## CHAPTER 1

# The challenges



**D**issertations and project reports are demanding tasks in terms of both research and writing. They're the sort of exercises that often come later in a degree course or at postgraduate level, but many institutions now make them an earlier part of the learning process. They can have a noticeable effect on your marks and, possibly, influence your overall classification.

## **A professional approach**

Imagine looking at a substantial piece of work on a topic that interests you. It's a bound volume of several thousand words and there, on the cover page, is your name. For many students, it's one of the highlights of their undergraduate academic career. It's taken them a few months to put together but it's proof that they have the knowledge, understanding and, not least, stamina to make their own choices, follow them through and show that they've mastered the advanced academic skills of their discipline.

OK, you've imagined it, now how do you set about making it a reality? Well, in broad terms, you'll have to choose your topic, do lots of research, thinking and writing and you'll have to present it all in a professional way. And it'll be your unique, original contribution to your subject. You'll get well under the surface of your material and have to push yourself to meet the various challenges it'll present. The skills involved may be close to those that



potential employers will be looking for, too. So, in every way, it's clear that you need to treat such tasks with energy, commitment and a determination to show how focused and disciplined you can be.

**brilliant tip**

Writing dissertations and project reports are similar activities in many ways, but there are differences, too. Wherever possible, we've tried to provide material which applies to both, but there are also chapters and sections that focus on techniques and strategies for specific types of document. Find the material which best suits your own needs and meets the requirements of your particular discipline.

### Getting a good start

Exercises such as essays, lab reports and case studies are relatively short-term commitments, with usually a few weeks or even days between the exercise being set and the submission date. But dissertations and reports are long-term affairs and that brings its own problems. With a whole term or more in which to complete the task, it's easy to drift aimlessly at the start and just convince yourself that thinking vaguely about the topic now and then keeps you in touch with it. It doesn't. Students who've written their dissertations often remark that each stage took longer than they expected. So don't be under any illusions; if you don't get organised, the time will rush by and you'll be struggling to meet the deadlines.

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good time management  
is critical

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Good time management is critical. As soon as you know what the task is, focus on it, start planning the various elements and make it a part

of your routines. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll experience the reality of the job in hand and the more inclined you'll

be to commit to something that's exclusively yours. So, do something positive.

- Find out (and make sure you understand) exactly what it is you're supposed to do and how you should do it. Read the course handbook or regulations or talk to your supervisor or, if you don't yet have one, someone who might be your supervisor.
- Start looking at your research area or source material. It'll probably seem vast at first, with jargon that maybe sounds obscure, and you may feel that so many experts have written so much on it that you can't imagine finding anything to add. And yet, in a few months, you'll be handing in a substantial document on it which is all your own work. So get involved in the topic, start reading some background material and start asking questions. The sooner you start, the better.
- Sitting thinking about it is part of the process, but at this stage you should also be active. Start taking focused notes of your background reading, create a plan of action, organise your timetable. In some research projects, you may have to make some early observations or set up a pilot experiment; in others, you may need to source materials and/or textbooks. Whatever initial things your task calls for, get stuck into them.



### **brilliant tip**

Check your motivation. Your friends, family and tutors may all think you're motivated but you're the only one who really knows.

- If you are, use the feeling to get yourself energised and tap into it whenever things get difficult.
- If you're not, talk to someone about it. Some supervisors are very good at motivating students, and staff in support services such as counselling and the careers service also have lots of experience of helping in this way.

## Work efficiently and effectively

In the course of the book we'll keep stressing the need to organise your timetable. It makes sense; you won't lose or waste time worrying about what you should be doing or whether you're on track, and you'll have more time not only for thinking and reading but also for relaxing. So get into the habit of being efficient.

- Plan ahead for each day or part of a day.
- Make sure you know precisely what you're trying to achieve during each day or part of a day.
- Get working as quickly as possible.
- Prioritise tasks.
- Don't get distracted.
- Keep your papers and your workplace well organised.
- Don't overdo it. Take breaks when you need to rest.

As well as efficient, be effective. That means doing things that actually produce results. Be sure that each thing you do has a point and is contributing in some way to achieving your goal.

- Don't waste time. Get started right away.
- Keep your focus on the end product.
- Cut out unproductive work.
- Watch out for things that are stopping you making progress and find ways to overcome these obstacles.



### **brilliant** tip

Effective working is smart working. For each part of the task you undertake, this SMART goals mnemonic may help you to remember what you need to keep thinking.

- Specific (What exactly are you trying to achieve?)

- **Measurable** (What achievable targets can you set yourself?)
- **Attainable** (What can you really achieve in the time available?)
- **Realistic** (Is the goal you've set achievable?)
- **Tangible** (Will you be able to see if you've made progress?)



## **brilliant** dos and don'ts

### **Do**

- ✓ remember you'll need to organise large amounts of information.
- ✓ keep records of research sources so you can cite them properly.
- ✓ make sure you adopt a professional approach to presenting data.
- ✓ allow time for your supervisor to provide feedback and time for you to take it into account and act on it.
- ✓ set aside time for your dissertation or report to be typed, or, if you need this service, for graphics to be produced or printed, and for the finished dissertation or report to be bound, if that's what your department requires.

### **Don't**

- ✗ underestimate how long it may take to do the research or to actually write the dissertation.
- ✗ start reading aimlessly just to persuade yourself you're doing something.
- ✗ lose sight of the need to maintain your writing skills at a high level.
- ✗ plagiarise or infringe copyright. Make it part of your routine to be sure that you don't.

Don't wait – get started right away

When you know you have to write a dissertation or report, get going as soon as you can. Read a basic text to get some background. Start compiling a personal glossary of specialist terms. Ask your supervisor or tutors questions. Start looking at the current research in your area. Look at online databases to begin your literature search. When you organise your timetable, give

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get going as soon as you can

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yourself a good chunk of time for the initial, general reading to get into the feel of it and make sure you take notes as you go.



**brilliant tip**

As you get further into your project you'll find that you think about it a lot. Be prepared to have ideas popping into your head at unlikely times. Carry a small notebook around with you so that you can jot them down. Some may turn out to be bad ideas, but lots could be worth pursuing. Don't just assume you'll remember them. You won't always.

Clear the decks. Finish any outstanding tasks, tidy your work area and let your friends know that you may not be socialising quite as much. (Which doesn't mean you should stop. Keep a balance. Remember, 'all work and no play ...' etc.) Start writing, and that includes note-making, because the act of writing is part of the thinking process. The act of writing isolated paragraphs on the basis of something you've read or an idea you've had can help to clarify your thoughts and they can be the basis for further development once you've read a bit more. And even if you can't use them, just writing out some ideas will help you to go further into the topic and understand it better. The more you write, the more you'll develop your own writing 'voice' and the closer you'll get to your particular take on the topic.

**brilliant tip**

Many projects stall or get abandoned because the person involved is a perfectionist. If you have that tendency, keep telling yourself that you may be wasting time trying to get a particular thing right when there are lots of other things still to be done. By all means get rid of the major flaws but don't get hung up over minor things. The important thing is to get the work finished.

Don't let writer's block get in the way. Sometimes the words flow, sometimes they don't. Just accept it. When you're finding that putting the sentences and paragraphs together is a struggle, work through it. Take a break, come back and just start writing anything, even rubbish. The important thing is not to use it as an excuse to stop altogether. It's part of the thinking process.

It won't hurt to review progress each day. 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 next?

**You need to make two important lists ...**

... of the things you need to do before you can start properly and the things you can leave until the project's finished. Then be strict with yourself. Focus on working through the first list and don't allow yourself to do anything on the other one – it'll just be a displacement activity.

**Make an appointment to meet ...**

... your supervisor or a potential supervisor. Have a general chat about the whole process, asking what realistic, achievable goals you might set and what they recommend you get started on.

**brilliant recap**

- Be professional in your approach.
- The project may take longer than you expect, so get yourself organised.
- Decide what you'll do, start researching it and thinking about it right away.
- Plan your timetable with care to help you work efficiently and effectively.
- Don't wait, get started immediately. Talk to your supervisor, organise the tasks you need to tackle.



## CHAPTER 2

# Deciding what to write about





**Y**ou're going to spend some significant time on your research topic, and it's going to occupy lots of your thinking, so you need to choose wisely. It's not just a question of looking through a list of options and deciding 'That doesn't look bad. I'll try that'. There are lots of things to consider – personal, departmental and practical. Let's look at the sort of factors that should influence your choice of topic.

## **Weighing your options**

The options open to you will depend on your department's policy. In some, your choice may be limited. Rather than asking you what you want to research, the department will give you a list of possible topics. Or there may be a semi-closed list, where members of staff provide suggestions of broad topics but leave you to select a particular area within one or more of them. In both these cases, it may be hard to choose and you may feel it's restrictive, especially if you don't know much about the topics listed. But, in each case, the idea is to give you as much choice as possible in the areas of expertise of the people who'll be supervising and assessing your work. They'll have thought not only about the topics but about practical issues surrounding them and the amount of scope they'll give you for developing your own thoughts on the subject.

If you do have to choose from a list, get moving on it quickly. Some of the topics may be particularly attractive and you'll need

to stake your claim early. But don't rush the choice itself. Get all the information you can and allocate time and attention to whatever you need to do to make the right decision. You may want to conduct library or internet searches or discuss aspects of the lists and topics with potential supervisors. Whatever's needed, do it, but get the balance right between a speedy and a considered response.

In some cases, you may not even get a list of options and you'll be expected to choose not only the topic but the specific research question you'll be trying to consider. Your choice may then have to be approved and you may be asked to write an outline of the question, giving a reasoned argument as to why it's worth investigating and describing the way you'll approach it.



**brilliant tip**

If you have a specific topic in mind and it's not on a prescribed list of options, try asking a potential supervisor whether it could be considered. But be ready to answer some pretty searching questions about why you think it would make a good research theme.

Whether your system of choosing topics is closed, semi-closed or totally open, there are many things you need to consider to get it right and commit to something that suits you and will produce the best results.

**Making it personal**

As we keep saying, you'll be spending a lot of time with this topic so make sure it's something you're interested in, which

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you need to feel  
motivated

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has scope for exploration and will be a challenge. If you're bored by or indifferent to it, it'll be all too easy to find reasons to avoid it. You need

to feel motivated and use that energy to deal with any problems you encounter.

The fact that you're following a particular course of study indicates that you're already interested in the subject, and your lectures, tutorials and reading will have probably intensified and broadened that interest. But now you're being asked to narrow your focus and look in greater detail and depth at one highly specific aspect of a subject. So how do you weigh up the pluses and minuses of each option? How do you choose?

### *Survey the field*

If it's an open choice, you could brainstorm possible topics and sub-topics, jot down all the possibilities and rank them in order of interest. Start with broader topics and break them down into more closely defined areas for potential research. Think back on lectures, tutorials, seminars or practicals and the discussions you've had about them. Try to recall which aspects of your course sparked your curiosity and interest the most. Use any criteria you think will help to narrow it down to a favourite or at least a short list.

If you're still finding it difficult to identify a theme that appeals to you, try looking at some of the general periodicals in your subject area – such as *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *Time*, *The Economist* or *The Spectator*. They'll have references to emerging issues, new strands of research or possible controversies arising from contemporary developments in your field.

If you have to choose from a list, look properly at each item on offer. Don't allow knee-jerk reactions to make you reject anything until you know more about it. Read some background information first, and look at some of the recommended texts. Consider all the aspects of each option, then, once again, rank them in order of attractiveness and potential. As before, this should help you to draw up a realistic short list.

**brilliant tip**

A simple way of ranking your choices is to give each one a mark out of ten. When you've looked at all of them, set aside the weaker ones and look again at the ones with the higher marks. Try explaining the reasons for your scores to someone else. Expressing your opinions in words forces you to be clear about them to the other person and, more importantly, to yourself.

### Some other considerations

But, of course, it's not just a question of choosing what you like; you should also think about how useful the experience and the end product might be. In fact, when you've arrived at your short

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think about how useful  
the experience and the  
end product might be

---

list, giving each topic on it a mark out of ten for usefulness might be one way of ranking them more precisely. It's just one of many practical aspects you need to consider.

### *Possible research approaches*

As well as choosing a subject, you need to think about how you'll approach it and what your research angle will be. What sort of challenge does it hold? Will you be answering a question, solving a problem, debating an issue? How broad or narrow will your focus be and how will you control it? What sort of research are you actually thinking of doing? These are all things you should consider. Your answers won't restrict you to a single course of action and your approach may change as you progress, but if you form a detailed notion of your intentions, it'll be easier to make your decision. And having a clear idea of the direction you're taking at the start will enable you to get going quickly and increase your chances of success.

**brilliant tip**

If you're attracted by a particular research option but are not really sure about how practical or relevant it is, ask around. Talk through its possibilities with a potential supervisor or another member of staff. The more people you discuss it with, the more angles you'll get on it.

*Time*

Yes, we're back to time management again. But it's not just a question of organising your schedules; you need to guard against being over-ambitious. One of the questions to ask about your potential topic is: 'Will I have time to do justice to the work and produce a thorough, satisfactory dissertation or report at the end of it?' That will include time to read, analyse and present your material, but also the sometimes surprising amount of time it takes just to get hold of the relevant literature. And there's also the possibility that, if the project is taking up too much of your time, it may have a negative impact on your other coursework.

In some cases, your work may have to be approved by an ethics committee (see Chapter 19). If so, that'll take time, too, and the whole process of actually writing, reviewing and editing a dissertation or a project will probably take longer than you expect. All these considerations should be part of your selection process.

*Getting printed resources*

This may seem an obvious thing to say but it's important to make sure you can get the information and material you need to do the work. For example, you'll have to refer to the literature to find the breadth of evidence that'll give your work substance, so you need access to printed material. Find out, therefore, whether you can get access to the books and papers you need:

- in your own institution's library;
- electronically through your library;
- through inter-library loan;
- or by visiting another library.



### **brilliant** definition

**Quantitative data:** information that can be expressed in numbers, e.g. the number of patients questioned in a survey.

**Qualitative data:** information that can't be expressed in numbers, e.g. the quality of care provided for patients.

### *Getting data*

When you have to collect data and record and interpret your findings, this needs to be factored into your estimate of the time the project will take. If it's quantitative data which you have to analyse, you may have to learn to use a particular statistical analysis software package and that'll take time. If it's qualitative, you need to discuss with your supervisor the most appropriate methods for gathering and interpreting the information. If it involves devising, distributing, collecting and interpreting questionnaires, you'll need to adapt your timing and your techniques accordingly.

### Tracking down sources

Your first stop should be the subject librarians in your library. They'll know most, if not all, of the answers to your questions and will tell you about:

- the resources already in your library, including stored materials;
- the main ways of getting information, including advanced online searches;

- alternative approaches that may not have occurred to you;
- less obvious resources and how to access them;
- contacts at other institutions who can help; and
- exclusive databanks held by professional organisations that you might be able to access through your department.

### How much support and supervision?

You're obviously aware that this is a major undertaking for you, but, even though the work's all yours, you won't be expected to do it entirely on your own. Your supervisor will guide and help you. You'd better find out at the start, though, just how much you can expect from him. Sometimes that may involve regular meetings between you, sometimes you'll only arrange meetings when they're needed. Generally, you'll be able to ask questions, seek guidance and discuss key issues. One area you need to clarify is how far and how often he'll be prepared to review your written work and give you feedback on it. He certainly won't proofread it for you; that's your responsibility. And he may not want to read the whole thing until it's submitted for assessment. So find out these things; it's best to know where you stand right from the beginning.



#### **brilliant tip**

If you have a choice of supervisor, make it someone you feel comfortable talking to, someone who'll give you support and guidance as well as help you to work hard and complete on time. Ask past students how they've got on with different tutors.

### To help you choose ...

Make it an informed choice. Use every available source to explore all the topics you've short listed and the work involved. Discuss them with your course director or assigned supervisor



<hr/> <p>make it an informed choice</p> <hr/>	<p>and do some background reading. Make sure you understand all the challenges you may face and, if it seems risky, don't choose it. Speak to students who've already done this kind of study. Get their opinions and reactions about what they felt was important when they were researching and writing it.</p>
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Look at dissertations and reports from previous years. They'll give you an idea of the style and standard that's needed. They'll also help you to appreciate the variety of approaches that may be relevant to your discipline. But don't let their professional structure and appearance put you off. Remember that they were written by students who, at the start, felt much the same as you do now. Learn from them; it'll help you make sure you reach your full potential and produce something that looks, feels and is just as good.

Plan one or more dissertations or reports as part of your decision-making process. Sketch out the overall structure, then think about a more detailed plan. If that's the one you eventually choose, you may not stick rigidly to it but the actual business of writing it will help you to sort out the ideas and decide how appealing and manageable they are.

This is a highly personal and very important decision, so get advice but think for yourself. Try not to be influenced by uninformed opinions or throwaway remarks by others. Some of your fellow students may have their own reasons for liking or disliking certain topics or supervisors. By all means listen to what they say, but use your own judgement, not theirs, when you make your final choice.

## What next?

### **The moment you have the necessary information ...**

... choose your topic and be prepared to devote time and attention to it right away. As we've said, you'll need to reflect and

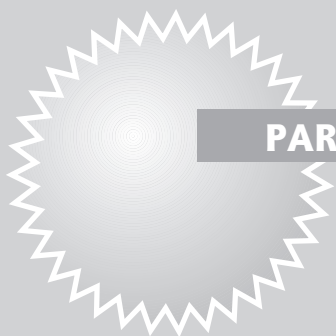
dwell on your options but, at the same time, you must be aware that you need to get moving on it or others might get there before you.



### **brilliant** recap

- Check out the available topics, approaches, options and formats and use them all to make your choice the right one for you.
- Choose early to avoid disappointment and/or having to compromise.
- Organise your time and check the availability of sources of information on your topic.
- Find out how to access those sources and what sort of overall supervision you'll get.





## PART 2

# Getting organised