SAGE Study Skills

Doing Your Dissertation in Business and Management

The Reality of Researching and Writing

Reva Berman Brown

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1 What's in this for you?

Why the book was written

Why yet another book about researching and your Masters dissertation? Because this one will enable you to get much more out of all those other research methods books that you will encounter during your researching for your dissertation. It is intended to increase the satisfaction, pleasure and success that you gain from doing your dissertation.

It is an open secret that researching is not the logical, linear process that your research methods textbook suggests it is. It is also obvious that academic research is only different in degree and not in substance from what we do in our normal lives. Any decision you make, however trivial or important, requires you to research – why has the parcel not arrived? What is the best way to find out about scholarships? When will the results come out? Where did I put the car keys? Which new pair of trainers shall I get? Who can I ask to tell me about that? How can I avoid having to go there? In general, you clarify what it is you are intending to buy or do, find out what there is available, balance your options, evaluate your alternatives, and pick the one that suits you.

Sometimes you are more conscious of this process than on other occasions, but in the main, if asked afterwards, you can explain how you reached your choice – and it becomes apparent that, at whatever level of simplicity or complexity, you have researched it.

And if you think further, you realise that you didn't always do one thing after another – clarify, find out, balance, evaluate and choose. While you were thinking about those trainers or that job, you were simultaneously evaluating the information you already had, as well as searching out more. You may well have already chosen, and then used the various decision processes to explain or justify your choice to yourself.

Academic research is a specialised part of ordinary life, not something totally removed from it. Research methods books are written in the way that they are because you need the information they contain, and you need to know one thing after another so that you can use that knowledge to do a lot of things at the same time.

This book points out which of those things need to be done at the same time, so that you can bring your ordinary-life skills of simultaneous action to research and produce your dissertation.

The number of Masters level degrees in business and management (MA, MSc, and MBA) is increasing. Each of these degrees requires a dissertation or project resulting from research undertaken by the student. One could number the books which supply research methods for this component of Masters programmes in double, if not treble figures.

All of these books provide advice on how to do a dissertation, listing the research issues – the different research approaches available, specific methods for data collection and analysis, the writing-up stage. Although many research methods books acknowledge that research tasks are carried out simultaneously, for the sake of clarity, the books tend to present the tasks in a sequential manner, as though the researcher begins at the obvious beginning with a research problem and proceeds through the steps suggested to produce the finished document.

It is well-known by all researchers (novice or experienced) that research is not undertaken in that way – that different activities are often performed

in parallel and not sequentially, and that the writing-up is not conducted in the order in which the dissertation or thesis is finally presented.

This book is not intended to replace the research methods textbooks that your supervisor has recommended. It supplements these, and fills out the information they supply by explaining how a dissertation is really researched and written, in all its chaos and uncertainty.

The book is written in 'easy English' rather than 'academic-speak' and deals in a straightforward manner with all the phases of undertaking a Masters dissertation, covering how to lay a foundation for the project, find a research problem, develop a proposal, and how to organise and write each chapter.

Its distinctive feature is that it does not treat the research process as a linear progression from a clear beginning to the end, but deals with the topics in the simultaneous order in which they are undertaken, rather than the order which is implied in current research methods books.

It starts before the beginning, assisting you to clarify your thoughts about yourself as a researcher and then about the project ahead of you. It therefore:

- **deals in more detail with the issues of finding the topic than is often provided in research methods books**
- **explains what is behind the requirements involved in creating the research proposal**
- **gives advice on the actual process of writing**
- **is a practical, down-to-earth user's manual intended to tell it how it is, not how it should be.**

What the book will achieve for your supervisors

The book will:

- **save them hours of repeating themselves in giving advice and encouragement when students come individually with the same problems and difficulties**
- **help them to be better supervisors – in writing the book, I have made explicit a number of items which supervisors sometimes take for granted because 'surely everybody knows that?', when everybody doesn't necessarily know it**
- **provide them with the satisfaction that comes from knowing that they have been able to provide advice and assistance to more students than those they currently teach.**

What the book will achieve for you

The book will:

- **help you to find the topic that you intend to research**
- **explain why you need to create the research proposal, so you understand why you are often made to do one**
- **support you through the confusion and anxiety that is a normal companion to undertaking research**
- **explain why you need to write your dissertation in a style that is often difficult to use**

- **advise you on the actual process of writing**
- **tell you how research for your dissertation is actually done, not how it should be done**
- **enable you to become a member of the community of researchers into management and organisations by introducing you to the real, as opposed to the ideal, world of research.**

What the book does not do

It does not:

- **present research as a linear, systematic, totally rational process that, once planned, can be conducted in a smooth, coherent flow, with no hitches, accidents or obstacles**
- **use 'academic-speak'**
- **repeat what is well-covered in current research methods textbooks such as detailed explanations of methods of data collection or data analysis**
- **explain the conventions or technicalities of referencing**
- **suggest learning outcomes**
- **solve all your researching problems**
- **replace the need to use your research methods textbook**
- **give lists of all the other books, papers and articles you should refer to as well as reading this one.**

It is thus not a stand-alone research methods book, but is intended to supplement these types of books with the actual process that is undertaken by all researchers – doing things in parallel, jumping backwards and forwards in both process and substance, creating order out of the chaos and uncertainty of researching.

How to use the book

I suggest that you read the book from start to finish. It won't take you long, and the time you spend reading it may well save you far more time when you come to do your research. Then, when your dissertation reaches the point where one of the chapters would be helpful, have another read to remind yourself of the information and tips that I've provided to guide and help you on your way to your research destination.

Something to bear in mind

When you start out on the research adventure, it might be helpful to bear in mind that despite all the emphasis on the systematic, scientific and the rigorous, research is essentially a human activity, affected by passions, hopes, imagination, cultural biases and personal prejudices.

The payoff

Research may be a serious endeavour, but it is also exciting and fun and very worthwhile. If you follow the advice in this book, what's in it for you is a better dissertation than you would have researched and written if you hadn't given any of this a moment's thought.