# **DISSERTATION STRUCTURE**

# **Title page**

The title page of your dissertation is the very first impression the marker will get of your work, so it pays to invest some time thinking about your title. But what makes for a good title? A strong title needs to be 3 things:

1. **Succinct** (not overly lengthy or verbose)
2. **Specific** (not vague or ambiguous)
3. **Representative** of the research you’re undertaking (clearly linked to your research questions)

Typically, a good title includes mention of the following:

* The **broader** **area** of the research (i.e. the overarching topic)
* The **specific** **focus** of your research (i.e. your specific context)
* Indication of **research** **design** (e.g. quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods).

# **Acknowledgements**

This page provides you with an opportunity to say thank you to those who helped you along your research journey. Generally, it’s optional (and won’t count towards your marks), but it is academic best practice to include this.

So, who do you say thanks to? Well, there’s no prescribed requirements, but it’s common to mention the following people:

1. Your dissertation supervisor or committee.
2. Any professors, lecturers or academics that helped you understand the topic or methodologies.
3. Any tutors, mentors or advisors.
4. Your family and friends, especially spouse (for adult learners studying part-time).

There’s no need for lengthy rambling. Just state who you’re thankful to and for what (e.g. thank you to my supervisor, John Doe, for his endless patience and attentiveness) – be sincere. In terms of length, you should keep this to a page or less.

# **Abstract (or executive summary)**

The dissertation abstract (or executive summary for some degrees) serves to provide the first-time reader (and marker or moderator) with a big-picture view of your research project. It should give them an understanding of the key insights and findings from the research, without them needing to read the rest of the report – in other words, it should be able to stand alone.

For it to stand alone, your abstract should cover the following key points (at a minimum):

* Your research questions and aims – what key question(s) did your research aim to answer?
* Your methodology – how did you go about investigating the topic and finding answers to your research question(s)?
* Your findings – following your own research, what did do you discover?
* Your conclusions – based on your findings, what conclusions did you draw? What answers did you find to your research question(s)?

So, in much the same way the dissertation structure mimics the research process, your abstract or executive summary should reflect the research process, from the initial stage of asking the original question to the final stage of answering that question.

In practical terms, it’s a good idea to write this section up last, once all your core chapters are complete. Otherwise, you’ll end up writing and rewriting this section multiple times (just wasting time).

# **Table of contents**

Table of Contents

[Title page 2](#_Toc67323557)

[Acknowledgements 3](#_Toc67323558)

[Abstract (or executive summary) 4](#_Toc67323559)

[Table of contents 5](#_Toc67323560)

[List of figures 6](#_Toc67323561)

[List of tables 7](#_Toc67323562)

[Chapter 1: Introduction 8](#_Toc67323563)

[Chapter 2: Literature review 9](#_Toc67323564)

[Chapter 3: Research methodology 10](#_Toc67323565)

[Chapter 4: Research findings 11](#_Toc67323566)

[Chapter 5: Discussion and analysis of findings 12](#_Toc67323567)

[Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations 13](#_Toc67323568)

[References 14](#_Toc67323569)

[Appendices 15](#_Toc67323570)

# **List of figures**

# **List of tables**

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Onto the first official chapter of your dissertation or thesis – the introduction chapter.

It’s important to understand that even though you’ve provided an overview of your research in your abstract, your introduction needs to be written as if the reader has not read that (remember, the abstract is essentially a standalone document). So, your introduction chapter needs to start from the very beginning, and should address the following questions:

* What will you be investigating (in plain-language, big picture-level)?
* Why is that worth investigating? How is it important to academia or business? How is it sufficiently original?
* What are your research aims and research question(s)? Note that the research questions can sometimes be presented at the end of the literature review (next chapter).
* What is the scope of your study? In other words, what will you cover and what won’t you cover?
* How will you approach your research? In other words, what methodology will you adopt?
* How will you structure your dissertation? What are the core chapters and what will you do in each of them?

These are just the bare basic requirements for your intro chapter. Some universities will want additional bells and whistles in the intro chapter, so be sure to carefully read your brief or consult your research supervisor.

If done right, your introduction chapter will set a clear direction for the rest of your dissertation. Specifically, it will make it clear to the reader (and marker) exactly what you’ll be investigating, why that’s important, and how you’ll be going about the investigation. Conversely, if your introduction chapter leaves a first-time reader wondering what exactly you’ll be researching, you’ve still got some work to do.

# **Chapter 2: Literature review**

Now that you’ve set a clear direction with your introduction chapter, the next step is the literature review. In this section, you will analyse the existing research (typically academic journal articles and high-quality industry publications), with a view to understanding the following questions:

* What does the literature currently say about the topic you’re investigating?
* Is the literature lacking or well established? Is it divided or in disagreement?
* How does your research fit into the bigger picture?
* How does your research contribute something original?
* How does the methodology of previous studies help you develop your own?

Depending on the nature of your study, you may also present a conceptual framework (or theoretical framework) towards the end of your literature review, which you will then test in your actual research.

Again, some universities will want you to focus on some of these areas more than others, some will have additional or fewer requirements, and so on. Therefore, as always, its important to review your brief and/or discuss with your supervisor, so that you know exactly what’s expected of your literature review chapter.

# **Chapter 3: Research methodology**

Now that you’ve investigated the current state of knowledge in your literature review chapter and are familiar with the existing key theories, models and frameworks, it’s time to design your own research. Enter the methodology chapter – the most “science-ey” of the chapters…

In this chapter, you need to address two critical questions:

1. Exactly HOW will you carry out your research (i.e. what is your intended research design)?
2. Exactly WHY have you chosen to do things this way (i.e. how do you justify your design)?

Remember, the dissertation part of your degree is first and foremost about developing and demonstrating research skills. Therefore, the markers want to see that you know which methods to use, can clearly articulate why you’ve chosen then, and know how to deploy them effectively.

Importantly, this chapter requires detail – don’t hold back on the specifics. State exactly what you’ll be doing, with who, when, for how long, etc. Moreover, for every design choice you make, make sure you justify it.

In practice, you will likely end up coming back to this chapter once you’ve undertaken all your data collection and analysis, and revise it based on changes you made during the analysis phase. This is perfectly fine. Its natural for you to add an additional analysis technique, scrap an old one, etc based on where your data lead you. Of course, I’m talking about small changes here – not a fundamental switch from qualitative to quantitative, which will likely send your supervisor in a spin!

# Chapter 4: Research findings / results

The results chapter (sometimes this is called the findings or analysis chapter) is where things start getting exciting. Up to this point in your dissertation or thesis, you’ve just spoken about what others have done and what you will be doing – now it’s time to actually get doing and show what you found!

In the results chapter, your task is purely to present the results of your data collection and analysis – not to interpret them in relation to the literature or your research questions. The interpretation bit is covered in the next chapter (the discussion chapter). This might seem a little bit awkward (especially for qualitative data), but “splitting up” presenting the results and interpreting the results helps keep things more digestible for the reader. That said, some universities prefer students to combine the results and the discussion chapter, blending data and interpretation – so be sure to check with yours to understand their preference.

How you approach this chapter largely depends on your methodology – **quantitative** or **qualitative**.

For **quantitative** studies (in other words, research that focused on numerical data), you’ll usually start by presenting some basics statistics covering the demographic data – for example, statistics covering gender, age, ethnicity and similar breakdowns.

From there, you’ll present your descriptive statistics – for example, means (averages), medians, modes, standard deviations and so. From there, you’ll move onto inferential statistics (if they’re needed), such as t-tests, correlations, regressions and so on. If this lingo sounds like gibberish to you, don’t stress – I’ll include a link to one of our blog posts that covers quantitative analysis methods.

For **qualitative** studies, the approach is a little bit different, and it can vary quite a bit depending on your analysis approach. With qualitative research, you may not have a specific hypothesis, and thus you’d want to report on topics or themes that popped up during your analysis.

Depending on your type of analysis, you would likely present a diagram explaining how you collapsed your codes into themes. Then, you would name and define the themes, supporting these themes with quotes from your participants.

The key thing to remember is that you should “show, not tell”. In other words, be sure to quote your sources verbatim as to show what your research has found.

Whatever you do, remember that the results chapter is purely about presenting the results. You should not be interpreting them or linking them back to your research questions, aims and objectives just yet. Interpretation is what the next chapter is all about (unless, of course, if your university wants you to merge them). So, on that note, let’s jump into the discussion chapter.

# Chapter 5: Discussion and analysis of findings

With the data laid out clearly in the results chapter, it’s time to get down to business in the discussion chapter. The discussion chapter is where you interpret your data and discuss your findings (hence the chapter name).

How do you craft a solid discussion chapter? Well, every project is a little different, but ideally you want to do the following in your discussion chapter:

1. First, you need to **interpret** the data to develop meaningful findings. For example, if you found strong correlations between variables in your statistical analysis, you would explain what this potentially means in terms of the relationship between them. For example, does Factor A potentially cultivate or stimulate trust, while Factor B has no impact”

2. Secondly, you should **relate** your findings to the **literature**. In other words, do your findings align with the existing research (which you covered in your literature review chapter), or are they at odds with previous research? If so, why might that be? For example, if your findings are at odds with the existing research, could this potentially be due to a different contextual or environmental factor (for example, culture or power dynamics)?

3. Lastly, and most importantly, you need to **relate** your findings to your original **research** **questions**. In other words, how do these findings help you address your research questions, aims and objectives. Do they provide clear answers, or do they suggests that things are a bit more nuanced than originally anticipated? For example, if your research question was asking which factors cultivate trust, you need to clearly state which factors seem to be linked to trust, based on your data.

A final note about the discussion chapter - it’s important to remember that your discussion chapter needs to be deeply rooted in your results chapter – in other words, you can’t present new data here, or make claims that aren’t connected to a data point in your results chapter. Every point you make here must have a supporting thread in the results chapter.

# **Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations**

You’ve presented your data and interpreted your findings – now it’s time to bring it all home and wrap things up neatly, which is what the conclusions chapter is all about. Its job is to tie your research together and highlight the key takeaways.

A useful thing to keep in mind is that someone who knows nothing about your research (a layman on the street) should be able to read your introduction chapter, then your conclusions chapter (and nothing in between), and have a clear idea of exactly what you wanted to figure out (i.e. your research aims and objectives) and what you ultimately found (i.e. your findings in relation to your research questions). Your family and friends should be able to easily digest this – saving them the potential pain of reading an entire manuscript just to understand what it is that you study.

How exactly do you pull together your whole dissertation or thesis in this chapter? Again, every project is a little different, but a good way to structure this chapter is as follows:

1. First, remind the reader what you wanted to find out – in other words, your research aims, objectives and questions.
2. Then, state clearly what you discovered – in other words, your key findings
3. Then, relate those findings back to your research aims, objectives and questions – in other words, explain how your findings helped answer your research questions
4. Once you’ve done that, discuss the limitations of your research – in other words, what were the potential issues in your study. For example, perhaps your sample size was too small, or your data analysis wasn’t sophisticated enough due to technology issues, etc. Here you should also give suggestions as to how the study could have been improved, and what other researchers could do to improve it, which is where the implications and recommendations come into play.
5. Lastly, discuss the implications and recommendations. For example, how can practitioners make use of your research and the new knowledge it’s generated? What should future researchers look into, and so on…

By covering these 5 areas, you’ll bring your research full circle. In other words, you’ll answer your research questions and discuss the implications of your research, both for industry and for academia.

As I mentioned earlier, a layman should be able to read your intro chapter and your conclusion chapter and have a clear understanding of what your project was all about. So, when you’re writing your conclusion chapter, it’s a good idea to re-read your introduction chapter a few times to get your head “in the zone” to ensure that you tie it all together.

Also remember to make use of simple language here – try to sway away from complicated and niche terminology. This can be challenging, but you should aim to keep things very digestible here.