Q-Step is a multi-million programme designed to promote a step-change in quantitative social science training

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

A step-change in quantitative social science skills

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, ESRC and HEFCE

Q-Step

Dissertation Guide

How to Write a Quantitative Dissertation

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Contents

Summary

The handbook summarises the key features, progression, and requirements to writing an original dissertation with elements of quantitative data analysis. This requirement is compulsory for students doing either of the Q-Step degrees, i.e. a BSc (Politics and International Relations, Sociology or Criminology). While this handbook provides a general overview of completing a quantitative dissertation, students are strongly encouraged to meet with their dissertation supervisors to discuss additional questions. The Q-Step Centre also provides statistical help desk and methods workshops throughout the academic year which may assist in the dissertation process.

Students are expected to carry out and effectively communicate an original, individual research project on a relevant social science topic of interest using quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. They will be expected to design a research project, collect, organise and analyse data, and correctly interpret the findings in 12,000 words (+/- 10%).

The dissertation will include a discussion of the chosen research design, including a justification of the importance/relevance of the chosen topic, a review of relevant literature, a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach to data collection and analysis, an explanation of the data collection process, an analysis of the data collected, a discussion of the implications of the findings, and an identification of limitations and avenues for further research.

Progression overview

Date(s)	Description	What to bring
6 October 2016	Introductory workshop 'How to Write a Quantitative Dissertation'	Preliminary research proposal or ideas
Supervision 1 Term 1, Week 2-4	Discussion about what literature to address, defining a question, narrowing the focus, possible methodologies/conceptual approach	Preliminary research proposal
Supervision 2 Term 1, Week 8-11	Discussion about the debate you will contribute to, refining the research question in light of what has already been written on your topic, agreeing on a methodology/approach	Draft literature review or a draft introductory chapter
Supervision 3 Term 2, Week 1-4	Discussion about preliminary findings of research already underway and what remains to be done, ensuring that the scope of the dissertation is viable and how it might be structured	Fully-developed research proposal and progress report
Supervision 4 Term 2, Week 8-11	Discussion about coherence, refining the main argument and structure.	Draft introduction or a draft chapter

Key information

Type: Dissertation

Length: 12,000 words +/-10% (not less than 10,800 words, not more than 13,200 words), word count does not include words in the bibliography, references, appendices, abstract, table of contents and other tables.

<u>If you exceed the specified word limit for an assessment, you will be subject to the following penalties:</u>

- Up to 10% over length   **No deduction**
- 10-20% over length   **Deduction of 5 marks**
- 20% or more over length   **Max mark of 40%**

Due date: 25 April 2017, before 2pm (BSc Sociology & BSc Criminology)

2 May 2017, before 2pm (BSc Politics)

Submission: Consult the Politics/SPA Office for details.

Late Submission: Work submitted up to two weeks late is awarded a maximum mark of 40%. If the actual mark awarded is below 40%, then 40% will be the mark awarded. If submitted more than two weeks late, the mark will be zero.

If, for medical or other reasons, you are not going to be able to submit your work on time, you must, as soon as possible, consult your advisor and the Director of Undergraduate Studies and inform the Departmental Secretary.

Plagiarism: The dissertation must be completely your own work. Bibliographical resources must be clearly referenced, and quotation marks used if you are using someone else's words.

If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please read the School policy (in the first instance), then speak to the module convenor if you remain unclear.

See: http://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/ug/handbook/

Ethics Approval: All research projects involving gathering primary data from human subjects (e.g., online questionnaires) need to be submitted for an ethical review to the Ethics Committee.

For more information on how to prepare an ethics proposal see https://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/research/researchenvironmentandpolicies/ethics/

If you require further advice please contact your supervisor or departmental representative.

Dissertation 101, key roles and responsibilities

What is a dissertation? A dissertation provides an opportunity to undertake independent research on a topic of your own choice. It is not just a long essay. It requires you to engage reflectively in designing and undertaking a discrete piece of independent research. A dissertation will demonstrate your ability to draw on evidence to answer a particular research question (or questions). The "evidence" used can come in many different forms, including the examination of primary and secondary sources of statistical data. The dissertation will also require you to justify your "research design" or the general strategy that you choose to take to combine empirical evidence to answer your question of interest.

While this process may seem overwhelming at first, there are a number of advantages to writing a dissertation. For instance, you will have greater control over and flexibility in not only the topic of study, but how you choose to allocate research time over the course of the academic year. You have the opportunity to seek out individual advice on your topic from your dissertation advisor and gain first-hand experience of the research process. Lastly, your dissertation will result in a piece of work that can be shown to prospective employers.

What makes a dissertation quantitative? A quantitative dissertation employs quantitative research methods to collect and/or analyse primary and secondary data. This can mean designing and running a survey or an experiment, collecting media content from social or traditional media and analysing these (or other) data using methods of statistical analysis and/or quantitative text analysis. You can also use existing sources of data available through an archive (e.g. UK Data Services). Quantitative data analysis usually relies computer-aided techniques and relies on statistical software packages (e.g., R, SPSS, STATA) and/or quantitative content analysis packages (e.g., R, NViVo, QDA Miner). However, your overall research design will be determined by research question and thus it is essential to discuss this design with your assigned supervisor.

Choosing your topic: A key aspect of the dissertation is that you will determine your own research topic. You may write your dissertation on whatever topic you choose, as long as it fits the following requirements:

- it fits the broad subject area of your degree programme,
- it can be addressed using quantitative methods of research,
- you are able to find adequate staff supervision within the area of study.

You should expect to refine and develop your research topic through dialogue with your supervisor. It is worth having a look at your supervisor's online research profile before your first meeting to get a sense of their research interests. You should consider seriously any suggestions your supervisor might make about shifting your approach or refocusing your topic. Your supervisor is also likely to be the first marker of your dissertation, so it makes sense to take their advice seriously! At the same time, it is important that you choose a research topic and develop a research question you are genuinely interested in. This will make the overall process of writing a dissertation more enjoyable for you.

The role of the dissertation coordinator is to:

- Assign a supervisor to your project based on your research proposal

- Discuss and help resolve any difficulties that may arise in relation to your supervision throughout the year
- Organise the dissertation skills workshops

Once assigned a supervisor, you should address any specific concerns related to your project to her/him. If you have decided to change your topic you should still meet with your assigned supervisor to discuss this before contacting the dissertation coordinator. The dissertations skills seminars will provide an opportunity to raise more general questions. You should only contact the dissertation coordinator if an issue arises that cannot be addressed and/or resolved in supervision meetings or in the dissertations skills workshops.

The role of the supervisor: Your dissertation supervisor will provide guidance on the research process. He or she can:

- Provide a sounding-board for developing your own ideas
- Help you identify a relevant literature/debate to address
- Help you to formulate a viable research question
- Make suggestions about the organisation/structure of the dissertation
- Recommend an approach or methodology
- Challenge you to make explicit and defend underlying assumptions

You can expect to meet with your supervisor four times throughout the year. To make the most out of these meetings, you should prepare for them by writing an outline of the progress made, as well as an outline of specific questions/topics you want to concentrate on next. While styles and practices of supervision vary depending on the subject matter, individual students' particular needs, as well as staff members' teaching methods, the following schedule provides an indication of the broad stages of the supervision process.

Feedback: Supervisors will read draft sections and work-in-progress presented to them before the Easter non-teaching period. This means that all draft work must be submitted before 31 March 2017. The amount of draft work on which a supervisor can comment throughout the year should not exceed 3,000 words (or 25% of the dissertation). Supervisors will provide you with general comments on coverage, structure, presentation and development of your argument.

This section gives an overview of how projects will be carried out and detail how research topics will be organised.

Library services

Do get in contact with library staff if you need help finding resources, getting additional training, or support in referencing, bibliographical software, etc. There is a wealth of resources in ELE for getting to grips with important information skills such as guidance on writing dissertations, referencing software/creating bibliographies, using online databases and exploiting e-resources.

Find these in ELE in the **Library** tab and **Student Resources** tab, by choosing **Library and Research Skills** and/or **Undergraduate Skills**.

Library contact libraryhelp@exeter.ac.uk

Core library skills: http://vle.exeter.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1830

Data Sources

Secondary data is a type of quantitative data that has already been collected by someone else for a different purpose to yours. The analysis of secondary data, therefore, involves the use of existing data, such as government or NGO statistics, population surveys and data deposited by individual researchers or research teams.

Data archives and major data sets

Comparative Politics:
GESIS – Data Archive for the Social Sciences (DAS)
World Values Survey
European Social Survey
Dataverse
World Bank Data
Latin American Databank
Democracy Barometer
Quality of Government Institute Data

International Relations and Security
United Nations Database
Big, Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) Dataset
Ethnic Power Relations

United Kingdom:
UK Data Services
Office for National Statistics
2015 British Election Study
2001-2010 British Election Study
Electoral Commission
Understanding Society
British Household Panel Survey
UK Crime Survey

Replication datasets

Many journals, publishers, and funding agencies require researchers to deposit replication datasets in a public repository. Such repositories make this special type of data easily discoverable for other researchers to reuse without having to contact the study's authors.
Open Access Exeter
Journal of Peace Research
Dataverse Project

Guidance to dissertation writing

General advice on the writing process

It is advisable that you do the main bulk of readings during the first term so that you can have a clear structure in place by the end of the first term/beginning of the second. While you do your readings, it is advisable that you take notes and write down references to the books/articles you read. Begin to draft chapters no later than February. Your supervisor will provide you with feedback on draft sessions only if you submit them before the Easter non-teaching period (see below for details about how much draft work your supervisor can read).

You should also leave sufficient time (2-3 weeks) to re-read and polish your final draft and to check grammar and spelling before submitting the final copy of your dissertation. If possible, it is a good idea to have <u>someone else</u> proof read your work for minor mistakes.

Presentation standards

These instructions should be taken into account when preparing your coursework for submission. If you do not follow these instructions, you should expect to lose marks (unnecessarily, as these are easy things to do!).

Font

Times New Roman (12pt), Verdana (12pt), Arial (12pt), Calibri (12pt), Garamond (12pt), Cambria (12 pt)

Spacing

2.0 (double-line) spacing with 3cm margin

Headings

Please use appropriate headings when writing a dissertation (introduction, literature review, methodology, data collection, etc.). Headings should be distinguished from the rest of the text—for instance, using larger font, bold, or italics. (You may refer to the headings used in this document and the module guide as an indication of what this looks like.) If you have questions, please reach out to your supervisor.

Title

It should make clear the subject you are addressing. Ideally, it should also indicate the main argument or finding of the research. For example, 'District Competition Matters: How Constituency Competitiveness Shapes Elite and Mass Behaviour in Great Britain (and Beyond)'.

Page numbers

Page numbers should appear in the footer of every page.

Referencing and bibliography

For references and bibliography, you should use the <u>Harvard referencing system</u> (in-text bracketed citations) consistently throughout the dissertation. Feel free to use online referencing tools, e.g., <u>http://www.harvardgenerator.com/</u>.

The bibliography should start at the top of a new page. It should be alphabetised by author surname (or organisation, if the author is unknown) and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) style. Bibliographies should not be numbered or bullet-pointed, and sources should not be sorted by type, only alphabetised.

Footnotes

Footnotes should be used judiciously and only when necessary. They should not be used for referencing. Footnotes may be used when there is an additional piece of relevant information you wish to include, which does not fit in the flow of the paragraph. Keep in mind that footnotes count towards the word count, so these should only be used to avoid interrupting your argument and not to 'hide' words.

Spelling, grammar and punctuation

Make sure you carefully proofread the dissertation and fix any spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes before submitting your work. Thorough editing improves the flow of your argument and the presentation of your dissertation.

1st/2nd person

We would encourage you to use first person (e.g., 'I think', 'I believe', etc.) for two reasons. First, it implies that you are making your 'own' argument and take responsibility for it. Secondly, it allows you to avoid unnecessary complex and distracting syntax (e.g., passive voice).

On the other hand, do not use second person ('you') at all.

Contractions

Contractions (don't, won't, etc.) should not be used in formal writing. All of these words should be written out in full form, e.g. do not, will not, etc.

Structure of the dissertation

This section explains how the dissertation should be set out. This does not mean that the elements must appear in exactly this order or under exactly these headings, but all of these items should (in the majority of quantitative dissertations) be present.

Title

It should make clear the subject you are addressing. Ideally, it should also indicate the main argument or finding of the research.

Abstract

An abstract is an outline and a quick summary of the main findings of the dissertation. *It is not an introduction*. Think of an abstract as the sound-bite version of your dissertation. Most journal articles include an abstract at the beginning; read some of these to get an idea of what one should look like. <u>Abstracts should only be 200-300 words and count in the word count.</u>

Table of contents

Use meaningful section headings that signpost the main points of the dissertation and indicate how they fit together. Make sure that the section headings and page numbers in the table of contents are correct and correspond to the section headings and page numbers in the main text.

Introduction

Explain the problem and how your thesis will address it. It is essential in the introduction to answer the 'so what' question: why should the reader care about your research and what is the real-world relevance. You should also clearly outline your main argument(s) or finding(s). It is also useful to provide a brief 'roadmap' for the remainder of the dissertation by including an overview of how each chapter supports the overarching claim of the dissertation. <u>It should be approximately 1,000 words long.</u>

Literature review

The literature review serves three main purposes:

1. to show that you are aware of what other people have written and are not simply repeating exactly what someone else has already said;
2. to point out some of the tensions in the literature, e.g. rival interpretations, flaws in the arguments, missing information; and
3. to demonstrate what you are going to add by conducting this research.

The literature review should be from reliable academic sources, such as journal articles, books, government reports, well-regarded think tanks, and charities. Literature reviews should not normally include journalistic sources.

Research questions

Research questions help writers focus their research, avoid the 'all-about' dissertation and work toward supporting a specific, arguable thesis. They should be clear, focused, and concise. The research questions should be clearly identified sometime around where you write your literature review. You should note your overall research question and break it into any relevant sub-questions.

Hypotheses

You should lay out your hypotheses when you present the literature review or methodology. Your hypotheses should be justified by the literature, drawing on relevant theories and/or previous research. The hypotheses should be precise and testable using your data and the chosen methods of data analysis. They should also be clearly linked to and address the research question(s).

Methodology

While the literature review will lead to *what* you are going to do, the methodology tells us *how* you are going to do it. What sources do you use, both primary and secondary? Are there any possible problems with the data you use? How did you collect the data? How did you analyse all of your data? You need to explain what methods you used and justify why this was a good approach (or the best approach possible within the limitations of the project). There is no perfect methodology, but that does not mean you should not do the best and critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your proposed design.

Results and Analysis with discussion

This may be split into multiple subsections, for example testing each hypothesis or exploring each sub-question of your larger research question. The analysis section should present the findings of your research and provide the reader with clear answers to your research question. Make sure you also explain why your research and findings are important by drawing on the academic literature.

Conclusions

There should be no surprises here! Do not save your punch-line to the end! The conclusion should re-iterate the main idea/argument/finding as set out in the introduction, but in a more sophisticated way, given the analysis built up in the body of the dissertation. It may also identify limitations and areas/questions for further research. The conclusion should be approximately 500 words.

Bibliography

A list of all the sources consulted for your dissertation; use the Harvard (author-date) referencing system and provide full bibliographical information listing all the sources in the alphabetical order by author surname (or organisation, if the author is unknown).

Frequently Asked Questions

Question: Should I wait for my advisor to contact me?

Answer: No, contact your advisor. It is your responsibility to initiate and maintain contact with your supervisor. This is your project; take the initiative!

Question: Does the 10% word-limit rule apply to dissertations?

Answer: Yes

Question: Should I attach an eBART sheet to both copies of my dissertation when submitting my work?

Answer: Yes

Question: When will I receive the mark for my dissertation?

Answer: You will receive the mark for your dissertation in the last week of term; at the same time that you receive the marks for your other modules.

For the Ethics Approval related queries refer to the Ethics Committee FAQs page
https://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/ethicscommittee/frequentlyaskedquestions/