

MBA Dissertation Structure Guide

You should first read the dissertation guideline provided in the student handbook and then combine its features and virtues with the ramblings below to guide you in the production of your dissertation.

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- Title:** Cover page in style as detailed in the student handbook.
- Abstract:** 1 or 2 pages: I favour an introductory paragraph, then a paragraph for each section of your dissertation, finishing with a closing to wrap it all up (there are merits for both producing this first or last in the grand scheme of things).
- Contents:** Table of contents and if appropriate table of figures etc. I think it is a good idea to get the bones of this constructed early so that you can use it as a guide. Outlining in Word is an effective method to use - also helps if you use Word styles for headings.
- Acknowledgements:** If any.
- Introduction:** A brief statement of the problem/opportunity/issue that will lead to a definition of the topic to be investigated and the general aims of the work. This should describe the overall context and the scope of the research, including an overall aim and a list of specific objectives. Provide a focus and structure of the work to guide the reader through the document, establish a thread to say what the work is about and follow it through the whole dissertation. You need at the outset to clearly identify your focus and introduce a theme that you can follow throughout the research period.
- Background:** This may be whatever! Keep introductions about the company, revenue, history, structure etc quite brief - it will not really add much to the work; invariably some bits could be put in appendix (which is not included in word count).
- Research Methods:** Consider and discuss the merits of several options before making your choice and say why you chose what you did. Pros and cons of each should be discussed before selecting and detailing the research design. State the reasons for making your choice. Some academic words of wisdom re research design (including interview structure / questionnaire design etc) would be good here. Note: both quantitative and qualitative.
- Methodology:** State the potential avenues of research and the advantages and pitfalls of these. Discuss the accelerating pace of change and the difficulties and timeliness in generating primary data. Say why you decided to do it this way (even if that means it was just your preference - say so!) and why the other avenues were discarded. Give guidance of the statistical relevance (or otherwise) of the method. Demonstrate that you piloted the mechanism to ensure quality.
- Secondary Research:** An important area of the work which seeks to establish a theoretical academic framework - try to sprinkle academic references throughout the work so that most pages have a reference - this is important. When you use a reference then credit it, if the opinion is your own then say so (eg my view is that, the author considers this to be etc). I prefer to use italics or similar to show quotations from other parties. Remember it is an academic work - attribute all opinions and quotes to their source (even if that source is you). You can use web site references and articles in magazines. Academic references should feature highly. In simple terms this is stuff that is already known and documented.
- Primary Research:** This must be new work with data obtained by one or more various means. In simple terms this is new stuff, generated by you. Before you start think how and from where are you going to obtain the data required. This may be a questionnaire, interviews, case studies etc or a mixture of various methods.
- Questionnaires: Think carefully about the design - show you understand, if possible provide brief references to questionnaire design. Always do a pilot study and say that you

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have - this will check your creation and assist in its validation. Give it sections, make it flow, ensure all questions are relevant to your theme and that they make sense.

Interviews: You will need a balance of who, how many and from where. What do they have to contribute and why is it important. How did you contact them and what was the structure of the interview.

Case Studies: Be precise - try to have more than one. If you use a single case study then use anecdotal evidence from elsewhere to add to your discussion.

Results and findings: Simply say what you found - how does it tie in with your secondary research. Does it support or refute current thinking that you have researched. You may use graphical representation. You could equally agree or refute current thinking, as long as you substantiate your argument.

Recommendations: Don't just finish with a full stop!. If in hindsight you would have done it another way then say so.. Include potential ideas for future research.

Conclusions: State how the objectives were met (or not), the limitations of the research and the methodology. Criticise your work if this is appropriate (but don't be too hard on yourself here).

Closing: A simple closing to finish the work off. A personal perspective - if you wish.

Bibliography and References: A list of the sources you have used. Usually split between published and web based sources. Ensure these are properly referenced.

Appendix: Not really part of the dissertation (or included in the word count) - simply additional information provided for the more curious reader.

Presentation: Check presentation requirements - see Student handbook
Give each new section a suitable opening and closing paragraph - in the intro say what the section is about - in the closing round it all off.

Ensure all quotes are referenced and dated - ensure they are delineated and delimited - use quotation marks and italicise the text - it stands out much better.

Spell check (and grammar check - if you can stand it - I think this is a good idea on a final proofing pass).

Use Office tools to make life easier - see my document "A Dissertation Production Made Easy".

MBA dissertations in Durham are a maximum of 15000 words (from intro to bibliography).

Finally: Your supervisor is likely to have several students - don't leave everything to the last minute, and check holiday plans!

There are several resources on my web site - see below

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