

Problems you face as you work on your dissertation

What are the common problems you face as you work through your dissertation? Nobody ever said that it is going to be easy, and it is something that you may have to live with for a year or more. The problem is that writing a dissertation is a one-off activity and engaging with it may seem overwhelming or even intimidating as it is probably the longest or most significant piece of written work that you have ever been faced with. For this reason, you need to be passionate about the topic or centrepiece of your study. It must be something that is going to hold your attention, keep you interested, enable you to answer questions and about which you really do want to analyse issues and create a process of discovery.



Think of all problems as a set of traffic lights. The red light indicates that you have come across an obstacle and that you have a problem. As you work through the problem, the traffic light moves on to amber as you bring lots of sources together that help you to solve the problem and, when you solve it, it then turns to green.

So, as you work through your thesis, what problems might materialise and how do you deal with these? These problems could include the following:

- **Not having got your research question/hypothesis and aims exactly as you would like them.** These live with you and might change and need to be refined as you work through your thesis. There has to be an underpinning flexibility to your approach as the reading should impact upon thoughts that you have about the structure and direction of your project. Being flexible and developing ideas and the direction for your project in a way that feeds upon itself is normal. Like an ouroboros, a circular being from mythology that eats itself, your project is something that creates energy through cyclical self-reflection, and may from time to time wear you down! This is one of the most exciting parts of a research project.
- **Not having any definitive deadlines.** If you start thinking about your thesis in September and it is not due until the following September, it is easy to work upon more immediate priorities and put your thesis work to one side. A thesis is something that requires constant tinkering and is something that you have to get to grips with straight away. One of the most sensible strategies is to set aside either a half or a full day from the outset which you isolate from other studies and on which you simply focus upon your research project.
- **Quantity of literature.** It can be difficult to deal with the quantity of literature that you might have accessed, and your search for the elusive literature elixir will persist throughout the year until you hand your work in. Your literature review is iterative and never stops. This involves managing your literature, accessing data that support the framework of the research, identifying keywords and alternative keywords, as well as constantly looking for

new and fruitful sources. With any source, do not forget to look at the references at the back of the text and compare them with your sources. Library staff are always willing to help.

- **Producing an appropriate quality of writing** within the literature review. A literature review has to go beyond being a series of references and citations. You need to interpret the literature and be able to position it within the context of your study. This requires careful and measured interpretation and writing in which you synthesise and bring together the materials that you have read. There also needs to be a logical approach and progression. Get your supervisor to look at a sample of your literature review so they can check your writing style and provide you with feedback about how you are constructing your review.
- **Referencing.** This can be a perennial problem. Most university libraries will have an online guide designed to support you with the process of referencing. Unlike writing a letter, academic writing can be slow, time-consuming and even tedious as it requires a lot of thought and a considerable amount of piecing together.
- **Needing to talk to someone about your work.** This is an inevitable consequence of having put so much effort and thought into your planning, reading and preparation. At an early stage, it always helps to work with critical friends so that you can check each other's referencing. Critical friends ask questions about each other's approaches such as 'Is it right that you are doing it this way?' or 'Have you thought about ...?' They are usually peers who act as an improvement mentor, and this can be a two-way process.
- **Concern that your focus is either still too broad or too narrow.** This concern is inevitable. Be prepared to adapt your research as you look through the literature. This might mean either increasing its focus or narrowing it down so that it is manageable. A broad focus for research might be narrowed down by adding an appropriate context or age group, looking for another variable within the research question or by focusing upon a theoretical viewpoint.
- **Poor support from your supervisor.** It is very difficult to provide advice if there are issues between you and your supervisor. A supervisor should be able to keep in contact with each of their students, providing advice and instruction on research methodologies and methods relevant for the study. As part of their role, they should provide you with regular guidance. In a similar vein, as a student you have responsibilities, including attending all seminars and meetings.

As you engage with the literature and the processes that you are going through, the issues and problems may be tempered and countered by a sense of satisfaction caused by the effects of adrenalin as your dissertation takes control of you. Think of your dissertation as a reverse bungee slingshot fairground ride! At times you are heading to the ground at breakneck speed. You have a feeling of lack of control. Then suddenly, everything clicks into place and you are moving upwards, accelerating towards your goal.