General Points Length

. The word limit (which should be stated on the title page) includes the title page, acknowledgments, contents page, abstract and any glossary of terms or list of acronyms but not the full reference list/bibliography. All in- text Harvard references are included, as are any footnotes or endnotes (we do not generally encourage their use).

You may include appendices. An appendix may ONLY provide sources of information that have been cited in the main dissertation but are not publically available – e.g. interview transcripts or data accessed overseas in hard copy. Data or tables from public sources that you see fit to present should appear in the main body of the dissertation. Appendices are not included in the word count but you

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should remember that a marker is not obliged to read them – they provide supplementary reference material only. For this reason, NO discussion in your own words of data or methodology is permissible in appendices. If in doubt, ask your supervisor during the supervision period.

It is School policy that a penalty for exceeding the word limit will be applied and students should provide an accurate word count on the front cover of their assignment/ in the box on the front of the declaration of academic integrity.

If the word limit is exceeded by less than 10%, no penalty will be applied. For work that exceeds the word limit, the following penalties will be applied:

Exceeds word limit by

10.1- 20.0% 20.1- 30.0% 30.1- 40.0% 40.1- 50.0%

Marks to be deducted

5 10 15 20

If the word count exceeds the word limit by more than 50%, the mark awarded for the work will be a maximum of 20.

It is School policy that students are required to provide an accurate word count on the cover (title) page of their assignment. This is strongly recommended.

The word limit may be exceeded by no more than 10%. 13,200 words is therefore an absolute maximum. Anything even a few words longer will be regarded as “more than 10% over length” and therefore penalised at a rate outlined in the Code of Practice.

Choice of title

You will be required to submit a broad title and preliminary plan for your dissertation. A special form is provided for this. To find this form, and other information relating to your dissertation:

Log on to the VLE

Select Modules

Select PIED5800M POLIS Postgraduate

Defining a research topic

A dissertation is not a simple descriptive account of an area of study. The success of your dissertation depends upon finding a good research question; only if you have such a problem/question/issue to consider can you expect to develop a coherently argued piece of work. This stage is one of the hardest parts of the task and you should spend time on it.

Though your search for a topic may well begin with an 'area of study' it must not end there. In looking for a focus you should ask yourself: 'what is problematic about this topic?' or 'what is the question I am asking?'. It is important that practicability includes you asking yourself 'is this question sufficiently precise?'. For example, 'is home confinement for childbirth better or worse than hospital confinement?' might be transformed into 'which is safer?'. Can your question be approached from a known body of literature, or could you shed light on it by empirical research? If the latter, do you have the time and expertise? Interrogating yourself in this way should improve the question with which you have started.

We suggest that you start by deciding the kind of topic in which you are interested, perhaps by considering your starting point. Below are a number of possible starting points: you might consider whether your topic fits any of these:

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Empirical: Topics in this category would be concerned with description. The following sort of questions would be empirical: what happened; how did people behave; how do organisations/institutions work; what do statistics show? Topics in this category will aim to describe some area of life (e.g. population sex ratios, women’s employment in global export industries, the role of the UN in the Iraqi war, youth unemployment, problems of economic transition in the Former Soviet Union, the role of the media in international disputes, football hooliganism, United Nations peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan). But it is vital to remember that an empirical topic like this also needs to be framed by a focused research question – it is not enough to describe what happened – you have to ask a question of the material presented.

Practical: Topics in this category would be concerned with policy questions; how social and political problems came to be recognised as such and their character defined; how policies have been developed and implemented; how the effects of policies are assessed, (e.g. policies for economic empowerment of women, policies for reducing the incidence of domestic violence. policies for helping with retirement, policies for promoting human rights such as education, policies for preventing international conflict). Such topics can be addressed in a general way but it is usually a good idea to apply the discussion to one or more case studies and to provide a range of examples and detailed empirical information to illustrate your arguments.

Conceptual: Topics in this category would be concerned with the meaning of terms; how phenomena have been conceptualised and what alternative definitions exist (e.g. the nature and meaning of concepts such as 'authority', 'integration', 'sovereignty', 'welfare' etc.; the ways in which development has been defined – in terms of Sen’s functioning and capabilities; the measurement of empowerment, the role of international courts in Human Rights law and implementation; democracy as a Eurocentric concept, etc).

Methodological: Topics in this category would be concerned with how phenomena are best studied or measured (e.g. the measurement of famine, educational achievement, the scope and nature of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, harassment, media impact, famine, democracy etc., approaches to measuring the asset portfolio of a poor rural village, etc.) But as in the other kinds of topics, having decided what kind of topic you are interested in, you must consider how you intend to analyse and interpret your theme.

i. If your starting point is empirical then you might show how description by itself is inadequate or incomplete. You might show your understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of rival explanatory theories, approaches or ways of seeing things and how these relate to the definitions of concepts. You might consider methodological and/or policy issues if these are appropriate for your

question.

ii. If your starting point is practical and policy oriented then you might consider how your topic came to be defined as a problem. You might consider: the conceptual basis; measurement and the part played by measurement in conceptualization; the relevance and appropriateness of certain theoretical contributions. You might want to consider the consequences or effects of present or possible policy arrangements by referring to empirical data drawn from one or a number of sources.

iii If your starting point is conceptual and methodological, then you might consider how conceptual issues and methodological issues are linked. You might consider how certain definitions are related to particular explanatory theories. You might propose to undertake a critical examination of the relevance and appropriateness of certain theoretical contributions by testing them against empirical data from one or a number of sources. You might consider the policies that have been formulated as a result of certain methodological or conceptual decisions.

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In all cases remember that you have to provide some ‘value added’ to your topic – not just review the available literature and sources. In some cases this will require you to collect your own data (primary research) and present and analyse it; but in most cases your dissertation will be based on your own interrogation and analysis of information obtained from secondary sources.

Reading and planning your dissertation

You need to bring both your own particular perspective and a coherent argument to your dissertation. Find opportunities for making comparisons, for using theoretical perspectives (which can be kept very simple); adopt a particular ideological position, however crude to begin with, which will allow you to probe and identify problems and issues. Try to approach the literature with an open mind, but be clear what your own interpretation is well before you start writing. You may prefer to adopt a particular perspective – for example being a 'feminist' or a 'Marxist' or a 'liberal'; having a particular standpoint can make the initial questioning process easier but becomes a barrier if you adopt your position uncritically.

Do not forget, either, that there are traditional lines of approach which might start you off. You can ask yourself what are the social, political or economic issues you are interested in - all this will assist in formulating and shaping questions. Remember that this is a continuous process, not one that is done at the beginning. It would be a very dull exercise if you discovered nothing along the way!

Above all look for relationships between questions. Much of what is regarded as original consists of seeing relationships that have not previously been observed - comparisons that throw fresh light on a problem, perspectives or theories that allow it to be looked at in a slightly different way, a set of values which exposes neglected aspects of a topic. What are the dangers of humanitarian intervention, in what ways has foreign investment supported local industries, what did the old lady really think about living in a high rise flat, the feminist see in motherhood, the Marxist find in the classroom?

Use of sources and referencing

A dissertation depends upon sources. It is never a pure product of the mind of the writer. The examiners will evaluate the way you use the sources available and engage in existing debates. Before you commit yourself to a title, make sure that adequate and appropriate sources are available. If you are thinking of undertaking some empirical research, consider carefully whether you have the resources to make an adequate job of it.

Some dissertations depend mainly upon primary sources (surveys, case reports, interviews, official statistics, etc.); most depend more upon secondary sources (e.g. books and articles). Examiners will look for evidence that you have covered all the relevant sources, and evaluated them critically. It is, therefore, very important that you acknowledge all sources.

Failure to cite sources is to pass off other people's words and ideas as one's own. This will be penalised for its dishonesty. More positively, references indicate how well you have covered and used the sources available, and you can expect to be credited for a comprehensive set. You must cite your sources. Direct quotations must be shown as such and paraphrases of a quotation should also be acknowledged.

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Note taking

Remember that you will need page references for these quotations and paraphrases, and therefore you will need to keep very good records of your reading from the beginning. Remember too that the reference list/bibliography will be the first page many examiners will turn to after reading the title. They do so for two reasons:

i) your sources, taken together, create a mental picture of what one can expect to find in the text;

ii) the comprehensiveness, or otherwise, of the references gives an impression of how thoroughly the topic has been covered.

Works which have been read but not cited in the text

Your reference list/bibliography should only include those texts actually cited in your dissertation. If you would like to include references for additional reading you have done, but not cited, you may include them under a new subheading, such as 'Additional References Consulted', or 'Further Selected Bibliography'. However, such further citations should be minimal.

Presentation of Dissertations

Beneath is a guide of how you could format your dissertation. As you can see there are a number of optional contents that you may or may not wish to include. These are included to show you where they would go should you include them.

Dissertations should be typed in an easy to read font, with a point size of 11 or 12. Acceptable fonts are Arial. Assignments should be presented in double line spacing (except indented quotations or footnotes where single spacing may be used). Left and right hand margins should be at least three centimetres wide.

A title: finding something snappy and eye-catching is one of the creative aspects of this project, but you should also have a working or sub-title that keeps the topic in focus for you and provides more information for the reader. It should be a single sentence outlining the topic and - if relevant - the time, the place and the sources upon which it was based.

An introduction, in which you set out for the reader what the dissertation is about and a summary of the arguments and evidence you will be considering. This is where you should introduce your research question(s).

The body, which contains all the evidence and/or arguments you have gathered on your topic. This should be organised into chapters, and you are advised to use of sub-headings within chapters to keep a clear structure and direction of argument.

A summary, in which you review the evidence and arguments contained in the body and your conclusions and comments as they evolve from the evidence you have presented. These two sections may be treated separately or amalgamated. Here you should make sure that you have answered the research question(s) with which you began.

A reference list/bibliography: for guidance on this see the section on ‘references and bibliographies’ elsewhere in this handbook. (NOTE: specified word limits include all text and references but excludes bibliography and appendices.)

Criteria employed in assessment of dissertations

1. Ability to formulate an issue that is worth studying and is manageable in terms of data and time available.

2. Evidence that the student has used the literature in a critical fashion and given enough thought to various aspects of the subject.

3. Evidence that the relevant literature is sufficiently surveyed and critical studies are given importance. Evidence that journal articles and World Wide Web material has been utilised is also important.

4. Evidence that the student has managed to handle the topic competently, covered the chief points, shown the interconnectedness of things, given the main features or general principles of the topic.

5. Evidence that ideas and concepts are comprehended and used effectively to support arguments. 6. Ability to express herself/himself clearly and succinctly; to show originality and creative thinking.

Marking criteria (as in the POLIS Assessment Guide) 80–90 Distinction (an achievement of exceptional merit).

An achievement at this level will:

  demonstrate the student’s familiarity with and ability to critically apply advanced theories relevant to the subject

  demonstrate the student’s comprehensive and critical grasp of empirical material relevant to the subject

  demonstrate the student’s ability to formulate complex matters with clarity and in a flawless style appropriate for the subject matter

  demonstrate the student’s ability to form an independent academic judgement and to develop original ideas relevant to the subject

70–79 Distinction (an excellent achievement).

An achievement at this level will:

  show evidence of independent thought and/or an outstanding ability to abstract from particular cases to general theories or issues or to relate theory to practice

  demonstrate, where appropriate, critical appreciation of theories and academic debates relevant to the topic

  demonstrate an in-depth knowledge and mastery of techniques relevant to the area of study and a sophisticated understanding of concepts, information, and techniques at the forefront of the area of study

  address issues relevant to the question or topic in a comprehensive, well-informed way with elements of originality

  show evidence of wide reading of secondary (and, where appropriate, primary) sources relevant to the subject

  demonstrate the student’s ability to write in a consistent academic style appropriate to the topic

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60–69 Merit (a good achievement)

An achievement at this level will:

  show evidence of independent thought and/or an ability to abstract from particular cases to general theories or issues or to relate theory to practice

  demonstrate, where appropriate, awareness of theories and academic debates relevant to the topic

  demonstrate knowledge and mastery of techniques relevant to the area of study and an understanding of concepts, information, and techniques at the forefront of the area of study

  answer the question or deal with a topic in a critical, comprehensive, balanced, and well-structured way

  introduce the topic in a clear manner, develop a clear argument, include the relevant information and data, and draw appropriate conclusions from what has been discussed

  be competent in the use of language, conveying a clearly formulated and coherent meaning

  demonstrate independent reading beyond set coursework materials and ability to relate reading to the argument

  include an accurate and correctly presented reference list and present citations within the text correctly

  be well presented

50–59 Pass (a satisfactory achievement)

An achievement at this level will:

  answer the question or deal with the topic in a comprehensive way

  demonstrate a basic level of critical judgement

  be based on a competently defined topic

  have an appropriate structure or argument

  present information of relevance to the topic

  give evidence of good understanding of class notes, textbook materials and/or general works

  use language in ways that convey coherent meaning

40–49 Fail (below the required standard)

An achievement at this level will:

  partly answer the question or deal with the topic

  be based on a clearly defined topic

  have a basic structure or argument

  present information of some relevance to the topic

  give evidence of basic reading of class notes, textbook materials and/or general works

  use language in ways that convey basic meaning

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20–39 Fail (severely below the required standard)

An achievement at this level will:

 show basic awareness and understanding of issues relevant to the topic

 use sources partly relevant to the topic

 show elementary abilities in presentation (grammar, spelling, and choice of words)

Guidelines for students in dissertation writing

There are a number of useful guidelines for research paper and dissertation writing, and general study skills (the Library catalogue lists over 30 titles under ‘Study Skills Higher Education’). See, for example:

Hart, C. (2004) Doing your Masters Dissertation: Realizing your potential as a social scientist. London: Sage Publications.

Turabian, Kate L. (1996) A manual for writers of term papers, theses, and dissertations. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Northedge, A. (2005) The good study guide. (2nd revised edition) Milton Keynes: Open University.