A practical approach to the process of writing a dissertation

Many student nurses feel overwhelmed by the task of writing a dissertation, uncertain how to approach it and doubtful about their chances of success. Few are fully confident that they know how to go about writing the dissertation, manage the supervisory relationship and highlight the essentials of the topic they wish to examine. However, writing a dissertation is a learning process, and need not be such an onerous task if it is carefully planned.

A dissertation can be defined as the report of a process; it may also be seen as a long essay (Biggam, 2015). By comparison, a thesis is more sophisticated and adds to the knowledge in a field, or challenges accepted norms to bring about changes in established understanding. Undergraduates and taught master’s degree students are more likely to produce a dissertation, as do many master’s students, whereas students at doctoral level are more likely to write a thesis.

Dissertations must be clear, organised and focused, and demonstrate critical insight

Methods according to the nature of the project, the main purpose of a dissertation is to enable students to demonstrate organisational skills, begining insights into research, and deeper, more critical understanding of their chosen focal topic. However, there are commonalities between a dissertation and thesis, especially around the importance of good supervisory relationships. This article focuses on dissertations, offering a framework for students embarking on – or stuck in the middle of – the process of writing one.

**Purpose of a dissertation**

Students are asked to write a dissertation to demonstrate their ability to focus on a subject, examine it in detail through systematic enquiry and identify relevant theories. They need to show they are capable of presenting work in an orderly, academic form, clearly demonstrating a working knowledge of their chosen subject. Equally important is the development of various levels of critical insight, depending on the level of degree for which the dissertation is to be submitted – undergraduate or master’s. Box 1 summarises what is expected from you in a dissertation.
Patient being unclear about information on treatment options. Given the importance of patients understanding treatment options so they can make informed decisions, the scenario might appear more complex than it first seemed. You might want to consider the impact on you as a practitioner, who else was involved, what was particularly important and why (the variables). Your reflections will eventually crystallise into a clearer topic and will help you justify your choice.

This part of a dissertation is often seen as the most challenging. Without a clear focus, the rest of the process is likely to stall, so spending time with your supervisor at this stage is invaluable. Go it alone if you will, but it is far better to nurture the supervisory relationship (Kimani, 2014).

Determining the research question
Not all dissertations need a question or questions; some can be purely observational – for example if they use grounded theory. When questions are involved, however, they must be relevant and have a reasonable chance of producing answers. Unless the subject matter makes it impossible, you should never use a closed question (questions starting with “is”, “are”, “does” or “can”), as the answer will inevitably be yes or no. For example, the answer to the question “Is the process of completing a dissertation arduous?” is

Getting started
According to Wisker (2013) a dissertation is a large piece of work requiring careful planning, good time management, critical thinking, conceptual understanding and adherence to practices for completion. The time taken initially to decide on the topic, approaches and resources will be time well spent.

Many students consider identifying and refining the topic of their dissertation to be one of the most difficult elements in the process. It is fair to say that once the topic has been defined, the rest unrolls like a carpet – as long as you follow a few basic rules (Box 2).

It is important to avoid chaos and to put effort and care into every stage of the process; the SCARY checklist contains useful advice on what a dissertation should and should not be (Box 3). One key piece of advice is that it must be the student’s own work, which means plagiarism must be avoided (Box 4).

The qualities that distinguish an outstanding dissertation from an average one include clarity of purpose, clarity of thought and sophistication of the argument. A first-class submission will be highly organised and focused, clearly demonstrating critical insight, as opposed to a simple, unquestioned description.

Refining the topic
A topic that may seem obvious at the outset can prove to be too vague or too complex. It can be helpful to distil your ideas using a framework such as Lowry’s reflective triangle (Lowry, 2016). Start by making notes on what interests you and why (the ‘case’), then put these into the ‘context’ and consider all the ‘variables’ (Fig 1). For example, you might have an interest in educating patients and want to explore this case in more depth. The context might be your recent experience of a

Box 1. What your dissertation must demonstrate
- Ability to delve into a subject through systematic enquiry
- Capacity to present written work in an orderly, academic form
- Working knowledge of a subject
- Clarity of purpose, clarity of thought and sophistication of argument
- Ability to focus, plan, organise and work methodically
- Ability to think critically

Source: Adapted from Lowry (2016)
almost certainly yes, to an extent, so the question has no real value. A more interesting alternative would be to ask “To what extent is completing a dissertation arduous?” This offers something to explore and play with to produce a discussion. If you study human society in any shape or form, you will quickly discover that it is seldom binary and rarely fits an 'either/or' format.

**Considering resources**

While refining your topic and research question, you also need to identify and justify the resources you may need, such as help from a statistician, support with transcribing data or advice from experts. Consider whether these resources will be available within the time frame and budget. It would be unwise to seek answers to questions that require disproportionate resources.

**Using discursive writing**

Students tend to avoid discursive writing, preferring to report rather than to argue, but Kamler and Thomson (2006) emphasise the importance of producing lively and informed discussions. There are opportunities for discussion in various sections of a dissertation, including in the literature review, and it can be used throughout your work, starting with the justification of your choice of topic and methods.

**Choosing the right pronoun**

It has long been debated whether to use the personal pronoun in academic work; the upshot is that, where justified, there is no reason to avoid writing in the first person. As Kamler and Thomson (2006) put it, “I is not just a matter of personal choice. There are epistemological/methodological and rhetorical reasons for choosing to use the first person pronoun”. Conversely, trying to shoehorn the personal pronoun (or third person) into your writing when it is unnecessary detracts from the intrinsic quality of the dissertation.

Discuss your preference with your supervisor and be ready to argue your case; the reason for your choice must be clear throughout, so never alternate between pronouns.

**Format and elements of a dissertation**

Once you have a general feel for what your dissertation is going to look like, you can get started. The requirements for format and what elements the dissertation should include vary according to institutions and supervisors, so be guided by them. More information on the practicalities of preparing a research-based dissertation can be found in Bowen (2005). Generally, all the elements described below are needed in one form or another. At each step, remember to justify your choices as opposed to alternatives, rather than simply stating them and moving on. In terms of style, avoid colloquialisms and discipline your thinking to search for relevant illustrative expressions.

**Box 2. Basic rules for writing a dissertation**

- Refine the topic, spending time with your supervisor at this stage
- Choose question(s), where relevant, that will likely produce interesting answers
- Consider resources
- Do not hesitate to write in the first person if appropriate
- Put effort and care into every stage of the process
- Justify your choices rather than simply stating them
- Produce a lively and informed discussion
- Follow the format requirements of your institution/supervisor

**Box 3. The SCARY checklist**

Your dissertation should be **SCARY**, in other words:

- **S**traightforward: avoid waffling or overcomplicating ideas; you should, however, demonstrate complexity when discussing findings and literature
- **C**lear and unambiguous: whatever you set out to do must be easily defined and may be trailed for audit
- **A**chievable: within the time frame, limits of the remit, available resources and size limitations
- **R**ecency, ensure that the material you are using to inform the work is current; it might be wise to ensure that all literature dates from the last 10 years or so, depending on the subject matter. Unless older work is seminal, avoid citing it and seek newer material; never use literature just because it is convenient or to hand
- **Y**ours: do not be tempted to claim anyone else’s work as your own

**Introduction**

Although the introduction to the dissertation comes first it should be written last, after everything else is complete. Only then will you know exactly what is in your dissertation and how to introduce it.

**Background**

The background section tells the story of what led you to undertake this work – for example, a recent placement, clinical experience or a presentation in an academic forum. It brings the reader to the table, so to speak.

**Aims and objectives**

Aims and objectives must be determined at the outset. Have at least one (main) aim and four (contributory) objectives: fewer than four objectives might appear superficial, especially considering that the aim has been deemed interesting enough to merit a study. Objectives must be relevant to the aim(s), and aims and objectives must be clearly stated and explained.

The aim is the overall destination and the objectives are what you need to do to get there; for example, if your aim was to help women to decide what method of contraception to choose, your objectives would include establishing what methods are available, examining the risks and benefits of each, and evaluating different forms of patient information.

**Literature review**

The literature review – sometimes called literature search or literature enquiry – is crucial. What you have read must be current and relevant, and you need to show that you have examined it critically. If one author’s assertion is contradicted by another, your role is to unravel the arguments and extract meaning from them. The fact that authors have had their work published does not mean they are necessarily right.

Synthesise what you have read, bring the information together and demonstrate how it has contributed to your thinking. From your reading you will develop ideas on how to investigate your topic – including what design best fits your purpose.

Journal articles are generally more focused and detailed than books. Ensure the journals you cite are peer-reviewed: this means its articles have been scrutinised by people with the relevant specialist expertise before being accepted for publication. How many articles or books you include depends on the nature of your work. You are likely to need at least 20
current articles or books to make sense of your topic. Fewer sources may betray an unwillingness to delve into the subject, whereas featuring a huge amount of literature may indicate you have skimmed through it. Be selective and be prepared to justify your choice of included work.

**Design**

The design – also referred to as approach or method – is the way in which you explore your topic. This section can adopt various presentations but should be clear and succinct, and you should avoid becoming mired in uncertainties. It may feature:

- The epistemological approach – for example qualitative or quantitative, or perhaps eclectic – and why you made that choice;
- The method – for example, if you have chosen a qualitative approach your method could be a survey, while a qualitative approach could be the observation of informants and interpretation of their behaviour with the help of follow-up interviews. These methods are by no means exhaustive and relevant texts on research principles, such as Parahoo (2014); Moule and Aveyard (2016); Ellis (2016) will help you select your method.
- Resources needed for your project;
- Any perceived limitations, such as availability of informants, response rates or equipment, and how these were dealt with.

**Ethical approval**

Research is awash with ethical challenges; you need to identify them early and show what steps you have taken to address them. Do refer to the theories on ethics that you have used to guide your thinking. As a general rule, undergraduates should not be encouraged to involve patients in their research projects, but they will still need to secure ethical approval if they intend to involve peers, staff or any other informants who could potentially be harmed. Obtaining ethical approval is a long and sometimes complex process that should not be taken lightly.

**Sources**

This section states what sources you derive information from; for example, this could be literature only, different types of literature, individual informants or observations.

**Fieldwork**

Describe what you have done, what worked and what did not. Do not avoid exploring errors in your work, but when doing so, demonstrate how they have contributed to your understanding.

**Findings**

This is the section where you describe what has emerged from your study and what you think needs to be examined further (and why). Do not merely end with a series of superficial comments about what else could be done, but explain what brought you to these views.

**Discussion**

The discussion is your chance to shine. It is likely to be longer than most other sections – if not there may be a problem. Start by stating what resulted from your enquiry, and every time you make a statement, ask yourself: so what? It may seem odd, but this self-enquiry will result in deeper insights, which will impress examiners.

If you want to excel, incorporate the findings from the literature review into your discussion and explore whether the findings from your work concur with or differ from the literature. You can further enhance the discussion by integrating fieldwork, findings and ethical challenges. The more fully you engage with the dissertation at this stage, the more sophisticated the end product will be.

**Conclusions**

The conclusions (or recommendations) need to be brief, draw everything together and suggest what needs to happen next and why.

**References**

You must include a carefully compiled list of literature cited in your dissertation. Bear in mind that examiners do check references – especially if they are themselves among the authors cited. They may find incomplete reference lists – or, even worse, their published work misquoted or wrongly interpreted – extremely irritating. Refer to your institution’s guidelines for reference protocols.

**Conclusion**

A dissertation is a means for students to demonstrate they can work methodically and think critically. It is also a powerful vehicle for learning, and one that may well stimulate students to become further involved with systematic enquiry. At the very least, it will engender an appreciation of the process of research.