

What is a dissertation?

Many degree programmes include a dissertation, or extended piece of writing based on broader research and reading. Some schools and departments may define it as a long project. Both your academic subject area and the level of award you are studying for will define what is required for your dissertation.

Generally, the following summaries identify the key features of dissertation writing:

a. Undergraduate

A dissertation provides a student with an opportunity to develop intellectual independence and to specialise in depth in a topic of interest. Especially in the humanities and social sciences, you will mostly be using secondary sources; that is, the existing scholarship published in journals, books etc. You will then develop your own critical analysis of these materials and their contribution to your research topic. However, some academic subject areas encourage students to use some primary sources or to produce data, especially – but not exclusively – in the sciences. Such sources/data may include experiments, case studies, questionnaires, or a focused study of selected archival documents.

b. Masters

It is very likely that at this level you will have to produce or identify a specific collection of primary sources or data. By conducting your own research, you begin to add to the scholarship already produced and add/develop your own critical analysis on your research topic. Usually, the Masters dissertation is a longer piece of writing than for undergraduate study, requiring more extensive reading and research to put your own critical interpretation of sources into the context of existing scholarship.

c. PhD

Writing a doctoral thesis such as a PhD requires a student to make “an original contribution” to the existing knowledge on their research topic; that is, it should both identify and fill a gap in that knowledge. Primary source research is therefore a significant element of a PhD, whether this involves consulting archives or historical documentation, or producing empirical data from experiments, case studies, or questionnaires. However, do remember that despite the scale of a PhD (it can be up to 100,000 words in length), your work still has to be focused and the gap you are filling may be quite small even if it is intellectually significant. Despite thousands of books and theses already out there, each year people still find new things to write about the playwright William Shakespeare!