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What Types of Dissertations Are There?

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2.1 Your choice

In any discipline, if you are granted a degree of freedom to decide, there will be a range of subjects that you will be able to choose from. The subject matter of your choice will have a direct bearing on the sort of study you will undertake and the type of dissertation that you will write. The character of possible studies ranges from highly scientific and technical to abstract philosophical and artistic, with a whole medley of social, economic, natural and psychological options in between.

One way of looking at different approaches to doing a dissertation is to list the five broad generic areas within whose boundaries almost all research falls (Leedy, 1989, p. 82). These headings concentrate on the objects of investigation, and you can ask yourself whether you are particularly interested in any one of these:

- People – social, medical, religious, political and all other subjects that include how people exist, act, interact and behave individually and in society.
- Things – biological, geological, chemical and all other subjects that look at the condition and behaviour of the things around us, from the scale of the microbe to that of the universe.

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- Records – studies of archives and any written documents, reports, recordings and archaeological remains, and even works of art and music manuscripts.
- Thoughts and ideas – philosophy and religion, political theory, language and semantics and all other subjects that deal with the products of human intellectual argument.
- Dynamics or energy – studies of causes and effects in diverse fields such as astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, politics and industry, and other disciplines where forces and reactions are present.

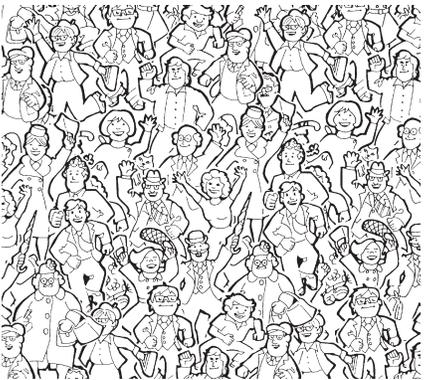


FIGURE 2.1 People

theoretical and practical approaches, and built up a diagram of some of the offshoots of these. Following this diagram is a short account of the characteristics of some of the main activities and the skills you need to carry them out. This might help you to decide what kind of research you will be interested in doing. In all the cases below, it is unlikely that you will be able to concentrate solely on one type, as there is invariably a cross-fertilization between one and another.

In fact, if you consider your degree subject, it might even be based on dealing almost exclusively with one of these particular aspects of study.

Another way is to look at doing a dissertation from the point of view of the kind of approaches you might take. Investigation in any of the above areas requires different approaches, some of which you might be more attracted to than others. In order to give an indication of what may be involved in the different types, I have started by dividing choice between

2.2 Practical investigations versus theoretical studies

Do you prefer to spend your time organizing and getting involved in real-life activities, or would you rather search through the library shelves and pore over the thoughts and theories of others? This is a pretty unrealistic question, as any useful research must have a sound theoretical basis and most theories have a basis in reality:

hence you will probably have to spend some time in both camps. Nevertheless, there is always some weight in one direction or the other, and you can choose to put the stress either way (or even balance the two equally).



FIGURE 2.2 **Theoretical**



FIGURE 2.3 **Practical**

Figure 2.4 extrapolates beyond the simple descriptions above to show some of the branches of investigation that might follow on from particular approaches. It is quite possible, indeed likely, that you will venture down more than one path, as it is usually very difficult to completely isolate aspects of a problem. But it will be necessary to limit yourself to a manageable task; so having a strong emphasis on one approach is necessary, any other related aspects being considered only enough to feed into your main focus of effort.

In all the subjects I can think of, there will be an option of both practical investigations and theoretical studies. Let us look in more detail at what sort of activities may be involved in each of these branches of research.

2.3 Practical investigations

The accent here is on doing rather than philosophizing, though you will still have to do some thinking to make sure you are doing the right things! There are two main

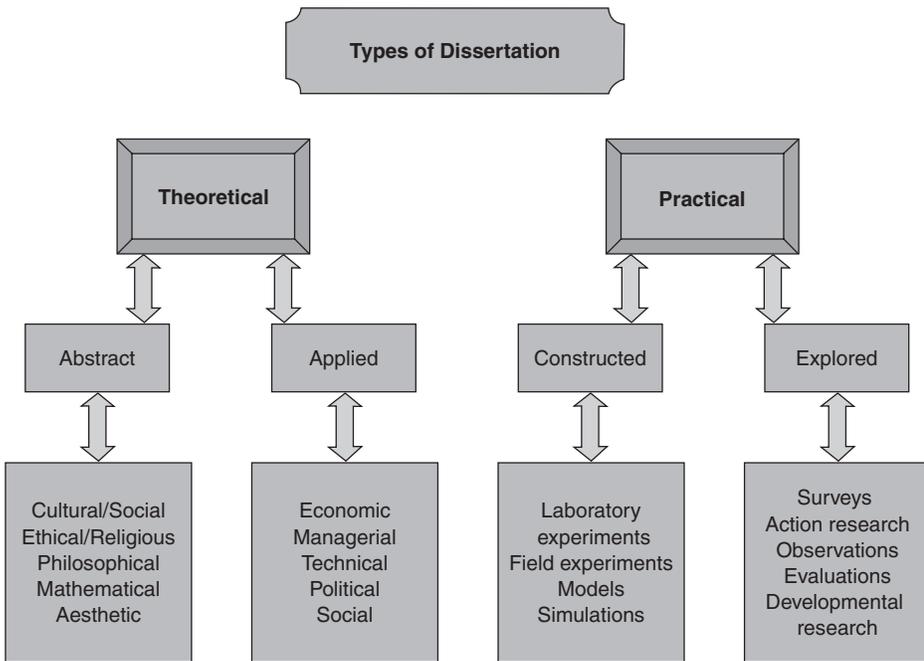


FIGURE 2.4 Types of dissertation

categories of practical investigation work in controlled conditions (such as a laboratory experiment), and work in uncontrolled conditions (such as fieldwork for a scientific or social survey). In both cases, the accent may be on an attempt to verify or test an existing belief or theory, or an attempt to formulate a new theory. It is unlikely that you will be able to achieve the latter within the scope of an undergraduate dissertation.

EXPERIMENTS

The essence of these is the control that you have over as many as possible of the factors (or, technically speaking, the variables) that are present in the process. It is not necessarily the case that experiments have to take place in a laboratory, or that they are limited to natural science subjects. The main point of experimentation is that you observe the influence of specific factors on a situation, so it is necessary to isolate the important elements in order that you can manipulate them and exclude as many extraneous influences as possible.

In order to do this successfully, you will have to be very clear about exactly what you want to test, and to devise or adopt a reliable way of doing this. You will probably

need to have specific equipment in order to carry out the test, and you will have to be well organised in order to carry it through and record the results. It is also essential that you give yourself enough time to analyse the results of the experiments, as a long list of raw data is of no use to anyone.

You do not have to be a boffin in a white coat to do experiments. However, personal attributes and enthusiasms needed for this are: a clear, logical thinking ability; practical DIY skills; good organization and timing skills; and, if you are dealing with human subjects, good diplomacy and social gifts.

FIELDWORK

This usually means getting out and about. The big distinction is probably whether you are doing investigations that involve people or things. The techniques you use will be very different in each case, though even when investigating things, people are invariably involved in some way or another (e.g. in order to get permissions, to locate sites, to provide transport etc.). You might have to contend with bad weather, unforeseen circumstances, practical and social difficulties and even dangers. The point about fieldwork is that you are entering into an existing situation (that you want to observe without changing it), so your control over events is usually weak.

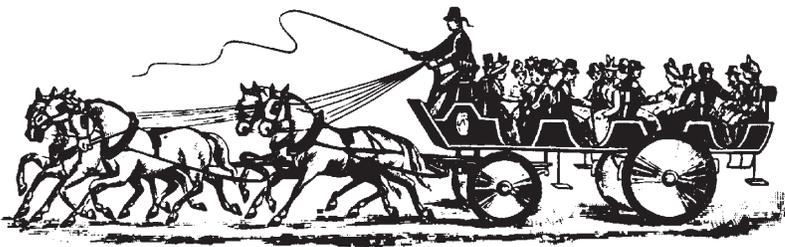


FIGURE 2.5 Getting out and about

As with experimentation, you will have to be well prepared as to exactly what you want to find out and how you are going to do so practically. The methods you use should be tried and tested, and applied in an ethical and rigorous manner. It often requires some resourcefulness to get your own way, and persistence and patience are needed when everything does not go as planned, or if results are not immediately forthcoming. You will probably not need to devise specialist equipment to carry out fieldwork; often, good pairs of ears and eyes and quick recording skills are sufficient.

You do not have to be a train-spotting anorak to do field research. You do, however, need to be enthusiastic and to have: a capacity for clear, logical thinking; practical organization skills; patience and resourcefulness to get over unexpected

difficulties; methodical observation and recording skills; and again, if you are dealing with human subjects, good diplomacy and social gifts. You should also be pretty resistant to adverse weather conditions if you are doing your fieldwork outdoors.

2.4 Theoretical studies

Ideal for bookworms and eggheads, you might think! Yes, but you could also be a revolutionary or a guru. Theoretical studies might be abstract, but they are not always divorced from real life. After all, actions (apart from the most instinctive and animalistic) are based on theories, even if these are not overtly recognized. Also, our understanding of virtually everything is founded on concepts and theories: this is the way we make sense of the world around us.

ABSTRACT

Whatever subject you are studying for your degree, you will have encountered abstract concepts and theories that underpin the thinking about the subject. Examples of these are feminism, aesthetics, sustainability, social contract, capitalism, subsidiarity and so on. Spend a few moments thinking of the theoretical terms that appear over and over again in your subject. There is usually plenty of argument about the exact definition of these concepts and theories and about how they are relevant to the particular subject.

These arguments can be studied on an intellectual level, and conclusions can be drawn from the discourse arising. Subjects such as philosophy, sociology, psychology are obvious areas where theoretical debate is rife and an important aspect of the discipline. But most other subjects also have a theoretical base that is contentious and open to discussion and examination. Architecture and design, education, healthcare, management – all subjects that have very practical applications – rely on theoretical foundations. For example, all of these require ethical issues to be addressed, economic priorities to be set, and equal rights to be considered, apart from theoretical matters uniquely connected with their individual characteristics.

You can define your study to examine these theoretical issues at an abstract level, weighing up arguments, contrasting positions, comparing approaches and verifying implications.

APPLIED

In most subjects, the underlying theory is a foundation for action. For example, the theory of sustainability is becoming influential in many aspects of life, whether in the



FIGURE 2.6 Practical applications rely on theoretical foundations

built environment, social development or industry. How these theories are applied in the real world, how they work and how useful they are, are excellent subjects for a dissertation study. Again, consider your own degree subject. You will be able to think of many theories that are influential in how the subject is studied and applied. Some theories may be strongly based on scientific evidence that would need expert knowledge to challenge, but others are more philosophical and institutional and thus more open to general critical examination. What their implications are and whether they deliver what is claimed can be studied by examining actual case studies. In this way, theoretical issues and their effects can be a focus for your dissertation.

This kind of research combines investigation and understanding of theory – a literature-based activity, perhaps combined with consultations with influential thinkers, and with practical field-based activities, to study the application and effects of the theories. This type of study will involve you with a really interesting and varied set of activities, particularly suitable if you are the type who wants to combine thinking with doing.

2.5 Another way of looking at types of dissertation

Another way to review the choice of dissertation types is to consider what is the main technique of enquiry that you will use when doing the research. Here are seven that I could think of.

Tracking through time This is the study of the history of events or people. The actual time element can be anything between a few seconds or millions of years, depending on what you are studying, e.g. the first fractions of a second after the Big Bang, or the development of dinosaurs.

Describing Finding out what things are like. This involves identifying particular features, classifying, measuring sizes and quantities, examining constituents and organizations. The things can be objects, living beings, organizations, systems, or even ideas.

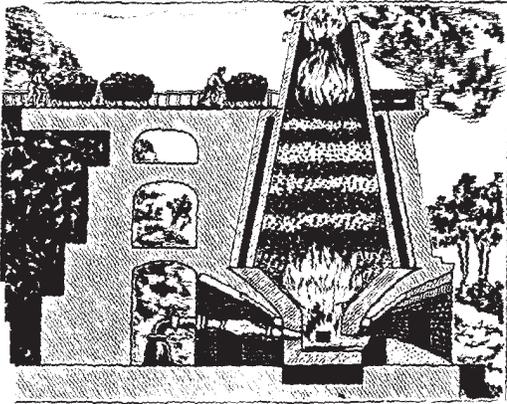


FIGURE 2.7 History of events or people

Comparing This can be comparing like with like, or like with unlike. In both cases the aim is to identify differences and similarities. Aspects studied might be performance, organization, methods and techniques, appearance, attitude, and so on.

Correlating Searching for relationships between objects and events, and sometimes tracking influences and causes. This technique often uses statistics to record the behaviour of two or more phenomena and judges the likelihood and strength of relationships. Other non-statistical methods can be used in some cases.

Evaluating This is examining something and judging it against a set of criteria. Questions like how successful, profitable, quick, efficient etc. are answered. It is necessary to set up a basis for judgement before you start the evaluation.

Intervening By making changes to a system, evaluations can be made as to whether the change is beneficial or not, or to gauge other effects on the system's performance. It is often difficult to predict in theory what will happen when changes are made, so this technique is used, often on a small scale at first, to help development efforts.

Simulating This is the technique of making a controllable microcosm of the phenomena that you want to study. It always involves simplification of the real-life situation, sometimes miniaturization or expansion, and possibly abstraction. Experiments and models are the typical medium for this kind of study.

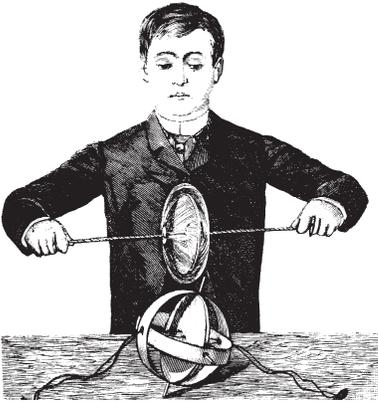


FIGURE 2.8 A controllable microcosm of the phenomenon

Of course, these techniques can and often must be combined. The introduction to a dissertation will commonly give some historical background; description is normally the necessary first step in carrying out the other techniques. It is, however, useful to be aware of these different techniques, as one or more can be used as the basis for your study.

2.6 What should I do now?

Consider what you have read in this chapter and think about what sort of activities and interests attract you the most. Do you like the company of people and are you not afraid of talking to strangers, or are you more retiring and do you prefer to observe from the background or to manipulate inanimate things? Are you interested in abstract ideas, or do you only see the point in something if you can go out and do it? Are you more fascinated by how things became what they are, or would you prefer to explore how things might be changed in the future? Are you a specialist, better at concentrating in a narrow field of study and in great depth and detail, or are you more a generalist, who likes studying the wider context and is adept at making cross-disciplinary connections?

22 / YOUR UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION**FIGURE 2.9** Enjoy the activities involved

Use the answers to these questions to help you decide the direction your study should take and the activities that you will enjoy doing. Keep in mind that you will write a much better dissertation if you enjoy the activities involved. I know it won't all be easy-going and entertaining, but it will take much less effort to motivate yourself if you actually quite like doing the main tasks.

Make a list of the activities you will enjoy doing best and relate them to the dissertation types above. This will give you an indication of the sort of dissertation that you want to write. You could draw up a sort of specification for the work. Now you can go on to the next chapter to consider how this can be used to home in on the actual title of your dissertation.

2.7 REFERENCES TO MORE INFORMATION

Most books on 'doing research' have a section on the different types of theses or dissertations. If you want to add to what is given here, it would be a good idea to look for books that concentrate more closely on your subject area. Do a search in your library in your own subject area, but be careful that you do not get bogged down in books that are all about specific research methods. Look for books that are aimed at doing undergraduate dissertations. Here are a few examples that I found of books in this genre. Generally, as in this book, the issue of what choices you have in your research will appear near the beginning of the book.

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