Writing a Proposal for an Undergraduate Dissertation

An undergraduate dissertation is a piece of original research on a topic, closely related to your degree, in which you are particularly interested. The first stage involves formulating your research ideas, planning your research project, and capturing your ideas and plans in a proposal. This handout provides guidance on writing a proposal, and on where to obtain further help.

The main benefit of preparing a proposal is the opportunity to evaluate your dissertation plans before you embark on extensive research. It enables you (and your supervisor) to assess whether your project is practicable (do you have the skills, knowledge and enough time?), whether your project work will address your research question, and whether it will meet university requirements for an undergraduate dissertation (Greetham 2009: 126-27).

Before writing your dissertation proposal

- Familiarise yourself with the university/faculty guidelines for dissertation work.
- Identify your area of proposed research or research topic.
- Carry out a preliminary literature review to assess the available knowledge on your topic, and to identify a research gap or problem that you will address.
Typical Structure of a dissertation proposal

As Greetham (2009: 134) illustrates, the elements of a dissertation proposal include:

Title
Formulate your proposed title and sub-title, that is, the main subject and its scope.

Outline of the problem
Describe the problem your work will examine or the research gap you will address.

Aim
Formulate your overall research purpose and research question.

Objectives
Specify the sub-questions, and how they will be measured, at a level of detail that will enable you to identify achievable project activities.

Background
Develop an overview of current academic thinking on your topic, including recent research and publications, the main themes and issues, the main academic perspectives, and the gaps to be filled or new areas to be researched.

Research methodology (if appropriate)
Explain the methods you will use to collect information. Link these to your aims and objectives. Specify how each method addresses each sub-question. Identify the activities you plan to carry out, any equipment you need, and any anticipated project costs. Explain how you propose to address anticipated problems and ethical issues. Assess your approach for reliability and validity.
Timetable
Draw up a simple project plan to show the sequence of project activities and deadlines for their completion.

Provisional outline of dissertation structure
Outline the proposed chapter headings and sub-headings of your dissertation. This will give structure to your work by providing you with a plan for your writing.

Conclusion
State what the significance of the outcome of your research is likely to be. What will it contribute to the body of knowledge and how might it influence future research? Relate your conclusions back to your research aims and objectives.

References
Compile a List of References for those cited in the proposal, using the referencing style laid out in the Coventry University Guide to Referencing in Harvard Style: www.coventry.ac.uk/cuharvard

What Next?
Discuss your proposal with your supervisor and be prepared to revise it. Keep it by you and consult it as you carry out your project work.
References and further reading


Dissertation guides that focus on specific academic subjects are also available in the Library.