



Developing a dissertation question

Introduction

Some dissertation students will need to create their own research question. However, some students can find it difficult to think of a 'good' question. The following sections outline how to develop a research question.

Identify a topic

The first part of developing a dissertation question involves deciding upon a topic area. It is a good idea to start by making a list of topic areas that you have found most interesting during your time at university. It can also be useful to think about whether particular issues related to your course are currently 'hot topics' (for instance are appearing in the news). Some academic departments will provide a list of topic areas where staff are able to offer supervision– this will illustrate what will be a suitable focus for a dissertation.

After selecting a topic one of the mistakes that a lot of dissertation students make is to quickly decide on a very specific research question. This can be problematic because until you have got to know your topic area it can be very difficult to know how to structure a question. Consequently, your first attempt at developing a question may not be suitable. It is therefore best to initially think about your dissertation in terms of a broad topic area.

List question ideas

Once you have selected a topic it is useful to make a list of **potential** dissertation questions that would enable the topic area to be addressed (you may wish to discuss these early question ideas with your supervisor). At this stage do not commit to one

specific question – remain open-minded until you have done some research. Therefore, if you are not able to think of a question at this stage – do not worry.

Research the topic

Developing a good appreciation of your topic will help you to construct a question. Consequently, undertake research to see what is already known about your topic of interest. How have other researchers looked at this area? What do we already know? Whilst undertaking your research you should make notes about each of the sources that you have read. For example, when reading a journal article summarise rationale, study design, key findings, any limitations, what authors have suggested for future work.

Focus the question

After you have summarised a range of different sources start to think about how to focus your research question ideas. If you are not sure what to include you might consider:

- Is a topic area under researched?
- Could an alternative methodology be used to examine a topic area?
- Could an additional variable be used to expand an existing topic area?
- Could an existing theory or model be tested?

You may think of several possible dissertation questions. If so, record all of your ideas.

If you are still struggling undertake further reading and/or talk to your supervisor.

Assess question suitability

Once you have decided upon a specific question it is important to think carefully about whether it will be suitable for a dissertation. Keep in mind:

- Word count
- Time available
- Other assignment commitments
- Your knowledge, skills and experience
- Availability of literature
- Dissertation format – primary research / systematic literature review

Remember: you are not writing a PhD! You must be able to actually address the question.

Finalise

It is important that you agree your final question with your dissertation supervisor.

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit:

lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub

