

# How to Write an MSc Dissertation

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## Autumn Term

Welcome to the whirlwind of one of the world's most active research departments. You're just settling into life at the LSE, but it's already time to start thinking about your dissertation. So, buy a nice new notebook, or create a 'Dissertation-Notes' file on your computer, print this guide, and let's get started!

### Step 1 Topic exploration.

Your courses will be packed with fascinating topics that will move you, and some that won't. Here are some guidelines for choosing a dissertation topic from among them.

- **Be passionate about your topic.** You're going to spend a year on this topic. Make it one you love: your writing will be better if it comes from the heart.
- **Choose a topic you are capable of mastering.** You might feel passionate about the philosophy of quantum mechanics, but only choose this topic if you're capable of mastering it. If you don't like maths, choose something else.
- **Stick to Department strengths.** LSE teaching faculty are here to support you. Choose a topic that at least one of them is an expert in, or you'll miss an opportunity to receive expert guidance on your work.
- **Find a topic with lots of open questions.** Some questions are more or less settled, like the proof of Bell's theorem or Arrow's theorem, and there won't be much for you to contribute. Look for topics with lots of open questions for you to explore: your question needs space to shift as your research develops.

The advantage of a topic with lots of open questions is that you generally have greater chances of selecting an appropriate one. This brings us to the next step:

### Step 2 Determine a research question.

Your research question should be interesting, philosophical, and specific. But the most important thing is that it should have a special character that will lead to success no matter what you do. This might be called a win-win question:

A *Win-Win Research Question* is a statement that is true or false and you don't know which, but which will result in an interesting finding either way.

Finding a win-win question is the holy grail. Schedule office hours, discuss possible questions in your MSc seminars, and consult your lecturers and peers about your ideas. Read widely and use your course essays as an opportunity to read deeply. A course essay can be a good starting point for an MSc Dissertation.

### Step 3 Read some past dissertations on topics related to your interests.

Past MSc dissertations can be found on the Ph499 Moodle Page.<sup>1</sup> Look at the good, the bad, and the ugly. Take special note of the topic, research question, and the thesis of those dissertations that received strong marks.

### Step 4 Make a month-by-month Dissertation Plan.

Create monthly dissertation goals and organise them into this plan, going all the way to the final summer submission deadline. You should revisit your plan often and change it whenever you need to. There is nothing wrong with moving unfinished items ahead to future months: everyone does this! But organising your time this way will help you stay on track. See Section 4 for an example.

## Winter Term

### Step 5 Select three supervisors who will be a good fit and who have expertise suited to your interests.

You should have a firm idea of the topic of your dissertation by the middle of Winter Term at the latest. You are required to submit a provisional title for your dissertation, an abstract and select up to three supervisors by the end of week 7 of Winter Term (for part-time students this will only apply in their second year). You will then be allocated a supervisor with the right expertise for your topic. You can find the link to the form on the [PH499 Moodle page](#). Should you change your title, all changes need to be approved by your supervisor. Permission to change topic will not normally be granted after the Spring Term examinations.

Your supervisor can be anyone in the Department who is an expert on your topic! So, have a look at the [current teaching staff and](#) the 'Staff areas of expertise' document available on the PH499 Moodle page. Once your dissertation supervisor has been allocated, you should aim to schedule a meeting with them during their office hours **at least once per month** to discuss your dissertation.

### Step 6 Literature Review of relevant scholarly articles and books.

When you have decided on your topic and question, you should read as much as you can, and take notes so that you'll be ready to address existing literature in your dissertation. Most dissertations include a section consisting of a literature review, and all dissertations engage with the relevant existing scholarship. This helps to increase the impact of your writing by connecting to existing work and allows you to help make progress by filling gaps that have been left open by previous authors. The steps:

- **Read, read, read.** Check with your lecturers and supervisor for key readings. Use Google Scholar to seek out key terms. Check the 'citing articles' in the search results. Follow up on relevant references in the bibliography of articles and books. There are lots of resources online on how to do this well<sup>1</sup>. There are also great tools like

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<sup>1</sup> A guide to writing a literature review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIYC6zG265E>

Endnote, Mendeley or Zotero to keep track of your references and automatically compile a bibliography later.<sup>2</sup>

- **Take organised notes on your readings.** Some people use the index card method<sup>3</sup>. Others use software like Bibisco (free) or Scrivener, often together with reference software. A notebook or a file on your computer will do; just develop some system to keep track of what you read.
- **Include your reactions to readings.** In addition to summarising the ideas you read, keep track of your own personal questions and reactions as they come up.

As you read, you may already find that you have ideas about what kind of thesis you might like to argue for, and how you might go about it. This leads to:

### Step 7 Sketch a working thesis and a possible argument.

Your thesis and argument will change as you continue your reading, and as you attempt to write down your ideas and realise that they need further clarification. However, it's important to start thinking about your thesis and argument as early as you can, as this is the core of every MSc Dissertation. This is so important that it might be called:

*The Fundamental Axiom of MSc Dissertations:* A good MSc Dissertation sets out just one thesis statement, which is clear and philosophically interesting, and then proceeds to give an extended argument for exactly that statement.

It's best not to make two, three, or a multitude of points. Most good MSc Dissertations argue for just one statement that answers your research question. This should be a statement that is philosophical, broadly speaking. Absolutely everything that you write should be in service of establishing that thesis. You will likely do a literature review, but this will be to help establish the background to your argument. Don't include anything unless it is relevant to this project.

## Spring Break

Over the Spring Break you'll be catching up on sleep and preparing for exams and essays. This is also the time to start preparing the main steps of your dissertation.

### Step 8 Write a dissertation outline and submit this to your supervisor by ST week 5 (beginning of June)

Think of your dissertation in terms of sections: 1) Introduction, 2) Background, and so on. Use subsections liberally to help organise your ideas. Write an outline of these sections, including detailed notes about what you want to say in each, well in advance of writing. If you're a visual person, you might create a mindmap, or write your ideas on notecards to allow you to reorganise them quickly. This outline will change as you go but having it on hand will help keep your writing organised.

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<sup>2</sup> Comparison of bibliography managers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCqKW51vtKQ>

<sup>3</sup> Index card method: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoFZQOJ8aA0>

## Spring Term

In the Spring term you'll be busy with exams and essays, but you should make time every week to work on your dissertation. It is up to you to arrange (in consultation with your supervisor) a dissertation work plan and supervision schedule. Your weekly dissertation seminar will help you keep on track with your progress.

In practice, your dissertation is very much like the essays that you write for your coursework at the LSE, but in much more extended form. It is important to write a draft now because the last opportunity to submit written work for feedback from your supervisor is near the end of June: see the MSc Handbook on the PhH99 Moodle page for the exact date this year.

### Step 9 Write up a draft of your dissertation for submission for feedback from your supervisor near the end of June.

As a general model, we recommend planning to have around four supervision meetings over the course of Spring Term. We also recommend breaking your draft writing into stages and setting yourself targets over Spring Term. For example, the following is a sensible model:

- Early in Spring Term: Write a short overview of your research project, explaining the research question, lines of enquiry, and areas for further research, for discussion with your supervisor (500-1000 words).
- Middle of Spring Term: Write a short essay setting out one or two main lines of argument that you aim to develop in the dissertation, for discussion with your supervisor (1000-2000 words).
- End of Spring Term: Submit a draft of the dissertation to your supervisor.

As per the MSc student handbook, the total amount of text you can submit to your supervisor for feedback should not exceed the total word count of your dissertation. So, if you submit shorter pieces of work to your supervisor over the course of Spring Term, this text should be subtracted from your final draft. For example, if you submit a 1000-word dissertation overview and a 2000-word essay for feedback, the word limit for your final draft should be reduced by 3000 words.

## Summer Break

Your supervisor will come back to you with feedback on your dissertation within a few weeks. Rework your research where necessary, do those extra readings, and polish your work into a final draft. Work with your peers where possible; form study groups and exchange dissertations with other students for feedback. Make sure your dissertation is properly blinded and formatted. Then comes the final step:

### Step 10 Final Dissertation Submission (End of Summer: see MSc Handbook)

## Creating a Dissertation Plan

A detailed monthly plan for the completion of your dissertation will help keep you on track. A sample template is provided below. Please create a plan like this and discuss it with your supervisor. You are encouraged to revise and update this plan regularly over the course of the academic year.

### Sample Dissertation Plan

**September-October:** Topic exploration: Determine a few possible win-win research questions.

**November:** Choose your topic/question: Begin thinking about the literature you will need to review and discuss this with a lecturer or potential supervisor.

**December:** Start doing some readings for your literature review. Fill out the present dissertation plan.

**January:** Literature review: Write essential reading To-do list. Remember to keep careful notes for yourself as you develop your ideas. Meet with potential supervisors.

**February:** Literature review: Summarise readings. Decide on supervisors and a dissertation title. Develop the main ideas you wish to talk about.

**March:** Write a Thesis/Argument Sketch. Submit the Dissertation Title and supervisor selection form by week 7 of Winter Term. Meet with your supervisor once you have been allocated.

**April:** Outline: Write revised Dissertation To-do list. Catch up on further readings you know you'll need. Start thinking about the introduction and background material section.

**May:** Write the 'background material' section of the dissertation. Start writing the introduction and main argument sections. Meet with supervisor at least 1-2 times for consultation as you go. Submit an outline of your dissertation to your supervisor by week 5 of ST

**June:** Finalise a draft of the dissertation. Meet with supervisor. Submit draft for feedback by the deadline near the end of June.

**July:** Read supervisor feedback carefully and make adjustments to your writing. Finalise readings, research and revisions.

**August:** Polish your writing and consider exchanging your thesis with some of your colleagues for feedback. Ensure your dissertation is blinded and has the correct formatting following the MSc Handbook guidelines.

Final submission deadline (see MSc Handbook for date)

## Dissertation Checklist

- Step 1 Topic Exploration (Autumn): Survey possible topics and choose one.
- Step 2 Research Question (Autumn Term): Settle on a win-win research question.
- Step 3 Read Past Dissertations (Autumn Term) related to your topic.
- Step 4 Dissertation Plan (Autumn Term): Create a month-by-month timeline.
- Step 5 Select three supervisors you would like to work with (Winter Term): ensure they all are a good fit with expertise on your topic.
- Step 6 Literature Review (Winter Term): Explore, read, and keep notes.
- Step 7 Thesis/Argument Sketch (Winter Term): A working attempt that may change.
- Step 8 Dissertation Outline (Spring Break): Outline your thesis section-by-section, with notes on each component.
- Step 9 Initial Draft (Spring Term): Write the introduction, background material, main components of your argument, for submission to your supervisor before the deadline near the end of June.
- Step 10 Final Draft (Summer Break): Polish your thesis taking into consideration feedback from your supervisor. When you are happy with your work, submit it.

## Deadlines

- Winter Term Week 7: submit your Dissertation Title and Supervisor Allocation Form
- Spring Term Week 5 (latest): submit an outline of your dissertation to your supervisor
- Late June (see MSc Handbook): Draft due for supervisor feedback.
- End of Summer Term (see MSc Handbook): Final submission deadline.