

Guide to using the sample dissertations

Five sample dissertations have been included to give you a sense of what your final dissertation might look like. Do bear in mind the following when reading the dissertations.

1. The dissertations we have chosen are the very best dissertations which were awarded marks of 70+. Example A received a mark of over 80.
2. They are 'finished products' and two of the chapters will have been revised following feedback from academic staff.
3. All of the dissertations draw upon material students have been exposed to during their degree but none of them simply try to expand on a topic they have already covered directly. Be ambitious with your choice of topic!
4. There is no standard format for a dissertation although generally they comprise of three to four substantive chapters book-ended by an introduction and conclusion. You will see that the introduction and conclusion tend to be shorter than the other chapters but a recurring theme in the feedback on the individual dissertations is that concluding chapter could have been expanded. Conclusions to dissertation are quite different from essays. As well as consolidating the argument they might suggest future research projects or consider the impact of the research for policy and practice.
5. You will see that two of the dissertations (A and B) are based upon empirical research. As a consequence, these chapters also include a methodology section. However, it is good practice for library-based dissertations to explain how you identified your sources; for example, which databases did you search? what terms did you use? where there any limitations on your search such as only UK-based literature or a particular time period.
6. The requirements for a dissertation can vary from year-to-year so look at the dissertation handbook for guidance on matters such as word length, presentation and so on.
7. Look at the dissertations with the marking criteria in mind (these can be found in the handbook).
8. Finally, it should be obvious that a huge amount of work is needed to produce the very best dissertation so factor this into your planning.

Feedback on Example A

This is an example of outstanding dissertation which received the highest mark awarded (to date) for an undergraduate dissertation on the BA Criminal Justice and Criminology programme. It is currently being revised for publication for an academic journal. The two markers used terms such as 'brilliant', 'exceptional' and 'terrific' to describe the dissertation. The markers in particular praised three features of the dissertation.

- The efforts the student had gone to collect data which is not in the public domain to test the hypothesis – does turning off street lighting at night increase crime?
- The use theoretical material (from the field of crime prevention) to frame the research questions

- The exemplary conduct of the research from research design through to analysis with sufficient recognition of the limitations of the research.

Dissertations are in many respects the pinnacle of the degree. In this instance, the student demonstrated that they were now capable of conducting their own criminological research and could draw upon material covered in a number of modules. They also appreciate the role criminologists can play in informing policy at a local and national level.

Feedback on Example B

This is an example of an original dissertation on a challenging topic. The markers praised the student for the high level of their analytic skills. They were able to demonstrate these through engaging with official documents and academic literature, alongside conducting an analysis of the coverage of terrorism in two politically distinct newspapers. One of its strengths is the breadth of coverage, drawing upon resources from range of disciplines. Note carefully how the dissertation 'hangs' together. For example, the discussion of definitional issues in the first chapter is used to frame the empirical research project discussed in Chapter 3 and then again the Chapter 4 to look at alternative explanations of newspaper coverage. The conclusion – which is perhaps a little short – consolidates the main argument in the dissertation. If there was sufficient space, this might have been developed to include a discussion of the implications of the research; for example, is there a need for a guide to inform media coverage of terrorism or training for journalists?

Feedback on Example C

This is an example of a dissertation on a timely and important topic. The student was praised for the breadth of their reading and consequently, they demonstrated a strong grasp of the subject matter. The range of material used is impressive – academic literature from a range of disciplines; media articles; legislation and policy documents. They engaged with debates about terrorism but also about higher education. They were able to draw upon their research to offer a balanced discussion which challenged the idea that universities are sites of radicalisation and identified the potential (negative) consequences of implementing a particular policy. The conclusion – which is perhaps a little short – started to draw out the policy implications of the research. If there was sufficient space, this might have been developed to explore some of the challenges of permitting freedom of speech.

Feedback on Example D

This is an example of an original dissertation on a neglected topic. The student was praised for their ability to understand a complex body of literature and the analytical skills demonstrated as they explored critically three possible responses to corporate fraud. For each they focused on the themes of fairness and effectiveness so the dissertation had a clear line of argument throughout. A challenge for students preparing a dissertation (with a strict word limit) is deciding what to include and what not to include and the markers suggested that either more detail was needed on responses to fraud in countries other than the UK or a more detailed discussion of evidence from the UK would have enhanced the dissertation.

Feedback on Example E

This is an example of an excellent dissertation which set out the challenge typical perceptions of female child sex offenders and the first marker concluded it has challenged hers. One strength of the dissertation is that it drew upon theoretical work (that the student had been introduced to in year two), applied it to a particular group of offenders and questioned its appropriateness. It also made effective use of case studies of high-profile female sex offenders to illustrate the themes covered in the review of literature on media representations. The conclusion – which is perhaps a little short – consolidated the argument advance in the thesis. If there was sufficient space, the practice implications of the research might have been explored or a future research agenda may have been identified.