Dissertation

**What is a dissertation?**

A dissertation is a long piece of written work (8,000–10,000 words) that offers a detailed, sustained and critical treatment of a chosen topic. The aim of the dissertation is to enable students to advance their knowledge of the disciplines they have studied on their BA programme by pursuing an independent research project on a chosen topic within one or more of these fields. Students completing the dissertation will have examined a subject in substantial depth, shown evidence of an ability to undertake sustained critical analysis, developed and improved their research skills, and produced a long piece of written work that demonstrates understanding of an area relevant to your degree.

**Who writes a dissertation?**

BA students are not required to do a dissertation but they can choose to do one in their final year in lieu of a Level 6 option module (see programme handbooks for more details). The dissertation involves independent study, but it is in no way an ‘easy option’: students writing a dissertation should expect to dedicate at least the same amount of hours per week to researching, reading and writing as they would in any other Level 6 taught module. In many respects, the dissertation offers a taste of postgraduate study and throws up distinctive intellectual and logistical challenges associated to independent learning.

**Proposing a dissertation topic**

A copy of the dissertation proposal is available here along with further information: UG Dissertation Guidelines 2015-16.docx. The proposal, which must be relevant to your degree programme and approved in advance, should contain a provisional title and subtitle with the keywords identifying the theme of the dissertation. It also requires a 1,000-word outline description detailing the proposed structure and tentative content of the dissertation, including around a dozen key bibliographical references.

The purpose of this form is to present a dissertation topic for approval by the undergraduate dissertation coordinator Dr Alex Colás, who will then help you identify a suitable supervisor.
Once students have chosen to do a dissertation, they must e-mail the dissertation proposal to Dr Colas at a.colas@bbk.ac.uk by 31 August in their penultimate year of study.

Assessment Criteria

The dissertation is assessed according to the following criteria, with credit given to the extent that:

- the research question is well-defined, and contextualised;
- an argument is specified, coherently presented and supported by evidence;
- alternative arguments are analysed;
- the approach is critical, not descriptive;
- a relevant methodology is employed;
- relevant sources have been consulted;
- knowledge of relevant literature, issues and debates is demonstrated; and
- **the style and presentation is clear and careful, and appropriate academic conventions have been observed**

Ethics proposal form

All research that is carried out by Birkbeck students that involves intervention or interaction with human participants, or the collection and / or study of data derived from living human participants (e.g. conducting research interviews), requires ethical approval. See ethics proposal form in the annex to this document. For more detailed guidance, please see: [http://www.bbk.ac.uk/sshp/research/sshp-ethics-committee-and-procedures](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/sshp/research/sshp-ethics-committee-and-procedures)

Submitting your dissertation

**All dissertations must be submitted on the 15 May.** Please submit one hard copy to the Department of Politics office (10 Gower Street, London WC1E 6DP) by 5pm on the day of the deadline and upload your dissertation electronically to the dissertation Moodle base for your programme. This should appear as one of your modules when you log into [http://moodle.bbk.ac.uk/](http://moodle.bbk.ac.uk/)

If you cannot access Moodle or your dissertation module does not appear, please send your dissertation by email to ugpoltics@bbk.ac.uk

The length of the dissertation should be 8,000–10,000 words inclusive of footnotes, appendices and bibliography. A dissertation which exceeds this word count by more than 10% may be penalised by the examiners. The dissertation much be typed or word-processed, and spiral bound. The dissertation should include a completed cover sheet (see annex).

The role of the dissertation supervisor

The dissertation is intended to provide an opportunity for students to pursue a research project independently. Students are, therefore, entirely responsible for the work for their dissertation. The
role of the supervisor is to offer advice and guidance, not to direct the research. Your supervisor will help you to identify a topic, to draw up a suitable preliminary bibliography and to plan the primary and secondary research you will need to do for the dissertation. He/she will be available to advise you on approach, coverage, questions to be asked and the outline structure and research design.

You should have up to three meetings with your supervisor. It is up to you to contact your supervisor for meetings and you should make sure that you do so in good time. Please note that the supervisor is under no obligation to meet you after the end of spring term so it is advisable that all supervision meetings take place before then. Nor is the supervisor required to find you a suitable topic for the dissertation, read preliminary drafts of your work, offer you guidance or proof read your final draft.

Additional Support
The School of Social Sciences, History and Politics has Learning Support Officers who support undergraduate students with their studies and offer help with academic skills such as essay planning and writing, note taking and time management. If there’s an aspect of your work that’s worrying you or you feel you could use some additional help contact your department administrator (ug-politics@bbk.ac.uk) to make a booking.

Birkbeck’s Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) runs occasional workshops on undergraduate study skills that may be useful for your dissertation. For further details, please see: http://www.clpd.bbk.ac.uk/students/

Assessment Criteria
The dissertation is assessed according to the following criteria, with credit given to the extent that:

- the research question is well-defined, and contextualised;
- an argument is specified, coherently presented and supported by evidence;
- alternative arguments are analysed;
- the approach is critical, not descriptive;
- a relevant methodology is employed;
- relevant sources have been consulted;
- knowledge of relevant literature, issues and debates is demonstrated; and
- the style and presentation is clear and careful, and appropriate academic conventions have been observed.

Marking Schema
The pass mark for the dissertation is 40. Dissertations written for courses or during examinations are marked according to the schema:

0-29: A totally inadequate dissertation, which does not specify a research question, fails to present an argument, is largely descriptive, shows little or no knowledge of the topic, or its intellectual context, does not refer adequately to the relevant literature, fails to follow an appropriate methodology, and is
shoddily presented

30-39: An inadequate dissertation, which fails to identify a research question adequately, does not present a clear argument, includes some relevant material, but does not evidence of sufficient reading and is overly descriptive

40-49: A poor dissertation, which identifies a research question, states an argument, shows some knowledge of the literature and addresses the question, but does not sustain the argument, is overly descriptive, and lacks originality, sufficient knowledge of the relevant literature, issues and debates, and organisation.

50-59: A satisfactory dissertation, which defines a research question adequately, makes an argument, shows an awareness of the major issues, shows some knowledge of the sources and of alternative approaches to the subject, but does not adequately develop or sustain the argument, does not show a clear understanding of alternative arguments, and makes uncritical use of sources.

60-69: A good dissertation, which offers a precise specification of the research question, presents a clear and coherent argument that is well-substantiated by evidence, treats the issues in a critical and balanced way, shows an awareness of context, sources and different explanations, and achieves a high standard of presentation

70-79: A dissertation of distinction quality, which addresses a well-defined research question, displays exceptional knowledge of the literature and/or a substantial measure of originality, and achieves a high standard of presentation.

80-100: A dissertation of distinction quality, which is outstanding in virtually all areas of a calibre far beyond what would be expected at this level. Contains substantial evidence of original and independent thought.

Plagiarism
The dissertation must be your own work. Plagiarism - the presentation of another person's thoughts or words as one's own - in the dissertation constitutes grounds for failing the dissertation; more serious sanctions may be also applied if circumstances warrant them. Please read the plagiarism guidelines in the annex to this document to ensure that you understand the concept of plagiarism and why it should be avoided.

Deferring your dissertation
Students who wish to defer their dissertation must inform the undergraduate dissertation coordinator, Dr Alejandro Colas (a.cols@bbk.ac.uk), before the dissertation is due. Students who do so without claiming mitigating circumstances that are then accepted by the undergraduate dissertation coordinator will be given one additional attempt to pass. Students who claim mitigating circumstances that are approved by the undergraduate dissertation coordinator will be offered two remaining chances to pass the dissertation. Deferred dissertations can be submitted by 15 May in the year following deferral.

For further details on mitigating circumstances, please see:

http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/services/administration/assessment/exams/mitigating-circumstances
Annex

1. Dissertation Proposal Form
2. Ethics Proposal Form
3. Dissertation Cover Sheet
4. Some tips on writing an undergraduate dissertation
5. Birkbeck plagiarism guidelines
Please copy and paste this form into a new document, complete it, and upload it to the Moodle site for your dissertation, which you can find at moodle.bbk.ac.uk.

If you cannot access this Moodle site, please e-mail the dissertation proposal to the undergraduate dissertation coordinator Dr Alejandro Colas (a.colas@bbk.ac.uk)

Name:

E-mail address:

BA/ BSc programme:

Title of proposed dissertation

Description of subject area

What scholarly literature will you be examining?  
(For example, indicate here modules that you have studied that are relevant to your proposal)

What primary research material might you use?  
(For example, do you have access to information via your workplace?)

Have you identified or spoken with a potential supervisor? If so, who?
ETHICS PROPOSAL FORM

PROPOSAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH INVOLVING ADULTS (over 16yrs)

Please complete this document and upload it to the relevant dissertation module on Blackboard. Do not begin collecting data from participants until ethics approval has been received, usually from your supervisor, but where necessary, from the School ethics committee. If you intend to do research with minors (persons under 16 years old), then you must complete a different form. Speak to your supervisor about this before proceeding, and to obtain the form.

Your name: ________________________________________________________________

Name of supervisor: _________________________________________________________

Course/Programme: _________________________________________________________

Title of study (15 words max): _________________________________________________

As a student project, the supervisor must read this proposal carefully, answer the following questions and sign below.

1. I have read the proposal and/or discussed its ethical implications with the student and confirm that in my view he/she is aware of and has taken steps to address any ethical issues: YES/ NO

2. I consider the proposal routine because it does not pose undue risk of harm to participants, researcher or the reputation of the College: YES/ NO

3. I consider the proposal non-routine and believe it needs to be assessed by the ethics committee: YES/ NO

SIGNATURE of supervisor:
Date:

If the supervisor ticks options 1 and 2, above, then the application has received ethical approval and the student may proceed with his/her project. Both student and supervisor should keep an electronic file of this application.

If the supervisor ticks option 3, then the application should be passed to the Department ethics committee representative who will review it along with an ethics representative from another department, and then advise the supervisor of next steps.

The student must complete the following research proposal. Expand sections for answers as necessary. Answer all questions.

4. Is any other Ethical Committee involved in this research (e.g. Economic and Social Research Council): YES/NO

If YES, give details of committee, stage of process/decision, enclosing any relevant documentation: ____________________________________________
5. Aims/objectives of the study (20 words max): ____________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

PARTICIPANTS

6. How will participants be selected? ____________________________________________

7. Any inclusion/exclusion criteria? ________________________________________________

8. Where will the study be conducted? (E.g. city or town, but also, where do you plan to do interviews – Office? Public space?) ________________________________________________

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

9. Briefly describe what participating in the study will involve. (Max 1 page)

10. Attach your questionnaire or interview schedule(s) if you are using these (draft versions are fine). Briefly comment on their content: e.g. could any questions cause distress or offence? Invade privacy? How will these risks be managed? Attachment? YES/NO

11. Equipment/facilities to be used (if not included in answer to 13).

12. How will you find/access potential participants? (Include copy of any relevant documentation e.g. email solicitation, letter to manager, advert, notice to go on notice board.) Attachment? YES/NO

CONSENT, CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

13. Depending on the nature of your study and your intended participants, it may be necessary for you to have policies on consent, confidentiality and anonymity in carrying out your research (e.g. are you interviewing members of the public, elected officials, public servants…?). The Political Studies Association “Guidelines for good professional conduct” says:

“Members should treat their research subjects fairly. Subjects' agreement to participate should be given on a voluntary and informed basis. Participants should be made aware of the likely limits of confidentiality and must not be promised greater confidentiality than can be realistically guaranteed.”

Please describe your plans with respect to gaining consent, and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, where this is appropriate for your study. (e.g. Will your informants be identified in your dissertation, or will their identities be concealed? What are your plans for protecting the security of your data, especially if it is sensitive or personal information?)

14. If you feel the proposed investigation raises other ethical issues please outline them here.

15. I consider my study conforms to the expectations of ethical social research: YES/NO
SIGNATURE of student: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Department of Politics

DISSERTATION COVER SHEET

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**Disability and dyslexia support:** Do you have an Individual Student Support Agreement with the Birkbeck Disability Office that is relevant to this coursework? Yes or No (Please delete as appropriate)

**Plagiarism statement:** Coursework is monitored for plagiarism and if detected may result in disciplinary action. In submitting this coursework, I hereby confirm that I have read Birkbeck's plagiarism guidelines and taken the online tutorial on avoiding plagiarism and on this basis declare that this coursework is free from plagiarism.

Plagiarism guidelines: [http://www.bbk.ac.uk/politics/current-students/essays/plagiarism](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/politics/current-students/essays/plagiarism)

Plagiarism tutorial: [http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/get-ahead-stay-ahead/writing/referencing](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/get-ahead-stay-ahead/writing/referencing)

**Dissemination:** I agree to this coursework being made available anonymously to future students in the Department of Politics. Yes or No (Please delete as appropriate).
Some Tips on Writing an Undergraduate Dissertation

1. Introduction

What is a dissertation?
A dissertation is a long piece of written work (8,000–10,000 words) that offers a detailed, sustained and critical treatment of a chosen topic. It is an analytic undertaking. It is not a descriptive account of the topic under investigation, nor is it a review of books and articles read. A dissertation differs from an essay in requiring a more sustained treatment of a topic, greater depth of analysis and wider consultation of sources and materials. The dissertation will differ from your course essays far more than might appear at first glance: it is more than an extended course essay. This makes it all the more important that you begin work on the dissertation as early as possible and that you ensure at the outset that you have a clear idea of what the dissertation will require.

Aims and Objectives.
The aim of the dissertation is to enable students to advance their knowledge of the disciplines they have studied on their BA programme by pursuing an independent research project on a chosen topic within one or more of these fields. Students completing the dissertation will have examined a subject in substantial depth, shown evidence of an ability to undertake sustained critical analysis, developed and improved their research skills, and produced a long piece of written work that demonstrates understanding of an area relevant to your degree.

2. Intellectual requirements

Substance and aims
A dissertation should address a well-defined research question, specified at the outset. It has precise intellectual objectives, and presents a logically developed argument, the claims of which are supported by evidence where necessary. A dissertation requires a central integrating argument. The argument should be logically developed, building up a case point by point and displaying a critical and analytical approach to the subject. The dissertation can be a mixture of primary and secondary research. Some originality will be expected. This can take the form of previously unexplored primary sources or of an original theoretical analysis or interpretation of existing literature. Whatever approach you choose, it is critically important to develop a distinctive argument of your own. It is not enough simply to write about the collection of books and articles which you have read about the topic. Alternatively, you can use primary material to develop your own critique of existing scholarly arguments.

Contextualisation of your argument is a critical issue and one that many dissertation candidates fail to tackle. In simplest terms, you should think of yourself as joining an on-going conversation among scholars. Thus, you will need to show awareness of what others in the conversation have already said (or are saying) and of the implications of their various views and positions for your own work. You will also need to have something of your own to contribute to the discussion. Your review of the literature on your problem should proceed with this in mind. It is not enough simply to summarise what has been written: you will need to ‘map’ the conversation so as to show how the works of different authors on the topic relate to one another and where your own work is intended to fit in.
**Scope**

Choosing an appropriate topic is very important. If you pick too broad a topic, you will not be able to deal with it satisfactorily. The dissertation should be used as an opportunity to show some original thinking. This will not be possible if you pick a topic which has been so thoroughly worked over that there is, for an undergraduate, nothing left to say about it. On the other hand, some other topics may be too narrow, and will not provide enough material to fill your dissertation. You need to pick a topic which is substantial enough to allow you to get to grips with it within the parameters of the dissertation, and closely enough defined to allow you to suggest something interesting about it.

**Structure**

The dissertation needs a *structure*, as does any essay. This is all the more important in a dissertation because of its greater length. Although structure varies according to the topic and methodology chosen, a dissertation typically consists of three parts:

- **The introduction** states the objectives of the dissertation, outlines the problematic, and identifies how it is intended to meet these objectives, *i.e.* a discussion of the methodology employed. The treatment of the topic under consideration must be contextualised by locating it in the relevant literature and relating it to the relevant debates.

- **The main body** of the dissertation develops the argument, offers supportive evidence, discusses relevant issues and presents a detailed analysis of the subject matter.

- **The conclusion** presents a summary of the findings of the dissertation, relates these to the argument outlined in the introductory chapter and states precisely what has been demonstrated.

Each of these sections (particularly the middle one) should have a clear internal structure of its own.

You will need to show that you appreciate the historical and scholarly context of the topic you are addressing. You must demonstrate not only that you can collect evidence and consider a particular problem or topic in detail, but also that you understand why the topic is of importance and how it relates to the work others have done in the same field.

**Relevance**

The dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for your BA degree. It should therefore address issues of relevance to one or both of the disciplines covered by the degree. You are encouraged to choose a topic which requires an interdisciplinary approach integrating more than one of the disciplines you have studied, but you are free to choose a subject which falls clearly into one of the disciplines.

**Presentation, style and referencing**
The same rules on providing text references and bibliographic information in essays should be followed in writing the dissertation. However, due to the greater range of material used, more thought may need to be given as to how to ensure that references are appropriately and consistently provided. The guidelines on referencing provided by the Department may answer some questions; otherwise, consult your supervisor. As with essays, there are several different referencing conventions and it does not matter which one you adopt provided that you sources are properly cited, all the necessary information is given and consistency is maintained. However, the 'Harvard' system is particularly recommended, not least because it is relatively simple and 'user-friendly'.

The same rules of clear and simple expression should be followed in writing a dissertation as would be in writing an essay. Discussion should be broken up into sections and sub-sections, but excessive fragmentation should be avoided. Sub-sections should be long enough to make a point. Breaking the text into too many very short sub-sections prevents coherent presentation and can encourage a superficial treatment of a wide range of material rather than a detailed and well-substantiated account of a tightly defined area.

Do use data where appropriate. Not only do charts simplify information for readers, but graphics—graphs, tables, charts, diagrams, flowcharts or organigrams—can be very informative. All graphs, tables, charts, diagrams, flowcharts and organigrams must be clearly presented, be a reasonable size, have relevant headings and acknowledge sources.

Excessive sloppiness in presentation will be penalised by the examiners. You should therefore pay close attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation. Be sure to leave enough time to proof-read the dissertation carefully before final submission to ensure that such errors are kept to a minimum. English rules of grammar must always be followed, no matter how arcane they may seem. If in doubt about questions of grammar and style, you might want to consult *Oxford English: a Guide to the Language*, compiled by I.C.B. Dear (1986), *The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors* (1981) or *Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926, revised 1965). All are published by Oxford University Press and all are readily available in many libraries.

It may be useful to consult the following when writing your dissertation:

- A good English dictionary.

*Sources*
Research for the dissertation may involve use of a variety of primary and secondary sources. You are encouraged, where appropriate and feasible, to use primary source material, for example, from interviews, surveys, or the analysis of original documents, provided you demonstrate an awareness of the methodological issues raised by the use of these sources. However, it is important to make sure that fieldwork is practicable, feasible within the time available, and ethical. Successful use of such material is likely to contribute to a higher mark. But make sure that any fieldwork that you do is ‘containable’ in the time-frame for the dissertation. And remember that the use of primary source material is not a requirement of a successful dissertation.

3. The dissertation process

Choosing a topic
Start thinking about possible topics as early as possible. Look at relevant debates in the literature to see how issues are framed and what arguments are made. Choose something that interests you, since enthusiasm is an important motivating factor in writing a good dissertation. Remember, though, that the project must be intellectually feasible, practicable in terms of gaining access to the necessary sources and manageable in the time available. The subject may be related to your work, but do not choose something for this reason alone or something that will get you into trouble. Also, the dissertation is an exercise in critical analysis, so it can only be about something that has happened, rather than a speculative exercise about what might happen or a stipulative or normative project about what should happen.

Defining the project
Once you have identified a general area, therefore, it is important to find an angle of approach that delimits a specific domain on which you can concentrate your attention. The first step is to identify a subject area that interests you, then to look for debate or contention in the literature and consider how you might use your subject area to make an argument that addresses that debate or assertion. You also need to consider what ground has to be covered to make your argument intellectually robust and what method is suitable. This is the stage at which your supervisor can be of most assistance, and you are strongly advised to arrange an appointment with the most appropriate lecturer in order to discuss whether your project is manageable, what your approach to the subject might be and what literature you might examine.

The treatment of your chosen subject will undoubtedly change as you pursue your research, but it is nevertheless important to define the ground that you need to cover and to plan how the chapters should be organised in order to present your argument. Once you’ve reached this point, you should write an outline, a summary of your argument and a plan of how you intend to divide your material between chapters on one side of A4 paper, submit this to your supervisor and arrange an appointment to discuss it before you proceed. You should not embark on a project before it has been formally approved by your supervisor. A form will be distributed to you for this purpose.

Planning the research
Once you have defined the project, i.e. identified the topic, selected the relevant method and decided what sources you need, it is important to draw up a schedule for carrying out the project. Try to develop a realistic estimate of how long it will take to collect and go through the relevant sources.
Interviews can be a very valuable source, providing information that is not available from other sources, or adding colour and emotion. If interviews would enable you to offer a more detailed or insightful treatment of a subject and if you have the opportunity to do them, you should think seriously about doing them.

College rules require that any research by students involving human participants (e.g. face-to-face or telephone interviews; questionnaires or surveys; focus groups; other) requires ethical approval prior to the research beginning. Should you intend to conduct interviews in your research please be sure to complete the ethics proposal form. This should be submitted to the undergraduate dissertation coordinator Dr Alejandro Colas (a.colas@bbk.ac.uk) at the same time as your dissertation proposal form (see above).

Researching
It is vital that you keep accurate notes on all the material you read. Make a note of the author, title, date and place of publication of books and articles along with notes on the contents. Be sure to keep track of the page numbers from which you take notes or copy out direct quotations. You should also keep a record of manuscript or newspaper sources. You will need this information (as well as the notes on the contents of the books or articles) in order to supply adequate references to the text when you write it up. You may find it best to use note-cards (file-cards) on which to record information; or you may prefer to stick with notebooks and files. But the main thing is to decide which system of note-taking suits you best and keep to it. Note-cards are also a good way of keeping the information you need to build up a bibliography. More detailed information on how to set out your bibliography is included in the section on referencing.

Remember that writing takes a long time, far longer than you may anticipate, so plan carefully and be generous in the time you allocate yourself for various tasks. Leave plenty of time for re-drafting and a final proof-reading before the submission deadline.

4. What to avoid

Most weak or failing dissertations reflect a combination of sloppiness, procrastination and/or lack of work. Avoiding these pitfalls is up to you. However, even candidates who do thorough research, who write clear, well-organised prose and who observe the conventions of scholarly writing sometimes produce relatively weak dissertations, because they have fallen into one or more of the ‘traps’ described below. These are the most common complaints examiners cite when criticising dissertations that show real ability and application but nonetheless fall short in some way. While none of these is fatal, all are worth avoiding, as they can seriously detract from the quality of the dissertation:

- **Excessive description.** The dissertation should offer an analytical treatment of the subject under investigation. This is probably the most common weakness cited by examiners.

- **Poor definition of the question.** One of the biggest differences between a dissertation and an essay or exam is that it is up to you to define the research question you wish to answer. Often,
this is the most difficult task of all. It is also one of the most important: many well-researched and well-written dissertations lose marks because the research question has been poorly specified. A fuzzy question often results in a weak overall structure, since the structure of the dissertation should be designed so that each section contributes to the argument you are making in response to the question.

- **Poor integration of theoretical and empirical material.** This is probably the second most common weakness. Many dissertations contain theoretical discussions that are meant to inform the analysis of the material under study but that are never rigorously and clearly applied to it. All too often, the theoretical section simply stands isolated from the rest of the text—a summary of some political science theory that is never referred to again in the dissertation. Its inclusion reflects an awareness that it is somehow relevant but it is never brought to bear on the case or cases under discussion.

- **Poor contextualisation.** Consider your dissertation as participation in a conversation that is on-going in the literature. You will need, therefore, to identify what the conversation is about and to outline the positions of the main participants in order to be able to situate the topic of your dissertation and the argument that you present. It is not enough simply to make an argument in a vacuum.

- **Uncritical use of sources.** It is important to subject primary and especially secondary sources to critical scrutiny. Don’t accept what is written because it is written—even if it’s been published in a prestigious journal. Check for logical, internal coherence and empirical support for arguments made
5. Finally

Having read all of the requirements for your dissertation in some detail, you may now be viewing it with considerable trepidation. Certainly, you should view it with respect: it is a serious undertaking and will almost certainly be unlike anything you’ve ever done before in your academic career. However, we hope that you will also find it to be among the most satisfying things you do during your course. Its is your opportunity to select a topic that interests you and to focus on it without the pressure of cramming 20 weeks’ worth of material for an exam or trying to write everything you know in sixty minutes in a crowded room full of nervous fellow students. Try to find a topic that really excites your interest. The dissertation is the culmination of your degree programme, and we hope you will find it an enjoyable task and that you will produce a piece of work of which you can be justly proud. Good luck!
Birkbeck Plagiarism Guidelines

Written by Birkbeck Registry and adapted for TSMB by Nicholas Keep

What is plagiarism?
Plagiarism is the most common form of examination offence encountered in universities, partly because of the emphasis now placed on work prepared by candidates unsupervised in their own time, but also because many students fall into it unintentionally, through ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism. Even if unintentional, it will still be considered an examination offence.

This document, developed as guidelines to departments by Birkbeck Registry, is intended to explain clearly what plagiarism is, and how you can avoid it. Acknowledgement is made to guidance issued by the USA Modern Language Association (MLA, 1998).

Plagiarism is the publication of borrowed thoughts as original, or in other words, passing off someone else’s work as your own. In any form, plagiarism is unacceptable in the Department, as it interferes with the proper assessment of students’ academic ability. Plagiarism has been defined as “the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of taking the product of another person’s mind, and presenting it as one’s own” (Lindley, 1952, p2). Therefore, using another person’s ideas or expressions or data in your writing without acknowledging the source is to plagiarise.

Borrowing others’ words, ideas or data without acknowledgement. It is acceptable, in your work, to use the words and thoughts of another person or data that another person has gathered but the borrowed material must not appear to be your creation. This includes essays, practical and research reports written by other students including those from previous years, whether you have their permission or not. It also applies to both ‘hard-copy’ material and electronic material, such as Internet documents. Examples include copying someone else’s form of words, or paraphrasing another’s argument, presenting someone else’s data or line of thinking. This form of plagiarism may often be unintentional, caused by making notes from sources such as books or journals without also noting the source, and then repeating those notes in an essay without acknowledging that they are the data, words or ideas belonging to someone else. Guard against this by keeping careful notes that distinguish between your own ideas and researched material and those you obtained from others. Then acknowledge the source.

Example 1

Original source:

To work as part of a team, to be able and prepared to continue to learn throughout one’s career, and, most important, to take on board both care for the individual and the community, are essential aspects of a doctor’s role today.


Plagiarism:
The essential aspects of a doctor’s role today are to work as part of a team, be able and prepared to continue to learn throughout one’s career, and, most importantly, to take on board both care for the individual and the community.

Acceptable:

One social writer believes that the essential aspects of a doctor’s role today are to work as part of a team, be able and prepared to continue to learn throughout one’s career, and, most importantly, to take on board both care for the individual and the community (Greengross, 1997).

Example 2

Original source:

The binary shape of British higher education, until 1992, suggested a simple and misleading, dichotomy of institutions. […] Within their respective classes, universities and polytechnics were imagined to be essentially homogeneous. Their actual diversity was disguised. […] The abandonment of the binary system, whether or not it encourages future convergence, highlights the pluralism which already exists in British Higher Education.


Plagiarism:

Prior to the removal of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities in 1992, there was a misleading appearance of homogeneity in each sector. Now there is only one sector, the diversity of institutions is more apparent, even if convergence may be where we’re heading.

Acceptable:

Peter Scott has argued that prior to the removal of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities in 1992, there was a misleading appearance of homogeneity in each sector. Now there is only one sector, the diversity of institutions is more apparent, even if convergence may be where we’re heading. (Scott, 1994)

In each revision, the inclusion of the author’s name acknowledges whose ideas these originally were (not the student’s) and the reference refers the reader to the full location of the work when combined with a footnote or bibliography. Note that in the second example, the argument was paraphrased – but even so, this is plagiarism of the idea without acknowledgement of whose idea this really is. In writing any work, therefore (whether for assessment or not) you should document everything that you borrow – not only direct quotations and paraphrases but also information and ideas. There are, of course, some common-sense exceptions to this, such as familiar proverbs, well-known quotations or common knowledge. But you must indicate the source of any appropriated material that readers might otherwise mistake for your own. If in doubt, cite your source or sources.
Copying material verbatim
Another example of plagiarism is the verbatim copying of chunks of material from another source without acknowledgement even where they are accepted facts, because you are still borrowing the phrasing and the order and the idea that this is a correct and complete list. Also, you might be infringing copyright (see below). For example if you wrote based on example 2 above ‘The binary shape of British higher education, until 1992, suggested a simple and misleading, dichotomy of institutions. (Scott, 1995)’ then this still could be regarded as plagiarism as you used his exact words. It is important to rephrase the ideas in your own words, to show that you understand them while still acknowledging the source.

Re-submission of work
Another form of plagiarism is submitting work you previously submitted before for another assignment. While this is obviously not the same as representing someone else’s ideas as your own, it is a form of self-plagiarism and is another form of cheating. If you want to re-work a paper for an assignment, ask your lecture whether this is acceptable, and acknowledge your re-working in a preface.

Collaboration and collusion
In collaborative work (if this is permitted by the lecturer) joint participation in research and writing does not constitute plagiarism in itself, provided that credit is given for all contributions. One way would be to state in a preface who did what; another, if roles and contributions were merged and truly shared, would be to acknowledge all concerned equally. However, where collaborative projects are allowed, it is usually a requirement that each individual’s contribution and work is distinguishable, so check with your lecturer. Usually, collusion with another candidate on assessed work (such as sharing chunks of writing or copying bits from each other) is not allowed.

Copyright infringement
Finally, you must guard against copyright infringement. Even if you acknowledge the source, reproducing a significant portion of any document (including material on the Internet) without permission is a breach of copyright, and a legal offence. You may summarise, paraphrase and make brief quotations (as I have done from my sources), but more than this risks infringing copyright.

References
