

Extract from

Constructing a Good Dissertation

**A Practical Guide to Finishing
a Master's, MBA or PhD on Schedule**

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If your investment is time and your return on investment is your final mark, editing offers the highest return on investment of all the activities you could undertake.

EDITING

Pretty much everything that you will read below has been said elsewhere in this book. If it seems like nagging, it is. As Edith Summerskill once remarked to the Married Women's Association, "Nagging is the repetition of unpalatable truths." The unpalatable truth here is that your dissertation will be full of errors when you have completed the first draft. Editing is what will correct what is wrong and polish what is correct. Many people skimp on the time they set aside to edit. Do yourself a favour and don't.

Good dissertations are planned, researched, structured, written and then *edited* into shape. You have the unique opportunity to make sure that everything is exactly as you want it before you submit it for evaluation. Editing allows you to check, change and polish *anything* in your work before you hand it in for assessment. You can add and delete, fix mistakes and re-order material until you are satisfied. That's a huge advantage and you would be wise to use it to the fullest.

A dissertation is not finished when you're done writing. It's finished when you're done editing. It's in your interests to make sure that you hand in a finished product.

Edit for anything that might go wrong in your work. If you've written an evaluative report (see Marking Your Dissertation), you'll reap the benefits in full. When you edit your work, edit actively. Be engaged with the material. If you get tired, rather leave it until you are rested.

Editing works best if you move from *large* to *small*. Top-level changes will affect everything below, so if you start with the small stuff, you'll just end up re-editing what you have already edited. Start with editing the structure. Then edit the internal structure of the different elements that make up your dissertation, piece by piece. Then edit for flow and evidence. Then go to formulas, graphs and the like. After that, move on to the paragraphs and sentences. Finally, check that all the formalities are in order.

Do print out your work when you edit it. Editing on hard copy will give you a better impression of what your examiners will be looking at, and will allow you to flip through the surrounding bits more easily. You'll also be able to draw arrows and write notes and ideas in the margin where appropriate.

STRUCTURE

You should be editing the structure of your dissertation for relevance, omissions, repetitions and logical placement. Certain elements belong in certain places in a dissertation. Check that everything is present and where it ought to be, first in your dynamic table of contents and then in the actual text. As you check your structure, make sure that you have included all the elements required by your institution and that they are named according to institutional guidelines. You don't want your examiners hunting for something that is there, but disguised under another name.

Check that every point made in a given section matches the purpose of the section. Start by checking that every section is directly relevant to your thesis statement. If you find anything irrelevant or out of place, don't be afraid to delete, or move material. This can be painful, especially when you have invested considerable time and effort in the material that needs to be deleted or changed, but it really will improve your dissertation.

While you're at it, check to see that your headings are short, accurate descriptions of what follows below them, and that they are formatted correctly. If you change a heading, do a quick search and replace (Control+H in MSWord) to make sure that the new heading is used consistently throughout the document.

FLOW

The flow of a work can be difficult to define but what it comes down to is, "Does everything follow naturally?" Flow can be considerably improved by adding, deleting and moving paragraphs and by changing sentences. A rough formula for flow is:

$$(Logical\ Progression + Balance) - Irrelevance = Flow$$

The logical progression lies in how you structure your dissertation, how to the point your arguments are, and how you link your ideas. Do readers always have the background information that is needed to make sense out of any given piece? Is the reasoning always clear, and does it always relate back to the larger point that you are making? Do arguments go naturally from A to B to C? Check for the effective use of introductions and conclusions that will make readers more comfortable with the logic underlying your work.

Balance – the amount of space devoted to any particular point in your work – is also important for the flow of a text. Is the amount of space (length) devoted to any particular point in approximate ratio to its importance to your study? Two useful general rules for balance are:

- The more important the point, the more space should be devoted to arguments and evidence.
- The more difficult or abstract the point, the more explicitly it should be explained and related back to the thesis statement.

The converse is also true: For points that make a relatively small contribution to your thesis, less is usually more. Use your appendices for information that is too detailed or long to include in the body of the work, but which readers ought to have available.

EVIDENCE

The quality of arguments ultimately depends on the quality of the evidence offered to support them. To edit for evidence thoroughly, go through a printout of your dissertation with a highlighter. Everywhere you find an assertion or an argument, highlight it, and check that you have evidence to support it. Then make sure that the evidence is factually correct and matches in weight whatever it is required to support; general or controversial claims require stronger evidence than smaller claims. Look also for weak evidence and consider how you could improve it. Can you make it more reliable or get support from an outside source? If your evidence is open to more than one interpretation, acknowledge the fact and give readers reasons to entertain your interpretation.

MATHEMATICAL/STATISTICAL ERRORS

The kind of analysis you undertake should have been settled long ago, in the proposal and in the method chapter. If in doubt about *how* to analyse your data, get help and get it early – first and foremost from your supervisor, *before* you start writing.

Check the actual calculations, and check again. If you need outside expertise to help you check, get it. A dissertation may not contain errors of calculation. It's careless, ugly, and leads to bad conclusions.

WRITING

Of course you check your writing for spelling and grammatical errors; dissertations shouldn't have any. Period. Nor should they have punctuation errors. But editing your writing goes well beyond spelling and grammar. Accuracy, clarity and brevity should be your guiding principles. All the points discussed in Academic Writing should be checked for.

When you check your writing, try to do it after leaving your work alone for a while. Coming at it with a fresh eye helps a lot. It also helps to read your work out loud. It may feel silly, but try it anyway. People tend to see what they expect to see, and reading out loud will slow you down, giving you a better chance to see what is really there. It also stops you thinking ahead while reading. Finally, hearing your writing will also give you a good idea of the flow and rhythm of the words and

sentences. If they sound bad and you make them sound better, the text will read better too.

If English is your second or third language, or if you simply want to be sure that you haven't overlooked anything, ask someone else to check your work. If you can afford it, use a professional academic editor. While expensive, doing so can yield a high return on investment. If you do use an editor, do so only after you have completed your writing and edited it to the best of your ability and have had the content of your final draft approved by your supervisor. You don't want to pay to have work edited that will change again later.

A good editor should be generally knowledgeable with regard to the academic writing style, experienced in editing dissertations, and completely fluent in the language used in the dissertation. Direct expertise on the content of your dissertation is not nearly as important – that comes from your supervisor. You should have all your points, arguments, evidence and conclusions in the right places and in a form that the average reader in your field is able to understand. And you should give a copy of your institution's guidelines to your editor. If an editor does not ask you for a copy, run a mile screaming. He or she can't possibly do a good job without it.

FORMALITIES

Get, and get familiar with, your institution/department's formatting guidelines. The guidelines will specify in detail what is required in terms of line spacing, margins, etc. Follow those instructions to the letter. The same applies the formatting of the title page, table of contents, acknowledgements, abstract, declaration of own work, etc. Be sure to double-check page, table and graph numbering as well as your references and bibliography, both for style and to make sure that all the necessary references are there.

CONCLUSION

Editing is what produces a consistent, easy-to-read, professional dissertation. Every error caught and every improvement made will contribute directly to your final goal. It doesn't take nearly as long and isn't nearly as arduous as many other steps you will have taken to produce your work. It is also gratifying – you see your work transforming into a solid, polished dissertation.

Checklists

Use the checklists below before you mark your own work. That way you'll know that you have all the required components in place, serving their intended purposes. The checklists are designed to cover most dissertations. Your dissertation, depending both on your work and on institutional guidelines, may not require all the elements included. Similarly, you may also need to add some elements too specific to your study to be included here. Some elements are optional and these are marked with an asterisk (*).

There are three checklists: a content checklist, a proposal checklist and an editing checklist. The content checklist contains the various elements that a good dissertation should have, while the editing checklist deals with technicalities and style matters. As much of what belongs in a good proposal also belongs in the dissertation proper, the proposal checklist should be used in conjunction with the content and editing checklists. Elements that should be in both the proposal and the dissertation proper are numbered in grey blocks (e.g. 1.) in the content checklist.

✦ The checklists below are available online in Microsoft Excel format. They are easy to adapt to your institution's guidelines and will allow you to add or delete elements to customise them to your work. You can also add a list of the errors that you typically commit.

A word of advice: When you adapt the checklists, do so deliberately. If you're not sure about something, don't guess. Rather find out. Be especially sure that the items that you delete from the checklists really are not required for your work or by your institution.

CONTENT CHECKLIST**Title**

1. Does your dissertation have a title that accurately and succinctly reflects what the dissertation is about?
2. Does the title include keywords so that others can find it later?

Content Tables

1. Table of contents (complete, captions as in text and with correct page numbers).
2. List of tables (complete, captions as in text and with correct table and page numbers).
3. List of figures (complete, headings as in text and with correct figure and page numbers).

Formalities

1. Is your abstract a concise statement of your problem, method, principal findings and conclusions?
2. Have you included all required additional pages (title page, declaration of own work, etc.)?

Introduction

1. Does your background information section provide your reader with sufficient information to understand and contextualise your work, and is it to the point?
2. Do you clearly identify and discuss the problem that your work will address (problem statement)?
3. Do you have a clear thesis statement that meets *all* the criteria for good thesis statements?
4. * Is your thesis statement broken down into clear research questions?
5. Do you make a clear case for the significance of your work?
6. Do you discuss the limitations of your work?
7. When you use technical terms, have you defined them and do you use them consistently?
8. Have you explicated all assumptions that underlie your work?
9. Does your introduction contain chapter overviews that show the structure and name the main points in each chapter?

Literature Review

1. Do the sources that you include provide a reflection of the *current* state of work in the field?
2. Does your introduction explain the scope and organisation of your review?

3. Do you provide a theory base for your work?
4. Do you group works in logical categories?
5. Is your review structured from broad (pertaining to the topic) to specific (pertaining to your investigation)?
6. Is the amount of space you devote to any work and category of works in accordance with its importance to your dissertation?
7. Is your literature review a dispassionate appraisal of the works?
8. Does your literature review conclude with a summary of the current state of academic writing pertaining to your investigation, and does it indicate how your dissertation will add to that?

Method

1. * Do you give an overview of possible research designs?
2. Do you discuss your research design?
3. Does your method chapter clearly indicate how you're going to investigate
4. Does your methodology section justify your approach?
5. Have you discussed your research instruments in detail?
6. Have you described your data and its strengths and weaknesses?
7. Have you explained and justified how you intend to analyse the data?
8. Have you discussed your method's limitations and their consequences?
9. Have you complied with your institution's guidelines pertaining to ethical

The Body

1. Do the data and analysis presented in the body chapter correspond with your methodology section?
2. Is the body logically divided into parts (chapters, sections, subsections, and paragraphs)?
3. Are the parts in a logical order?
4. Does every argument you make relate to the point of its section or subsection?
5. Do you arrive at subconclusions at the end of every chapter, section and subsection?
6. Do your subconclusions relate back clearly to your problem statement?
7. Have you checked that there are no non-obvious claims or assertions that have no evidence to support them?
8. Is the weight of evidence in proportion to the importance of the argument?
9. Have you dealt with other possible interpretation/s of evidence?
10. Does every use of other scholars' work relate to your point/s?

11. Have you used all quotations fairly and do they fully justify the inferences you make from them?
12. Are all your mathematical calculations correct?
13. Are your statistics presented objectively?
14. Are all tables and graphs clear, to the point, and discussed in the text?

The Conclusion

1. Do you include a summary of findings?
2. Can your conclusions be easily deduced from the body of your work?
3. Do all your conclusions relate directly and clearly back to your problem statement?
4. If you generalise, do you justify the extent of your generalisation/s?
5. Are you sure there is no presentation of new research data?
6. Have you made a brief summary of contributions?
7. * Have you discussed the theoretical implications of your work?
8. * Have you discussed unexpected problems that limit your work?
9. * Are your recommendations practical?
10. * Do you have a section with suggestions for future research?

Appendices

1. Does the information in your appendices support points made elsewhere in the dissertation?
2. Are your appendices internally logical?

Referencing and Bibliography

1. Are all citations referenced and included in the list of literature cited?
2. Are all the references complete, giving:
 - 2.1. Date of publication
 - 2.2. Title
 - 2.3. City of publication
 - 2.4. Name of publisher
 - 2.5. Name and location of institution or source if not available in print
 - 2.6. Volume number and month or issue number if a journal article
 - 2.7. Web address (URL), with date accessed, if on the Internet
3. Do all references have a consistent layout, according to your institution's guidelines?

EDITING CHECKLIST

Structure: Check for correct order of headings and that the text under them is relevant.

Text: Check that all text, including references, abstract, figure and table captions, bibliography, etc., has point size and line spacing according to your institutional guidelines.

Titles: Make sure the titles are the same, wherever they are given.

Author Information: Make sure all information about you, including surname, designations, affiliation (and contact details, if necessary), is correct.

Copyright Ownership: Obtain permission to reproduce any copyrighted data, information, images, etc. Attach copies of letters of permission or disclaimers.

Headings: Check that headings are in correct logical level and format.

Terminology: Check for slang, gender-sensitive words and self-references (unless you have permission to write in the first person).

Units of Measure: Check for consistency (they may not be mixed, such as acres and hectares).

Currency: When value is in another currency, give the equivalent in Rand for the particular year/period.

Numbers: If not specified otherwise by your institutional guidelines, these should be in South African format throughout, i.e. with decimal commas and with spaces to mark thousands.

Tables and Figures

1. Check that complete sources are given for all, even those that you created yourself.

2. Check that data in tables/figures correlates with information in the text.

3. Check that calculations are correct.

4. Ensure that all labels and/or keys are readable and accurately reflect the content.

5. Make all tables charts and graphics sharp and clear.

Definitions

1. Check that all potentially confusing words and terms are defined.

2. Check that all defined words and terms are consistently used as defined and that there are no confusing synonyms.

Abbreviations

1. Make sure that all abbreviations are given in full where they are first mentioned in each chapter. (Do not use initial capitals for general terms, e.g. 'non-governmental organisations' [NGOs], when giving them in full.)

2. If you have a list of abbreviations, check that all the abbreviations used in the text are included in the list and check that none are listed that are not used in the text.

Writing

1. Spell-check your document.
2. Check for the errors of style and grammar discussed in *Academic Writing*.
3. Are sentences short, to the point, and stripped of all redundant words?
4. Is the point that you are making clear to the reader in every paragraph?
5. Are your paragraphs logical units (of thought, argument or description)?
6. Check text for relevance, redundancy and repetition.
7. Check for flow. Does everything move logically into what follows?

Technicalities

1. Have you checked your table of contents for consistency in:
 - 1.1. page numbering?
 - 1.2. table and graph numbering and naming?
 - 1.3. section headings?
2. Does your abstract conform to your institution's word limits?

Institutional Guidelines: Check for any requirements not listed here.

PROPOSAL CHECKLIST

In addition to the elements numbered in grey blocks in the Content Checklist above, check to see whether you:

1. included a table of contents for the proposal.
2. double-checked that everything is clear and that you can keep your promises.
3. included a preliminary bibliography/reading list.
4. * included a realistic timeline for your dissertation.
5. * included a tentative outline of the rest of your dissertation.
6. * submitted proof of funding for your research.
7. * obtained approval from your institution's ethics committee.
8. * included a brief summary of your proposed work (do this last!).