

WORKING ON A DISSERTATION

TFG (BA DISSERTATION), TFM (MA DISSERTATION) OR THESIS (PHD DISSERTATION)

English Literature and Culture

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A. Writing a Dissertation

Whether you are writing a TFG, a TFM or a PhD dissertation, the principle is the same one: the dissertation is an *argumentative essay* which proves that you have acquired the skills required to do research at the level appropriate for each type of degree. The dissertation also proves that you can present a *thesis*, expressed through a *thesis statement*, and *argue it convincingly* on the basis of *textual evidence*. What varies from one kind of dissertation to another is the *extension* and, therefore, the *depth* of your argumentation. Also, the amount of *originality* expected:

TFG extension = 5000/9000 words (15/20 pages)
Originality of contribution to knowledge = low to moderate
Time to write it: 1 semester, in the second half of the fourth year (you choose your tutor and the topic the previous semester, usually in November/December)

TFM extension = 10000/15000 words (35/50 pages)
Originality of contribution to knowledge = moderate to high
Time to write it: 1.5 semesters, within the MA
(if you register part-time, you may write the TFM in the second year). You are assigned a tutor and choose the topic in October/November

PhD extension = 300/350 pages
Originality of contribution to knowledge = high
Time to write it: 3 years (full-time) to 5 years (part-time)
(in our Doctoral programme you do not take any courses)
You must have a tutor before enrolling and, ideally, a basic topic before registration

A dissertation makes a contribution to *general knowledge* (in our case within the Humanities), and more specifically *to the field of your choice* (a topic of English Literature and/or Culture). At TFG level you are supposed to prove that you understand the methodology of research and can find a topic original enough. For a

TFM the demands are higher in terms of your ability to do autonomous research on an original topic. The PhD dissertation proves your *full autonomy* as a researcher: both your topic and your contribution must be new and relevant.

B. The task of the tutor/supervisor

My tasks as your tutor (or supervisor, whatever word you prefer) are:

- Helping you to find a suitable topic, based on your own suggestions (this is *your* dissertation, not *mine*, don't expect me to choose the topic for you!)
- Guiding you to write a formal dissertation proposal that other doctors (like me) can assess, if necessary (this is always done for TFMs in January)
- Helping you to structure your dissertation into a solid sequence of parts
- Checking that your bibliography is suitable and up-to-date (maximum 20 years old, though older relevant sources can also be used)
- Having regular tutorials with you to discuss the progression of your work
- Reading, correcting and assessing the partial drafts you may submit and the final version of your dissertation
- Finding a tribunal to judge your dissertation; setting up a date for the viva (or 'defence')
- Helping you to structure your oral presentation for the viva before the tribunal, including one rehearsal

My tasks do not include:

- Editing your text for you. You must follow at all time a suitable edition system (MLA is preferred), or use the Department's guidelines for Literature, based on the same style: http://www.uab.cat/doc/DOC_Guidelines_paper_literature_ca
- It is also important that you learn how to *master the basics of Word*: inserting an automatic table of contents, editing by styles, using footnotes, numbering pages, breaking the text into different sections, adding page breaks, using headers, etc.

Please, note: it is very important, particularly at TFM and PhD levels that you keep *regular contact* with your tutor. For TFG dissertations we have a fixed number of tutorials, but the number of tutorials for TFMs and PhDs depends on you. Email me regularly (every two weeks for the TFM, every four weeks for the PhD), send me brief reports of your activities and meet me regularly. Do not make me chase you... this is your dissertation... not mine! PhD students should keep a written record of their thesis-related activities with monthly entries (what you have read, written or thought).

C. Choosing a topic

It is important that you choose a *coherent* topic of a scope and depth suitable for your dissertation. By *coherent* I mean a topic that can be understood the moment you mention it and that is limited by clear boundaries: be specific about authors, texts, period, nationality/geographical area, theme.

Make sure that your topic is small enough for the TFG or the TFM but big enough for the PhD. My experience is that TFGs and TFMs end up being much longer than expected because the topics chosen are too ambitious (= too big). Try to avoid working on two texts, if one will do; if you work on a series (of books, or TV) focus on a reasonable segment. In contrast, you will need a variety of main or primary texts for your PhD dissertation, at least four or five major ones that can be studied each in a chapter.

If you are an MA student thinking of writing a PhD dissertation it is a very good idea to consider the topic for both simultaneously. Your TFM may later become a chapter in your dissertation, as the extension is similar. If you want to work on something completely different for your PhD dissertation, this is not a problem at all (I did that myself!). It is just *more practical* to think of the TFM as a first step in the direction of the PhD dissertation.

Please, have a look at the topics of all the dissertations I have supervised to far at (and read some): <http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/research>. Do not be afraid to suggest something completely different and new: this is how research progresses.

D. Submitting a proposal

Once we agree on the suitability of the chosen topic, you need to submit to me a formal dissertation proposal. This consists of the following:

- Title (provisional) in two parts: a clever, attractive main title and a subtitle. Make sure that your title announces your thesis and mentions the texts/author(s) you study (see the examples in the link above).
- An abstract: 350 words for the TFG, 500 for the TFM and the PhD. An abstract is a brief summary of your dissertation, including your main thesis and arguments. The abstract should NOT make announcements (“In this dissertation I am going to deal with the gentleman in Dickens”) but summarise arguments (“In this dissertation I argue that Dickens sees the gentleman as an ideal masculine model”).
- Keywords (minimum four, maximum eight): these must include the name of the author and the title of the text, and the main issues (for the Dickens example: Victorian fiction, masculinity, gentlemanliness, Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*)
- A bibliography: minimum 5 titles for the TFG; 10/15 for the TFM and around 25 for the PhD. Both for TFMs and PhDs 5 of these secondary sources must be accompanied by a commentary (5 lines at least) explaining why they are important for your dissertation.

Please, note: the PhD dissertation proposal must actually run to at least five pages and it is more complete, for this is also the text that the aspiring student submits to ask for admission to the doctoral programme (in early May or early September). It should, therefore, cover the following points:

1. MOTIVATION AND INTEREST IN THE DOCTORAL PROGRAMME

1.1. Studies so far

1.2. Reasons to join the Doctoral programme

2. PhD or DOCTORAL DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

2.1. Title and topic

2.1.1. Provisional title

2.1.2. Topic (500-word abstract)

2.2. Interest and originality of the topic

2.3. Precedents in the study of the topic selected

2.4. Research question(s)

2.6. Thesis statement

2.5. Methodology and research fields the dissertation belongs to

2.7. List of primary sources

2.7.1. Main works

2.7.2. Other works

2.8. Structure and organizing criteria: list of chapters (provisional)

2.9. Bibliography (of secondary sources)

PLEASE, NOTE: PhD students, once admitted, are asked to rewrite their proposal along more formal lines, including a calendar with their yearly activities, for their 'Pla de Recerca', or 'Research Plan'. They also sign a 'contract' pledging themselves to carry out the complementary activities (attending at least one Doctoral programme workshop and one conference, submitting an article to an indexed journal). Writing a PhD dissertation takes between 3 and 5 years, you need to consider whether you want to register full or part time.

E. The research question and the thesis statement

Whatever type of dissertation you write, and whether you are submitting a short abstract or a long proposal, you need to inform your reader of the following:

- why you have chosen this topic (you may mention personal motivations but try to sound as academic and formal as possible)
- why your topic is valid and relevant for a dissertation
- to which field your topic belongs to, as specifically as possible

- who has studied your topic before you (name the main specialists and their works; show that you have read them)
- what main problem/gap/lack you have found regarding your topic in the studies that precede yours
- your research question = this is the question you ask yourself when you notice the problem/gap/lack in all preceding studies (“why has the idea of the gentleman been overlooked in the research on the novels by Dickens and how important is it?”)
- your thesis = this is the answer to your research question and also the MAIN IDEA you are going to argue (= defend) throughout the dissertation (“My thesis is that Dickens understands ideal masculinity as the expression of gentlemanliness”)
- your main arguments (in support of your thesis)

The order of these matters may vary a little in your abstract and/or your proposal, and each point might be longer or shorter. In all cases, though, the *research question* and the *thesis statement* should be clearly visible.

F. Structuring your dissertation

Your final dissertation should consist of:

1. **Title page** containing the title of your dissertation, your name, the name of your supervisor, the title of your degree, the name of the department, the name of the university, and the year. *Please, note:* You may add an illustration if it is relevant (not just to make the cover look ‘prettier’); the same rule applies to illustrations used inside the dissertation: as many as you need, but all of them relevant.
2. **Table of contents.** Learn how to produce an automatic table of contents, by using Title styles for your titles. Use a maximum of two levels in TFGs (1., 1.1/1.2.), three in TFMs (1., 1.1./1.2, 1.1.1./1.1.2.) and four in PhDs (1., 1.1/1.2., 1.1.1/1.1.2., 1.1.1.1/1.1.1.2).
3. **Acknowledgements:** here is where you mention and thank the persons who have supported the efforts you have made in writing the dissertation, including family, friends and partners. Also, if you wish, your tutor.
4. **Abstract** (alter as much as you need your proposal abstract); don’t forget the **keywords**
5. **Introduction.** This part should occupy about 15% of the dissertation and be twice as long as the conclusions. In this section you should introduce the topic to the reader and state your research question. Here you need to justify why your research question is worth answering and then briefly present your main arguments, which you will then discuss at length in the body of the dissertation. You also need to explain how you have structured your dissertation and describe the main arguments in each part. You can subdivide this section in TFMs (optional) and PhDs (necessary). By the way: page numbers begin here, in the Introduction, with 1, NOT with the Table of Contents.
6. **Body.** This part should occupy about 70% of the dissertation. You should subdivide it into suitable parts, which might be two or three for the TFG and the TFM;

and up to five for the PhD, in which we call them 'chapters'. Each part, or chapter, can be subdivided, of course, depending on its length. Make the parts of *similar length*. If one part appears to be extremely long, subdivide it. If one part appears to be extremely short, then include it into a longer section—or add more text to it.

7. **Conclusions.** This part should occupy about 7% to 5% of the dissertation and be half as long as the introduction. Be concise in presenting the conclusions of your research, putting special emphasis on what you contributed to what was previously known about the topic you conducted your research on. Describe the further research you (or other persons) could do, starting with the findings in your own dissertation.

8. **Works Cited.** This part should occupy about 5% to 10% of the dissertation. You may include separate lists inside this segment for Primary Sources, Secondary Sources, Filmography. I do not think that internet sources should be listed separately as Webography, so do not do that. *Please note:* a primary source is an original text, the ones you study in the dissertation— the secondary sources are the texts that analyse your primary sources. If in doubt, check the MLA guidelines (or ask me!).

9. **Appendices** (if applicable). You might need to include a plot summary here if your primary sources are very long, or a list, or graphics, an interview, etc. This is not compulsory.

Please, note:

- TFGs need not be bound, just stapled. The cover may contain an illustration.
- TFM must be bound with spiral binding, a rigid plastic back cover and a transparent plastic front cover. The cover may contain an illustration.
- PhD dissertations must be bound in hard or soft covers and must in practice look like an A4 size book. Our current practice is to use the cheaper soft covers, with illustrations.

Please, note, these are approximate indications based on the 70% / 30% ratio:

- main body = 70% of the final text, divided into segments or chapters
- remaining 30% = introduction (15%), conclusions (7%), bibliography (7%)

- **TFG, 20 pages = 14 pages for the body [7+7], 6 for the rest (introduction 3, conclusions 2, references 1).**
- **TFM, 50 pages = 35 for the body [17+17], 15 for the rest (introduction 7, conclusions 4, references 3).**
- **PhD, 300 pages = 210 for the body [4/5 chapters of 45/55 pages each] + 90 for the rest (introduction 45, conclusions 20, references 25)**

Try to keep the same proportion if your dissertation ends up being longer.

G. Receiving feedback

- For TFG dissertations you receive feedback only from your tutor, as you progress.
- For TFM dissertations, you receive feedback from all the doctors in the MA programme when you submit your proposal (in January) and again from two of

them when you submit the required 5 pages of the Introduction or one part (in April). Ideally, the same two doctors will be part of your tribunal (in mid July, or early September). You need to discuss the feedback received with your tutor and incorporate the most relevant aspects to your dissertation.

- For PhD dissertations, you need to pass a yearly assessment interview in June before your supervisor and two other doctors in the programme. You need to submit two weeks before a report (about 5 pages) explaining your progress along the year. You need to pass this assessment interview to be allowed to register for the following year (this is usually no problem at all if you have your supervisor's support).

H. The 'viva' or 'defence'

Once you complete your dissertation, you need to submit it to your tutor, and I will return it to you for you to produce a final version. Please, make sure it is correctly edited, don't make me waste my time in matters you need to solve yourself!

This final version, once revised, needs to be submitted again to me and to the members of the board or tribunal:

- For TFGs: You submit your final version in mid-June and present your dissertation for assessment in public on a date in late June or early July before your tutor and a second doctor. I select this second doctor (s/he awards a mark for the written work, and another for the oral presentation).
- For TFMs: You submit your final version either in late June (25-28), or early July (1-8) and present your dissertation for assessment in public on a date in mid-July (15-18) before a board composed of two doctors, selected by your tutor. The tutor cannot be part of this tribunal, which may have members from outside the Department or even the UAB.
- For PhDs: You submit your final version whenever it is ready and, once the Escola de Postgrau i Doctorat allows it, you present your dissertation for assessment in public on a date about two months later, before a board composed of three doctors, selected by your tutor. The tutor cannot be part of this tribunal and only one member can belong to UAB. The paperwork is time-consuming and complex, make sure you check what is required with plenty of time in advance.

The viva/defence procedure is quite similar in the three cases: you need to prepare an oral presentation accompanied by a nice, attractive PowerPoint and then answer questions. In the case of the TFG you get a separate mark for the oral presentation or viva. For TFMs and PhDs depending on the quality of your presentation and of your answers the board may determine to give you a higher or lower mark. Very often dissertations initially considered a 9 end up earning honours at this stage.

How each presentation works:

- TFG: you present your work in about 10 minutes, then each examiner (first your second examiner, then your tutor) has 5 minutes to make comments and ask 1 question.
- TFM: you present your work in about 15 minutes, then each member of the board (two doctors, excluding your tutor) has 10 minutes to make comments and ask possibly up to 3 questions. You answer their questions at the end of all their interventions.
- PhD: you present your work in about 20/30 minutes, then each member of the board (three doctors, excluding your tutor) has 15 minutes (or longer) to make comments and ask as many questions as they want, possibly around 5. You answer their questions at the end of all their interventions.

PLEASE, NOTE: for TFGs, students usually don't make notes, they just listen to the questions. For TFMs and PhDs you need to make notes, distinguishing between comments and questions (if in doubt, ask the examiner: 'sorry, I'm not sure whether this is a question or a comment', or 'does this answer all your questions?'). I find what works best is using an A4 sheet of paper horizontally with columns for each examiner, in this way you can visualize at one glance all the questions, etc, and the possible overlappings.

For TFGs the viva session lasts 30 minutes, between 60 and 75 minutes for TFMs and 2-3 hours (or more) for PhDs. Make sure you won't be hungry throughout the procedure. In the case of PhD dissertations, carry some glucose with you (cough drops are discreet and effective). And you will also need a bottle of water in all cases. By the way: you may stand or sit down, as you wish. You may NOT read the presentation, but notes are always allowed. If your PowerPoint is well built, you won't even need any notes.

The PowerPoint presentation

The Power Point presentation must be visually attractive, easy to follow and complete in the information it provides. Some advice:

- Use light colours, particularly for the background; make sure the letters on the screen are big and thick enough, preferably dark against a pale background (NO reds!!)
- Do not use much text; avoid using complete sentences or paragraphs unless you need to make sure that a quotation is fully understood by your audience
- Use images which complement the content of your words; use always high-resolution images (otherwise, they look blurred)
- Work on the collocation of the items on each slide, so that a certain symmetry is achieved that looks pleasing to the eye
- Avoid using videos as they often malfunction
- Always avoid producing PowerPoint presentations that look too 'baroque', excessive, and that use different styles
- Bring your PowerPoint presentation to the viva in different formats, including .pdf. Use a USB but also email yourself the presentation in case the USB malfunctions

The content of the PowerPoint presentation should cover:

- The title of your work, your name, programme it belongs to, year
- Reasons for the choice of topic
- Research question
- Thesis statement
- Precedents of study and methodology (fields of research)
- Sub-thesis and main arguments of each part of your work
- Conclusions that you have reached
- Contribution (to research/knowledge) that you have made
- Further research (at a more advanced level)
- Thanks

As you can see, depending on which kind of dissertation you are defending you will need more or less time for each section, in particular for

- Precedents of study and methodology (fields of research)
- Sub-thesis and main arguments of each part of your work

These will be necessarily the central aspect in TFM and PhD vivas, less extended in TFG presentations. In any case, the minimum would be about 12 slides for the TFG, possibly 20 for the TFM, 25 or more for the PhD depending on your needs.

Please, note: It is customary to start presentations by thanking the members of the board for judging your work. I find it more elegant to thank your supervisor towards the end of the presentation, but you can also do it after you thank the board at the beginning (in TFGs or TFM).

Rehearsal

In all cases you need to rehearse with me your complete presentation, ideally in the same room where the viva/defence will take place, and also ideally at least one week before the actual presentation so that you can correct content and PowerPoint if necessary.

Dress code (yes, there is one!)

Your personal appearance also plays a role in your viva/defence as your board will expect you to dress formally and to look well-groomed. This does not mean that you need to wear formal dress or clothes different from what you would usually wear. It means you need to look as well-dressed as possible *within your habitual style*.

You need to exclude in all cases: [ladies] low-cut tops or dresses, clothes too tight or too short, jeans, flip-flops, excessive make-up; [gentlemen] t-shirts, short trousers, jeans, flip-flops and sandals. In case of doubt, wear dark or discreet colours. Note: Ties and jackets are not compulsory for gentlemen (in some universities they are...); skirts, dresses and high-heeled shoes are not compulsory for ladies (you may wear trousers and low-heeled shoes if you wish, as long as they look formal).

The viva or defence

You will logically feel nervous when presenting your dissertation in public. This is understandable. My experience is that if a rehearsal goes well, the presentation goes even better.

Presentations are *public* and you can invite your *friends or family* to give you support, though they need to be silent, and of course never make comments about the board... You MAY NOT record the viva, nor take photos, to respect the privacy of the board. If you wish to record only your own presentation, you may do so, first asking for the board's permission.

Your tone should be always polite and you should never sound arrogant, even when the questions you get may make you feel impatient, scared, annoyed, etc. Address the members of the board by their title: Dr. Owen, Dr. Hand, Dr. Pujolràs, etc. Even me: in vivas I am Dr. Martín!

To calm your nerves, keep at hand a pen you can play with, some cough drops and water in case your mouth goes dry or you feel hungry (it can happen in PhD vivas). If you think that eating beforehand will help do it but avoid stimulants (coffee...) and tranquillisers (both medication or a simple herbal tea...) as *you need to be alert*. And as *calm* as possible.

Please, note: PhD students (not TFG or TFM) are expected to invite their tribunal and tutor to lunch (vivas tend to be on a Friday morning). I will help you to choose the convenient place here at UAB (usually the restaurant at Lletres or La Marmita at Hotel Campus). This is a long-established convention all over Spain, make sure you keep some budget aside for it...

GOOD LUCK!!!

MA in Advanced English Studies

<http://www.uab.cat/web/estudiar/l-oferta-de-masters-oficials/informacio-general/estudis-anglesos-avancats/-advanced-english-studies-1096480139517.html?param1=1308551783424>

Doctoral Programme in English Studies/Filologia Anglesa

<http://www.uab.cat/web/postgrau/doctorats/tots-els-doctorats/informacio-general/filologia-anglesa-1345467765418.html?param2=1345654650517>