

Writing a Masters Dissertation - Advice and Tips



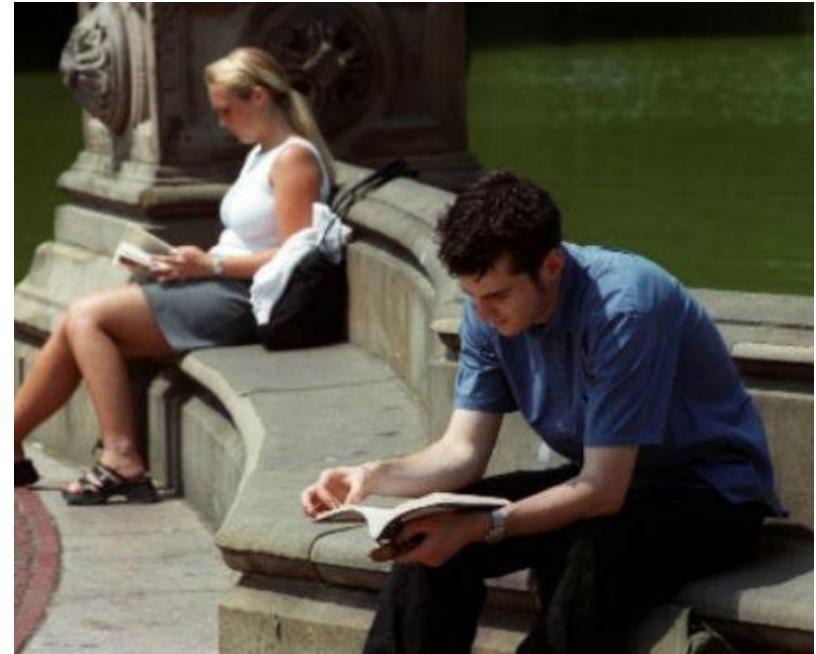
1. Don't Panic

- Give yourself enough time
- Don't go on holiday
- Start reading now
- Start writing a.s.a.p.
- Choose a realistic question to address



Work socially if possible

- Read/write in library or social spaces
- Take breaks together
- Go somewhere nice at least one day at the weekend – read in the park



2. Look at previous dissertations

- There are plenty of good ones around
- None of them are perfect
- None will be exactly the same as yours
- Get an idea of scope, structure and size

An Archaeometallurgical Investigation of Waste Materials from a Late- to Post-Medieval Foundry in Dubrovnik, Croatia

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
MSc Technology and Analysis of Archaeological Materials of
University College London in 2012

UCL INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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3. Go to bed with the MA handbook

- It tells you what the markers are looking for
- Read it carefully and understand it
- Do it now and get used to it



UCL INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

MA/MSc HANDBOOK

INFORMATION FOR MA AND MSc STUDENTS
2013-14

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The ideal dissertation should:

- Be written coherently and concisely in a well-structured and easily readable form that is clear and free from unintended ambiguity.
- Present evidence of independent critical thought.
- Display originality in the novel interpretation and presentation of existing information, the approach to the problem, the structure of the argument, the discovery of new information and/or the presentation of new ideas.
- Display a thorough and critical knowledge of the relevant literature, concepts and ideas and a sense of proportion in evaluating evidence and the opinions of others.
- Display notable depth and breadth of understanding and perception relating to relevant ideas.
- Employ well-focused, relevant, cogent and sophisticated reasoning.
- Show how the project relates to current knowledge in the area to be investigated.
- Present a coherent research project with clearly defined aims.
- Use clearly defined and appropriate methods to gather "data" (whether this be new data arising from studies in the field, laboratory or on collections, or from critical reviews of relevant literature).
- Select data that are appropriate for addressing the questions posed by the project.
- Use clearly defined and appropriate methods of analysis and/or synthesis of the data.
- Apply the chosen methods rigorously and consistently, indicating clearly (if appropriate) why and how the methods adopted were improved or modified during the course of the project, and showing critical awareness of how they might be further improved in future work.
- Present the results clearly and appropriately.
- Draw appropriate conclusions from the results, showing critical awareness of any limitations in the methods and the material available for study,
- Indicate potentially fruitful avenues for developing future research in the chosen subject area.
- Cite all sources clearly and precisely, and give detailed references in accordance with the stipulated conventions.

The ideal dissertation should:

- Display originality in the novel interpretation and presentation of existing information, the approach to the problem, the structure of the argument, the discovery of new information and/or the presentation of new ideas.
- Display a thorough and critical knowledge of the relevant literature, concepts and ideas and a sense of proportion in evaluating evidence and the opinions of others.
- **Show how the project relates to current knowledge in the area to be investigated.**
- **Present a coherent research project with clearly defined aims.**
- Use clearly defined and appropriate methods to gather "data" (whether this be new data arising from studies in the field, laboratory or on collections, or from critical reviews of relevant literature).
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Criteria for awarding a mark within the distinction range (70 - 100%)

- To gain a mark in the distinction range, the dissertation will need to show clear evidence of some of the attributes of an ideal dissertation listed above. The dissertation will also need to demonstrate excellent critical ability and originality. **Normally there should be no significant errors, mistakes or misunderstandings and few if any irrelevancies.**
- 70-72% An answer which meets but does not exceed the basic criteria for the award of a distinction mark.
- 73-76% A solid distinction level dissertation which meets the basic criteria of a distinction mark and also shows strong evidence of several of the ideal attributes of a dissertation listed above.
- 77-79% An exceptionally good distinction level dissertation which shows strong evidence of many of the attributes of an ideal dissertation listed above.
- 80% and above. These marks will be used for outstanding work of exceptional originality and insight.

Research Aims/Question

- Not over-ambitious
- Something that can be answered
- Don't list a whole series of things you want to find out then don't answer them
- Strategic re-drafting of the research question at the end of a project is sometimes necessary
- You should answer the research questions in the conclusions.

Key considerations

- You should have a clear question
- You should be able to predict/expect/hope for a particular answer (or a choice of answers)
- If you have no idea of what your results might be, now is the time to discuss with your supervisor

Structure

- Narrative
- Should not anticipate – each section should be understandable in the light of what has previously been mentioned
- Standard: Introduction (Research questions), Review, Materials, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusions

The ideal dissertation should:

- Apply the chosen methods rigorously and consistently, indicating clearly (if appropriate) why and how the methods adopted were improved or modified during the course of the project, and showing critical awareness of how they might be further improved in future work.
- Draw appropriate conclusions from the results, showing critical awareness of any limitations in the methods and the material available for study,
- Indicate potentially fruitful avenues for developing future research in the chosen subject area.

Formal language?

- “had a bit of a waxy look to it”
- “The samples were the size of a pinky finger nail”
- “I am now going to take a look at”
- “to suss out the reasons for this....”

Figs and diagrams

- Refer to figs in text
- Proper explanatory captions
- Scales
- Labels
- Adjust brightness and contrast of figs in Word
- Composite figs can be made in PowerPoint and saved as JPEGs

Material

- Explanation of context – where are samples from, museum numbers, typological groupings etc. Don't make assumptions that the reader knows what you are talking about.
- If you are dealing with a lot of material, make a catalogue in the appendix
- Take advantage of camera on your mobile phone.....

When things go wrong....

- Talk to your supervisor immediately
- Carry on working systematically
- Negative results are useful and sometimes publishable if produced rigorously



Presentation

- Should give the impression of competence and good organisation
- Look like you enjoyed it and were really involved
- No mistakes! (use a spell checker).

Good Luck!