



## Undergraduate Dissertation Guidelines

### 1. Introduction

Honours students at the Department of International Relations, in line with the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts Honours degree at the University of Malta, are required to submit a dissertation, an elaborate written report, as their final year project. The dissertation, as a research-based long essay, holds particular significance as a form of assessment in establishing the final grade as weighting of the course components is biased in favour of the later parts of the course, on the principle that the fairest evaluation of a student is at the point of exit.

The dissertation differs from other module assessments in offering the opportunity of taking responsibility for own learning, undertaking largely independent research on a topic of one's choice in the field of International Relations. Researching and writing the undergraduate thesis usually takes several months, and it really helps to like the subject matter. It begins by formulating an interesting question, which has to narrow the research topic to a manageable size, before forming the key assumption and hypothesis (question(s) may be refined as understanding deepens). Through research, the central idea or argument of the researcher must be compared with those of others on the subject. It requires conducting a review of relevant literature, describing the conceptual and analytical framework and establishing the method for undertaking the study. The results of the research and the discussions of the findings are presented as the case study, which draws together theoretical, methodological and empirical work, followed by the concluding notes with possible suggestions for further research.

On the topic of the dissertation, it is advisable for the student to become familiar with the main scholarly areas of interest of the academic members of the Department of International Relations, which fall under the general headings of foreign policy analysis, European integration and the role of media, culture, political change, democracy, humanitarianism, institutions, security, war, development, political economy, and geography in International Relations. Members of the Department also hold research interests on a number of countries and regions, including Malta, the EU, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa, Central and Eastern European and Nordic countries, the United States, Russia and the Asia Pacific region. Further details may be found on the individual staff profiles found on the Department website.

Writing a dissertation is a lot like writing a book. On 'how it should look like,' some tutors keep copies of previous good work, and most departments deposit good examples in the Library for students to look at. There are B.A. (Hons.) dissertations examples online on the University of Malta Institutional Repository OAR@UoM, an online archive that collect, preserve and disseminate a variety of scholarly material produced under the auspices of University of Malta. OAR@UoM accepts for submission national intellectual output and heritage. Most of the content deposited onto OAR@UoM, which is integrated with the Library's portal HyDi and accessible via the Library website, is available in Open Access, including a number of articles, books and book chapters, theses/dissertations, conference proceedings, audio visual, out of copyright material and other scholarly content.

## **2. Research Proposal**

The student is advised to set out his/her key ideas in writing as soon as possible, before he/she is required in the first week of May in the second year of study to submit a document of no more than two to three pages as a Research Proposal. Dissertation Proposal Forms are included in the course materials of the Study-unit of Research Methods in International Relations. The aim of writing the proposal is to think about the topic, scope of the research, and the way of conducting the proposed research. It should outline the objective, and put forward how what he/she intends to investigate is important, and how the method the student plans to use is suitable and feasible.

## **3. Writing and Presentation Style**

An effective thesis should generally answer the 'how,' 'what,' or 'why.' Simple description is not enough and will result in a low mark. The final essay, though not really expected to produce something completely original, should be written as a statement/argument put forward by the writer on the subject (regardless of acceptance by the reader). It should show evidence of adequate understanding, thought and insight, along with attempts to analyse the results obtained through proper research. Sources of information and data that the writer has consulted as well as the ones from which it was quoted have to be accurately cited, with properly constructed bibliography and references list. The dissertation should clearly point out the using of words or ideas of another author(s), and the most accepted way of acknowledging the work of others is to use a referencing system.

Considerable importance is attached to matters of presentation of the dissertation as a piece of academic work. It should avoid colloquialisms, contractions, phrasal verbs and vagueness, through clear and concise expression, appropriately presented in scholarly style. No style sheet can answer every query that might arise when writing a dissertation, but the most fundamental rule to keep in mind is consistency of style throughout the entire report, e.g. font type and size, headings format, paragraph format etc.

The Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) Style Guide deals with preparing material for publication; spelling and usage; names; abbreviations; punctuation; capitals; italics; dates, numbers, currency, and weights and measures; quotations and quotation marks; footnotes and endnotes; references; the preparation of indexes; useful works of reference; and proof correction. It is widely useful to students and other authors, to editors, and to publishers of texts written mainly in English. It provides information on referencing, including online publications and social media, and on indexing. The MHRA Style Guide Third Edition (978- 1-78188-009-8) is available in book form from all good bookshops and online retailers. The MHRA Style Guide Third Edition may also be downloaded without charge as an Adobe® Acrobat® PDF file:

<http://www.mhra.org.uk/pdf/MHRA-Style-Guide-3rd-Edn.pdf>

The norms are also detailed in the style sheet provided by the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta:

[https://www.um.edu.mt/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/432979/int-relationsstylesheet.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/432979/int-relationsstylesheet.pdf)

The Oxford Referencing style (<https://libguides.mq.edu.au/referencing/Oxford>), which is also sometimes referred to as a documentary-note style, is a note citation system with two components: Footnote Citation and Reference List. On the Oxford style, some clear guidelines are available on <https://student.unsw.edu.au/footnote-bibliography-or-oxford-referencing-system>

Adherence to proper academic writing and presentation style is mandatory and is taken into consideration when assessing the work submitted, and students are urged to familiarize themselves with it early in the course and to adopt it whenever possible when writing essays and other assignments. For accurate referencing the student must record for:

## **Books**

- The author's or editor's name (or names)
- The year the book was published
- The title of the book
- If it is an edition other than the first
- The city the book was published in
- The name of the publisher

## **Journal Articles**

- The author's name or names
- The year in which the journal was published
- The title of the article
- The title of the journal
- The page number/s of the article in the journal
- As much other information as you can find about the journal, for example the volume and issue numbers

## Electronic Sources

- The date of accessing the source
- The electronic address or email

## 4. Regular Meetings with the tutor/supervisor

The student should organise meetings, at least once a month, with the tutor/supervisor, who will assist in gradually working it out from some general ideas and puzzling problems (which most of us begin with), toward a sharper definition of the topic and the argument, and offers guidance to the best ways to formulate the thesis, organise the research and form the case study. The student should establish with the tutor/supervisor a schedule and time framework. For each meeting, the student should prepare with specific queries, and bring with draft copies of his/her writing. The writing a dissertation remains, by definition, a self-directed process in terms of management, usually with no regular discussions with classmates, effectively no reading assignments and no weekly deadlines from tutors and supervisors. Planning is important and self-discipline is needed for doing it well, and completion on time.

## 5. Ethical considerations

The set of guidelines drawn up by the Research Ethics Committee appointed by the University Senate in June 2002 states that: Each university member, student or member of staff, undertaking research will fill in a proposal form and present it for approval to the faculty research ethics committee. Please ask your supervisor in the beginning of the research process about it, and submit your proposal and form to the Faculty of Arts research ethics committee (FREC) <https://www.um.edu.mt/arts/students/researchethics>. The form clearly identifies the person taking responsibility for the research and for compliance with the regulations and with Data Protection legislation. These guidelines first published in 2004 were reviewed and slightly amended by Senate in September 2007. For a summary and full details of the guidelines, and to download the proposal form, itself revised in September 2007, please see: <https://www.um.edu.mt/research/ethics>

## 6. Structure of dissertation

The dissertation should be present a sustained line of thought, written in subsequent chapters that are inter-linked coherent parts with smooth transitions. To ensure that the flow of the argument is coherent and concise, the dissertation's overall length should be between **15,000 and 18,000 words inclusive of footnotes and the bibliography** (but excluding acknowledgements, title page, and the table of contents). Appendices should be kept to a minimum. The dissertation includes:

- a. **Title**
- b. **Abstract** – This part presents in a very brief manner the most salient issues, arguments, results and conclusions of the dissertation (it should be written at the final stages). It is a concise and clear summary of what you set out to do and why, how you did it, and what you found (recommendations). The aim is to let the reader know about the background to, and significance

of the study, the research strategy being followed, the findings of the research, and the inferences that were made. On each of these components, with each making up a part of the 200 to 350 words that are typically written in dissertation abstract, the writer should write a few sentences.

c. **Acknowledgments**

d. **Introduction** – The introductory chapter should provide an interpretative overview of the main parts of the whole dissertation. It must explain the central research question (or a series of closely-connected questions) that guide the research, help to maintain coherence and avoid distraction by interesting (but irrelevant) digressions. It has to present the thesis, how one came to choose it, how it was tackled, and what are the research methods. It must provide a short description of the background, context or setting in which the study has taken place, as well as of the organisation of the study and the structure of the dissertation. Approximately 1000 words.

e. **Literature Review** – Writing a literature review is fundamental and requires particular attention as the springboard for the entire dissertation. It is necessary for justifying the purpose of the research by identifying the gap in earlier work that the dissertation seeks to fill, and exhibiting the importance of the dissertation, and for mapping of theoretical direction and methodological focus of the research. It should go beyond basic reporting on what is read and understood, showing satisfactory awareness of the most significant issues, debates and controversies, and their relevance to the central question of the dissertation. It must reveal (in the books, journal articles and online publications that were reviewed) what appear as emphasized, less elaborated upon or neglected on the main thesis of the dissertation. Approximately 2000 words.

f. **Theoretical Underpinning** – Dissertations require a conceptual and analytical framework that makes explicit the particular academic discourse within which the study is framed. The theory is the foundation for the analysis of the case study. This part is meant to shed light on the central thesis of the dissertation in a scholarly or scientific style and form, not achievable by ordinary, everyday reflections. It presents the major theoretical assumptions that will be used to analyse and interpret the results of the research. There are theories that help to distinguish between, and categorise different phenomena, and others that help to look into various aspects of a certain phenomenon. The student should take care to choose a theory that fits with the focus of the dissertation, staying away from theoretical and hypothetical perspectives that are not being put to use, in order to avoid creating false expectations that can portray the research as faulty and incomplete. Approximately 2000 words.

g. **Methodology and Research Methods** – This chapter explains the way research was conducted. The main research types are primary that relates to the collection of primary (new) data, and secondary that entails the re-examination of data that has already been published. The major types of research analysis are quantitative, qualitative and mixed research analysis methods. This chapter must indicate the limitations of the study, which are the result of the ways in which the researcher initially chose to design the study and/or the method used. It must identify and acknowledge those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from the research, or made constraints on generalisability, applications to practice, and/or utility of findings. Students must make sure that the methodology fits with the topic and the question, and that there is a fit between the theory and the methodology. Approximately 1500.

h. **Case Study Material Analysis** (one or more chapters) – This part, in many ways the heart of the dissertation, will apply the theory and the methodology to the empirical material. It is where all the strands of the dissertation start coming together. Approximately 7000- 8000 words.

**Conclusions and Recommendations** – This part that closes the essay is just as important as the

introduction. It summarises the main findings and further avenues for research (or policy making), and usually presents no new material. Students are advised to spend some time on carefully writing the conclusions and recommendations, in order to give a good final impression of the dissertation. Approximately 1500 words.

- i. **Bibliography and References** – This part of the dissertation includes all items cited in the text through footnotes and items that have informed the argument or the approach adopted, and web resources cited. The bibliography should be primarily organised according to the type of source, and then alphabetically, by surname of author (see above).
- j. **Appendices** – If material is widely available online, it is not necessary to include it in an annex

## 7. Submission

Students are required to submit their final dissertation by the early days of May in their third year of study.

All supervisors instruct their students on submission through Turnitin. A draft and final submission upload section will be available. The draft submission is for self-checking, prior to the final submission that will be verified by the supervisor.