

Your dissertation: getting started

Chris Bishop

Learning Enhancement Tutor

Student Support Service

We will look at:

1. Finding a focused, manageable topic
2. Developing a clear research question
3. Techniques for starting writing
4. Ways you might structure your dissertation

Consider...

- The dissertation as a process

How are you going to manage what you need to do between now and when you submit your work?

- The dissertation as a product

What will your dissertation look like when it's finished?

Possible challenges?

LOGISTICAL

(Process)

CONTENT

(Product)

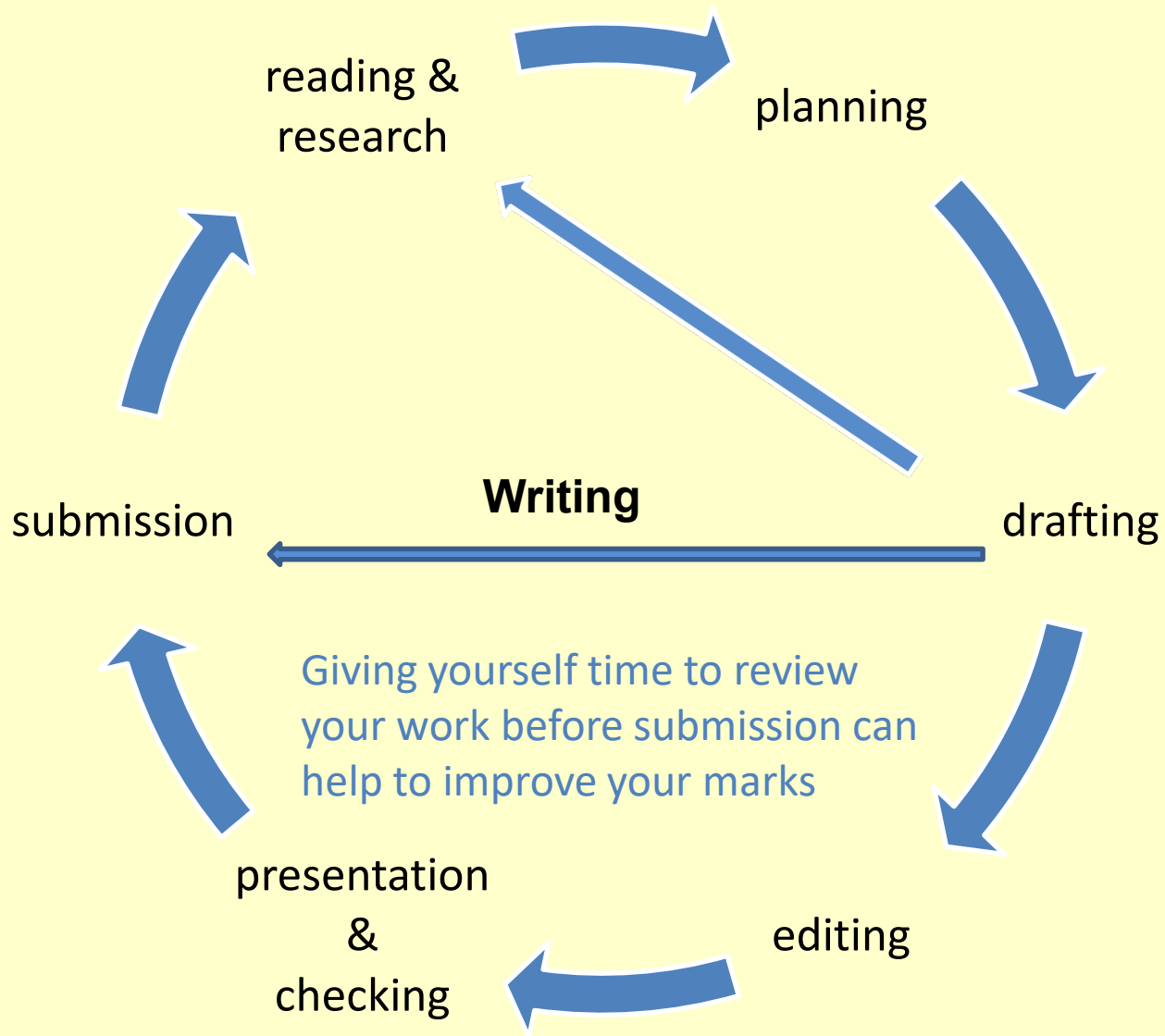
Possible challenges?

LOGISTICAL

- **Time-frame** – how can you do all this before the deadline?
- **Access to information** – how easy is it to get the information you need?
- **Confidentiality and ethics** – are these relevant to your area of study?

CONTENT

- What will you **focus** on? (i.e topic)
- Do you have the **necessary knowledge or skills**?
- How will you do **your analysis**? (e.g. text/discourse analysis? Lab-based experiments etc?)



How to choose what to write about

- Is the topic of **academic significance**?
- Will it keep me **interested** for a long period?
- Can I answer my research question(s) with the **time and resources** I have?
- Do I have some idea of **how** to go about answering my research question(s)?
- How might **my own attitudes, values and beliefs affect** my research?

Developing a research question

Think about:

- The **issue** you're going to investigate.
- What you think about the issue you're going to investigate (ie what is your **argument**?).
- The **limits** of your research.

Developing a research question

A good question....

- Will be written in **plain English**.
- Must **interest you**.
- Must be **open**.
- Avoids **assumptions**.
- Derives from the **research problem**.
- Answerable with a **methodology and available data**.
- Builds on **previous scholarship** and addresses an issue the academic community is interested in.

A bad question...

- **Too ambitious** for the word count.
- **Too vague and descriptive**.
- Existing scholarship: **too much, too little, not available**.
- Requires **specialist skills/resources**- no time to acquire them.

Moving from a **topic** to a **question**

Topic of interest:

19th century British art

More specifically:

The use of Japanese motifs in 19th century British art

Especially:

How this use changed after 1850

Question:

How did the Japanese arts influence British artists during the second half of the 19th century?

What could be problematic here?

“I am going to conduct an extensive examination of British economic policy from 1990-2010. I will combine examination of Treasury economic data and statistics, policy reports and documents with political speeches made by ministers. I will also use interviews with officials, former ministers and MPs and experts.”

Possible problems

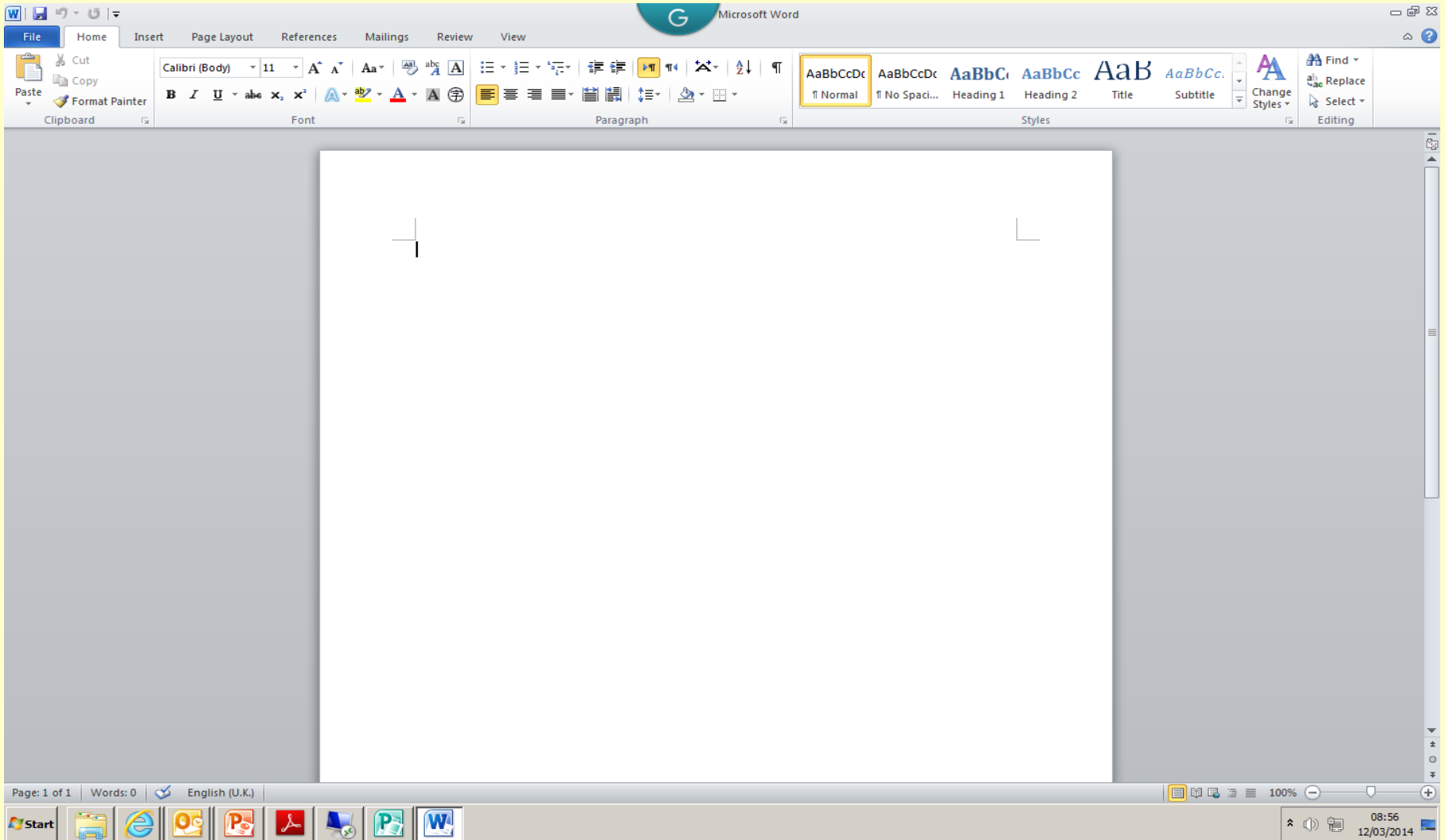
LOGISTICAL

- **Time-frame** – how can you do all this before the deadline?
- **Access** – how easy is it to travel for interviews? Where will you hold them?
- **Interview process** – do you need an interview template? Will you record the interviews? Do you need to transcribe the interviews?
- **Confidentiality and ethics** – what procedures will you need to go through at UEA?
- **Documents** – how many will you need to look at? Are they accessible or will you need Freedom of Information applications?

CONTENT

- Which **aspect** of economic policy? (i.e focus)
- Do you have the **necessary statistical knowledge**?
- How will you **analyse speeches** (do you have text/discourse analysis knowledge?)

Drafting: how do you begin...?



‘Don’t get it right, get it written.’

James Thurber

Drafting - 'low stakes writing':

writing to help you develop your thinking

Editing – 'high stakes writing'

(is the writing 'good enough?'):

Freewriting

- Writing for five minutes
- Without stopping (don't stop to read over what you have written or to cross something out)
- In sentences
- For no reader
- Without structure

Writing prompts

- What I am most interested in is ...
- What are you going to write about?
- Why are you interested in it?
- What's complicated about it?
- What writing have I done and what would I like to do?
- What I want to write about next is ...
- I have nothing to write about because...

Zero draft



?



First draft

Zero draft



Pick out words, phrases, sentences from your freewriting that seem interesting or provocative and try writing beginning with them.



First draft

Zero draft



Generate an outline by asking yourself questions:

What stands out for me most in what I've written? Is there an argument in this mess?

Which are my main points, and which are subordinate?

Is what I've said true? Do I still believe it?



First draft



Outlining your dissertation project

- My research question is ... (50 words)
- Researchers who have looked at this subject are ... (50 words)
- They argue that ... (75 words)
- Debate centres on the issue of ... (25 words)
- There is still work to be done on ... (25 words)
- I expect my key message(s) will be ... (50 words)

Setting goals ... *Writing to prompts*

What writing for my dissertation have I done and what do I need to do (in the long, medium and short term)?

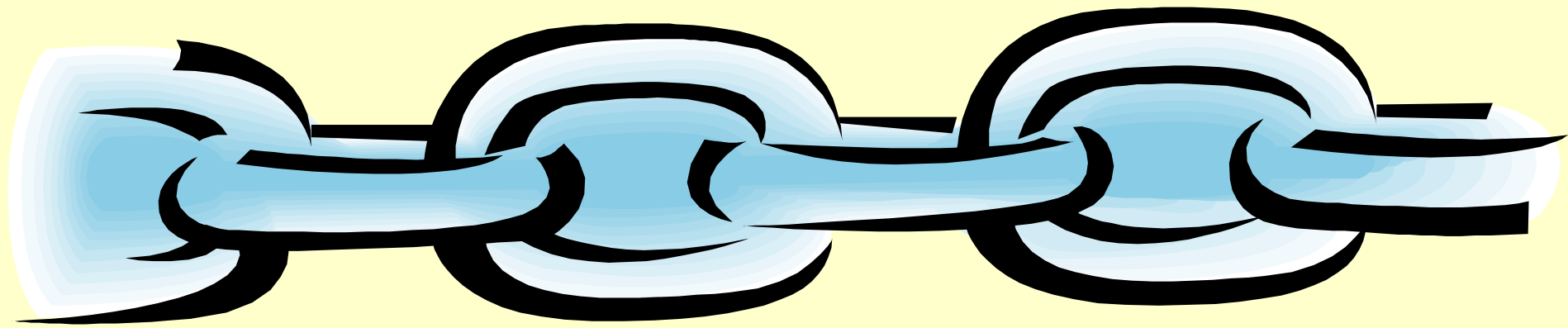
- 5 minutes
- In sentences
- Private writing – no one will read it
- To be discussed in pairs or groups

Setting goals ... *Writing in layers*

- Outline the structure: write a list of chapter headings.
- Write a sentence or two on the contents of each chapter.
- Write lists of headings for each section in each chapter.
- Make notes, below the headings on how you will develop each section.
- Write an introductory paragraph for each chapter.

Research as a party?





The product

- A 'piece' of research

AND

- A text (a 'piece of language')

As the writer, it is **your responsibility** to make clear:

- What you are saying
- Why you are saying it
- What you think about what you are saying
- How the different things you are saying relate to one another

What does your reader want to know?

- What are you doing?
- Why are you doing that?
- How are you going to do that? Why that way and not a different way?
What sources will you use and why?
- What have other people said about the topic? Does everyone agree?
What do they say about each other's conclusions? What do you think about what they say?
- What methodologies / theoretical frameworks have been developed that you could use to help you think about the answer?
- What did you find?
- What do those findings mean?
- **So how does that answer your question?**

How should you structure your dissertation?

IT DEPENDS:

- ...on the conventions of your subject discipline (reader expectations)
- ...on the type of question you are asking and how you are answering it
- ...on what your answer is, and the best way to get there
- ...on whatever works best!

Keep reflecting...

For every part of your writing (chapters, sections, paragraphs, sentences) ask yourself...

- What am I saying?
- Why am I saying it?
- Why am I saying it now?
- Why am I saying it in this way? How else could I say it?
- How does it relate to the bit before it?
- How does it relate to the bit after it?
- How does it relate to my main argument?

Next steps

- Have **a clear research question** – ideally built around why and/or how.
- Develop **a clear argument** you will make.
- Develop **a clear structure** to present that argument.
- Have **a clear way to answer your question**.
- **Engage with the literature** – what does it say and what do you think about that?
- **Engage with your data/findings/evidence** – what do you think it demonstrates and why?
- **Start writing as soon as you can** – don't leave it all to the end.

Learning Enhancement Team



Develop strategies to improve your:

- **study skills**
- **mathematics and statistics**
- **academic writing**
- **use of English**

Resources

Study guides, videos, webcasts and worksheets on our website

Workshops

Group sessions, delivered centrally or embedded in degree programmes

Tutorials

Expert tuition to help you study more effectively and improve your work

Further resources available from LET

- [Drop-ins](#): Mon-Thurs, 4-5pm in the Student Support Centre
- [Tutorials](#): 50min individual appointments
- Online [study resources](#)
- Dissertation [workshops](#)*
- [Writers' groups](#)*: regular opportunities to write in the company of others

*Our website has further details - search online: **UEA LET**

Further resources

Search online: **UEA LET**

www.citethemrightonline.com - for referencing guidance

<https://resources.library.leeds.ac.uk/final-chapter/> - dissertation advice from Leeds University

Kirton, B. and McMillan, K. (2007). *Just Write*. Abingdon. Routledge.

Nygaard, L. (2017). *Writing your Master's Thesis*. London. Sage.

Thomas, G. (2017) *How to do your Research Project* (3rd edn). London. Sage.

Wallace, M. and Wray, A. (2016). *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates* (3rd edn). London. Sage.

How can you contact us?

portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement

ask.let@uea.ac.uk

01603 592761

....or come to the Student Support Centre.

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