

The SuperDiss Dissertation Workbook

From curiosity to a dissertation you can defend

Write it down. Write it out. Write it up.

SuperDiss will not write your dissertation. It will help you become the person who can.

superdiss.com — free to print and use. Your institution's regulations, handbook and supervisor's instructions always take precedence over anything in this workbook. Only your institution can grant ethical approval or award grades.

How to use this workbook

Fourteen stages, each with a short explanation and space to write. Work through them in order — every stage depends on the one before it. Nothing here is a template to copy: the value is in what you write in the blank space.

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1. Write it down — your curiosity

Before anything else, capture what you are actually curious about. Not what sounds impressive: what you find yourself asking.

Work through these

- List ten things you are curious about in your subject area.
- Circle the three you could still care about in nine months' time.
- For each, name the population, the phenomenon and the context.
- Cross out any where you cannot see how you would get evidence.

Your notes

2. From curiosity to a researchable problem

A curiosity becomes researchable when you can say who is affected, what is unclear, and what evidence would change your mind.

Work through these

- Who exactly are you studying?
- What specific behaviour, decision or outcome?
- Which setting, sector or country?
- What timeframe does this cover?

Your notes

3. The research gap

A gap is an evidenced limitation in what has been published — population, context, method, contradiction, time or theory.

Work through these

- Read the limitations sections of five recent papers.
- Group what they say they could not do.
- Write: 'It is known that... (cite). What remains unknown is... This matters because...'
- Check you can cite at least three sources for the gap.

Your notes

4. The research question

Specific, answerable, non-trivial, bounded. Every later chapter is downstream of this sentence.

Work through these

- Write your question three ways: what / to what extent / how do participants describe.
- Choose the version whose method you can actually deliver.
- Write two to four sub-questions.
- Ask: if the data came back the opposite way, would that still be a legitimate answer?

Your notes

5. Aims and objectives

One aim. Three to five objectives, each of which is something you will actually do.

Work through these

- Aim (one sentence, starts with 'To...'):
- Objective 1 — and the method that delivers it:
- Objective 2 — and the method that delivers it:
- Objective 3 — and the method that delivers it:

Your notes

6. The literature matrix

One row per source. Read down the columns, not across the rows — that is where synthesis comes from.

Work through these

- Citation and year / Theory used / Method and sample
- Key finding in your own words
- Stated limitations
- Theme, relevance, and one quotation with a page number

Your notes

7. Writing the literature review

Organise by theme, never by author. If a paragraph cites one source, it is a summary, not synthesis.

Work through these

- Name your themes — these are your subheadings.
- Per paragraph: claim, evidence, tension, implication.
- Evaluate design, sample, context and inference — not 'good' or 'bad'.
- Finish by narrowing to your gap and your question.

Your notes

8. Methodology — the because chain

Justify by comparison. Name the alternative you rejected and say why.

Work through these

- My question requires ... because ...
- That means my philosophical position is ... because ...
- So my design is ... rather than ... because ...
- My sampling strategy is ... and it cannot support claims about ...

Your notes

9. Ethics

Only your institution can grant approval. Prepare so the application is not returned.

Work through these

- Participant information sheet in plain language — drafted?
- Consent form, including right to withdraw and the deadline — drafted?
- Data management: stored where, who has access, retained how long?
- Consistency check: do all three documents make the same promises?

Your notes

10. Analysis

A theme is not a topic. A theme has a subject and a claim.

Work through these

- Write each candidate theme as a full sentence with a claim.
- List the participants whose data supports it.
- Find one extract that complicates it — and report it.
- Link every theme back to an objective.

Your notes

11. Discussion

Results say what you found. Discussion says what it means.

Work through these

- Restate the finding in one sentence.
- Interpret: the most plausible explanation.
- Compare: agrees with whom, contradicts whom, and why.
- State the implication, then the specific limitation.

Your notes

12. Abstract — the six moves

200 to 300 words. Context, gap, aim and question, method, findings, contribution.

Work through these

- Write exactly one sentence per move.
- Name the actual findings — 'several themes emerged' says nothing.
- No citations, no undefined abbreviations.
- Cut to the word limit, protecting the findings sentence.

Your notes

13. Viva preparation

The viva tests whether the work is yours and whether you understand the choices you made.

Work through these

- Summarise your research in two minutes, out loud, recorded.
- Why this method rather than the obvious alternative?
- What is your contribution, in one sentence?
- What would you attack if you were the examiner?

Your notes

14. Academic integrity

The thinking, the argument and the words submitted for assessment must be yours.

Work through these

- Have you read every source you cite, in the original?
- Can you explain why every claim in each paragraph is there?
- Does your institution require you to declare AI use? Have you checked?
- Have you asked your supervisor in writing about anything you are unsure of?

Your notes

Where to go next

Every exercise in this workbook has an interactive version at superdiss.com, with a supervisor that asks follow-up questions as you write. The learning centre at superdiss.com/learn covers each stage in more depth, free.

SuperDiss provides developmental educational guidance only. It is independent and is not endorsed by any university or professional body.