Dissertation Research & Writing for Construction Students

- User-friendly, easy-to-dip-into guide for all Built Environment students
- Takes the reader from the stage of choosing a topic to writing a well-structured dissertation
- Best case practice illustrated with numerous examples, case studies and references

Dissertation Research & Writing for Construction Students covers topic selection, research planning, data collection and methodology, as well as structuring and writing the dissertation – in fact, everything needed for a successful write-up.

A new section advising students on the use of the SPSS software package Statistical Analysis for Social Sciences will help readers make the best use of this tool. New examples and references ensure that this new edition of the bestselling construction dissertation guide is right up to speed with current practice.

This is the ideal resource for students involved in research in Construction Management, Building and Quantity Surveying.

Dr S. G. Naoum is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Property, Surveying and Construction at London South Bank University. Before beginning his academic career he worked as a site engineer and project manager.
Dissertation Research & Writing for Construction Students

Third edition
Dr S. G. Naoum
To my mother, Rose
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Preface

This book has grown out of my involvement in supervising BSc and MSc dissertations as well as my accumulated experience of teaching research methods to postgraduate students at London South Bank University. Over the years, I became convinced that construction students needed something akin to research methods lectures, in addition to tutoring, that could provide them with guidance on basic research techniques and how to write a dissertation. There have been an enormous number of textbooks which presented research design and methodologies but few, if any, are related to built environment studies.

This book approaches dissertation research and writing as a process, involving a sequence of learnable activities. Each activity prepares the student for the next step and some steps are best taken before others. I have divided the process of dissertation research into three parts, which are best carried out in the order presented.

Part I is ‘preparing the ground’. It involves:

1. identifying the problem (including narrowing and clarifying the problem);
2. writing a proposal (including the aim, objectives, hypothesis and/or key research questions);
3. reviewing the literature (including critical appraisal of literature).

Part II is ‘research design’. It involves:

4. approaches to data collection (deciding whether to use a survey or a case study);
5. techniques for data collection (deciding whether to use the post or go for interviews);
6. constructing and sampling the questionnaire.

Part III is ‘analysis of the results’ and producing the dissertation. It involves:

7. measurement of data;
8. analysis of data (including interpretation and discussion of results);
9. structuring and writing the whole dissertation;
10. dissertation supervision and assessment.

This book is aimed specifically at BSc and MSc students, who are embarking on research as part of their degree. It will provide students with a clear explanatory
text which is supported by numerous examples illustrating good practice. Students of Built Environment subjects such as Construction Management, Facility Management, Building Surveying, Quantity Surveying and Civil Engineering will find this book of use. It will also be of use to those candidates requiring membership of the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) and anyone else involved in research work.

**About the third edition**

It has been very pleasing to receive the many complimentary and positive comments from reviewers and users of the first and second editions. These comments have been most appreciated and provided the encouragement for, the basis of, the third edition.

The third edition retains the same underlying theme, aims and approaches. It also carries forward the same basic framework with the same sequencing and ordering of the chapters.

There is, however, a general review and update of material. The rationalisation of the text recognises the need for new sections such as ‘examples of research road maps’, ‘further examples of writing a literature review’, ‘further examples of data analysis’, ‘the use of SPSS’ and ‘additional appendices’.
I wish to express my special thanks and appreciation to David Coles for his encouragement during the preparation of the first edition of this book.

I am also grateful to the following students for their permission to extract information from their dissertations: Miss H. Cooper, Mr S. Green, Mr B. Hemmings, Mr M. Howard, Mrs Z. Mulholland, Mr F. Rassam and Mr T. Whitworth.

I also wish to thank Longman Group Ltd, London, for permission to adapt appendices from their book *Statistical Tables for Biological, Agricultural, and Medical Research*, sixth edition (1974); to Pitman Publishing, for permission to adapt a table from their book, *Management and Organisational Behaviour*, fourth edition (1996); and to Unwin Hyman Publications, for permission to adapt a table from their book, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (1988). Last but not least my thanks go to my colleague D. Fong for his permission to use his SPSS lecture notes, which are exhibited in Appendix 5.

References to sources of information and material are given as accurately as possible throughout this book. Apologies are expressed if any acknowledgement has inadvertently not been recorded.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the staff of Prepress Projects Ltd, who masterfully crafted the production of this book.

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This book provides a guide and learning support document in the preparation of a dissertation for honours undergraduate students and for students undertaking dissertations on taught Masters degrees. The book focuses specifically on built environment subjects with a special reference to the discipline areas of Construction, Project Management, Quantity Surveying, Building Surveying, Estate Management, Facility Management and others. However, as the book follows the interrelated process of conducting a research, it can also be useful to undergraduate and postgraduate students of various disciplines. It covers issues such as the selection of a dissertation topic, writing a proposal, conducting a literature review, selecting the research approach, devising research instruments, collecting information, analysing and presenting information and producing a well-written dissertation.

Rationale for conducting a dissertation

The rationale for including a dissertation as a major component of the BSc and MSc courses is that it provides for the development of intellectual skills of a kind that is not fully facilitated on the other components of the teaching course. The dissertation requirement accords with the educational philosophy of the BSc and MSc course in that it requires students to take responsibility for their own learning, specifying and defining the task, and defining the learning outcomes.

The aims and objectives of conducting a dissertation are therefore:

1 To provide the opportunity for students to undertake an independent piece of work of a demanding nature.
2 To enable students to investigate, in depth, a subject in which they have a particular interest and of their own selection.
3 To provide students with an opportunity to stretch their intellectual and technical skills.
4 To encourage students to develop new forms of analysis, conclusions and policies which may make an original contribution to the knowledge in the field of study concerned.
Introduction

To encourage both clarity and depth of thought in that the project involves analysis of a problem in depth and the development of a logical sequence of ideas.

To provide students with an opportunity of learning how to acquire detailed information on a particular issue. It will involve them in the use of bibliographies, libraries and library reference systems. It will involve them in using primary sources of data such as a census, and it will involve the collection of new data through interviews, surveys and archival research.

To require the proper use, presentation and communication of data.

The meaning of research

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines research as ‘careful search or inquiry; endeavour to discover new or collate old facts etc. by scientific study of a subject; course of critical investigation’ (Soanes and Stevenson, 2004). From this we can conclude that the word ‘research’ may be used interchangeably with ‘inquiry’, ‘study’ or ‘investigation’. And yet something more is implied: the inquiry, study or investigation must be conducted in a careful, scientific and/or critical manner. Others have added to this list of adjectives ‘methodical’ and ‘systematic’. It does not really matter which combination of words is chosen (systematic inquiry or critical investigation) so long as both words are kept clearly in mind.

In addition to a specific method of inquiry, a research project has to have an aim or objective. In general terms, the aim of all research is to expand knowledge. But we do not simply want a list of facts. A good piece of research will focus on certain aspects of a topic. It will seek to answer specific questions, solve a particular problem or test a hypothesis. The issue(s) to be addressed must be clearly stated at the outset in the objective(s) of research.

Purpose of the book

This book fulfils the need of the construction industry by providing students with a useful guide to undertake a piece of research. The construction industry is now developing a community with a new attitude to research. Although a number of texts are available on research design and methodology, there is little, if any, applied in construction. This book is specifically designed to assist:

1 Honours undergraduate students in Built Environment with specific emphasis on construction-related degree programmes;
2 MSc (taught Masters) students in Construction Management/Project Management-related subjects;
3 CIOB (member) new educational framework course programmes offered by universities, colleges of higher educational, correspondence courses, and so on;
4 CIOB (direct member) thesis route programme.
The book will also assist:

1. students of other related Built Environment disciplines, for example Building Surveying, Quantity Surveying, Architecture, Building Economics, Facility Management, Estate Management, and Commercial Management;
2. students in the social sciences and people concerned with social surveys.

Additionally, the book should provide a useful ‘foundation’ guide to students who are about to start an MPhil/PhD programme. However, it is not designed to provide a manual for PhD students, nor does it provide the type of analysis that a doctorate deserves.

**Plan of the book**

As mentioned earlier, this book will follow the interrelated stages of conducting a dissertation research. Figure 1.1 illustrates the research process stages with their corresponding chapters. This book is therefore composed of 10 chapters.

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter provides a general introduction to dissertation research and outlines the main aims and objectives of the book.

**Chapter 2: Selecting a topic and writing the dissertation proposal**

The choice of a dissertation topic usually comes from your interest in and value of a particular subject, which are usually interrelated. The interest and value will eventually be developed into a series of questions, which you will be keen to find answers to. Selecting a topic is discussed in the first part of the chapter. After selecting the subject of your dissertation, you need to formulate a proposal that should contain a rationale, research goals (aim, objectives, hypothesis or key questions), outline methodology and a programme of work. The extent and degree of details for the dissertation proposal are given in the second part of this chapter.

**Chapter 3: Reviewing the literature**

This activity will most likely be carried out throughout the whole research process but more extensively at the earlier stages of the research. It basically involves reading and critically appraising what other people have written about your subject area. The chapter also gives details on how to conduct a systematic literature search.
Chapter 2
Selecting a topic and writing the dissertation proposal

Chapter 3
Reviewing the literature

Chapter 4
Deciding on the research approach

Chapter 5
Deciding on the research technique

Chapter 6
Constructing the questionnaire
or
Designing format for secondary data collection

Chapter 7
Data measurement and coding

Chapter 8
Analysis of the results

Chapter 9
Structuring and writing the dissertation

Chapter 10
Dissertation supervision and assessment

**Figure 1.1** Research process diagram.
Chapter 4: Approaches to data collection

After deciding on the topic that you wish to study and having conducted an extensive literature search, you will be in a position to design your research. Designing the research involves the following activities:

1. Deciding on the type of data that has to be collected (quantitative or qualitative data). This chapter provides further description of these terms.
2. Confirm the method of data collection (i.e. should you conduct a survey or a case study). The chapter describes each of these methods in great detail.
3. Deciding on the techniques for data collection (i.e. should you gather the data by interviews, by telephone or by postal questionnaire?).
4. Designing your sample. The research design should tell you how your sample needs to be drawn, to whom you should target your questionnaire and how many to issue.

Chapter 5: Techniques for data collection

After deciding on your research approach you will be involved in collecting the data for your research study. If you are collecting ‘primary’ data (data collected at first hand), you need to undertake certain activities such as inviting your sample to complete the questionnaire, preparing the data summary sheet or taking whatever action is required for your fieldwork. If you are collecting ‘secondary’ data (data gathered from some other sources), you need to contact those organisations that store the data (if not stored in the library), such as the state and its agencies, statistical offices such as Her Majesty’s Stationery Office (HMSO) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Chapter 5 explains the main features of the postal survey and the interview technique, together with showing the advantages and limitations of both techniques.

Chapter 6: Questionnaire construction

This chapter describes and illustrates methods of questionnaire construction: the content of questions, types of questions, question format and the sequence of questions.

Note to students: After constructing your questionnaire, it is strongly recommended to conduct a trial run on the questionnaire before circulating it to the whole sample. This trial is called a ‘pilot study’. The pilot study involves testing the wording of the questions, establishing the length of the questionnaire, avoiding ambiguous questions, and suggestions for analysing the data, as well as testing the technique selected for collecting the data. In large research projects such as MPhil or PhD, the researcher should even try to analyse the results of the pilot study to ensure the reliability of data collected. Chapter 6 gives further details on the pilot study.


**Chapter 7: Measurements and probability**

This chapter prepares the ground for analysis of your results. It is concerned with the nature of measurement in research. It includes the explanation of the four levels of measurement: nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio. The main point to recognise about measurement is that each level of measurement requires a certain type of analysis that is more appropriate than others. This chapter will also explain the meaning of the term ‘probability’ and its relevance to the analysis of your results.

**Chapter 8: Analysis of the results**

Once you have collected all the completed questionnaires and/or gathered the archival data, you will be ready for the next stage: the analysis of the data and determining the direction of the study. This stage involves processing the data, putting answers to categories and generally finding out the pattern of the responses. Some results require statistical analysis, as in the case of a large sample survey, and some results involve finding out the trend of the responses, as in the case of in-depth interviews. Chapter 8 gives details on how to analyse the results both manually and with the use of the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

**Chapter 9: Structuring and writing the dissertation**

After you have completed the literature review and analysed the data, you will be ready to write up the whole dissertation. Writing your dissertation involves reporting and critically appraising the literature review, analysis of the data, discussion and interpretation of your findings. Bear in mind that the writing-up stage can be overlapped with any of the above activities and may start as early as the literature review stage. Chapter 9 provides details on structuring and writing a typical dissertation project.

**Chapter 10: Dissertation supervision and assessment**

Once you have decided on the topic of your study and your proposal gets approved, your department should then appoint a personal supervisor for you. It is therefore important to know the role of your supervisor and what can be expected from him/her.

This chapter will discuss the basics of what you should expect from your supervisor. It first explains what the role of the supervisor is and what it is not. Second, it illustrates how you may plan your dissertation and finally how you would expect to be assessed in the end.

**Reference**

Part I

Preparing the ground and reviewing the literature
Selecting a topic and writing the dissertation proposal

The first step of the research process involves selecting a research topic and writing your dissertation proposal. This means that you need to do a great deal of reading and clear thinking to identify the problem and your area of interest. This chapter deals with choosing a topic for research and gives guidance on writing your dissertation proposal. The contents of Chapter 2 are illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Choosing the topic

When embarking upon research as part of an undergraduate or a postgraduate study programme, it is important that you pay particular attention to the choice of subject or topic of the research. The choice of topic usually comes from your interest in and value of a particular subject. This interest and value will eventually be developed into a series of questions that you are keen to find answers to. If you are finding difficulty in choosing a researchable topic, you can consider the following:

1. Consulting the library catalogue and inquiring about theses and dissertations, articles in academic journals, reports, books and the like.
2. Using web searching to find areas of interest.
3. Talking about problems and possible topics with your colleagues and/or with your lecturers who are experts in the field.
4. Arranging an informal interview with professionals in the industry and discussing what you should emphasise and what are the possible practical outcomes.

There are a number of criteria that need to be considered when deciding on your research topic. These are summarised below:

1. *A dissertation topic should be realistic.* You need to identify a problem (supported by published materials), investigate the causes and possible solution. You might wish to investigate a problem on site, for example the causes of variation orders and its effect on the project outcome, or the problem of material management on site. Alternatively, the research subject might cover an
Preparing the ground and reviewing the literature

1. Choosing a topic

- Working title
- Purpose of the research
- Aim
- Objectives
- Hypothesis (or key questions)
- Outline methodology
- Proposed contents
- Initial references
- Work plan

The dissertation proposal

Figure 2.1 Contents of Chapter 2.

office procedure or the appraisal of a particular system. Here you will be investigating what should be done and what is actually done.

2. Your topic should be specific and narrow. For example, if you are conducting a detailed case study, do not investigate all the factors that may influence site productivity as a topic, but rather limit yourself to the influence of financial incentives on productivity. You might be tempted to study job satisfaction in the building industry, but this again is too broad. A better way is to narrow it down and investigate job satisfaction of operatives who are working for small-size firms. Narrowing down the topic can be diagrammed as in Figure 2.2. Bouma and Atkinson (1995, p. 30) comment:

the first thing to do if we are to narrow and clarify a problem question is to ‘unpack’ it. Most of the starting-points contain many issues and suggest many different avenues of research. The questions we begin with are usually quite complex. They may sound simple, but they are probably far from it. If we are to narrow and focus the issues for research, we have to list the issues involved in the question. We are then in a position to choose from that list, a question that will focus our attention on a narrowed problem.

3. Your topic should show individuality, that is your personal contribution to the study. What is new about your investigation? This can take the form of case
studies, a series of interviews, postal questionnaires or analysing archival data (Chapters 4 and 5 discuss these approaches in detail).

4 **Accessibility of information.** Your topic should be in an area for which you can have access to the data necessary for the successful completion of the dissertation.

5 **Personal ability.** The subject and extent of the research should be within your intellectual and physical resource ability.

6 **Personal interest.** Last but not least, you should be interested in the subject of research. It is of no use if you do not like or enjoy the research subject.

**The dissertation proposal**

After you decide on a topic for research, your dissertation proposal should contain the following:

1 **Working title**
2 **Purpose (rationale for the study)**
3 **Research goals**
   - **Aim**
   - **Objectives**
   - **Key questions**
   - **Hypothesis (if applicable)**
4 **Initial literature review**
5 **Outline methodology**
6 **Proposed contents**
7 **Initial references**
8 **Work plan**
Preparing the ground and reviewing the literature

The extent and degree of detail for your proposal should ideally take the following into account.

**Working title**

A working title is a short line that gives your research a ‘direction’ and the title might change slightly at the final stages of research. The title should give your research an identity/name that reflects the focal point and area of the research. It should therefore be clear and to the point. There are a number of questions to be borne in mind when selecting a final title. These are:

1. Does the title identify precisely what is being studied?
2. Is the title clear and concise and at the same time sufficiently descriptive to allow for rapid categorisation?
3. Has the title been stripped of superfluous words and redundancy? Phrases such as ‘A contribution to . . .’ or ‘Towards a theory of . . .’ are nothing more than padding.
4. Are the key nouns correctly chosen and in the proper order?

(See examples of working titles in Appendix 1.)

**Purpose of the research (or rationale for the study)**

This should be a one-page discussion of approximately 500–1000 words that sets out (with supporting empirical facts that are fully referenced) the problem and the reason for the proposed study, highlighting the issues to be investigated (see Appendix 1 for examples).

**The research goals**

This section contains four parts, namely the aim, objectives, hypotheses or assumptions, and key questions.

**Aim**

Ideally a *one*-sentence aim should be provided, highlighting your ultimate goal. Appendix 1 provides examples of aims but here are some more specimens:

Example 1: To *provide professional guidelines* to engineers who are required to undertake the role of the project manager.

Example 2: To *develop a conceptual model* for analysing productivity barriers of subcontracting.

Example 3: To *develop a theoretical model* for identifying the different factors that may influence the behaviour and effectiveness of project managers.

Example 4: To *construct a comparative table* showing the difference in
performance between various types of procurement methods.

Example 5: To design a management system for improving the safety performance to small-size contractors.

Example 6: To develop a chart that demonstrates the strength of the relationship between implementing lean construction initiatives and productivity level on site.

Example 7: To develop a mathematical formula to predict the productivity level of various construction techniques.

Example 8: To construct a scoring matrix showing the level of performance between management and traditional form of contracts.

Note to students: Notice that the above aims are phrased as if the researcher is seeking to deliver some kind of a ‘product’ that would benefit the industry and other future researchers, such as to provide professional guidelines, to develop a conceptual framework, to construct a comparative table, to design a management system, to develop a chart, to develop a mathematical formula or to construct a scoring matrix.

In the conclusion chapter, you need to deliver the product that you have aimed for at the start of your research. Appendix 7 shows an example of an achieved aim.

Objectives

Ideally between three and five single-sentence objectives should be developed. Objectives are the breakdown of your aim (sub-aims), which focuses on finding out or establishing certain issues while achieving your aim (see Appendix 1 for examples). The objectives will then pose a number of questions that will form your research questionnaire later in the research process. As shown, try to phrase each objective in the form of:

To investigate . . .
To analyse . . .
To assess . . .
To examine . . .
To compare . . .
To test . . .
To critically appraise . . .
To find out . . .
To evaluate . . .

etc.

Hypothesis

If your research is designed to test or validate a hypothesis or a conceptual theory, or to explain a phenomenon, then a one-sentence main hypothesis needs to be established that should clearly and specifically state the position for the argument
Preparing the ground and reviewing the literature

or investigation. This main hypothesis can be broken down into a number of sub-hypotheses (see Proposal 2 in Appendix 1).

A hypothesis is a tentative proposition that is a subject of verification through your investigation. Your conclusion will either support or reject your proposed hypothesis, or support part and reject others. Hypotheses can often be formulated as ‘if . . . then’ statements, or as a hunch that you have about the existence of a relationship between issues or variables. Your hypothesis should also be sharp and specific. Appendix 1 provides various types of hypotheses.

Key questions

A number of ‘key questions’ need to be formulated in your proposal that would state the position for the argument or investigation. Appendix 1 provides various types of key questions.

Initial literature review

In this part of your proposal you need to expand on the rationale section and write an initial literature review of approximately 1000 words. (See examples of writing-up styles in Chapters 3 and 9.)

Outline methodology and research road map

In this part of the proposal you should highlight your proposed methodology for obtaining the information necessary for the study. Research methods can take many forms (see Chapter 4). At the proposal stage, however, all you need to provide is an outline methodology, for example which academic journals you will concentrate your reading on. If you intend to interview personnel, who will they be and approximately how many of them will you interview?, and so on (see Appendix 1 for examples).

It is strongly recommended to include a road map for your research methodology (see a typical example of a research road map in Figure 2.3 and also Figure 9.2).

Proposed structure of the dissertation

Naturally, you would not be expected to provide the precise structure of your dissertation at this stage, but an initial indication is necessary. So in this part you need to provide the proposed titles of your chapters, which will be subject to verification and can be tweaked at the end. For example:

Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the problem
Chapter 2: Previous project management models
Chapter 3: Apparent advantage and disadvantages of project management
Chapter 4: Research design and methodology
STAGE 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW

ARCOM Abstract www.arcom.ac.uk/abstracts.html
+ ASCE + CME + ECAM + IPM Journals

Major elements associated with the formation of CPMs (Chapter 3)
- Knowledge & skills, educational background, further education, training & experience.

Construction Project Management (Chapter 2)
- Definition of project management, project life-cycle, location of the CPM, the role and the changing role of the CPM.

Stage 2
Questionnaire Design
Chapter 4

Stage 3
Conduct a Survey with 30 Project Managers

Stage 4
Analysis of Responses
Chapter 5

Educational Background
Course Contents
Further Education
Training Achievement

Sources of knowledge
Experience

Major knowledge & skills

Figure 2.3 Example of a typical methodology road map. Source: Naoum and Al-Dhyaf (2006).
Preparing the ground and reviewing the literature

Chapter 5: Analysis of the interviews, results and discussion
Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

(See Appendix 1 for more examples.)

Initial references

Details of the core sources of references, particularly those that have been consulted in order to provide the basis of evidence and information necessary to enable the dissertation proposal to be developed, should be indicated. Each reference should provide author, title, publisher, edition and publication data (see Appendix 1 for examples).

Work plan

This should be a simple work plan or timetable. A bar chart of activities over the weeks of study is often helpful, indicating what you intend to do and when (see Figure 10.1).

Summary

Selecting your dissertation topic is an important task. Therefore, you should allow a reasonable amount of time in which to develop your proposal. The first step is to identify areas that have potential and seem interesting to you. Consult your library and read articles, books, dissertations, etc. that are related to your area of interest. Discuss your ideas with your colleagues and/or lecturers. The second step is to write your initial proposal following the instructions given in this chapter (see Appendix 1 for examples). The three most important parts of your proposal are the purpose of study, objectives and methodology. Finally, discuss your initial proposal with your appointed supervisor and make amendments, if required. Start your investigation as soon as you can and stick with your work plan.

References and additional reading