Student Guide: Dissertation

1. What is a Dissertation?

If you consult dictionaries, you will find various definitions of 'dissertation'. Here are some typical examples:

Definition	Source
A formal exposition of a subject, especially a research paper	http://www.allwords.com/word-dissertation.html
A treatise advancing a new point of view resulting from research	http://www.wordreference.com/definition/dissertation
A lengthy, formal treatise	http://www.thefreedictionary.com/dissertation
'to dissertate' meaning 'to discourse', from the Latin *disserere*, 'to discuss'.	Chambers English Dictionary

All these definitions are relevant to the Extended Project. Key elements of a dissertation are:

- Research
- Point of view
- Discussion
- The structure of extended writing

For the Extended Project Dissertation you will need to explore a research question on a topic that interests you and develop your own point of view on the question you have selected. Some time and effort will be devoted to finding out both the factual information and what other people have said/written that relates to your research question. A key element of the dissertation is developing your thinking skills (analysing what people say and write, and developing your own arguments). You will also improve your abilities in communicating and presenting your ideas.

Extending yourself

Resources reference
You can find advice on Dissertation projects in the AQA Extended Project Companion, the Edexcel Level 3 Extended Project Guide and the OCR Extended Project Guide.

In choosing your research question, remember that the Extended Project dissertation will look different from essays and coursework pieces you do for other qualifications. It may be tempting to 'play safe' and explore a question that is already familiar but you may be missing out on an opportunity to do something creative and extend your knowledge and thinking. Look for opportunities to bring in ideas from a wide range of subject areas and develop your thinking skills.

You may also want to talk about your Extended Project work in an interview for higher education or employment. You are most likely to impress your interviewer if you can show that you have stretched yourself in new directions.

Activity 1: Reviewing Exemplar work
Look at the example dissertations provided in small groups. With your group look for evidence that the writer has carried out some relevant research, and expressed and argued for a point of view. Also look at the way the report has been structured. Identify aspects of the project that you feel were successful, and others that you feel were less successful.

2. Frameworks for thinking

Frame your thinking

Good dissertations are those in which the central ideas are clearly explained and analysed, and where the point of view is backed up by strong lines of argument. You will find it helpful to use **frameworks** to organise the ideas in your dissertation and to help you structure the flow of the argument. Frameworks are tools you can use when analysing issues, identifying and defining points of view, and forming lines of argument.

For example: if you are writing your dissertation on an ethical topic, a good way to begin the discussion section is by looking for thinkers who adopt a **utilitarian** point of view. You can then contrast their arguments and opinions with those who identify themselves with alternative ethical frameworks (e.g. virtue theory). Once you have looked at the main framework positions related to your question, state your own viewpoint, and explain how your view relates to the frameworks you have been using e.g. are you more of a utilitarian, or do you base your ethics on a theory of divine commandments?

By using a framework you will be able to reach a deeper level of analysis, and your writing will be clearer and better structured; these are key features of successful Extended Project dissertations.

Big Questions

Resource reference
For more on ethical frameworks, see Section 2 of the Edexcel Level 3 Extended Project Guide.

The dissertation is a chance to think deeply, to spend more time exploring and analysing ideas, and to develop a personal point of view about questions for which there may be no generally agreed upon answer. It isn't surprising, then, that many dissertations include an element of philosophical reflection (philosophy is where we think logically about fundamental questions). Philosophers think about 'Big Questions'. Here are some examples:

- How can we know things?
- What is truth?
- Is there a God?
- What is the mind?
- Do we have free will?
- What is the universe made from?
- Am I the same person today as I was yesterday? (Or when I was born)?
- How does language work?

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Activity 2: Big Questions
Think about whether there are any 'Big Questions' that are relevant to your chosen topic. Make a list of these and discuss them with your group.

Philosophical Frameworks
Once you have established that there is a 'Big Question' relevant to your project, the next step is to find out what the possible answers are. This may lead you to explore one (or more) of the frameworks that relate to the ideas in your project. Frameworks can be useful when exploring the meaning of central ideas in your work (analysis), and also when seeking to integrate ideas from different subject areas (synthesis).

Realism is the view that there is a single objective reality which exists independently of human beings.

Relativism is the view that truth is relative. There is no single objective truth. Truth depends on human beings.

Theism is the view that there is a supernatural being (a God) of infinite power who created the universe.

Atheism is the view that there is no God.

Agnosticism is the view that we cannot know whether or not there is a God.

Dualism: is the view that the mind and body are distinct from each other. The mind could exist without the body.

Materialism is the view that human beings are made up of physical stuff. The mind depends entirely on the brain and could not exist without it.

Essentialism is the view that there is a real self. Some features of you are essential to your ongoing personal identity.

Constructivism is the view that your personal identity is constructed. People are who they are because of their social relations and the role they play in society.

Determinism is the view that the state of the universe at one moment in time fixes the way it will be for all future times. Nothing is truly random. There is a sufficient cause for all events.

Libertarianism is the view that free choices can be made which were not pre-determined. When we make choices there are real alternative possibilities between which we can choose.

Innatism is the view that the mind contains ideas from the moment of birth.

Empiricism is the view that all ideas in the mind come from experience of the world (they are not there from birth).

Activity 3: Framing Answers
Now you have identified some of the 'Big Questions' relevant to your dissertation, look through the list of frameworks to see whether any of these are helpful in exploring possible answers to the questions. Often, the frameworks help to define a spectrum of possible opinions. Discuss with others where you would place yourself on the spectrum.

3. Frameworks and Dissertations

Using frameworks
Here are some ways you can use philosophical frameworks in your dissertation:

- When reading other people's ideas. For example, if you are thinking about the question of truth, you will be able to organise the ideas you read if you recognise that some people's views about truth belong to the realist framework, while others are relativist.
- To help work out where you stand on an issue. Frameworks often define opposite ends of the spectrum of ideas (e.g. dualism and materialism) - are you nearer to one end rather than the other?
- As a tool for analysing lines of argument. Having stated an argument, you can work out how people who believe in different frameworks might respond to it. For example, suppose your argument is that you need to have a language to have thought. Does this mean that the mind did not exist until language was learned, and if so, how would a dualist respond to this argument?
- To bring together ideas from different subject areas. For example, you could explore whether realism is a more appropriate view in science and if relativism is more appropriate to the arts.
- As a challenge to think about concepts in different way. You may feel that the frameworks miss out important alternative views, or that the way they are described is not clear. You can use these thoughts to improve on the definitions, or even argue that sometimes looking for definitions isn't helpful, as things are just too complicated.

Activity 4: Using Frameworks
Study one or more of the case studies below and discuss the issues they raise. Think in particular about the way in which the students are planning to use different philosophical frameworks.

Is there a single true picture of the world?
Charlotte has decided to write a dissertation exploring how science and art approach truth in different ways. Her teacher tells her that this is a very broad field, and she should look for a more focused research question. She decides to look at the question: Are there any connections between the work of Einstein and Picasso? After researching this, she finds that a central question in both the scientific work of Einstein and the artistic work of Picasso is whether or not there is a single 'true' description of the world. She decides that she is going to argue that both Einstein and Picasso challenge this idea. She does some more research and encounters two useful philosophical frameworks; realism and relativism.

Charlotte can use these frameworks to help define her viewpoint and begin analysing the arguments. She isn't happy with the realist view but she also disagrees with the relativists – so she needs to find a new position of her own, somewhere between the two.

When does life end?

Edward is interested in the question about how we define death. At what point should we say that someone is no longer alive? When he researches this question, he discovers that a traditional definition of death relied on the dualist view: death occurs when the soul leaves the body. Nowadays, we think about the question in more materialist terms: death is defined by the end of function in the parts of the brain that support consciousness.

In his dissertation, Edward decides first to write a literature review exploring the history of this development, then to write a discussion in which he analyses the arguments for and against these different viewpoints. He realises that the question has many important ethical implications e.g. when a life support machine should be turned off. Edward agrees with the materialist view. He also realises that the spiritual aspect which many people associate with the question has to be discussed. Can he perhaps find a way of synthesizing the two approaches?

Is there a real me?

Imran has recently moved to the UK having been born and brought up in Kenya. He and all his family are Muslims. He has noticed big cultural differences between his former homeland, where religion is a prominent part of public life, and his new life in the UK. He has also noticed that it affects the way he himself thinks and acts. It raises the question: has he changed? Is he still the same person, essentially, or has the shift to a new society in some way changed his own identity? When he begins researching this, he finds many arguments which suggest that your identity is something which is shaped by forces around you. Yet he believes that there is still a sense in which he is the same person that he was before he came to the UK. Is that a point of view he can defend in his dissertation?

Who is to blame?

Annika has read of court cases in the USA where defence lawyers defend clients by arguing that their actions were pre-determined by processes in their brains. She wonders whether this could be true, and what difference it would make to how we go about praising and blaming people for their actions.

She decides to write a dissertation exploring the question of free will and responsibility. As well as looking at some relevant case studies, she researches to find lines of argument supporting belief in free will, as well as lines of argument against. She realises that the topic she has chosen is a large and complex one, so to help keep her work focussed; she concentrates on one particular case study. As well as exploring some of the philosophical issues, she tries to find out how the law relates to questions about responsibility.

Rather than answering the question directly, she decides to argue that questions like this need to be decided by looking at all aspects: scientific, philosophical and legal. She thinks the philosophical frameworks will be helpful as a guide to her thinking - which ones should she use?

Does religion make you a better person?
Sam read an article in a newspaper in which researchers claimed to have proved that religious people are more ethical than non-religious people. He found this intriguing and he discussed it with his teacher.

Their first thought was that he could conduct an investigation/field study, using questionnaire surveys as a research tool. As they discussed it further, they realised that there were many problems about the methodology of this kind of study (how do you tell whether one person is more ethical than another? How reliable is a questionnaire when trying to find data of this kind?). There were also a lot of issues about defining concepts e.g. what do we mean by 'religion' and 'belief'?

Sam decided to work on a dissertation in which he would review the research literature and go on to explore some of the ethical and philosophical questions raised. He thought that frameworks such as theism, atheism and agnosticism, as well as the ethical frameworks, would be useful.

He realised that the frameworks could be combined in different ways. For example, a theist might normally accept a divine command theory of ethics, but could theists be utilitarians instead? And must atheists reject the ethical conclusions of the divine command theory? As soon as these questions had occurred to him, Sam realised that the situation was much more complicated than the newspaper article had led him to believe. One thing that was clear was that a straight-forward 'yes' or 'no' answer didn't make sense.

Can you think before you can speak?
Liz had a good friend who had recently given birth. Liz had met the baby on a number of occasions, both before and after he had started to talk. It had set her thinking about the relationship between language and thought. Does all thought require language? Is it really true that animals and small children, who have no language, cannot think at all? If that is the case, how do babies learn to speak?

Liz decided to focus her dissertation on the question, 'can you think before you can speak?' She carried out a review of the secondary literature, but she also included some records of her own observations of her friend's child as a primary source. When she began to analyse the question further through discussion with her teacher, she encountered the debate between the innatist and empiricist perspectives. Are the ideas we use when we think something which belong in the mind from birth, or do we get them through experience? Liz wasn't sure she knew the answer, but it did seem useful to have these two frameworks in mind as a tool for identifying and exploring the links between different possible answers.

Project springboard
Notice how several of the students in the case studies started from their own experience and observations; this is a can be useful way to develop your own research question.