Extended Project Teacher Guide: Dissertation

1. Introduction to Dissertations

There is an associated Student Guide to accompany these lessons.

This lesson is designed to provide guidance about specific points related to dissertation projects.

Discussion: What is a dissertation? (15 min)

The report models described in the Edexcel Level 3 Extended Project Student Guide (chapters 3 and 4) and AQA Extended Project Companion (chapter 3) provide a good way of structuring dissertations; abstract, introduction, research review, discussion, conclusion and bibliography. The OCR Extended Project Student Guide also has some general guidance in the section on project formats.

Talk through the idea of a dissertation with students to ensure that they understand what is expected of them (revisit as needed). Key points include:

- The academic core in a Level 3 dissertation; research should include references to academic source material (not just news articles/material from websites).
- Students need to demonstrate that they have reviewed available research conducted by others on their chosen topic (they need to think about what research has already been completed on their chosen research topic when making their final question choice).
- The research review should, where appropriate, take the form of a narrative, or a series of narrative threads, outlining the key developments that underpin the dissertation. A narrative where developments are linked chronologically is more readable than one that has snippets from different sources. This approach should also ensure that students have tried to understand the material researched.
- A reminder for students to use the '5Ws' as a tool to assist them (Edexcel Level 3 Extended Project Student Guide, chapter 1). If they can set the scene it will improve the quality of their writing: What happened? Who was involved? Where did it happen? When did it happen? Why did it happen?
- To raise a discussion into the top mark band the focus should be on *lines of argument.* There should be an attempt to integrate the arguments for and against a point of view into a coherent line of reasoning.
- Students should be encouraged to:
  - ☑ Provide an assessment of relevant points of view
  - ☑ State their own viewpoint clearly and precisely (using frameworks looked at in lesson 2)
  - ☑ Provide their supporting arguments
  - ☑ Consider and reply to counter-arguments.

  The Edexcel Level 3 Extended Project Student Guide (chapter 2) provides a model for this structure.
- Lines of argument, counter-arguments and responses to the arguments will need to be constructed for a number of issues raised by the research question. For example:

  A student working on the question 'is experimentation on animals acceptable?' might need to address three main issues;

  a) Should non-human animals be considered to be equal to humans in terms of ethical regard?

b) Is there reliable data to be gained from animal experiments?
c) Are there satisfactory alternatives?

For each point, there are a number of arguments and counter-arguments which the student should address in a logical manner.

- Students need to think about how to frame their discussion (signposting the direction their argument will go, and a reflective commentary on the general flow of argument).

Activity 1: Reviewing Exemplar work (25 min)

Choose an example of a dissertation (from your awarding organisation's website or using previous student dissertations from your centre) and ask the students to review the exemplar work in small groups. They should be looking for evidence of the research carried out, how the argument has been structured and how the dissertation has been presented. Ask them to think about what elements they felt were and were not successful.

The aim of the activity is to help students become familiar with how dissertations are structured and to be able to talk through what they will need to do for each of the various sections.

2. Frameworks for Thinking

Building on the general dissertation points covered in lesson 1, this lesson gives further guidance on how to organise central ideas and the theoretical frameworks that can be used. At level 3 we expect to see students making use of relevant theories to their research questions. The use of theoretical frameworks lends clarity, structure and depth to dissertations. Also introduced is the idea of frameworks as tools for organising the analysis and development of ideas in a dissertation.

Discussion: Frame your thinking (5 min)

As a first step towards identifying which frameworks might be relevant for particular projects, students are encouraged to spend time thinking about 'Big Questions' that are relevant to their work. The 'Big Questions' below are given as examples in the Student Guide;

- 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?

Activity 2: Big Questions (10 min)

Ask the students to think about whether there are any 'Big Questions' that are relevant to their chosen topic. They should then list the questions and discuss them in small groups.

Students do not always have a clear sense of the main ideas they should discuss when they start their dissertation project. Identifying central issues through a discussion exercise may help them to decide how to focus their research, thinking and writing.

Discussion: Philosophical Frameworks (10 min)

Discuss the idea of theoretical frameworks and how frameworks can be used to support their dissertations. The list of frameworks given (realism, relativism, theism, atheism, agnosticism, dualism, materialism, essentialism, constructivism, determinism, libertarianism, innatism and empiricism) is not mandatory and you may want to select other examples which are more relevant to the questions your students are likely to select for their topics.

Activity 3: Framing Answers (15 min + homework)

Once the students have identified some of the 'Big Questions' for their dissertation, ask them see if any of the frameworks are helpful in exploring possible answers to the questions.

The aim is for students to begin thinking about the range of positions that link to the 'Big Questions'. It may be useful for them to think about the 'extreme' positions from either end of a spectrum of ideas (with a view to identifying where they stand on the spectrum). One way of doing this would be to ask students to form a line, with either end of the line representing two different framework positions (e.g. materialism and dualism), and ask them to stand according to where they fall on the spectrum. They would then explain why they have chosen to stand where they have.

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3. Frameworks and Dissertations

This lesson looks at frameworks from the perspective of using them in practice.

Discussion: Using frameworks (5 min)

Spend a few minutes reminding students how they can use the frameworks from lesson 2 to guide and enhance their project work.

This may also be a good time to remind students about the need demonstrate *extension* in their dissertation. Each of the case studies they will study has the potential to lead to a project with strengths in the areas of broadening skills, deepening understanding and widening perspectives.

Activity 4: Using Frameworks (35 min + homework)

Ask the students to look at one or more of the case studies below and think about the different theoretical frameworks that the students in the case studies are planning to use. They should then discuss the issues they identify.

The case studies listed should provoke a lot of discussion and the focus should be on the role that theoretical frameworks play in each case.

Case Studies

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.