

# Department of Sociology

## Guide to Undergraduate Dissertations

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### Dissertation Course Organiser

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### Overview

**Students may choose to write a dissertation of between 6,000-10,000 words in place of a paper for Part IIB.** For many students the opportunity to study a topic of their choosing in depth is the most rewarding part of the Tripos as it provides a chance to develop new skills and show your work in a more original and polished way. For some, it provides evidence of their potential to future employers; while for others, having one less three-hour exam to revise for and sit is also a big attraction.

**A topic for the dissertation will need to be chosen, and a suitable supervisor for that particular topic should be approached, before the end of the Part IIA year. A supervisor must be in place by the start of the Part IIB term.** Students should consult with Directors of Studies when making these decisions.

The area identified might arise from a paper already taken or might relate to an area of interest within the Department; sometimes students choose a dissertation topic that relates to a long-standing interest (for instance a charity or social movement), or is relevant to their career aspirations.

[Academics in the department](#), [affiliated academics](#), and [postdocs and research staff](#) can all act as dissertation supervisors.

**It is important to talk to potential supervisors in good time, since a critical part of a successful dissertation process is identifying a viable topic.** To help students choose a supervisor and topic, consider reading the brief accounts of staff research interests found via the above links. (Further advice on how to reach out to a supervisor can be found in these [workshop slides](#).) One element to the art of succeeding with a dissertation lies in choosing the right kind of question. This should be sufficiently arresting to make someone want to write up to 10,000 words in answer to it, but not so demanding that you will only be able to scrape the surface. It should equally be sufficiently compelling to keep you interested in providing the answer.

Students should, at a minimum, begin thinking about their dissertation and do some preliminary reading in the summer vacation preceding their final year. They should also consider whether some time during the vacation should be used for obtaining ethical approval and collecting data or undertaking other relevant fieldwork.

To avoid adversely affecting your performance on other papers you should at least start preparing your dissertation over the summer break, and plan your dissertation work so that it does not detract from your supervision work on your other three papers. This planning of a timetable is best done in association with your dissertation supervisor.

## Key Deadlines

**SOCIOLOGY DISSERTATIONS**

**DEADLINES**

**Title Application form: 20 October 2023, by 12:00 noon** to: [undergrad@sociology.cam.ac.uk](mailto:undergrad@sociology.cam.ac.uk)

*\*changes to titles must be submitted **not later than 9 February 2024***

**Ethical approval forms: by 31 January 2024**

**Dissertation Submission:** Electronic versions should be submitted by 12:00 noon on **3 May 2024** to: [undergrad@sociology.cam.ac.uk](mailto:undergrad@sociology.cam.ac.uk)

### Title Application Form

**By the division of Michaelmas of your final year (see deadline above) you will need to complete the 'Title Application' form.** If you want to make a start on your dissertation before this (which is recommended) you should submit this form in the previous Easter term. The form can be accessed from the Part II Sociology Moodle site or via this link:

[UG Sociology Dissertation Title Submission Form](#)

**Your supervisor must approve the title before the form is submitted.** After submission of the form, the Director of Undergraduate Education will either approve your title or recommend modifications.

The focus of the dissertation may change as you delve further into it. You therefore can change your dissertation title up to the division of Lent Term (see deadline above). If this does happen, you should have submitted a formal request for a title change to the Undergraduate Secretary for the Department of Sociology.

### Research Methods

Dissertations for sociology do not have to contain original empirical research, but often will, since they should draw on a wide range of sources and/or primary material, which may include first-hand observations, experiments, interviews, statistical data or archive holdings. Examples of good dissertations from previous years can be found on Sociology Part II Moodle site:

<https://www.vle.cam.ac.uk/mod/folder/view.php?id=4191861>

**Students will need to display a knowledge of the sociological literature on methodology, in addition to general research methodology literature,** to demonstrate they have chosen an appropriate research method (or methods) for their dissertation, and are aware of the strengths and limitations of the method(s) they use. There are no restrictions on the research methods that students can use in their dissertations as long as they are good sociology (i.e., that they align well with the study's

objectives), ethical, and the risks involved are acceptable.

**The department provides several dissertation workshops throughout Michaelmas and Lent to help students: plan their dissertations; seek and obtain ethical approval; undertake a literature review; develop suitable methodologies; analyse data; and provide guidance with writing and referencing. Please refer to the Moodle page for information about these workshops.**

Good research projects can consist of the use of more than one research method, for instance a qualitative and a quantitative method. Whilst that is to be commended, experience suggests that, within the temporal and resource constraints of undergraduate dissertations, students are often better off doing one method well rather than over-stretching themselves and employing multiple methods to a lower standard.

### **Quantitative Dissertations**

As stated above, students can employ qualitative or quantitative methods as appropriate. **It is hoped that a number of students will use quantitative methods.** Students intending to write a dissertation which will make use of secondary data should look at the website of the Cambridge Undergraduate Quantitative Methods Centre (<http://www.cuqm.cshss.cam.ac.uk>), which contains links to several useful sources of data. The website also has a video recording of a presentation which was given by the UK Data Service in 2015, outlining their key resources and demonstrating their online tools and search facilities. In addition to individual supervision, classes can be provided to assist students with the analysis of data.

Students are also welcome to make use of The Statistics Clinic, based in the Statistical Laboratory at the Centre for Mathematical Sciences. The statistical laboratory offers a free, walk-in statistical consulting service to members of the university, regardless of their field. The website contains more details: <http://www.statslab.cam.ac.uk/clinic/>

### **Expense**

The department does not have any funds for students' dissertations. However, some students have, in the past, obtained generous funding from their colleges for dissertation-related expenses, such as travel. Your college Tutor or DoS should be able to advise.

### **Teamwork**

Students can collaborate in their dissertations, for instance in collecting data together, but their final reports must be written separately, and acknowledge the collaboration. In some cases in the past, students have collaborated with organisations such as charities, companies or political groups.

Again, this is fine, but their contribution must be acknowledged.

### **Supervision of Dissertations**

**Students can expect to receive approximately six supervisions for their dissertation.** Please note that

supervisors might only be available to meet during term. Supervisors will read draft chapters once and a draft of the whole dissertation once and will also provide written comments. They will not, however, read revised drafts of the dissertation.

Supervisors will advise on readings where they can, but students should not expect supervisors to provide a comprehensive reading list. The readings should reflect some independent initiative on behalf of the student.

### **Ethical Approval for Dissertations**

**Sociological research requires ethical approval if it involves the use of primary data, whether obtained from archival sources, social media, or from participants in the field.**

**If your dissertation relies on this type of data, you will need to complete the Sociology Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment Form and submit it to the Sociology Ethics Committee for approval before research is undertaken.** (If you are unsure about whether or not your research requires ethical approval, please consult with your supervisor.)

The Sociology Ethics Committee's remit is to ensure that research conducted in the Department conforms: (a) with the ethical standards established by the discipline's professional bodies and in the academic profession as a whole; (b) with legal provisions and responsibilities, especially those governing universities, and (c) is achievable within the time constraints of the Tripos.

**Please see the Department of Sociology's website for more information and a copy of the ethical approval form:**

<https://research.sociology.cam.ac.uk/research-ethics>

In previous years, we have found that those who seek to obtain ethical approval from February of their final year are more likely to also seek an extension to the deadline. It appears they ran out of time to collect and analyse the data and finalise the dissertation.

**As such, the department has implemented a deadline for submitting ethical approval documents of 31 January 2024.** Ethical approval forms submitted after this date will only be considered if appropriate mitigations (e.g., serious health problem, major family difficulty) have been presented by the student in conjunction with their Director of Studies. In this first instance, please contact the Dissertation Coordinator (Dr Nomisha Kurian) and Chair of the Ethics Committee (Dr Matthew Sparkes, [ms2268@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ms2268@cam.ac.uk)) to outline your reasons.

### **Word Limit**

Students and supervisors should note that the dissertation must be between 6,000 and 10,000 words. **There is no leeway and students exceeding the 10,000 word limit will be penalised.** The word limit must be written on the coversheet for your dissertation at submission and the Department will carry out checks. In recent years some essays and dissertations have had marks deducted because they were over the word limit.

**The word count will include all preliminary matter (e.g. title, acknowledgements, abstract, table of**

**contents), the main text, footnotes and endnotes, but NOT the bibliography.** Photos are also not included in the word count. **Tables will be counted according to content.** Numerical tables, graphs or figures (for example, reports of statistical data) will be counted at a fixed rate of 150 words per table. Non-numerical tables, graphs or figures (for example, comparison tables showing attributes of various groups) will be counted per word, and all of the table will be counted. You do not need to include consent/debriefing forms in your word count.

As a general rule, any content that the Examiners must read in order to assess your work, should be included in the main body and not in an appendix; overuse of appendices may be penalised if it impairs the understanding of your work.

*Important: You will also be penalised if your dissertation word count is less than 6000 words.*

### **Recommended Layout**

- Font: Use 12-point font and double-spacing for the text and 11-point and single spacing for footnotes, lengthy (of 40 words or more) inset quotations, notes, and bibliographies
- Margins: Allow approximately 3 cm on the left side of the page, with other margins of at least 2.2 cm
- Pagination: number the pages serially from the second page
- Abbreviations: At the first mention give the full name and its acronym or abbreviation in brackets. It is often useful to include a list of acronyms and abbreviations that you use.
- Contents: A table of contents should be presented, and normally appears between the abstract page and the statement of acknowledgements
- Sections: Dissertations will normally have sections and separate chapters (these do not have to start on a separate page).
- Acknowledgements: Any statement of acknowledgements should appear between the contents page and the start of the examinable text
- Abstracts: include an abstract of no more than 150 words
- All work should be proofread; examiners will penalise work with many grammatical or typographical errors
- *Important: You should **NOT** include your name or College anywhere on the dissertation*

### **References and Bibliographies**

Some word processing programmes (e.g., [Endnote](#) for later versions of Microsoft Word or [Mendeley](#)) format references automatically from a bibliographical database in a variety of accepted conventions. These can be extremely useful, particularly if you update your database each time you read new material. Be consistent throughout in the convention that you adopt (e.g. 'author-date' citations in the text, with a bibliography at the end of the work).

Make sure your referencing is complete: for journal articles etc. the author, the title of the article, the

name of the journal, the volume number, the year and the pages (and where page numbering starts with each issue, the issue number also). For example:

O'Reilly, J., Smith, M., Deakin, S. and Burchell, B. (2015). Equal Pay as a Moving Target: International perspectives on forty years of addressing the gender pay gap. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39(2), 299-317.

For books and book sections, the editor(s) as well the author(s), the title of the book, the place of publication, the publisher and the year. For example:

Baert, P. (2015). *The Existentialist Moment: Sartre's Rise as a Public Intellectual*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

If you use sources other than books or journal articles, make sure to say what these are. For sources obtained from the web etc., give the access address as well as date accessed.

### **Plagiarism or unfair practice**

Concerns about plagiarism are taken very seriously and students should ensure that they are familiar with the Faculty's guidance (available in your handbook and current student webpages:

<http://www.hsps.cam.ac.uk/current-students/course-materials/c-m-files/plagiarism>).

Cases of suspected unfair practice including plagiarism, potential data fabrication or breaches of ethical research practice will be investigated by the Chair of Part II Examiners on a case-by-case basis. This investigatory meeting may involve your examiners, supervisor, College Tutor(s) and the University Proctors. Following the investigatory meeting, the Chair may recommend that penalties be applied to the final mark. All penalties to be applied will be agreed at the final Examiners' meeting. Students should read the University's Statement on Plagiarism at: [www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism](http://www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism).

### **Submission and Late Submission**

All work must be submitted by 12 noon on the advertised deadline.

Unless the student has been granted an extension, any work submitted after 12.00 noon will incur a **penalty** as follows:

- 1 point per hour or part thereof – up to 3 points (1 point per the first hour, another point for the second hour, and a third point for any further delay up to 12 noon the next day)
- Next 10 days or part of thereof – 3 points per day
- Any work submitted after 10 days is marked 0
- Electronic submission is mandatory
- If submission falls on weekends or holidays, the submission of the electronic copy is taken as relevant for application of the penalties.
- Handing times are standardised as 12pm on the due date, with daily penalties applied every 24 hours from the due time.

Students who have good reason to request an extension (e.g., serious health problem, major family difficulty) should contact their College as soon as possible, as all requests should go via the EAMC (Exam Access and Mitigation Committee), following the usual procedure outlined on [our website](#) and using the [correct application form](#).

### Suggested Timeline

- *Easter Term, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, or just after the exams* – choose a question, draw up a brief account of what the dissertation would cover and start to formulate a research strategy. Secure the agreement of a supervisor. Draw up a reading list.



- *Summer vacation* – conduct any preliminary reading.



- *Michaelmas Term, 3<sup>rd</sup> year* – Dissertation title form (link above) needs to be submitted by the stated deadline. Have the initial supervisions with the chosen supervisor and draw up a dissertation plan.

Fill out ethical approval forms if you are planning to collect primary data. Once approval is given, start primary data collection (if applicable). Aim to complete full drafts of the introduction and literature review by the end of term and have a supervision(s) to discuss drafts.



- *Christmas vacation* – aim to complete primary data collection (if applicable), and start to write the data analysis sections of the dissertation.



- *Lent Term* – Supervision/s to discuss the draft chapter of the data analysis. Any changes to the title will need to be submitted to the Undergraduate Secretary in February. Aim to complete a full draft of the dissertation by the end of term.



- *Easter vacation* – Refine the dissertation. Check the referencing and bibliography. Make sure the conclusion is supported by the arguments and evidence presented. Ensure you are within the word limit.



- *Easter Term* – final supervision to make sure the full draft is in a good condition. Proof read the dissertation.

### Marking and Assessment Criteria

The examiners mark dissertations mindful of the fact that, for most students, this is their first attempt at a research project, and are appropriately lenient when things don't go according to plan. In previous years the average mark for dissertations has tended to be higher than for examinations, reflecting the

commitment most students have to their dissertations.

<b>Mark</b>	<b>Quality of Answer</b>
<b>80+</b>	Identifies a clear question and states its importance cogently; shows a very clear understanding of a wide range of material relevant to that question; develops an original argument based on research or theoretical innovation or synthesis that is very well supported by evidence and/or texts, displaying a very high degree of insight; impeccable accuracy; faultlessly written and presented, and meticulously referenced. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display all of these qualities.
<b>70-79</b>	Identifies a clear question; shows a very good understanding of a wide range of material relevant to that question; develops an intelligent and persuasive argument based on research or theoretical innovation or synthesis that is well supported by evidence and/or texts, displaying clear indications of insight and/or originality; a high level of accuracy; well written and presented and meticulously referenced. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display all of these qualities.
<b>60-69</b>	Identifies a clear question; shows a good understanding of a wide range of material relevant to that question; develops a clear argument that is generally based on research, or theoretical analysis or synthesis and supported by evidence and/or texts; a good level of accuracy; well written and presented; well referenced. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display all of these qualities and should not show decisively any of the weaknesses listed under the criteria for a lower second.  Dissertations where there is some evidence of the negative qualities listed under the criteria for 50-59 will receive a mark between 60 and 64.
<b>50-59</b>	Identifies a question and generally pursues it through the dissertation but is weak in at least one of the following respects: clarity of the question posed; degree of understanding of relevant material; coherence of the overall argument or the absence of one; accuracy; the support of the evidence and/or texts for the conclusions drawn; writing, presentation and bibliographical material. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display both positive qualities. Dissertations that are in whole or in part not well written or presented will receive a mark in this range regardless of their positive qualities.
<b>40-49</b>	A clear subject and some attempt to develop a piece of work over the length of the dissertation but either lacking a question or extremely weak in at least one of the following other respects: degree of understanding of relevant material; coherence of the overall argument or the absence of one; accuracy; the support of the evidence and/or texts for the conclusions drawn; writing, presentation and bibliographical material for a significant part of the essay. To fall into this range, a dissertation has to display both positive qualities.



<b>21-39</b>	A stated subject for study and a discernible attempt to offer a discussion of that subject over the length of the dissertation but either a dissertation that is poorly written, or poorly structured for the length of the dissertation, or makes a large number of mistakes of fact, or demonstrates acute failures of understanding.
<b>1-20</b>	A dissertation that either shows a complete failure of understanding of the subject, or that is radically incomplete.
<b>0</b>	No dissertation submitted or a dissertation submitted more than a week after the deadline.

## Prizes

### CUQM/SAGE Quantitative Dissertation Prize

The prize of £50 worth of books from Sage Publishers is awarded to the best dissertation to have employed quantitative methods and analysis. The prize is open to dissertations from the departments of HSPS, Land Economy, Geography, Education, Linguistics and History.

### Useful References (see also SOC5 reading list)

Allen, G. & Skinner, C (1991) *Handbook for research students in the social sciences*, London: Routledge.

Babbie, E. (2015) *The practice of social research (14th Ed)*, Belmont: Cengage Learning.

Becker, H. (1998) *Tricks of the trade: How to Think About Your Research While You Are Doing It*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bell, J. *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in Education, Health and Social Science (4th Edn)*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Bouma, G. & Atkinson, G. (1995) *A Handbook of Social Science Research*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, London: Sage.

Burgess, R. (1984) *In the Field; an Introduction to Field Research*, London: Routledge  
Burnett, J. (2009), *Doing Your Social Science Dissertation*, London: Sage.

Czarniawska, B. (2014), *Social Science Research: From Field to Desk*, London: Sage.

Denscombe, M. (2014) *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Dunsmuir, A. & Williams, L. (1990) *How to do Social Research*, London: Collins Educational.

Edwards, A & Talbot, R. (1997) *The Hard-Pressed Researcher*, Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.

Gilbert, N (2008) *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage

Hammersley, M and Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.)*, London: Tavistock.

- May, T. (1993) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process (4<sup>th</sup> Ed)*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- McQueen, R. (2001), *Research Methods for Social Science: An Introduction*, Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed)*, Oxford: Blackwells.
- Robson, C. (2014) *How to do a Research Project: A guide for undergraduate students*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.
- Sapsford, R and V. Jupp (Eds.) (2006) *Data Collection and Analysis (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed)*, London: Sage.
- Smith, K, Todd, M. & Waldman, J. (2009) *Doing Your Undergraduate Social Science Dissertation*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- de Vaus, D.A. (2013) *Surveys in Social Research (6th Ed)*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Walliman, N. (2005) *Your Research Project: A Step-by-step Guide for the First-time Researcher*, London: Sage.
- Yates, S. (2004) *Doing Social Science Research*, London: Sage.

The following website is also very useful for all aspects of undergraduate dissertations.

<http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/>

September 2023