

# Writing a dissertation with Microsoft Word

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*This document explains some conventions about the form and style of dissertations and describes how to achieve these effectively using Microsoft Word. It is intended as a guide for Canterbury Business School students writing a dissertation as part of their MBA, MSc or final-year undergraduate project. It does not describe how to write in good English, how to reference correctly or how to choose what material should go in the dissertation. That does not mean these issues are not important.*

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## 1. Preface

### 1.1 Copyleft notice

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The web page version of this document was generated using the Perl script [sparse.pl](#) together with some free tools.

### 1.2 Acknowledgements

John Sharp has made helpful comments on the first draft of this document.

## 2. Introduction

You've used Word before. You've written reports and essays. And they look good. So why should you read this?

A dissertation is big, typically 10–15 thousand words. A good dissertation is a carefully structured document that maintains a consistent presentation across many pages. It will include a table of contents, references, chapters, sections and subsections that should be formatted in consistent styles. The style of the text should look the same from page to page. And chapters are not usually written in the order they appear. If you try to think about the structure and presentation at the same time as you're writing the dissertation, something will

suffer, usually the content.

So, if you want a high-quality structured dissertation, it helps to separate form (the structure and what the dissertation looks like) and content. Used properly, Microsoft Word can help you achieve this. Used carelessly, it will probably contribute to your problems.

The remaining sections of this document will look first at what form a dissertation should have. Then they will look at how to select a uniform style for the elements. Finally they will show how Word can be set up and used so that you can build up the dissertation in the structure and style you have designed.

What the document does not cover is what the dissertation should contain. That, after all, is up to you and will vary from student to student. But the ideas here should leave you free to think about the content as you write the dissertation. If you get that right, actually writing the dissertation can be the easiest and most satisfying part of your project.

One final word of warning. The writing style of this document is not appropriate for most dissertations: its purpose is to explain something practical in simple language, not to describe a piece of research.

## 3. The form of a dissertation

### 3.1 Form and content

The *Blue Danube* is a waltz. So is *Once upon a Dream*. *Ode to Joy* and *Waltzing Matilda* are not. The fact of being a waltz depends not on the composer or period or style of the music, but on its time-signature. This is an example of form.

Your dissertation may be about forecasting wheat prices, modelling electronic commerce, marketing teacups or motivation in the Bolivian Navy. The content will be very different for each of these, but the form will be largely the same. All will start with an abstract and table of contents. All will end with a list of references. And all will have sandwiched between them chapters describing the research work in some structured order. A good dissertation is not just about writing about your project, but writing about it in the required form. This does not mean that there is only one way to write about your project. But one of the skills you develop in your work is the ability to write in a prescribed form.

Fortunately, there is a great deal of flexibility in how you use the form (just as there is a great deal of flexibility in how you compose a waltz!). You can choose the order and structure of the chapters in many different ways. There is no *best way* to write the dissertation, though there are many bad ways. A good rule of thumb is that when you've got the structure right the dissertation will largely write itself.

### 3.2 The elements of a dissertation

The order of elements given below gives a typical structure for a dissertation and few will depart much from it. Some elements, like acknowledgements and appendices are optional. Others, like the title page, abstract and references are not.

- Title page
- Abstract
- Acknowledgements
- Table of contents
- Introduction (with objectives of dissertation)
- The main body of the dissertation (chapters)
- Appendices

- List of references

The main body of the dissertation is flexible, but tends to follow an ordered structure. Typically, the first chapter introduces the work and provides a reader map: that is, explain to the reader what will be covered in each of the future chapters of the dissertation. Then the following chapters describe the research methodology and data collection. Then comes the analysis and conclusions.

*As you write your dissertation, you should check any guidelines given to you for your programme or module.* Just as there are different rules for driving in different countries, there are different rules for different dissertations and you ignore them at your peril.

Notice that the form of the dissertation actually makes much of the writing easier because it takes away from you many of the decisions you could make about the structure and presentation of your work. Nonetheless, you should plan carefully *how* you will structure the dissertation within that form. And your structure and presentation should reflect the purpose of the dissertation: to explain as clearly as possible to a peer the nature and content of your project.

### 3.3 Considerations of style

Once you have chosen the structure of your dissertation, you want to make that structure plain to your readers. You also want to make the dissertation attractive to look at. It will help if your chapter and section headings all have the same font in the same size, shape and weight. You'll also want all your paragraphs to look much the same. In other words, you'll want to set the style of your document to make it more perspicuous to your reader. There are several elements of style to consider.

- **Font:** Choose a standard font for the main body of your dissertation. It is difficult to go wrong with Times roman, but other fonts are often acceptable. Usually Sans Serif fonts like arial or helvetica are best used only for things like chapter and section headings. Avoid difficult to read fonts like Lucida handwriting or the Simpsons font.
- **Justification:** You'll probably want to set the justification of most paragraphs to fully-justified. That spaces the words in each line so that the left and right of each line of text line up. The default in Word is left justification (ragged right), which looks horrible. Why do you think professional publishers avoid it?
- **Headings:** You'll probably want headings for chapter, sections and subsections to appear in a larger font than the main text, usually in boldface, often in a sans serif font. You may want these numbered and you'll certainly want consistency.

*Check the guidelines for your dissertation when choosing these.*

## 4. Using Microsoft Word

This section tells you how to use Microsoft Word to produce the kind of dissertation you want. Some of the advice is specific to Word, but most of it can be used in other word-processing packages such as Lotus Word Pro or Star Word.

### 4.1 Taking control of Word

Word provides some features that are supposed to be intelligent and helpful but turn out as often as not to be dumb and annoying. Here are some changes that you might want to make to get more control of Word.

**Make paragraph marks visible.** A lot of Word's formatting is embedded in paragraph marks (see Section [Paragraphs](#) below); so it makes sense to be able to see these as you work. Switch this feature on with *Tools* >

*Options.* Choose the View tab and tick the Paragraph marks checkbox. There is a button marked ¶ on one of the toolbars that allows you to toggle this feature on and off. While you're at it, you might want to make tabs and spaces visible. Tabs are a common source of problems, and you should avoid double spaces anywhere in your document: Word is not a typewriter and should format spaces between sentences without any help from you.

**Switch off unhelpful autocorrect features.** Click *Tools > AutoCorrect* and switch off all the features you don't want. I suggest you turn off automatic spelling corrections, automatic bullets and numbering (there are buttons for that), ordinals with superscript, fractions with fraction character, and internet and network paths with hyperlinks under the *autoformat* and *autoformat as you type* tabs. Most of these features are nice for two page documents that you want to email to people, but can be nasty in a 50-page dissertation.

Now that you've got Word set up sensibly, let's take a quick tour of how Word works. This really helps when you can't see why Word has done something you did not want. For example, have you ever had Word give you a numbered list where all the numbers except one were bold and nothing you did seemed to make a difference? After reading this section, you should be able to work out how to fix little problems like that.

Word has only three levels of formatting: character, paragraph and section. It does not recognise words at all. When you understand this, it's easy to see what has been formatted and how to control it.

## Characters

The lowest level of formatting is character level. You can change the font and size of individual characters and whether a character is bold, italic or both. (You can even change underlining at this level, but underlined words look ugly and were only used as a cheap alternative to italic in the bad old days of typewriters. Many publishers will not publish books with underlined words.) If you want to make a single word bold or italic, this is the level to do it at. If you want to change the font of your document, it is probably better done at paragraph level.

## Paragraphs

The next level of formatting is the paragraph. Paragraphs have a number of features of their own such as tab marks, indentation and justification. They also have character features, which can be altered by changing the ¶ character at the end of the paragraph. The only thing I know is changed by this is the appearance of bullets and numbering formatting used by the paragraph.

For general formatting of paragraphs, you can select *Format > Paragraph...* or use the right mouse button on the paragraph. This gives you very fine control of how you want the paragraph to look. You can change alignment: that is, whether the paragraph is left aligned (often called ragged right), centred, right aligned or justified (both the left and right end of the text are placed flush against the margin). You can also change various indentations, line spacing and amount of space before and after the paragraph.

A new paragraph is created every time you hit the return key. So if you hit the return key twice in succession, you create two new paragraphs. "Ah!", I hear you say, "But when I want a new paragraph, I just hit return twice." This is ok for short documents, but it is a good idea to wean yourself from this sloppy practice. If you want space between paragraphs (and you probably do), format the paragraph and select the option to add space at the end. Then you will only need to hit return once and there won't be any nasty surprises about how much space you actually get.

Unfortunately, the default in Word is ragged right paragraphs with no space between them. This raises another issue. You probably want two or three standard paragraph styles for your dissertation. You will want fully justified paragraphs with space between in (say) 10 or 12 point roman font for most of your text. You will want an indented version of this for block quotes. You may want a different style for the abstract. And you can use a paragraph for each section heading. But Word does not give you any of these, and you do not want to format every paragraph individually. There is a solution. You can define a set of linked paragraph styles so

that most times you start a new paragraph, Word automatically formats it in the way you want. We discuss this in Section [Choosing styles](#) below.

## Sections

The highest level of formatting is the section. You may well never have used more than one section in a document before. Sections allow you to control features like the page-width and layout of different pages, what appears in the headers and footers (e.g. running heads and page numbers). The page numbers conventionally start on the Contents page; so you could define a section for the front matter (Title page, acknowledgements etc.) that has no page numbers and then define one that has page numbers for the rest of the dissertation. Conventionally, each chapter of a dissertation starts on a fresh page. The neatest way to achieve this is to use next page section breaks.

Use *Insert > Break..* and choose a section break to create a new section. Format the page layout for the section under *File > Page Layout...*. This can be useful if (say) you want one landscape page between two portrait pages. Format the headers and footers using *View > Header and Footer*. Look at Word's help to find out more.

## 4.2 Choosing styles

We mentioned earlier that paragraph styles were useful for getting formatting right. So how do you define and use them?

First, you use a style by selecting the paragraph and selecting a style from the drop-down box, usually on the left of your toolbar or by selecting *Styles...* from the *Format* menu. The default style in Word is called *normal*. Word has a lot of built in styles that are easily modified to suit your needs. When I'm typing a Word document, I usually ask myself if I want to change style every time I hit the return key and create a new paragraph. It is a good practice.

Although Word has many built in styles, they are probably not (yet) right for your dissertation. This is because Word uses ragged right paragraphs with no spacing between as a default. Is this sensible? Probably not. But remember that Word was originally marketed as a replacement for the typewriter. Fortunately, it's fairly easy to modify Word's built-in styles and even define your own. The first one you will want to modify is *normal*. Select *Format > Styles*. Now modify the style. (*Format > Styles, Modify...* button and select *Font, Paragraph*, etc. from the *Format* drop-down button.) Think of this as modifying a paragraph, but with a few additional options. You probably want settings something like the following.

- Times roman font, 12 point, not bold, not italic.
- Fully justified paragraphs. No indentation for first line. 12 point spacing after paragraph, no spacing before paragraph. Single-line spacing for lines in paragraph.
- No tab stops.

Common variants on this are to have no space between paragraphs but the first line indented, and to have 1.5 line spacing within paragraphs. Check the guidelines for your dissertation on these.

Most of the other settings can be left alone. You should make the format for next paragraph also normal. Then when you start a new paragraph, it will have all your settings by default.

Try creating a new style—call it "block quote"—for block quotes, that is quotes from articles that you want to make clear are not your own. Base your style on normal and make the style for the following paragraph normal. The only thing you should need to change is the paragraph indentation—set that to about 0.5 inches for all lines.

Styles are a very powerful feature in Word and you should find all the help you need to use them in Word's

help system. You can even modify styles in retrospect.

## 4.3 Creating chapters and section headings

Styles are also useful for creating headings for chapters, sections and subsections. What you do here is create a style for chapters, another for sections, another for subsections etc. Then, when you want a heading, you choose the appropriate style in the toolbar dropdown box, type the heading and press return. This is a good way of ensuring that all headings are formatted consistently.

But Word can do more than this. If you use Word's built in styles called "Heading 1", "Heading 2", etc., you can use the styles to generate a table of contents for you—see next section. Typically, you use Heading 1 for chapters, Heading 2 for sections, etc.

You will probably want to modify Word's default styles for Headings. And you will probably want to use at least some of the features available in styles. You can create relative font sizes and base styles on normal so that, for example, Heading 3 is 2 points bigger than normal in Arial Bold, Heading 2 is 4 points bigger in Arial Bold, and Heading 1 is 6 points bigger, Arial Bold and centred. Set the following paragraph style to normal. So when you have finished typing a heading you are immediately ready to type ordinary text. Use "keep with next" to make sure that you never get a heading at the bottom of a page.

Word can number chapters and sections (through the style) automatically. You will want to do this at least for chapters. Using styles to do this has one great advantage: if you insert or delete a chapter or section, the remaining sections are automatically renumbered correctly. How do you do this? *Format > Bullets and numbering...*, under the *Outline numbered* tab, press the *Customize...* button and then the *More* button. Link levels to the various Heading styles and format the style for each level. You will probably need to look at Word's help for this feature.

## 4.4 Creating a table of Contents

When you have finished everything else in your dissertation, you can, if you've used the "Heading" styles to create headings, have a table of contents with page numbers generated automatically. This feature is a bit fiddly, but Word gives you some help. Open the "Office Assistant" (the big staple) and ask for help on "Table of Contents". This should give you enough to get the job done.

Word gives you a great deal of control over exactly what goes into the table of contents, but you really should generate (or at least *regenerate*) the table of contents right at the end. The table of contents is not adjusted automatically when you change the document, so inserting even one word after can make the page numbering go awry.

## 5. Some closing comments

I have not so far mentioned page layout. Here, Word's default layout is fine. I suggest you keep it and set all your text to 10–12 point single line spacing. You can change settings if you like, but examiners know all the tricks. Setting your dissertation 16 point triple-line spaced with 2.5 inch margins all round will certainly make your dissertation look thicker and may impress your friends, but it will not impress the examiners one jot.

You may want to copy in diagrams, figures or tables created elsewhere (e.g. from Excel or SPSS or a website). Word's copy and paste facilities are very good for this, but watch out. Word has a feature (some would say bug) that can make life difficult. If you just paste a picture, it gets "floated over the text". In practice this means it can float just about anywhere. The way to get around this is always to use paste special and make sure the "float over text" box is unticked.

One final comment: for technical reasons *no Microsoft product was used in the production of this document*; so if you are reading it as a Word document, it is probably not formatted as it advises. Nonetheless, similar formatting instructions were used to generate the document.