

Open UP Study Skills

# Succeeding with your Master's Dissertation

A step-by-step handbook

3rd  
edition

- Tells you the skills you need to succeed
- Packed with practical tips and advice
- Explains common pitfalls and how to avoid them
- Comprehensive guide to the entire Master's dissertation process



John Biggam

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# **Succeeding with Your Master's Dissertation**

**A step-by-step handbook**



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Third edition

*John Biggam*



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## Praise Page

☆☆☆☆☆ Amazon reviews for the 2nd edition:

*“Best book ever. Bought this for a friend because, even though I finished my masters over a year ago, I’m not parting with mine. This book got me my first.”*

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*“Perfect direction as I was at a loss with regard to starting my dissertation, simple speak (which was ideal for me) would certainly recommend.”*

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

Winnie Macfarlane  
21 January 1932 – 28 April 2013

*Always there with a soothing hand  
A mothering touch to make everything grand*

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 INTRODUCTION	1
<i>A Master's</i> dissertation: what is it?	1
So, what skills do you need to succeed?	4
Watch your words!	10
How to use this book	11
Summary of key points	13
2 DEVELOPING YOUR I-SKILLS	14
What are i-skills?	14
Information needs	15
Organizing skills	18
Literature search techniques	21
Select topic	22
Define terms	22
Set boundaries	22
Select sources	23
Analyse sources	23
Google it!	24
University library databases	27
Using social media in research	30
Speed reading	32
Critiquing skills	34
Communication skills and mind-mapping	34
Further reading	36
Summary of key points	37
3 REFERENCING AND PLAGIARISM	38
What is referencing?	38
Referencing in the body of your dissertation	39
Using Latin abbreviations and terms	42
Creating a reference list	46
Plagiarism	52
What counts as plagiarism?	52
What if you are accused of plagiarism?	58
Further reading	59
Summary of key points	60

4	PREPARING FOR YOUR DISSERTATION	61
	Putting together your research proposal	61
	Research proposal: working title	62
	Research proposal: background information	64
	Research proposal: overall research aim	64
	Research proposal: specific research objectives	68
	Research proposal: research methods	70
	Research proposal: setting a timescale	71
	Research proposal: ethics	73
	Producing a dissertation template	76
	Supervisor meetings	79
	Supervisor and student: roles and responsibilities	81
	An emotional journey	84
	Further reading	90
	Summary of key points	91
5	THE DISSERTATION INTRODUCTION	92
	The general structure of the Introduction	92
	Background	93
	Research focus (revisited)	97
	Overall research aim and individual research objectives	100
	Value of your research	104
	A further suggestion	106
	Summary of key points	108
6	THE LITERATURE REVIEW	109
	Focus on your research objectives	109
	Structuring your Literature Review	113
	Description vs critical evaluation	117
	Learning theory and your dissertation	122
	Good grammar	125
	Further reading	132
	Summary of key points	133
7	SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS	134
	What is a systematic review?	134
	The stages of a systematic review	136
	Stage 1: Determine review objective/question	137
	Stage 2: The literature search process	138
	Stage 3: What literature was selected (and why)?	139
	Stage 4: Pool studies	141
	Stage 5: Place findings in context	142
	AMSTAR: a checklist for systematic reviews	144
	Further reading	146
	Summary of key points	146

---

8	RESEARCH METHODS	147
	What's it all about?	147
	Research strategy	150
	Introduction	150
	Case study	151
	Survey	153
	Ethnography	155
	Experimental research	157
	Historical research	158
	Action research	160
	Grounded theory	161
	Quantitative vs qualitative research	162
	Sampling techniques	164
	Positivism and phenomenology	167
	Justifying your research strategy	169
	The question of reliability (and validity)	173
	Data collection	175
	Preparation, preparation, preparation	175
	What and why?	178
	Framework for data analysis	186
	Limitations and potential problems	194
	Further reading	199
	Summary of key points	200
9	WRITING UP YOUR FINDINGS	201
	The general approach	201
	The process of description, analysis and synthesis: an example	204
	Further reading	211
	Summary of key points	211
10	CONCLUDING YOUR DISSERTATION	212
	What's in a Conclusion?	212
	Research objectives: summary of findings and conclusions	214
	Recommendations	220
	Contribution to knowledge	225
	Self-reflection	228
	Summary of key points	232
11	WRITING THE ABSTRACT	233
	What is an abstract?	233
	How to write an abstract	234
	Abstract template	238
	Summary of key points	240

12	FINALLY: VIVA, DISSERTATION MARKING SCHEME AND SUMMARY OF GOOD/BAD PRACTICE	241
	Preparing for a viva	241
	The dissertation marking scheme	245
	Forewarned is forearmed	251
	Dissertation writing: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid	252
	Appendix A: Dissertation proposal form (example 1)	257
	Appendix B: Dissertation proposal form (example 2)	258
	Appendix C: List of research objective keywords	260
	Appendix D: Sample dissertation proposal	261
	Appendix E: Sample Introduction	265
	Appendix F: Sample chapter outline	272
	Appendix G: Sample Literature Review Introduction	274
	Appendix H: Sample Literature Review Conclusion	275
	Appendix I: Comprehensive set of useful verbs	277
	Appendix J: Sample Research Methods	282
	Appendix K: Sample questionnaire	302
	Appendix L: Sample marking sheet	306
	Appendix M: Sample completed marking sheet	307
	<i>References</i>	309
	<i>Index</i>	317

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## Acknowledgements

The author touches his hat in recognition of the part played by students in the creation of this book. Lang may yer lum reek.



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# Chapter

# 1



## Introduction

- A Master's dissertation: what is it?
- So, what skills do you need to succeed?
- Watch your words!
- How to use this book
- Summary of key points

### **A Master's dissertation: what is it?**

---

A professor was approached by one of her students, who enquired: 'Is it all right to put bullet points in an essay?' Another student queried: 'When you say you want journal articles, how many?' The academic was disappointed that her students required their assessment criteria to be explained in such minutiae (Wojtas 2006: 2). What may appear trivial to a dissertation supervisor can be a source of concern to you, the student. A Master's dissertation involves the production of a substantial piece of work, normally consisting of about 15,000 words, and it is likely that this is the first time you have encountered such a work, in such depth; therefore, it is important that you understand fully what is required of a Master's student and, equally, how to manoeuvre safely through the dissertation journey, from grasping an overview of the main phases of writing a dissertation (submitting your dissertation proposal, clarifying your research objectives, writing the Literature Review, etc.) to the finer detail of composing the content for each of these phases. This book provides in-depth guidance on how to complete your dissertation, thus meeting the needs of students eager for practical assistance in this commonplace, but challenging, mode of assessment.

Dissertations have always been a problematic area for students. Students registered for a *taught* Master's programme not only have to cope with their core subject areas, but they are also required, largely through independent study, and within tight time constraints, to complete a substantial dissertation project. Students registered for a Master's by *research*, although they have no taught element to contend with, often find the dissertation process equally stressful. For many Master's students, their venture into the world of the dissertation becomes

nothing short of a guessing-game, where the tasks to be completed are difficult to comprehend, and where the final mark awarded for their efforts is even trickier to fathom. Students are aware that they have to write an *Introduction*, but they are not really sure how to go about it; they sort of know that they have to complete something called a *Literature Review*, but they are at a loss where to start or what it ought to contain, or what will get them good marks; the section on *Research Methods* (necessary if students are implementing their own practical research work to complement their Literature Review) seems so abstract to them, and concepts such as 'positivism' and 'phenomenology', so revered by their supervisors, do not help matters; and so on.

There are many different types of Master's dissertations: some focus on a review of literature relevant to your topic of study; others also require the implementation of practical research; some involve a presentation of the dissertation findings; others, still, oblige you to attend an oral examination. At the heart of each of these dissertations is the study of a particular subject, usually selected by you, the student.

How does a Master's qualification differ from an undergraduate qualification? The traditional view of a graduate degree qualification – such as a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Business Studies – is that it is evidence that the holder of the degree has attained a level of *general* knowledge related to the subject area(s) named in the award (Hart 2006). For instance, a B.A. in History indicates that the holder has a general knowledge, at university level, of History, or specific aspects of history; similarly, a B.A. in Hospitality Management indicates that the holder has a general knowledge of hospitality management. A *Master's* qualification, by contrast, signifies that the holder has gone beyond the acquisition of general knowledge and has *advanced* specialized knowledge of a subject. Master's programmes come in various guises, with the more traditional and well-known Master's titles – MSc., MA, MLitt., and MPhil. – shown in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1** Traditional Master's programmes

<b>Postgraduate title</b>	<b>Latin name</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
Master of Science	<i>Magister Scientiae</i>	MSc.
Master of Arts	<i>Magister Artium</i>	MA
Master of Laws	<i>Legum Magister</i>	LL.M.
Master of Letters	<i>Magister Litterarum</i>	MLitt.
Master of Philosophy	<i>Magister Philosophiae</i>	MPhil.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of Master's titles found in university programmes. For example, Newcastle University in the UK offers a Master of Music (MMus.), while the University of Sydney in Australia lists a Master of Design Science (*MDESSC.*) within its postgraduate portfolio, and the University of Nevada in the USA advertises a Master of Education (M.Ed.). The form of the title abbreviation is left to individual institutions, with some institutions italicizing the title abbreviation (e.g. *MDESSC.*), some placing a full stop after the abbreviation of

Magister (e.g. M.Ed.), while others ignore full stops and italics altogether (e.g. MEd, MSc, MPhil, etc.).

Confusingly, an MSc. does not necessarily indicate that the topics studied are science-based, as many business schools within universities now offer MSc. programmes (e.g. MSc. in International Business). Equally confusing is the fact that not all Master's programmes are postgraduate programmes, where a related degree is the usual entrance qualification. For instance, the MA is traditionally viewed as an undergraduate degree in the UK, yet when offered in the USA it is normally offered as a postgraduate qualification. It is worth noting that universities in the UK and the USA sometimes use different terminology to refer to postgraduate programmes – UK universities stick to the term 'postgraduate' while universities in the USA commonly use the term 'graduate'. For example, the University of Chicago publicizes their LL.M. as a *graduate* degree, while the University of Cambridge presents their LL.M. as a *postgraduate* degree, but both qualifications are advanced law degrees requiring a degree qualification for entry.

A critical element of any Master's programme, whether it is an advanced undergraduate degree (such as an MA in the UK) or a postgraduate programme proper (such as an MSc.), is the requirement to complete a *dissertation*. So, what is a dissertation? *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1998: 391) defines a dissertation as 'a detailed discourse on a subject, esp. one submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a degree or diploma'. In effect, it appears to be a very long essay. In the context of a typical Master's programme, it is a focused 'essay', typically about 10,000–15,000 words in length (the MPhil. dissertation, often referred to as a *thesis*, is different in that the word length is easily in the range of 30,000–50,000 words). A dissertation is more than an extended essay, however: it is an independent piece of work (by you, the student) to be completed in such a way as to satisfy the examiner(s) that you are a *competent researcher* with advanced knowledge on a specific topic, normally chosen by you, which relates to your Master's programme.

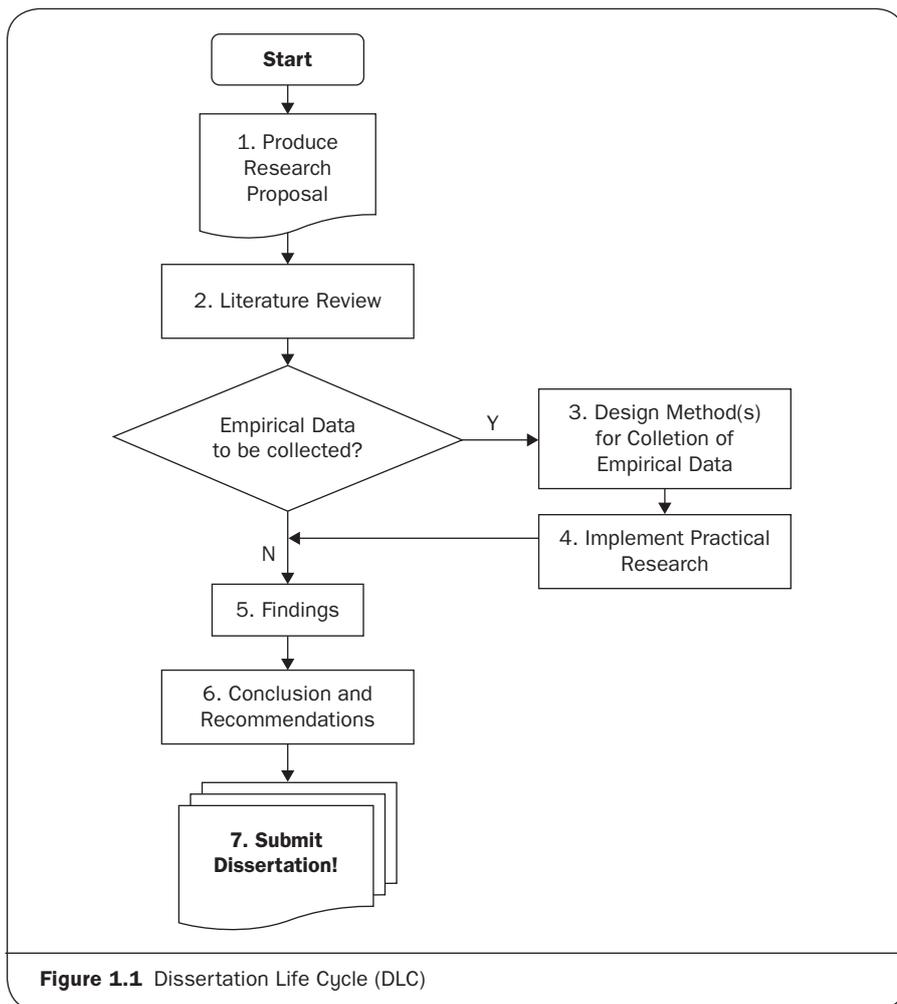
A *Master's* dissertation, as with Master's titles and programmes, can come in many shapes and sizes, varying from university to university, and even within different departments in the same university. The types of Master's dissertations available to you can include the straightforward Literature Review; or a work-based report, in which you explore a particular problem in an organization where you have worked, making practical recommendations based on your findings; or a laboratory-based dissertation, where you carry out experiments and then report on your results; or a dissertation which encompasses both a Literature Review and the collection and analysis of your own primary research data, providing you with the opportunity to compare theory (from your Literature Review) with practice (from your collected primary data, e.g. from interviews or questionnaires).

Your university should provide you with a Master's Handbook containing clear guidance on aspects of your dissertation. The Handbook will normally clarify the maximum length of your dissertation, dissertation format (line spacing, text type and size, style of referencing, page numbering, dissertation structure, etc.), expected minimum content for each major section of your dissertation (e.g. main areas to be covered in your chapter on Research Methods), the department's marking scheme, and details of your role and responsibilities.

Successful completion of a Master's dissertation, however, is more than adhering merely to university dissertation requirements and guidelines: you need competence in specific *dissertation-related skills* and a certain street savvy about the *rules of the game*.

## So, what skills do you need to succeed?

Basically, to pass your Master's dissertation you need to show that you are a *competent researcher*. On the face of it, this is quite a difficult task, mainly because this is probably the first time that you have attempted an independent piece of research work of this magnitude. A competent researcher is someone who can, in the context of a Master's dissertation, exhibit proficiency in tackling the various phases normally found in the *Dissertation Life Cycle (DLC)*, illustrated in Figure 1.1.



**Figure 1.1** Dissertation Life Cycle (DLC)

Note that the DLC in Figure 1.1 represents the traditional approach to completing a dissertation and this approach may vary slightly from one institution to another. For instance, some students may be asked to submit a Systematic Review rather than a Literature Review (see Chapter 7, Systematic Reviews, on how to complete a Systematic Review). To complete the DLC successfully, you are required to show proficiency in skills specific to each stage of the cycle, i.e. you need to be able to do the following:

- Put forward a credible research proposal (Stage 1 DLC).
- Evaluate literature, from a variety of sources, pertinent to your research objectives (Stage 2 DLC).
- Cite sources – books, journals, web sources, conference proceedings, etc. – using a standard acceptable to the academic community, such as the Harvard style of referencing or American Psychological Association (APA) citation style, etc. (Stage 2 DLC).
- Identify (and justify) how you will collect (and analyse) your own research data (Stage 3 DLC).
- Carry out your own empirical research (Stage 4 DLC).
- Discuss and analyse your findings (Stage 5 DLC).
- Wrap up your research work (Stage 6 DLC).

Be aware that the DLC is rarely a straightforward linear process, where the journey from Stage 1 to Stage 7 is smooth and untroubled. More often than not, you will find yourself revisiting previous stages, usually as a result of discussions and advice from your supervisor or perhaps because you have found additional material that enhances aspects of your dissertation. The DLC is an iterative process, so get used to the idea that you will be looking over your shoulder to review and improve earlier parts of your dissertation. Also, there are other elements to a dissertation that are not listed as main phases of the DLC, but which nonetheless will be included in your final submission, such as an Abstract (sometimes referred to as the Synopsis), an Introduction, and a section listing your References (all of which are discussed in detail later).

As stated earlier, there are different *types* of Master's dissertations and they all involve research of one kind or another. You may be asked to carry out a review of literature pertinent to your research objectives. Or in addition to a review of literature, you may be required to collect your own research data, to compare what you found out in your literature review against your own practical research findings (this is the more traditional dissertation). Alternatively, your dissertation may be framed in the form of a work-based report. Regardless of the type of dissertation that you are being asked to complete, the DLC still holds.

As well as skills pertinent to particular stages of the DLC – producing a credible research proposal, critically evaluating relevant literature, etc. – you will also need to acquire *generic* skills, i.e. skills that are useful regardless of the stage of the DLC in which you find yourself:

### Generic skills

- *Time-management skills.* You need to be able to manage your time effectively. You do this by adopting two types of time-management perspectives: macro-management and micro-management. *Macro-management* requires that you manage your time in terms of the bigger dissertation picture, guessing intelligently how long you think it will take you to complete each chapter in your dissertation, dovetailing nicely into the required submission date. Pivotal to the macro-management of your time is the need to work backwards from your dissertation submission date to generate an effective time framework. *Micro-management* occurs when you work out the time it will take you to do the sub-sections that go to make up a particular chapter. For example, as a result of a macro approach to managing your time, you might decide that it will take you three weeks to write the introductory chapter to your dissertation and that, switching to micro mode, this chapter will have three parts to it and that you intend allocating one week to each part. Remember to allow time for the binding or presentation of your dissertation in accordance with your university's regulations. Apportioning time slots, in both macro- and micro-management mode, will give you a sense of awareness about what lies ahead and with that insight comes a sense of control over your dissertation.
- Linked to time-management skills are *organizational skills*. You will have to organize a variety of dissertation-related activities: meetings with your supervisor, the overall structure of your dissertation, sub-sections within each chapter, your ideas and arguments, visits to the library, internet-based activities, reading material, cited sources, meetings with research subjects (e.g. people you might want to interview), and so on.
- *Self-discipline skills.* Keeping to your own timetable of activities will not prove easy. You will have other demands on your time, some predictable (e.g. parties, holidays, other assessments, part-time work, family commitments, etc.), others unpredictable (illness, relationship problems, family issues, etc.). Supervisors are realistic and accept that most students stray from their dissertation work from time to time, but the key to avoiding complete derailment is self-discipline, and that requires focus and an inner strength to keep going when things are getting on top of you. Time-management and sound organization will help you achieve a disciplined approach to your dissertation.
- *Communication skills*, both verbal and written. Communicating your ideas, arguments, rationale for choices made, whether at meetings with your supervisor or in your submitted work, requires clarity of thought and expression. If you cannot say or write what you mean, then your work will be hindered. Sloppy grammar in written work is a particular concern highlighted by many supervisors. When communicating, in whatever form, keep it simple, keep it clear and keep it relevant. Cluttered waffle helps no one!
- Effective communication also requires good *listening skills*. It is important that you learn to listen to your supervisor when advice is given – supervisors do not act in such a way for the sake of their own health. When

▶ your supervisor suggests that perhaps you should alter an aspect of your work in some way, you are being told politely that it is deficient in some respect and that corrective action can be achieved by taking on board the counsel offered. In effect, your supervisor is telling you how to gain marks (and avoid losing marks). It is not uncommon for supervisors to mark their students' dissertations, so it makes sense that you heed any advice proffered.

- *Presentational skills.* You may be required to present your work to examiners, in which case you ought to be aware of how to produce a skilful presentation, including use of appropriate technologies, voice projection techniques, structure of content, audience engagement, etc. Presenting your work periodically to friends, and your supervisor, will provide you with invaluable experience in appreciating what works and what does not.
- *Social skills.* Getting on well with people – your supervisor, fellow students, research subjects, departmental secretary, etc. – will ease your dissertation journey.
- *Technical skills.* Internet searching skills, library skills, email and word-processing skills are all essential aspects of dissertation work.
- *Independent learner skills.* This is the main difference between undergraduate degree work and Master's level work: the shift from *directed learning* to *independent learning*. Most dissertation handbooks highlight the importance of this requirement by including a separate section in the handbook on your responsibilities, emphasizing that it is *your* responsibility to identify a research topic, to put forward a research proposal, to plan and implement *your* dissertation activities and to be proactive in contacting your supervisor (i.e. to produce an independent piece of research). If you are a final-year undergraduate student considering applying to 'do' a Master's programme, then you need to appreciate that Master's work is very different from undergraduate work. Essentially, the difference is that at undergraduate level the learning primarily takes place through the lecturer (in the form of lectures, seminars, tutorials, laboratories, etc.), whereas at Master's level the learning is mainly student-centred, i.e. there is a major shift of responsibility from the tutor to you, the student. This is no more evident than in the Master's dissertation, where the responsibility for selecting the research topic and writing the dissertation lies with the student; your supervisor acts as a guide, albeit an important one. Taking responsibility for your own work can be quite liberating, but it requires the development of new skills and confidence in your own abilities. By covering the Master's dissertation process in detail, from start to finish, this book provides the practical skills necessary to allow you to approach each stage of your dissertation with confidence.

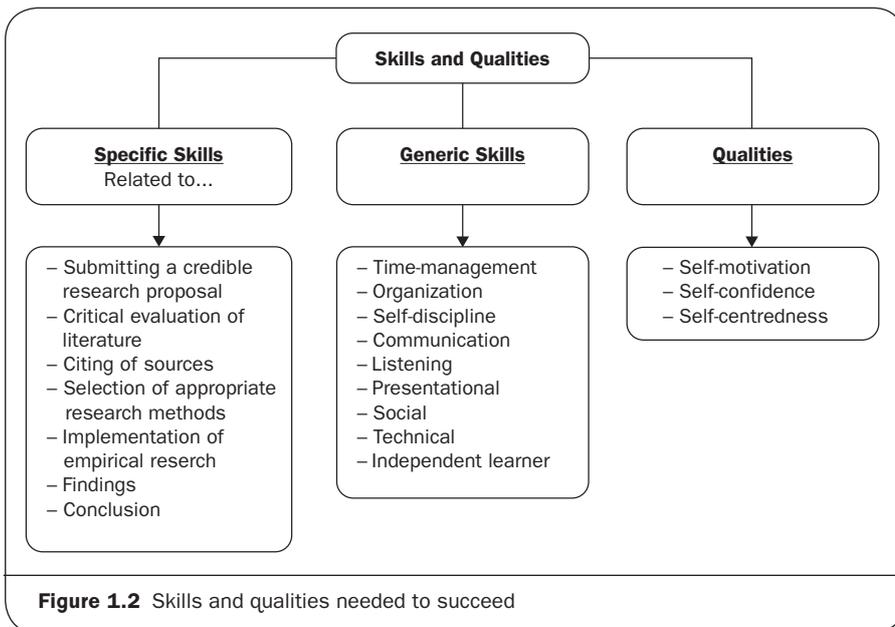
Dissertation work can be a lonely process, so it is no bad thing to lessen any sense of isolation by sharing your ideas about your work with your fellow students. This can be done more formally and constructively through something called *learner circles* (Biggam 2007a). This is where a group of students – a

learner circle – get together (e.g. over coffee) to discuss their work-in-progress at regular intervals. They can also formally present their work to one other, using modern technology such as a data projector to display PowerPoint presentations, in which case they would need to borrow the data projector from their department and book a university room, all of which show initiative and engender a sense of togetherness. Learner circles are normally led by a supervisor, in effect enacting group supervision, but they can be set up by students themselves, without the participation of supervisors. Akister *et al.* (2006) produced evidenced-based research showing that students who were supervised in groups were more positive when undertaking their dissertation and had a higher completion rate than students dependent on the more traditional one-to-one supervision model.

Finally, in addition to the aforementioned skills – specific and generic – there are certain personal *qualities* that are necessary prerequisites for the completion of a successful dissertation: *self-motivation*, *self-confidence* and *self-centredness*. A lack of motivation – i.e. personal drivers (for example, in pursuit of a particular career path or intention to register for a higher degree) – will greatly reduce the chances of you completing your dissertation. A Master's dissertation is the type of assessment that demands your time, concentration and enthusiasm over a lengthy period. A serious lack of genuine interest on your part will cause you to view every task as a tiresome activity, with the first real difficulty encountered probably resulting in the abandonment of your dissertation. On the other hand, if your motivation is strong, and you adopt a positive outlook, you can face every stage with enthusiastic curiosity, making the whole experience enjoyable and, ultimately, fruitful.

Have confidence in your own abilities. Occasional self-doubt is natural – everyone, staff and students, suffers from bouts of self-doubt. It is a natural human condition. In a Master's dissertation, you are required to judge the work of other researchers (for example, within your review of literature). Critiquing the work of respected academics demands a level of self-confidence to allow you to express your views on what these people are saying. One supervisor recalls a student lamenting, 'Who am I to criticize this author when I am just a student and he has such an international reputation?' Your views are as valid as anyone else's (providing, of course, you back them up with supporting evidence!). You are on a Master's programme because the admissions tutor has confidence that you will complete your studies. All supervisors start from the default position that their students will produce a solid piece of research, providing that advice given is followed. Nothing pleases supervisors more than when their students pass, and with flying colours at that! Others have faith in your abilities, so have faith in yourself.

There will be occasions during your dissertation journey when others – friends, family members, boyfriends/girlfriends, partners, spouses, etc. – will make demands upon your time. On such occasions, you need to remind yourself that your priority is your dissertation – if you respond to every request for help from those around you, then you will have difficulty in concentrating on your work. Self-centredness is a quality that will serve you well during your dissertation. From the outset, inform those close to you that you are serious



about completing your dissertation, that it is a priority for you, and that you will require understanding and patience from others as you devote your time and energies to give of your best. A book worth reading on how to make the best of your dissertation time is Roberts (2007), *Getting the Most out of the Research Experience*.

Figure 1.2 summarizes the combined skills – specific and generic – and personal qualities that you need to complete a winning dissertation.

What of the *rules of the game*? Although this is your first time attempting a Master's dissertation, your supervisor has probably marked hundreds of dissertations. Through experience, supervisors learn how to assess the type of student they are supervising. With each meeting, email communication, telephone conversation, work-in-progress submitted, your supervisor will form an accumulative picture of your abilities. The rules of the game refer not only to the university's *formal* rules and regulations in terms of your submitted dissertation (word count, page format, style of referencing, etc.) but also to the *informal*, unwritten processes and behaviour that constitute your dissertation journey, such as how you conduct yourself at meetings with your supervisor, the impression you give when you email your supervisor, the quality of your work-in-progress, and so on. For example, if at meetings with your supervisor you ask no questions or spend your time complaining that you cannot find any material on your chosen subject area (a common student complaint!), then you are ignoring the informal rules of the game: if you want to be viewed as a 'good' student, then behave like one (ask questions, enthusiastically discuss the work that you have researched, show initiative, etc.).

## Watch your words!

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Your dissertation handbook will stipulate the maximum number of words that your submitted dissertation must not exceed. For example, it might state that 'The word limit for your dissertation must not exceed 15,000 words'. Or your dissertation guidelines may include a word limit with a leeway of  $\pm 10$  per cent, meaning that you can be 10 per cent over the recommended word limit or 10 per cent under the recommended word limit, without suffering any penalty.

It is important that you adhere to the stated dissertation word-length for your Master's dissertation, for a number of reasons. The first, and obvious one, is that you may lose marks for ignoring your institution's guidelines. If your dissertation is to be written in no more than, say, 10,000 words, and you write 14,000 words, then you may be penalized before your marker actually starts to read your dissertation! The actual penalty incurred depends on your institution's rules and regulations, but it is not uncommon to lose 5–10 per cent of your overall marks. On the other hand, your institution may ignore your transgression, provided the extra words add value to your dissertation. One supervisor in a university was known to stop reading (and marking!) a dissertation after the allocated words had been reached! Incidentally, if you have exceeded the recommended number of words but your institution's handbook makes no mention of a possible penalty for such a breach, then you may be in a position to argue that you should not be penalized because the lack of a stated penalty implied to you that none would be given or that the 'recommended' word-length was not to be taken too seriously.

When you start your dissertation, you will have no idea whether or not you will exceed your allocated dissertation word-length. It is only when you are knee-deep in the write-up that you will begin to get an inkling of how quickly you might be eating up your available words. For instance, suppose that you have just finished writing your Literature Review and that it took you 8,000 words to do so. However, from sample dissertations borrowed from the university library, you noticed that the number of words used for that particular section was typically in the region of 3,500. As a result of this comparison, you might reasonably conclude that you are in danger of exceeding your overall word-length. This issue reflects how well you have *micro-managed* your activities: the tasks that you have to do (e.g. write your dissertation Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methods chapter, collect data, etc.), the time you expect each of these tasks to take (e.g. one week for the Introduction, six weeks to write the Literature Review, etc.), as well as the number of words that you anticipate each dissertation chapter/section to use up (e.g. 800 words for the Introduction, 3,500 words for the Literature Review, etc.).

Another reason why exceeding the recommended word-length might be unwise is that you may be guilty of *padding*. Sticking to an expected word-length is evidence that you can say something in a given number of words. If you go over the word-length, then you may be indicating an inability to write succinctly. Padding occurs when you include irrelevant material, just for the sake of 'beefing up' your dissertation. It is easy to spot and, at best, will not gain you extra

marks: more often than not, it will lose you marks, because it is an unnecessary distraction, interfering with the focus and substance of your dissertation. It is a great temptation to include material that you have read, even if it is not *really* relevant, just because you have gone to the trouble of finding and reading it! Have the courage to reject what is not essential to your dissertation's research objectives.

What do you do if you suspect that you are going over the recommended dissertation word-length? First of all, remove any padding (i.e. excise unnecessary material). If you still consider that you need extra words to play with, then ask permission to exceed the word-length. Write to your supervisor, giving the following information:

- 1 Your request to exceed the recommended word-length.
- 2 The (new) word-length that you need to complete your dissertation.
- 3 The reason(s) for needing the extra words.

Point 3 above is important. It is insufficient to write, for example, that you need an extra 3,000 words over and above the recommended limit because that is how many words it has taken you, or will take you, to complete your dissertation. It is likely that your supervisor will write back to you, advising that you are in the same boat as other students and that you need to reduce your word-length accordingly. On the other hand, if you were to explain, for example, that your data collection was extensive and that to do it justice you require the extra words to capture the richness of your empirical work, then you would be better placed to secure permission to exceed the word-length without penalty. You need to think about the position of your supervisor when you make a request to go over the word-length: if your supervisor allows one student, *without good reason*, to exceed the word-length, then the same opportunity must be made available to all other students on the same programme/course, which makes the idea of a word-length meaningless. Hence the need for a valid reason to go beyond the declared word-limit.

Finally, it is good practice when you have finished your dissertation to include the word-count near the start of your dissertation, somewhere between the cover page and your introductory chapter (check your dissertation handbook for guidance). All word-processing software has a facility for a word-count. Remember to exclude appendices from your word-count, as they are not normally included.

## **How to use this book**

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Writing a Master's dissertation is not easy: if it were, then it would not be worth doing. Consequently, there are so many areas where you can fall down. Fortunately, there are things that you can do to minimize the chances of mediocrity – or worse, failure – and improve the opportunities to secure impressive marks. This book takes you patiently through the stages of a dissertation – the Dissertation

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