



The dissertation, from a vague interest to a defended answer.

A dissertation fails for predictable reasons, and almost none of them are about intelligence. This document shows how the genre differs from an assignment, the length rule that applies at postgraduate level, worked examples of a narrowed topic, a chapter skeleton and a full proposal page, and the three published rules that can end a dissertation early.

1 What a dissertation is, and how it differs from the other three genres

A dissertation is an extended piece of independent work in which you define a question, gather evidence yourself, and defend an answer to it. The decisive difference from an assignment is ownership: there the question is set for you; here you narrow it until it can be answered with the time and access you have.

Genre	Typical length	Its purpose	Originality expected
Dissertation	Often 20,000–35,000 words at Master's level	To answer one defined research question with self-collected or systematically analysed evidence.	An original study or an original reading of existing material, to a stated standard.
Thesis	Longer, commonly 60,000–100,000 words	To make a contribution to knowledge in the field, defended before examiners.	A substantial original contribution, examined by viva in most systems.
Research project report	Often 5,000–15,000 words	To show you can carry out a bounded piece of research and report it properly.	Methodological competence rather than a contribution to knowledge.
Long essay	2,000–5,000 words	To argue from published sources, with no data collection.	None in the research sense; the argument must be your own.

Naming conventions differ between institutions; use the term your own programme handbook uses. Length figures here are typical ranges, not rules.

THE ONE-SENTENCE TEST, BEFORE YOU COMMIT

Write it as one sentence: *In [population], this study examines how [relationship], using [method].* If any bracket is vague, you have an interest, not a topic.

- Population. Can you list who is eligible, and say roughly how many there are?
- Relationship and method. Can you observe, ask about or measure it, in the time and with the access you have?

2 The length rule at postgraduate level

The University of Zambia's postgraduate regulations state a length for one specific award. It is worth reading slowly, because the sentence names both the pathway and the degree:

"Candidates of the Master's degree by Coursework and Dissertation shall submit a dissertation of 20,000 to 35,000 words."

University of Zambia, *Regulations for Postgraduate Training*, March 2015

Two things follow. First, the figure attaches to the Master's by coursework and dissertation — if your programme is structured differently, or is an undergraduate project, confirm the requirement with your school rather than assume this number. Second, a word range is a working space, not a quota: an examiner can tell the difference between a 30,000-word dissertation and a 15,000-word argument inflated to fill it.

SOURCE University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies. *Regulations for Postgraduate Training* (March 2015). https://graduate.unza.zm/images/files/pg_regulations.pdf

3 The five lines to write before a supervision meeting

Supervision time is short and shared. Arriving with these five lines written turns a vague conversation into a decision.

AGENDA — ONE PAGE, FILLED IN BEFORE YOU KNOCK

- What I did since we last met: piloted the questionnaire on six traders and revised four questions.
- What I have decided: a purposive sample of twelve, drawn from two sections of the market.
- What I cannot decide alone: whether the failed-transaction question becomes a second objective.
- What I am asking you to read: Chapter 3 draft, pages 4–9 only.
- What I will do before the next meeting: complete twelve interviews and transcribe the first six.



4 Twelve months, honestly spaced

Working backwards from the submission date is the only timeline that survives. The middle column is the test of whether you are on schedule; the right-hand column is what usually goes wrong at that point.

Month	What must be finished	The trap
1	Two or three candidate topics, each narrowed to a one-sentence question.	Reading forever without committing to a question.
2	Supervisor agrees the question; a one-page proposal exists.	Treating the supervisor as an approver rather than a reader of drafts.
3	Literature map; the three debates your study sits between.	Summarising every paper found instead of the ones that bear on the question.
4	Methodology fixed — instrument, sample, access, ethics clearance.	Collecting data before the instrument has been piloted.
5	Pilot on a small group; instrument revised.	Discovering ambiguous questions after 200 responses are in.
6-7	Fieldwork or data collection completed.	Under-estimating travel, permissions and call-backs.
8	Data cleaned, coded and described. Tables built.	Leaving cleaning until writing has begun; it always takes longer than expected.
9-10	Full first draft of every chapter, including the discussion.	Writing the introduction first and polishing it repeatedly.
11	Revision from supervisor comments; referencing checked.	Reformatting the document instead of answering the comments.
12	Proof-read, printed and bound, submitted before the deadline.	Binding the day it is due, with no time to correct the printed copy.

THREE WARNING SIGNS, CHECKED EVERY MONTH

- You cannot state the question in one sentence.** The earliest and most reliable sign that the scope is still too wide.
- You have read for a month and written nothing.** Reading without writing notes produces no chapter and no argument.
- Nobody else could repeat your method.** If a reader cannot tell who you sampled and how, you have written a description rather than a method.

5 Narrowing a topic — a worked example

Almost every topic arrives too large to answer. Narrowing is not a loss of ambition; it is a sequence of deliberate cuts until what remains can be defended with the evidence you can actually obtain. Watch three cuts being made on one topic.

FROM A BROAD AREA TO AN ANSWERABLE QUESTION

Broad area. Financial inclusion in Zambia.

Cut 1 — by population. Not "Zambians", but market traders in one named market in Lusaka. A defined group can be sampled and described.

Cut 2 — by relationship. Not "the effect of financial inclusion", which spans everything, but how one service — mobile money — changes the working capital a trader carries.

Cut 3 — by evidence. Not "how it affects traders", which cannot be observed directly, but what traders report changed in their daily cash-holding after they adopted it. That is answerable with interviews and a short questionnaire.

Candidate title	Verdict
"Financial inclusion and economic development in Zambia"	Rejected. A national question cannot be answered from one student project; every claim would be unsupported.
"The effect of mobile money on small businesses in Lusaka"	Workable, but still broad. "Small businesses" and "effect" both need defining.
"Mobile money and working capital among market traders in Lusaka's Soweto Market: a qualitative study"	Chosen. Named population, named relationship, named method — and therefore a defensible scope.



6 Objectives, research questions and a hypothesis — a worked example

These three are not interchangeable, and examiners mark them separately. An **objective** says what the study will do. A **research question** says what must be answered for the objective to be met. A **hypothesis** is a testable statement used when the design is quantitative. Each line below is written for the topic just narrowed, with a note on why it is phrased that way.

THREE OBJECTIVES

- To establish how market traders in Soweto Market use mobile money in their daily trading.
- To determine what traders report changed in their cash-holding after adoption.
- To identify the barriers traders describe when a mobile money transaction fails.

Each opens with a verb the study can deliver — *establish, determine, identify* — not "understand" or "explore", which cannot be shown to have been achieved.

TWO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do traders use mobile money in the course of a trading day?
- What barriers do traders report, and how do they respond when a transaction fails?

Each corresponds to an objective above. If a question has no matching objective, either add one or cut the question.

ONE HYPOTHESIS — AND WHEN YOU NEED ONE

H_1 : Traders who have used mobile money for longer than twelve months report a lower average daily cash balance than those who have not.

A hypothesis is only useful if the design can test it. This one needs a measured daily balance and a comparison group, so it belongs to a quantitative study — it does not belong in the qualitative design chosen above, where the question is answered by description rather than by test. Stating a hypothesis you cannot test is a common and costly error.

7 The chapter skeleton, with a word budget

A dissertation whose chapters are *Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion* tells the examiner nothing, because those titles fit any study ever written. The titles below carry the argument: read only the title column and you still know what the study claims and how it will defend the claim.

Chapter	Words	What belongs in it	What the examiner looks for
1. Why cash-holding matters for market traders	3,000	Problem, context, aim, objectives, the study's boundaries.	That the question is real, and that you have said what the study will not cover.
2. What is known about mobile money and trading capital	6,000	The debates, not a catalogue of summaries; ends with the gap.	A gap that the study's objectives actually address.
3. How the traders were studied	4,000	Design, sampling, instrument, pilot, ethics, limitations.	That another student could repeat the study from this chapter alone.
4. What traders said about cash and failure	7,000	Results only, in a fixed order, with the instrument's wording visible.	Results that have not been argued into the discussion yet.
5. Why the pattern looks the way it does	5,000	Your interpretation, placed against the literature of Chapter 2.	Explanation, alternative explanations, and honest limits.
6. What can be claimed, and what cannot	2,000	Answer to each research question, contribution, further work.	Claims no larger than the evidence in Chapter 4.
Front matter, references, appendices	outside the count	Title page, abstract, contents, tables, sources, instrument.	Usually excluded from a word limit — check your own programme's rule.

ORGANISING THE LITERATURE REVIEW BY DEBATE, NOT BY AUTHOR

The weak version reads: "Author A found X. Author B found Y." The strong version groups the reading into the arguments it belongs to:

- **Where the field agrees.** One dense paragraph, heavily cited, establishing what is settled.
- **Where it disagrees, and what has not been asked.** Paragraphs organised by the disagreement — ending with the gap your objectives address.



8 A one-page proposal, section by section

Most supervisors will not approve a study they cannot see on one page. Every section below is shown as a real sample sentence rather than a description of what to write — substitute your own content, keep the shape.

Section	A sample sentence, written properly
Title	Mobile money and working capital among market traders in Lusaka's Soweto Market: a qualitative study.
Background	Mobile money has spread rapidly in Zambia, but published evidence concentrates on uptake rather than on what changes in a trader's working day.
Problem statement	It is not known whether traders who use mobile money hold less cash, and if so, what that changes in how they buy stock.
Aim	To describe how the use of mobile money relates to the working capital that market traders hold during a trading day.
Objectives	The three objectives in section 6, reproduced in full — not summarised as "to study mobile money use".
Research questions	The two questions in section 6, matched one-to-one to the objectives.
Methodology	A qualitative design using twelve semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled traders, analysed thematically and reported under the themes that emerge.
Expected results	That traders report lower cash-holding but a new dependence on agent availability and network reliability.
Work plan	The month-by-month plan in section 4, compressed to a single line per month.
Ethics	Clearance will be sought before any interview; participants give written informed consent; no trader is named and no transaction data is collected.
Preliminary references	Five to eight entries in the one referencing style you have chosen, formatted in full.

The proposal is a promise, not an outline. Everything you state here — the sample, the instrument, the ethics route — becomes something an examiner can hold you to in Chapter 3. Write only what you are confident you can deliver.

9 Sampling and the instrument

SAMPLING

- Name the population precisely.** "Market traders in Soweto Market who sell vegetables" can be described; "small businesses" cannot.
- Justify the size.** For qualitative work, justify by saturation — the point at which further interviews stop producing new themes.
- State the inclusion rule.** Who was eligible, who declined, and how many were approached.
- Describe access honestly.** How you were allowed in, and who introduced you.

THE INSTRUMENT

Fault	The fix
Double-barrelled question	One idea per question.
Leading wording	Neutral phrasing; test it on a reader.
Unclear terms	Define in the trader's own vocabulary.
No pilot	Pilot on five people, then revise.

10 Research ethics, and the committee that hears misconduct

Any project that involves people — interviews, questionnaires, observation of identifiable individuals — normally requires clearance before you begin, and the exact procedure and forms are set by your own institution. What the university's research policy makes plain is where a case goes if something goes wrong:

"Issues of misconduct in Research should be brought to the attention of the Research Ethics Committee"

University of Zambia, *Research Policy and Intellectual Property Rights*, §4 "Misconduct in Research"

Misconduct is a wide category. It includes fabricated or altered data, presenting another person's work as your own, and failing to obtain consent. A study that collects no data is not automatically exempt; check with your school before you assume it is.

SOURCE University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies. *Research Policy and Intellectual Property Rights*, §4.
https://graduate.unza.zm/images/files/research_policy.pdf



11 Two published rules that can end a dissertation early

Everything else in this document is guidance. These two carry a formal consequence, and both are published by the University of Zambia.

ONE REFERENCING METHOD, APPLIED CONSISTENTLY

"One of the following methods should be used for the referencing and citation of published work in the dissertation or thesis"

UNZA, *Regulations and Guidelines for Postgraduate Studies*, 2024

The regulation permits a choice of method and requires you to use *one*. Mixing APA and Harvard inside the same reference list is therefore not a stylistic preference — it is a departure from the stated method.

THE SIMILARITY-INDEX GROUND FOR TERMINATION

"plagiarism exceeding the similarity index of 25% excluding tables, figures, references and appendices."

UNZA, *Regulations and Guidelines for Postgraduate Studies*, 2024

Note what the count excludes. Properly attributed and referenced quoted material is not the problem; unattributed copying is. Run the similarity check early enough to fix a chapter, not late enough to panic.

SOURCE University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies. *Regulations and Guidelines for Postgraduate Studies* (February 2024). https://graduate.unza.zm/images/files/PG_Regulations_Guidelines_rev.pdf

12 Finishing: submission, archiving and the viva

BEFORE YOU BIND IT

- Every in-text citation has a matching entry, and every entry is cited.
- Every table and figure is numbered, captioned and referred to in the text.
- Page numbers, contents page and table of tables agree with the printed copy.
- The abstract states the question, the method and the finding — in that order.
- Your supervisor has read the final version, not an earlier draft.

IN A VIVA, IF YOUR PROGRAMME HAS ONE

- Rehearse a two-minute answer to "what does this study claim?"
- Know your limitations section better than the examiner does.
- Where you cannot answer, say so, and say what you would do to find out.
- Defend the method, not the person. Corrections are normal and expected.

13 The eight commonest reasons dissertations lose marks

Reason	How it shows up	The correction
Question too large	Every claim is hedged; nothing is tested.	Cut the population, the relationship or the method — until it is answerable.
Objectives and questions do not match	A question is answered that was never set.	Map them one-to-one and delete the surplus.
Literature as catalogue	Ten pages of summaries, no debate.	Organise by argument, and name the gap you fill.
Method not repeatable	Another student could not repeat it.	Report sampling, instrument and analysis steps in sequence.
Results argued in the results chapter	Interpretation appears before the findings are complete.	Report first, interpret in the discussion.
Conclusions larger than the evidence	Policy recommendations from twelve interviews.	Scale every claim to the sample that supports it.
Inconsistent referencing	Two styles in one list.	Choose one method and apply it throughout.
Unexplained gaps in the text	Missing pages, blank tables, uncited figures.	Proof-read the printed copy, not the screen.

SOURCES QUOTED IN THIS DOCUMENT University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies. *Regulations for Postgraduate Training* (March 2015). https://graduate.unza.zm/images/files/pg_regulations.pdf
University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies. *Regulations and Guidelines for Postgraduate Studies* (February 2024). https://graduate.unza.zm/images/files/PG_Regulations_Guidelines_rev.pdf
University of Zambia, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies. *Research Policy and Intellectual Property Rights*, §4. https://graduate.unza.zm/images/files/research_policy.pdf