



How to produce a good dissertation: four advanced tips that may help you to sharpen your analytical writing skills.

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Objective ... better dissertation writing

The objectives of this presentation aim to assist you to:

1. Develop a succinct, concise writing style
2. Complete your dissertation faster
3. Pass with a 'no amendments' recommendation exam report.

Tip 1: **Avoid loose textual discussion**

You should avoid loosely worded discussion.

You should avoid writing universally unless you intend to do so. Avoid using extreme language (*e.g.* 'useless') unless you hold this opinion. Something that is 'useless' has no purpose whatsoever. Reflect on the meaning of the word 'worthless'.

Loosely worded discussion may include references to the other extreme of universalism. This includes the use of words such as 'voids' and 'global absences'.

Universal words

Universal words include those that refer to **all** members of a category such as:

Everyone, all, everywhere, globally, internationally, people, animals, plants, buildings.

For example, consider this flawed statement:

The President in **every** country is aged more than 25 years old.

Some countries such as Canada do not have a President - they have a Prime Minister. The Head of State of Germany is the Chancellor.

If you mean to say The Head of State of all sovereign nations, then you should use this description to convey your point more clearly.

Universal words (continued)

This example that looks at Heads of State illustrates the key principle of **exception**.

Universalism is rare in the arts and sciences. There are exceptions to laws of observation in virtually all cases. You therefore need to choose your words carefully.

Even in the natural sciences, many so-called universal laws do not always hold true.

$E=MC^2$. This formula might not hold true in all galaxies as this cannot be tested.

The speed of gravity, 9.8 metres per second does not hold true if there are magnetic forces or there are influences such as air (e.g. a floating feather).

When discussing the formula $E=MC^2$... you could inform the reader that this has not been tested beyond our Solar System. Furthermore you may state that the gravity rule of 9.8M is a general principle that holds true when there is no interference from other forces.

Universal words (continued) Use tighter wording

Loose statement

Google's search engine is available for use in all countries.

Tighter statement

Google's search Engine is available for domestic users in virtually all countries.

Why insert virtually all?

Because Google is not available for domestic users in China and North Korea.

Why insert domestic users? Government censors in North Korea and China may access Google to support their bureaucracy.

Universal words (continued)

Use tighter wording

The same principles about exceptionalism apply to negative words. Examples of negative universal words include: nowhere, noone, never, absence, extinct.

Loose wording

The white rhinoceros is extinct.

Tighter wording

The white rhinoceros is near-extinct as only three remain alive in the African continent.

Inserting the words 'near' and 'virtually' before an adjective is usually a safe way to tighten references to universalism. It shows that you are aware of exceptions, without having to state what these exceptions are. Or, you may state the exception. Example:

With the exception of Helen Clark, New Zealand's Prime Ministers have all been men.

Tip 2

VARIABLES and FACTORS

The words 'factors' and 'variables' are not synonyms.

The word 'variables' relates to a mathematical equation about causation. Consider this famous formula in physics:

$$\text{Energy} = \text{Mass} \times (\text{The velocity of light})^2$$

(2) denotes squared

Or, more famously, $E=MC^2$

E, **M** and **C** are **variables** in the above equation. A change in one variable will necessarily cause a change to a variable on the other side of the equation.

Variables ... continued

Be careful how you use the word 'variable'. What you say may technically be correct. However, there may be a more 'watertight' way to pose your argument. Research scholars should be able to demonstrate mastery of language communication.

Loose wording

The is a correlation between variable 'E' and variable 'M'.

Tighter wording

There is a positive correlation between variable 'E' and variable 'M'.

Variables ... continued

There are three main types of correlation between variables:

1. Positive correlation (e.g., annual personal income AND annual personal savings)
2. Negative correlation (e.g., national smoking rates AND national life expectancy)
3. No correlation (e.g., the price of eggs in Chile and life expectancy rates in Japan)

Choose your wording carefully. There may also be 'indeterminable correlation'.

Furthermore, correlation may not be known if it has not been researched and proven.

Factors

Factors refer to associations between any two or more 'things' that is not quantifiable.

These 'things' includes organisms (plants, animals), matter (*e.g.* oxygen) or objects (*e.g.* buildings).

For example: we can say that a political system is a factor that can promote (positive) or obstruct (negative) growth rates in a sovereign nation's domestic economy.

Economic growth rates can be quantified in percentage and currency terms. A political system (*e.g.* democracy *c.f.* communism) is not quantifiable.

Factors (continued)

We may also use the term ‘factor’ when there is no research or scientific formulae that enables us to quantify a known positive or negative association between things.

For example, one may state: “some philosophers argue that people who have positive feelings towards their Prime Minister are more likely to feel happier about their life”.

Happiness levels are rarely quantified by social researchers. Happiness is normally discussed thematically. A social scientist is likely to make a statement such as “a person’s attitude towards their prime minister is a **factor** that can positively or negatively influence their emotional health and wellbeing”.

Tip 3 **Chicken/egg analogy** and causation



Some people automatically assume that factor/variable A is a driver that causes outcome B. This may occur when these two events are always or invariably coupled.

We may falsely assume that factor/variable A causes outcome B for a number of reasons. For example, the popular media and/or national folk lore might perpetuate this belief over an extended period of time.

Loose wording

“When a patient has heart palpitations, s/he often focuses on their breathing as the stress that caused them to have heart palpitations needs to be countered.”

Chicken/egg analogy and causation (continued)

In most instances, the **chicken/egg** analogy requires you to consider three plausible scenarios and write in such a way that you show an awareness of these three explanations.

Scenario 1: factor/variable A may be a cause outcome B

Stressful experiences may exacerbate a pre-existing heart ailment.

Scenario 2: factor/variable B may be a cause of outcome A

A pre-existing heart ailment may exacerbate stress.

Scenario 3: factor/variable B may be a cause of outcome A **and** vice versa

Scenario 1 and 2 may occur at the same time.

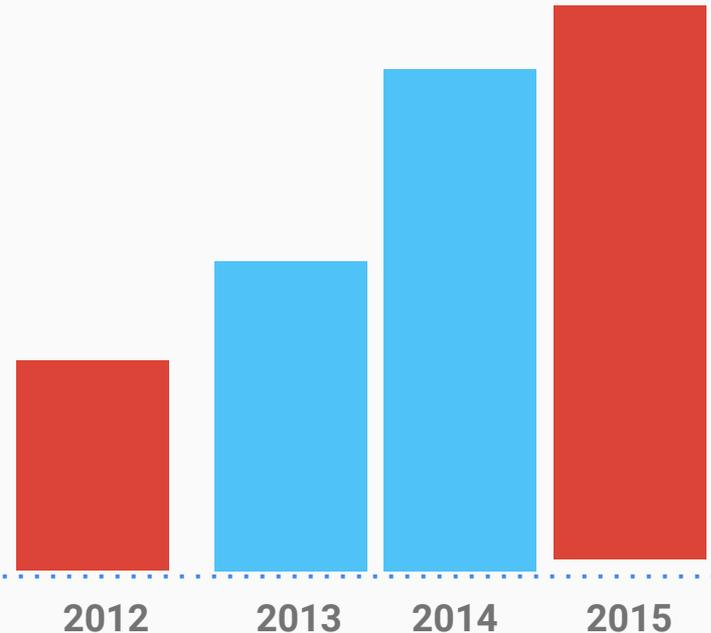
Tip 4 Demonstrate a **sophisticated vocabulary** and advanced analytical skills

A dissertation writer is an advanced writer and is a ‘serious’ scholar.

This statement below is correct. A doctoral scholar should aim to write a tighter statement and offer more analytical detail.

“The graph to the right shows growth during the period of analysis.”

Always state *where* and *when*.

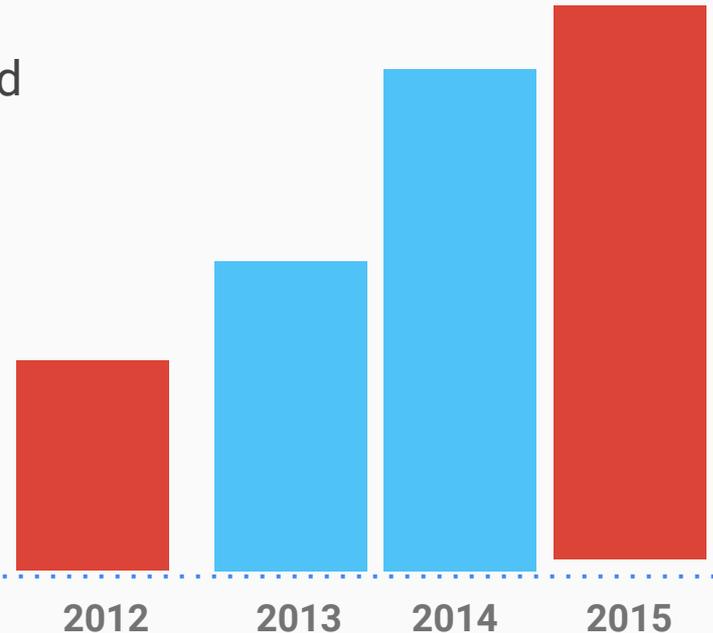


Demonstrate a **sophisticated vocabulary**

and advanced analytical skills (continued)

There are three main principles of advanced academic writing:

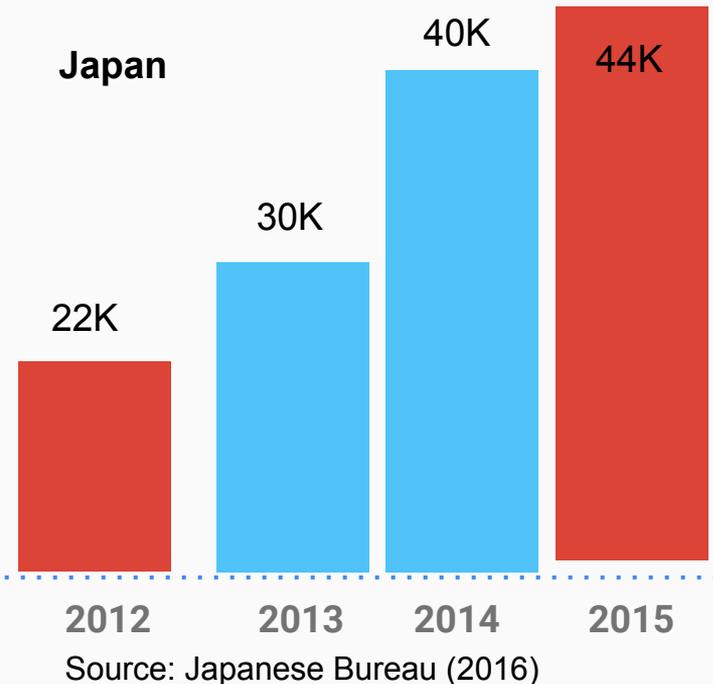
1. Be specific (e.g. time, place, quantity, people)
2. Use rich adjectives rather than simple words
3. Offer a sophisticated level of analysis beyond stating basic, obvious facts.



Demonstrate a **sophisticated vocabulary** and **advanced analytical skills** (continued)

This bar graph shows continuous growth in birth rates in Japan during all four years, *i.e.* from 2012 to 2015 inclusive. Birth rates were 22, 000 *per annum* during 2012 and peak at 44, 000 *per annum* during 2015. Total growth, year-on-year peaks at 10, 000 births between 2013 and 2014.

Total births during this period is 136, 000.



Further reading, open-access (yes, free!)

Boote, D. and Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational researcher*, 34(6), 3–15.

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Dong, Y. (1998). Non-native graduate students' thesis/dissertation writing in science: Self-reports by students and their advisors from two US institutions. *English for specific purposes*, 17(4), 369–390.

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Yu_Ren_Dong/publication/2634445068_Non-native_Graduate_Students'_ThesisDissertation_Writing_in_Science_Self-reports_by_Students_and_Their_Advisors_from_Two_US_Institutions/links/570cef0108ae2b772e42a47d.pdf>. Accessed 8 July 2016.

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