

Lecture 2: Choosing a research topic and writing a dissertation title

Choosing a topic is the first stumbling block for students. Many students consume a lot of time looking for an appropriate topic that meets their interests and satisfies their supervisor. This dilemma stems from the high expectations students and supervisors have about the topic and the wide range of possible research topics that students have to choose from.

1. How to choose your topic?

It is always recommended to choose topics that are closely related to your intellectual interests, personal experiences and favorite research areas. Tent (2008: 1) gives three reasons why students need to choose topics of personal interests.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, you will probably find you are motivated to investigate your chosen topic, pursuing your research with interest and completing a quality dissertation. Secondly, you probably already know a lot about this topic and can bring this knowledge to bear. This will help you as you define your research area and formulate your research question. Thirdly, you may find that researching an area related to your work or personal interests can help you to identify and gain access to the data you need to collect.

| | |
|---|---|
| Field Establish your field, and previous research work in it. | |
| | Problem Identify a practical problem or a gap/deficiency in existing research. |
| | Proposed Solution Define your proposed research and how it relates to the problem, gap or deficiency. |
| | Evaluation Consider and explain how your proposed research and its contribution to the field will be evaluated. |

Steps in choosing a topic (Tent 2008: 1)

However, one should avoid being over ambitious when choosing a topic. The massive question that occupies your intellectuality must be do-able and researchable; therefore, the researcher has to consider the variables that may limit the research process by answering the following questions:

- Do I have the necessary skills to accomplish this study?
- Are research tools and participants accessible to complete this study?
- Am I financially capable to accomplish my work? Is the allotted time sufficient to finalize all the steps of research?
- Do I have resources and documents necessary to obtain relevant data?
- Is there an availability of professionals in my research field who are ready to advise and assist me in the course of my research?

2. The dissertation title: Characteristics

Like any other parts of the dissertation, the title doesn't appear immediately. It takes time and effort in brainstorming and revising to come up with a working title that reflects the content and objectives of your dissertation.

The title is the façade of your dissertation. It catches the readers' attention, predicts content, reflects the tone, scope and nature of the piece of writing and highlights the purpose of the study (Hairston & Keen, 2003). Therefore, a good title should be:

- a. Descriptive and informative (explanatory):** a good title is well-constructed and concise so that each word carries meaning. It also informs the readers about the variables you want to examine and the adopted research methodology. It explains in fewest words possible the context, theory and population of your research.
- b. Accurate and precise:** being precise doesn't necessarily mean short. Titles need to be written in simple and clear lexis with a good word order and common word combination. Consider these examples:

| Not precise | Precise |
|--|---|
| Oral communication skill | speaking |
| The motivation of learners | learners' motivation |
| The implementation of effective teaching aids in the classroom to improve learners' outcomes | Towards implementing videos for better listening' outcomes |
| Second World War strategy of Hitler during Russia invasion | Hitler's raids: War consequences of the military intervention in Russia |

c. Internally consistent

Consistency means that titles reflect the content. Many titles are informative and precise but fail to be internally consistent due to the little attention paid to the language and concepts used in the written piece. Confusing or interchangeable terms should be cautiously used in order not to puzzle the reader.

- *Enhancing 2nd year EFL students' autonomous learning via task-based oral activities*

To be internally consistent, the content should be as the title suggests. It is about 2nd year EFL students, autonomous learning, task-based activities and it uses qualitative /quantitative approach.

3. The dissertation title: Components

All the components of your title should convey something about your research. This may include the focus of the study, the adopted research methodology, research variables, participants and setting. Study this title:

- *The contribution of extensive reading in successful writing of persuasive essays: A quasi-experimental study. The case of 3rd year LMD students at Mohammed Kheider university-Biskra-*

Other division of title components may include:

- a. Area of interest: refers to the broader theme the dissertation addresses. Having multiple areas of interest is also possible.
 - b. Focus of the research: the particular angle or perspective of that theme the dissertation stresses.
 - c. Methodological components: are related to research design, population and setting.
- *Barriers (focus) to Competency-based approach application (area of interest): a qualitative study (research method) among Algerian High School teachers (participants and setting).*

Including other components as research outcomes is also possible. ‘Research outcome’ is often included when you have a practical component in your dissertation and you would like to draw some attention to the proposed recommendations of the study. Look at these titles:

- *Problems (focus) with group work in oral class (area of interest): lessons (outcomes) from 1st year LMD (participants) case study (research method) at Biskra University (setting).*
- *The implementation (research outcomes) of Deming’s style of quality management: an action research in a plastic company.*

4. The dissertation title: format

A standard format of a dissertation title can be: informative title: indicative subtitle (Simon 2011). Some universities do not allow the use of a colon and require having the title as concise as possible. Consider these examples:

- *The wasted resource (informative title): factors affecting language lab use in EFL oral courses. A case study of 2nd year LMD classes (indicative sub-title)*
- *Brutality and justice: An analysis of symbolism in Orwell's animal Farm*
- *Short guy, big ego: a psychological analysis of Napoleon's military strategy*

5. Types of dissertation title

Hartley (2008) lists thirteen types of title that are used in dissertations and journal articles. Here are the six widely adopted ones.

1. Titles that state the general subject, for example
 - *The advantages and disadvantages of Cooperative learning*
 - *Designing task-based activities*
 - *Symbolism in Modern fiction*
2. Titles that particularize a specific theme following a general heading, for example:
 - *Pre-writing: the relation between brainstorming and outlining*
 - *The achievement of European industrial revolution: the liberation of Woman*
3. Titles that include a controlling question, for example:
 - *Are rubrics effective?*
 - *What roles figurative language may have in Modern poetry? Metaphoric images in X poet's master piece*
4. Titles that just state the findings, for example:
 - *Professional training as a solution to improve EFL novice teachers' instructional proficiency*
 - *Military over ambition: Russia invasion failure*
5. Titles that emphasize the methodology used in the research, for example:
 - *Using multilingual dictionaries in learning vocabulary: a quasi-experimental approach*
 - *Symbolism in Orwell's Animal Farm: a literary analysis study*
6. Titles that bid for attention by using startling openings, for example:
 - *Short guy, big ego: a psychological analysis of Napoleon's military strategy*

- *Listen, reflect and speak: the role of audio materials in developing EFL students' speaking skill*

6. Do's and do not's in dissertation titles

Simon (2011) suggests the following tips.

- Do not use a complete sentence as a title; no periods.
- Do make certain that the title is meaningful.
- Do not use abbreviations and acronyms.
- Do not put the research question as a title.
- Do make the sub-indicative title more elaborated and explanatory than the informative primary title.
- Do not write a lengthy title that confuses more than it guides.
- Do always write your title in present simple.

A good working title is the one that comes out of several drafting and preparation to be distinguished from the other competing titles.

References

- Hairston, M. & Keen, M. (2003). *Successful writing*. New York: Norton.
- Hartley, J. (2008). *Academic writing and publishing*. New York: Routledge
- Simon, M. (2011): *Dissertation and scholarly research: receipes for success*. Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success, LLC
- Tent, J. (2008). *Writing your dissertation: a guide*. Australia: Macquarie University.