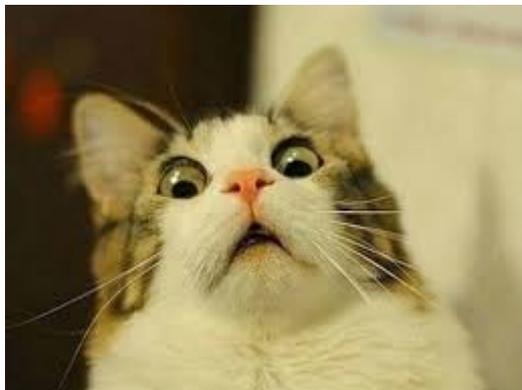


## The Undergraduate Dissertation

LSE Sociologists, it is final year- that means dissertation!



This blog is to provide some reassurance, and hopefully answer any questions you may have about the sociological dissertation. This is for you to refer back to as you progress throughout your dissertation course. Course convenor Fran Tonkiss provided an interview and some advice about the sociological dissertation project. *To find out more about Fran's work, [click here](#).*

### What is a dissertation?

A dissertation is a small-scale independent project exploring a clear issue, problem or question, drawing on theory and research from sociology and related fields.

This project can draw on different research methods, including qualitative and/or quantitative techniques:

- Interviews
- Surveys
- Ethnographic observations/fieldwork
- Textual analysis
- Documentary analysis
- Focus groups
- Secondary analysis
- Visual analysis
- Policy analysis
- Online analysis (you may use many of the above techniques to research the online world).

The way you decide to work is up to you – it depends on your topic, and where you stand in relation to your topic. You can start with a theory or hypothesis that you may wish to explore or test, or you can work backwards and let the theory emerge from the data. Some dissertation researchers are more interested in exploring a particular theorist's work in a substantive social context; others want to engage closely with a social issue or problematic and then work through the critical themes that come out of that engagement. *Please note that both ways of working are equally valid, and you are not penalised for favouring either way.*



## What did you do for your undergraduate dissertation?

Fran: I didn't do a Sociology degree. I actually did a Politics degree – there wasn't a Sociology department at my university and I didn't really know that Sociology existed! I did my first degree in Australia, where you have three-year programmes with an option of a fourth year to get an honours degree; it's similar to a one-year Master's in the UK. My dissertation was called *The End of the Political: an analysis of the theory of Jean Baudrillard*. I didn't have to do my own original research, as we expect from a Sociology dissertation; it was a critical analysis of his work. I did well in the dissertation but I remember one of my examiners definitely didn't like it – those kinds of post-structuralist arguments were not popular with all academics at the time, and I think it was a bit of a phase for me as well.

Although this wasn't based on empirical research, I chose this topic because I was interested in real-world debates. I did my degree in the late-1980s, when there was a lot of debate about the decline of class politics – it was the Reagan/Bush era in the US and Thatcher was still in power in the UK, and for many commentators, the relationship of class to politics had dissolved. I remember reading Andre Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class*, and Zygmunt Bauman's *Memories of Class* in particular at the time. I discovered politics in new ways at university; I had a strong political formation at home, but using theory to make sense of politics was really exciting for me as a student. Coming from the background I did, I was interested in class politics but also in new social movements; in the late '80s, there were a lot of solidarity movements such as the Latin American solidarity movements and the anti-apartheid movement, as well as the anti-nuclear movement, which I got involved in. Feminism was also very important: I actually came to feminist theory largely through doing a minor in English literature and reading feminist literary theory, and then began thinking about this in relation to politics – and life – more generally. When I was speaking to my teachers about where to go and what I wanted to do after my first degree, several of them said "that sounds like Sociology"- that's how I ended up doing a Master's in Sociology in the UK. And the rest is history! My Master's supervisor was the late John Urry.

My experience of the dissertation was very different – in a way, you had a more directive relationship with your advisor (it was my supervisor who suggested I study Baudrillard, whom he referred to as "boring Baud"); what we are doing now is much more about giving you the space to choose your own topic, and then working with you to craft and develop it. I definitely see my role as helping students to clarify what it is they want to study, and then helping them to realise that project, and I think that's generally how colleagues work in the department: we really can't tell you what dissertation you should write. It's just important to remember that your project, and your degree, is worth it – it can be hard to keep that focus when you're in the middle of doing it, and juggling everything else you have to do.

A reminder of the workshops:

- Introduction- formulating a research question
- Engaging with literature on your topic
- Reviewing past dissertations
- Research ethics
- Access
- Data collection

After the Christmas break, Kay will be facilitating the dissertation workshops. These will cover:

- Data analysis
- Writing up
- Working closely with academic advisors

Some final tips to take away:

- If you read a dissertation that is on your topic, remember there is no gold standard. The dissertation is yours and yours alone: an independent project. You can draw on someone else's work for guidance, but not as a model. Anyone who reads your work, including the examiners, is most interested in the original work you're doing on the topic. If you *do* look at others' work, you will notice that there is a real variety, and no single way of doing a dissertation.
- It can be helpful to look at research-based journal articles in your area – they are about the same length as a dissertation, and meet the same kind of objectives: identifying a topic for investigation; situating it both in the social world and in relation to existing literature and research; describing the methods they've used for data collection; presenting and analysing research material; and coming back to reflect on the original problem in light of their own analysis and argument. That can sometimes be more helpful than using a textbook on doing a research project or writing a dissertation.
- Use the workshops to help you structure your project, but remember that – while we have a broad structure in which first term is about research design and the second term is about data collection and analysis, followed by writing up – everyone is working to different plans and encountering different obstacles, so you can only assess your own progress against your own (flexible) schedule, not in relation to where other people are at.

Some helpful texts and textbooks:

- Gibson, W., & Brown, Andrew. (2009). *Working with Qualitative Data*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Broder Sumerson, J. (2013) *Finish Your Dissertation, Don't Let it Finish You!*
- Thomas, G. (2013) *How to Do Your Research Project*. London: SAGE Publications.

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