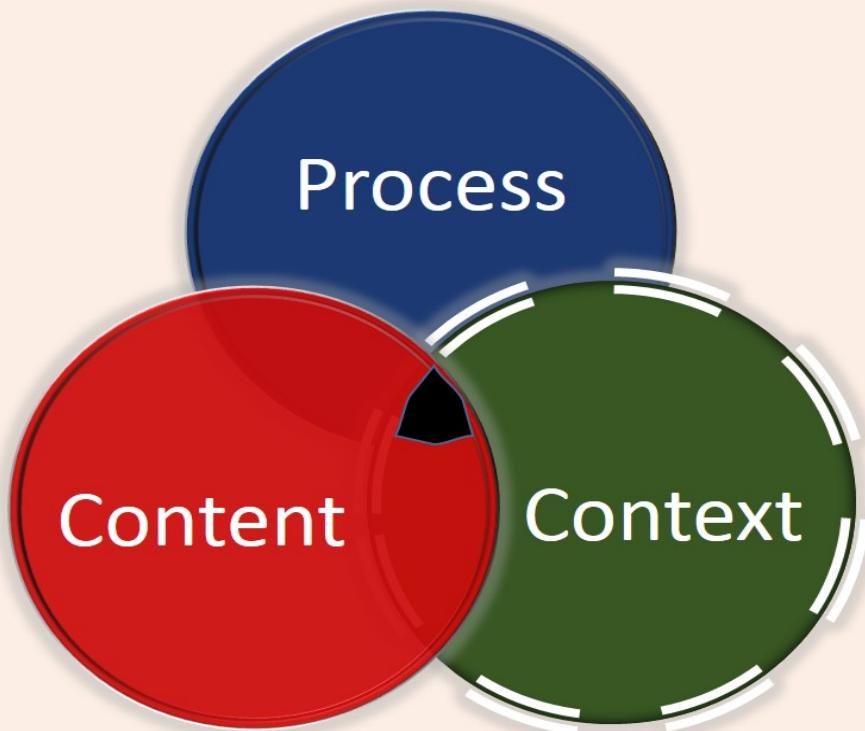


# Writing DISSERTATIONS & THESES

**What you should know but no one tells you**

**Miguel Moital**



# Writing Dissertations & Theses

What you should know but no one tells you

Dr. Miguel Moital

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/dissertations>

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# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| COPYRIGHT . . . . .   | i   |
| HELP! . . . . .   | ii  |
| DEDICATION . . . . .  | iii |
| ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . . . .  | iv  |
| PREFACE . . . . .   | vi  |
| 1. INTRODUCTION . . . . .   | 1   |
| 2. THE 6 Cs OF ACADEMIC WRITING EXCELLENCE . . . . .  | 2   |
| 2.1 Confined (to the aim and objectives of the study) . . . . .                                     | 3   |
| 2.2 Corroborated ( <i>by evidence</i> ) . . . . .   | 4   |
| 2.3 Critical ( <i>Actively engages with, rather than passively accepts, information</i> ) . . . . . | 4   |
| 2.4 Coherent ( <i>Logical and consistent</i> ) . . . . .  | 5   |
| 2.5 Concise ( <i>Written in a brief, but comprehensive way</i> ) . . . . .                          | 6   |
| 2.6 Captivating ( <i>Able to capture and hold the attention of the reader</i> ) . . . . .           | 6   |

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# HELP!

This ebook is a work in progress. This is just the first edition of what is intended to be a live document. Therefore, I encourage those who are using this ebook to share their thoughts about the ‘tips and tools’ with me. Is there anything that is not clear? Could I have provided an additional explanation that could have helped you? Welcome to the age of co-production.

You can contact me:

- by email [email<sup>1</sup>](mailto:mmoital@hotmail.com)
- through my [blog<sup>2</sup>](http://miguelmoital.blogspot.co.uk/).

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<sup>1</sup>[https://mmoital@hotmail.com](mailto:mmoital@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup><http://miguelmoital.blogspot.co.uk/>

# **DEDICATION**

To my Mentor, Professor Manuel Caldeira Pais (1930-2015)

To my PhD Supervisors, Professor Roger Vaughan and Dr. Jonathan Edwards

To my students, who have been the main inspiration for this book

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Miguel Moital

Dr. Miguel Moital is a Principal Academic in Events Management in the Department of Events & Leisure, Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, UK. At undergraduate level, Miguel lectures on the BA Events Management and at Post-graduate level on the MSc Events Management and MSc Events Marketing.

Miguel has supervised to completion more than 60 undergraduate and 25 Master's dissertations as well as 4 PhDs. He has examined Master's and PhDs as an external examiner and he is a frequent reviewer of articles for some of the leading tourism journals.

This supervisory and reviewer experience, coupled with his own research training (including two great PhD supervisors!), has given him an insight into the process behind academic writing excellence.

He has had great success in publishing with undergraduate and Master's students. So far he has published 5 journal articles (some in the leading hospitality and events journals) based on student dissertations, with another 3 going through the reviewing process (and a few more in the pipeline!). The research from several dissertations he supervised has also been presented at various international conferences.

He is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy and since his completion of the PGCert in Academic Practice (Bournemouth University, 2007), he has introduced a number of innovations in his teaching practice. Two of these were the basis for the BU Award for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning (Client-based assessment and writing student feedback using bank of comments). More recently he has led the adoption *Ugrade* (a peer assessment platform based on WebPA) at Bournemouth University.

His current areas of research interest include the consumer experience and marketing applied to events and leisure. He has published in a number of journals and has

presented more than 25 papers in international conferences.

# PREFACE

If you ask me what the most enjoyable part of my job is, I will answer with no hesitation: supervising dissertations (and theses). I love seeing students evolve as researchers and I am often amazed at their ability to develop their research skills in such a short period of time. While most of this evolution is down to the students' commitment to doing a good dissertation, I, as supervisor, can steer the student in the right direction (and away from mistakes).

Over the years I also have learned a lot from the students that I supervised, making me a better researcher and supervisor. During my supervision appointments I often end up thinking to myself "Wow, I had never thought of that!". Luckily, I have had many students that challenged my intellect. I remember a particular supervision where the nature of the work the student was carrying out was so innovative that I often felt out of my depth. In the end the student managed to do a very good dissertation, from which we managed to publish a journal article! It was a learning experience for me as much as for the student. Perhaps it is their ability to make me think, to enhance my knowledge and to challenge my research practice that makes supervising dissertations the most enjoyable part of my job.

Final year students doing the two undergraduate courses I teach on (BA (Hons) Events Management and BA (Hons) Events & Leisure Marketing) and MSc Events students have to write a dissertation. This is a major piece of work as it counts as a double unit (Undergraduate) and triple unit (Master's). Therefore, it is no surprise that students put a lot of effort into doing their dissertation. As a consequence, they also request frequent support from their supervisors. With all the pressures coming from the multiple demands of an academic job, my main challenge is to provide meaningful support without consuming too much time. This is even more challenging when one considers that I often have to supervise students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

Over the past 9 years I have supervised over 60 Undergraduate dissertations and 25 Master's dissertations. In addition, I marked as many dissertations supervised by colleagues (all dissertations at my School are marked by the supervisor and a

second academic). I have been confronted with countless situations that required not only identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a dissertation, but also finding an appropriate way to explain how the student could have done things differently.

Although sometimes students would prefer me to tell them the answer, my focus is on giving them the skills to be able to find the answer themselves. These generic skills, once understood and learned, can be applied to much of the work required to complete a good dissertation (or a research project), but also to other parts of life (e.g. produce stronger arguments, better communicate ideas). In other words, my focus is on helping students to learn how to be better at catching fish rather than on giving them the fish.

Over time, I developed a portfolio of ‘tips and tools’ that helped many students to improve their dissertation, sometimes significantly. When explaining some of the material covered in this book to my students, I often find myself looking at their faces and seeing that they just had a ‘Eureka’ moment. A moment when they change the way they view, and do, research forever. It does not need to involve a massive change. It is, as I often tell them, just another piece of the jigsaw puzzle that has been put in a different, better place.

This book should not be seen as another book competing with the many books on dissertation research skills. The book aims neither to be exhaustive nor to explain the whole dissertation research process. Instead it should be seen as complement and an add-on to such books. While I do include new material, I also adapt existing knowledge, expand it and/or explain it in a different way so as to make it easier for the students to understand it.

For example, I did not create the knowledge about the structure of an argument, but the analogy of the house is my take on how you can explain an argument using a ‘common sense’ example. Student feedback suggests that this analogy achieves its intended purpose to a good extent. Some of the material covers ‘unwritten rules’ that I have identified as associated with a good dissertation.

Although most of them will not be aware of it, my students have had a lot of input into this book. After all, many of the ideas contained in this book came from my interaction with them. In one form or another, I have shared many of the tips and tools with them and then saw if they were useful or not (i.e., improved the quality of their work). Other areas are untested.

Students can use this book as ‘self-help’ (acting as a ‘virtual supervisor’, as I tell my students), but also as a basis for discussions with their supervisor(s). Although it is written with students in mind, this book is also expected to be helpful to supervisors. Supervisors can use this book to enhance their portfolio of ‘tips and tools’, hopefully improving their ability to help students to produce better dissertations. While the examples given are related to my field of study (events, leisure, tourism and hospitality), by focusing on generic dissertation skills which are applicable to virtually any dissertation, I trust that most dissertation students will find this book useful.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The meaning of the word ‘dissertation’, ‘monograph’ and ‘thesis’ varies around the world. In this ebook, a dissertation is viewed as resulting from a research project that involves the collection of data. This data is obtained through a rigorous process of designing, implementing, analysing and reporting. It usually involves primary data generated through a variation of collection methods that may include interviews, questionnaires, experiments, observation or document analysis. However, the data need not only be primary; much of what is covered in this book is relevant to research projects based on secondary data.

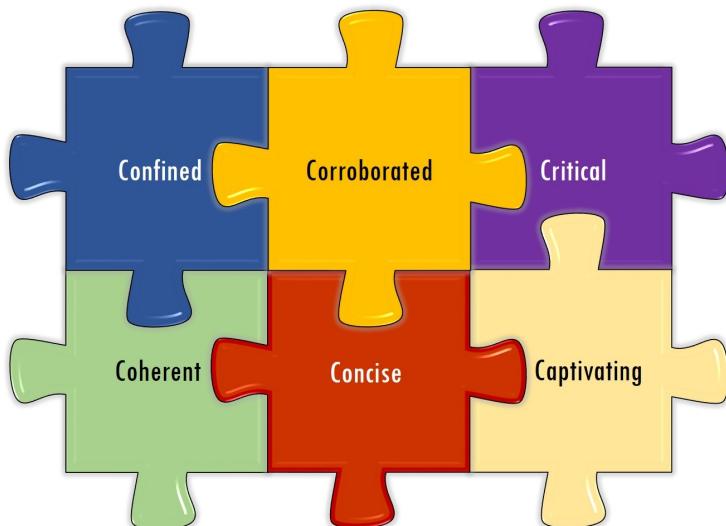
My supervision style distinguishes two key skills required to produce a high-standard dissertation. The first focuses on the process of research, leading to the collection and analysis of high quality data. The emphasis during this stage is on elements such as defining the scope of the study, getting familiar with the literature review, developing the conceptual framework, designing the data collection instrument, collecting the data and analysing it using suitable methods.

I emphasise the research process elements a lot and often my students have done a great job collecting their data, ending up with high quality data. The quality of the dissertation then is very much dependent on their ability to make the most of the potential their data is giving them. In other words, they have the basis to tell a great story; now their challenge is to make sure the report is able to accurately and confidently tell that story. Therefore, the second stage of my supervision focuses very much on communication, that is, writing up the report in a way that makes the most of the data collected. Much of this book is about the latter; however, references to the process of research will also be made.

The communication stage is concerned with making sure that the story the dissertation will be telling meets six criteria, expressed in the form of 6 ‘C’s: Confined, Corroborated, Critical, Coherent, Concise and Captivating. The range of ‘tips and tools’ presented in this book aim, in one way or another, to contribute to fulfilling the 6 Cs. The next chapter explains each of the 6 Cs in detail.

## 2. THE 6 Cs OF ACADEMIC WRITING EXCELLENCE

A well communicated dissertation needs to adhere to certain guidelines. When I started writing this book I came up with six criteria, expressed in the form of 6 Cs, that could serve as intuitive benchmarks against which to evaluate a dissertation. These 6 Cs are: Confined, Corroborated, Critical, Coherent, Concise and Captivating. Your grade will reflect your ability to meet the benchmarks (i.e. reference points) given by the 6 Cs. Please take some time to read them. Read and re-read it if is needed. These 6 Cs are the basis with which you should self-evaluate any piece of academic work, that is, you can use them to evaluate how good your dissertation is.



The 6 Cs of Academic Writing Excellence

## 2.1 Confined (to the aim and objectives of the study)

Imagine the following situation. You go to a bookstore and see a book entitled “50 Delicious Recipes of Asian Cold Dishes”. You like Asian food and decide to buy the book to try the recipes. You get home and open the book and eventually realise that half the book is about recipes from Europe and North America. What would you think? Probably that you have been fooled and that the content does not reflect the title. This anecdotal example represents well what confined is about.

The aim and objective(s) are a critical element in any dissertation. The first challenge is to make sure that these are appropriate to the dissertation brief, including focus and length. However, once you have come up with an appropriate aim and objectives, one important idea that I share with my students is the need to ‘stick to the promise’, i.e., stay within the boundaries defined by the objective(s) of your dissertation.

The objective(s) prepare the reader for what the dissertation is about. One implication is that from that point onwards he/she is expecting to read about aspects that are related to, and within the scope defined by, the objective(s). Including irrelevant material is likely to bring your mark down.

Objectives are not set in stone from the outset. They are dynamic, as students tend to refine them as their dissertation progresses. However, while doing the work it is important not to deviate too much from whatever your objective is at the time. When writing the final document, then it is very important that the content of your dissertation falls within your final objective(s).

I often have to deal with my students’ excitement about something they read, or an idea they came up with. The moment of truth is when I ask them ‘How is that related to the objective(s) of your dissertation?’ If they can explain its relevance in reasonable terms, then they can pursue it, if they can’t, it is not part of the story and should be excluded. It does not mean that it is not interesting and they should not be excited about it; rather, it just does not fit the ‘story’ they are attempting to tell in their dissertation.

## 2.2 Corroborated (*by evidence*)

One of the critical elements in writing a good dissertation is the ability to produce strong arguments. This means that whatever you say needs to be confirmed/supported by appropriate evidence. I often say to my students that I am not interested in their opinion, rather in their *substantiated opinion*.

The difference between an opinion and a substantiated opinion is that in the latter, the particular proposition the student is making (his/her opinion/conclusion) is based on evidence that was produced following a structured approach. In other words, what you are saying is based on a solid argument. If this explanation is a bit difficult to understand at this stage, read the section on ‘the structure of an argument’ presented in Section 4.1.

I’ll give you one example that illustrates this point in a dissertation context. A few years ago I supervised a dissertation and one of my challenges as a supervisor was to instil in the student the need to draw conclusions that were corroborated by the evidence she had collected through her primary data. I had to emphasise this because the student’s mind-set was one of drawing conclusions that reflected her opinion, rather than those which reflected what the data she collected was affording her to say (substantiated opinion). In other words, her conclusions were not based on solid evidence.

In academic work, producing solid arguments often requires two elements to be present. The first is a clear theoretical underpinning; the second is the collection of appropriate evidence (i.e. related to the theoretical underpinning). This ebook will explain both, for example in Chapter 2, when I cover the Research Pillars: Process, Content and Context.

## 2.3 Critical (*Actively engages with, rather than passively accepts, information*)

One of the main skills required to produce excellent dissertation is critical thinking. Broadly speaking, critical thinking is the process of actively “conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or

generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication” (The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 2014).

The above definition suggests that critical thinking is about your thought process, grounded on the premise that you will actively engage with, rather than passively absorb, information. Therefore, critical thinking is closely related to evaluation, which is the process of assessing the merits of the information you are dealing with (i.e. the positives and the negatives; its strengths and weaknesses).

I often tell my students that when doing a literature review they should go beyond ‘regurgitating’ what others have said. Instead, they should focus their efforts on breaking the information down in smaller pieces, compare and contrast those pieces and then re-group and categorise them. This is because conclusions drawn are then more likely to be critical. This is covered later in the companion ebook through what I call the ‘Intellectual depth ladder’.

Critical evaluation often requires a focus on the ‘why’. I always tell my students that the most important word in their course is WHY. If you are dealing with the whys you are scratching under the surface, and exploring the principles (or reasons) that explain the phenomenon. This is essential if you want to change the outcome (i.e. result). For example, I have devised a logical way to explain research process in a dissertation, including the types of reasons you can use to explain any methodological choice (Section 7.3).

When doctors want to prescribe a treatment, they do not focus on the symptom; they focus on what could be causing it. The same principle applies to much of the work you will be doing as a student. It is important that you address both the ‘what is happening’ and the ‘why it is happening’.

## **2.4 Coherent (*Logical and consistent*)**

Coherence is about good organisation. Delivering a well organised dissertation involves considerations about what to include (and exclude), the emphasis given to both topics and arguments and the order in which information should appear.

One useful exercise when considering what to include and exclude is what I call zooming: at times you could start with the general and then move on to the particular

(zoom in); at other times, the required strategy is one of moving from the specific to the general (zoom out).

Achieving high levels of coherence also requires consistency of language and style (with both appropriate to the area being covered) and purposefulness. Purposefulness is one skill that I actively try to foster in my students. It involves explicitly demonstrating the many skills the dissertation is designed to evaluate. It requires showing an awareness of what you did, why you did it and why you are communicating it in that way. In summary, it is about demonstrating that you did things purposefully rather than by chance.

## **2.5 Concise (*Written in a brief, but comprehensive way*)**

Being concise is about effectiveness and efficiency in communication. In other words, it involves providing information as clearly as possible (effectiveness) in as few words as possible (efficiency). It can be achieved by going straight to the point and removing duplicate or redundant ideas and information. Unless you are a very gifted writer, concision requires substantial efforts in writing and re-writing. That's why I always say to my students 'First drafts are never good!' (that is, they are never good enough as a final submission). Coherent and Concise are related, but different Cs. Coherence focuses on what to include and exclude, while Concise focuses on how clearly and succinctly the information is presented.

## **2.6 Captivating (*Able to capture and hold the attention of the reader*)**

A captivating dissertation will evoke the interest and attention of the reader/audience. In other words, it is about instilling in the reader the thought 'I want to keep

reading this'. Captivating is a combination of some of the other Cs (e.g. a dissertation that is not Concise and Critical is unlikely to be Captivating), but also includes those elements that if not there, could affect the ability to create and retain a high level of interest in the reader/audience. These elements include presentation and formatting aspects such as a professional (not lazy) look, font size and type, margins, quality of the tables and font/background contrast. [In order to meet the Consistent criterion, these need to be consistently applied throughout].

Getting these formatting elements right can be difficult as each reader will have his/her preferences. For example, should you align the text to the left or adopt justified alignment (aligned to the left and right)? While I have heard some colleagues saying that they prefer left alignment, it is my perception that justified alignment is now favoured by the majority of academics (including myself). I would even dare to say that due to computers, most text is now justified aligned (e.g. books, newspapers).

### ***Final words***

These six characteristics of a well communicated piece of academic work are not mutually exclusive (i.e. completely independent). For example, concision is likely to influence how captivating the dissertation is; confinement and coherence are also associated. Hence the importance of considering the 6 Cs together.

In summary, wherever you look back at your dissertation, these are the broad questions that you should ask at all times:

- Is what I am saying confined to the objective(s) of the dissertation?
- Is what I am saying corroborated by appropriate evidence?
- Is what I am saying written in a critical, coherent, concise and captivating way?