

Students can also fall prey to writing incomplete sentences. Refrain from writing sentences that do not make sense (as in 'During when Napster trading and sharing music files for free') or truncating sentences, leaving them hanging (e.g. 'The transformation to a successful business'). There is not much to be said regarding incomplete sentences, other than it is something that is avoidable. Read your work out aloud and you will soon spot sentences that do not make sense, either because they are garbled or because they are incomplete. If uncorrected, you will lose marks on two counts: the standard of English employed is inadequate and you have failed to communicate fully your ideas.

Acquiring good marks is not just about *what* you write in your dissertation but also *how* you write. Make an effort to expunge trivial spelling mistakes and slovenly grammar from your final dissertation. An excellent book that will help you get to grips with elementary grammar is *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss (2003). Another educational, and entertaining, book on grammar is *Fumblefules: A Lighthearted Guide to Grammar and Good Usage* by William Safire (2002). Careless grammar and slapdash spelling could prove costly in terms of lost marks, so take time to iron out such errors. In other words, watch your language!

A word of warning: plagiarism

In the world of education, technology is ubiquitous. Understandably, student use of the Internet in support of their academic studies is common in universities; indeed, it is to be encouraged. A student interested in Renaissance Art can be transported, with a few clicks of the keyboard, to a virtual gallery depicting works by Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Raphael. The same student can also access expert opinion on these artists. However, with a similar paucity of keyboard clicks, students can effortlessly cut and paste material found on the Internet, insert it into their assignments (e.g. essays, reports, papers, etc.) and submit it as their own work. Therein lies the danger with coursework and easy access to the Internet: that avenues and opportunities exist that may encourage you to cheat.

Plagiarism is clearly a growing problem in the world of education. School pupils reared on the Internet, and the move towards continuous assessment, have contributed towards a 'cut and paste' generation. You may be guilty of this practice yourself. Given the seriousness of this issue, this is a topic that is worth looking at in some depth.

What counts as plagiarism?

It needs to be emphasized that it is your institution's view of what counts as plagiarism that matters most, not the one that is given in this book. Marshall

and Garry (2006) raise the point that many students themselves appear to be unaware of what constitutes plagiarism. Find out what your institution has to say on the issue of plagiarism, including the consequences of such cheating if you are caught. If you are not sure what counts as plagiarism, then be proactive and ask your dissertation supervisor to give you examples of what is and is not plagiarism and how to avoid it.

Defining plagiarism is not an abstract, academic exercise: how an institution views what counts and does not count as plagiarism can impact not only on a student's future career – your future – but also on an institution's reputation. A simple definition of plagiarism is given by Northwestern University (2005: 1): 'submitting material that in part or whole is not entirely one's own work without attributing those same portions to their correct source'. An obvious example of plagiarism that would meet this definition is where a student takes a complete chapter from a book, changes the authorship, and then submits it as his own work. What if a student 'stole' a paragraph (not a whole chapter) from another source, copied it into his essay, word for word, and failed to cite the source. Is that plagiarism? For example, the following paragraph was submitted by a student:

Cryptography may seem to be a black art requiring extremely complex mathematics and access to supercomputers. This may be the case for professional cryptanalysts (codebreakers). But for ordinary people who need to protect data, cryptography can be a strong, often simple to use, and sometimes freely available tool.

The actual source of the text was found on the web. The student neither acknowledged the source nor placed the verbatim text in quotation marks, implying that these were her own words. Even though it may only have formed a small part of her essay, it is still plagiarism ('submitting material . . . in part . . .'). By the same logic, even if a student copies a sentence verbatim without acknowledgement, that is still plagiarism. It is a simple fact: taking someone else's text, word for word, without due acknowledgement, is straightforward plagiarism.

The types of plagiarism that students get up to, based on ideas developed at Indiana University of Bloomington's School of Education (www.indiana.edu/~istd/examples.html), with real-life examples of plagiarism italicized, include:

Copying whole paragraphs verbatim, e.g.:

There is no easy or perfect solution, no silver bullet to eliminate the security risks involved in operating online. Threats and vulnerabilities are constantly evolving. Moreover, a network is as weak as its weakest

point: if one component is compromised, whether deliberately or by accident, everyone connected to the network is potentially exposed.

Copying whole sentences verbatim, e.g.:

Cryptography, when used properly, should increase security in a computing environment.

Copying part of a sentence verbatim, e.g.:

Conflicting goals appear to be in operation too: security is based on limiting access, while collaborative computing requires that access to certain information be shared.

Copying text verbatim – paragraph/sentence/part sentence – and citing the author, but failing to use quotation marks, e.g.:

Digital signatures can be a significant tool in reducing online fraud and can thereby increase consumer confidence in online transactions (Kontogseorgou and Alexiou, 2002). Digital signatures should enable enforceable online transactions since any specific transaction is tightly if not irrevocably tied to a specific person. Businesses utilising digital signatures should be more efficient – since online transaction processes will be streamlined – and consequently highly competitive again thereby increasing their appeal to consumers.

Copying text verbatim without sufficient acknowledgement of the actual source(s) is plagiarism, irrespective of whether it occurs in part of a sentence, a complete sentence or a full paragraph. *Sufficient acknowledgement* means that when you are using someone else's ideas then you have to cite the author, and that when you are using another author's words, then you do two things: cite the author and place the verbatim text in quotation marks. If someone retorts that 'surely copying part of a sentence, or even a complete sentence, can't be treated as plagiarism?', they are confusing an act of plagiarism with how a university intends to respond to such an act. If an institution chooses to ignore it, then fine, but the institution's action cannot be justified on the basis that it is not plagiarism, but on the grounds that it does not view it seriously. If verbatim text has been copied and is insufficiently acknowledged, then plagiarism has occurred, pure and simple. That is different from deciding how an institution reacts to such incidences, and that depends on the extent of the plagiarism unearthed in a student's assessment.

When institutions define plagiarism as occurring if 'substantial unacknowledged incorporation . . .' has taken place, they are in fact implying that a certain level of plagiarism is acceptable. In one sense this is understandable: do you instigate formal proceedings against a student for plagiarizing a sentence? Clearly not, but you ought to educate the student that this is careless and bad academic practice. But it does beg the question as to what is an acceptable or unacceptable level of plagiarism.

There is another variant on the plagiarism classification types above, and that is when a student paraphrases – rewords – an author's passage, but embeds too much of the author's original text, including sentence/paragraph structure, and fails to provide sufficient acknowledgement. This is more problematic to detect (and punish) for staff and not easy for students to do successfully. For example, let us take the sentence 'The same article reported that in May 2003, after 1,800 essays were tested by plagiarism-catching software, 120 students (6%) at the University of Virginia were suspected of plagiarism' – this was written, by this author, after reading a Times Online article (McLellan 2003), the original of which read: 'Last May 120 students at the University of Virginia were accused of cheating on their physics coursework when a computer program checked 1,800 essays and found up to 60 incidences of copying.' Is this plagiarism? Similarly, from the same article, the sentence 'In 2002, a study of six universities in Australia reported that approximately 8% of student essays revealed plagiarism to varying degrees' was derived from the original sentence: 'A study carried out by the six universities in Victoria, Australia, last September, found that 1 in 12 essays contained some copied material.' Is this plagiarism?

Both the examples mentioned illustrate the difficulty of translating simple statements from a discovered source. How *can* you write that 'as a result of 1,800 essays being inspected at the University of Virginia, 120 students were charged with plagiarism' and, at the same time, achieve dissimilarity from the original text? In the second example it is difficult to use the pertinent facts – the year 2002, the figure of six universities, and the statistic 1 in 12 – without the two sources appearing similar. What you can do is: (1) cite the source; and (2) either quote the original source verbatim – McLellan (2003) states that '120 students at the University of Virginia . . .' – or make a genuine attempt to use the same facts but rewrite the sentence. Falling into lazy habits when dealing with sources, even where it is only one sentence, is bad academic practice and may lead you to engage in extensive plagiarism in the future.

One must accept, though, that it can sometimes be difficult to rewrite sentences and to paraphrase in a way that does not lose the gist of what the original passage is saying and at the same time does not cross the boundary into plagiarism. This is the problem with paraphrasing: you can unknowingly wander across the divide between receiving praise for skilful interpretation of an author's work and finding yourself accused of plagiarism. Nonetheless, poor paraphrasing can result in plagiarism and ought not to be encouraged. Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) identifies that this type of plagiarism – patchwork plagiarism or *paraplaciarism* – occurs where there is 'too much direct borrowing in sentence structure and wording [i.e. poor paraphrasing] regardless of whether or not the author is cited (<http://www.gcal.ac.uk/coursework/writing/plagiarism.html>).

Plagiarism can still occur even where there is 'good paraphrasing of wording and sentence structure' but the author's original ideas are not cited. GCU, in the same article, defines 'borderline plagiarism' as occurring when the text, after paraphrasing, 'borrows too much language', once again even when the author is cited. Bone (2003: 1) emphasizes that students 'need a very clear

understanding of ... where to draw the line between copying and paraphrasing'. Biggs (1999), cited in Bone (2003), uses the term *plagiarising* as a substitute term for patchwork plagiarism.

Another facet of plagiarism that needs to be confronted is the notion that only *deliberate* plagiarism counts as plagiarism, for reasons that will be made clear. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1998) records that the word *plagiarize* has its roots in the Latin word *plagiarius*, meaning 'kidnapper', and goes on to define the verb *plagiarize* as the attempt to 'take and use (the thoughts, writings, inventions, etc. of another person) as one's own'. Given that you cannot kidnap someone accidentally, this definition, in effect, implies that when a student commits plagiarism, he is engaging in a *deliberate* attempt to kidnap the work of another and pass it off as his own. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003: 2) concur with this interpretation when they define plagiarism as occurring when 'a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledgement'.

However, to include student intentions in a definition of plagiarism is to conflate the act of plagiarism with student motivation. If a student copies pages of text verbatim and neither cites the author(s) nor uses quotation marks, then plagiarism has occurred, regardless of the student's intentions. When determining incidents of plagiarism, universities need to separate a student's intentions from the act of plagiarism. Student intent should only come in to play when determining punishment, not when making the initial judgement. A work is either plagiarized or it is not: the motivation of the student is irrelevant. The UK Centre for Legal Education (Bone 2003: 1) supports this position when it concludes that the 'general view, however, is that intention is irrelevant - and that leniency should relate to the penalty and not to the definition', warning that 'otherwise serious cases of plagiarism in the final year may be defended by statements such as "I didn't know" or "I must have accidentally pasted those three pages across"'. In addition, if a university decides that a student intention should be an important factor in deciding whether to accuse a student of plagiarism, then there is the potential for staff to be influenced by whether or not they like the student or perceive the student to be a 'good' student or consider it unlikely that such a student could behave in this manner. Such extraneous influences may expose universities to the criticism that students are being treated differently, based on staff perceptions of student personality traits rather than on evidence of plagiarism.

The Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003: 2) makes the valid point that one should distinguish between plagiarism and a student's incompetent attempt at citation, and that the latter is not plagiarism:

A student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her source, but who misuses a specific citation format or incorrectly uses quotation marks, or other forms of identifying material taken from other sources, has not plagiarized. Instead such a student should be considered to have failed to cite and document sources appropriately.

Students who mix and match referencing styles in the body of their work or slightly misplace quotation marks or, at the back of their essays, when collating sources, italicize the wrong part of a journal citation or are unsure on how to cite a Web source are guilty of incompetence, not plagiarism.

Figure 11.7 based on sensible ideas suggested by Joyce (2006) may help you grasp what you have to do to avoid plagiarizing someone else's work.

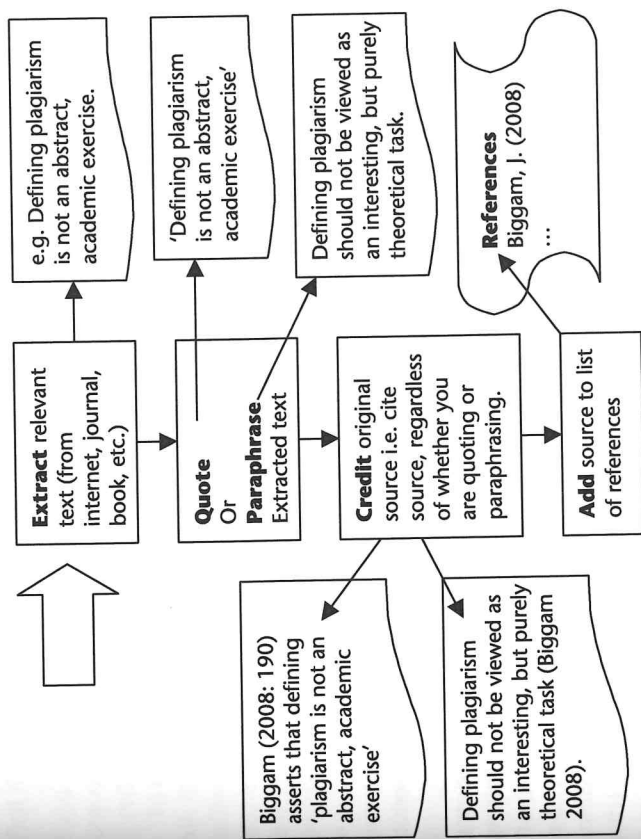


Figure 11.7 Mechanism for avoiding plagiarism

Just remember the general approach, viz.: *extract* the text that you are interested in; *quote* or *paraphrase* the text; *credit* the source; then *add* the source to your list of references. By following this procedure you ought to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing someone else's words or ideas.

On the other hand, if you decide to 'cut and paste' work from the Internet but stop short of crediting your sources then you are inviting the charge of plagiarism, as illustrated by the top half of Figure 11.8. It is an easy matter, and good academic practice, to go that bit further and quote or paraphrase your borrowed text, cite your sources and update your reference list (the bottom half of Figure 11.8).

Identifying what counts as plagiarism is not as difficult, or as daunting, as it may appear. Although there are degrees of plagiarism, essentially copying text verbatim without sufficient acknowledgement is plagiarism. What is more problematic is determining when *paraplagiarism* has occurred (i.e. patchwork plagiarism). Although it should be discouraged, it is a lesser form of plagiarism,

emphasize the importance of full and proper referencing. Staff can also set up the Turnitin system to allow students to submit their own work for checking, encouraging students to view such software as a useful facility rather than an attempt by their university to 'catch them at it'. Turnitin's database is impressive: over 10 million papers and 4.5 billion Internet pages.

What if you are accused of plagiarism?

If you are accused of plagiarism, the first thing you should do is to obtain a copy of your institution's plagiarism procedures. In that way you will be better placed to understand, and prepare yourself, for what lies ahead.

To defend yourself against the accusation of plagiarism, you need to ascertain how your institution defines the term plagiarism. If the definition refers to 'deliberate copying' then you may be able to argue that what you did was accidental and therefore, in your institution's eyes, not plagiarism. More often than not, when students are formally accused of plagiarism it is because they have copied too much text verbatim and omitted to credit the original authors in the body of the text. Perhaps you intended to include the references at a later date, but simply forgot. If that was the case, then say so. Too many omitted references in the body of your text will weaken your position. As for copying too much text verbatim – was it ever explained to you that this practice is unacceptable, i.e. did you receive instruction on what counts as plagiarism and how to avoid it? Of course, if you were aware of your institution's regulations and decided to cheat anyway, then arguing from a position of ignorance would be untenable. Even if what you did was a deliberate act of plagiarism, then there may have been extenuating circumstances which you wish to emphasize, such as stress, domestic problems, ill health, etc.

Next, satisfy yourself that you have a fair hearing. Jones (2006) stresses that universities need to ensure that students accused of plagiarism have a fair hearing, one that does not contravene natural justice. Unfairness may be evidenced, for example, in the composition of the disciplinary panel or where a student has not been made aware of the stages of the disciplinary process and their rights. Jones points to the model adopted by Edinburgh University as an exemplar which could be adopted by other institutions, where the disciplinary panel consists of a pool of academics from a variety of discipline areas and departments, none of whom are in the same subject area as the accused student, so removing a potential complaint from a student that someone on the panel is in his own subject area and may therefore know him and, as a result of that knowledge, be biased. What should not happen is that the supervisor who first spots the alleged plagiarism also appears on a formal disciplinary panel, at whatever level, in effect acting as judge and jury, which would clearly conflict with natural justice. So make sure that whoever is accusing you of plagiarism is not on the disciplinary panel judging your case.

Baroness Ruth Deech was the first Independent Adjudicator in charge of an independent student complaints scheme called the Office of the Independent

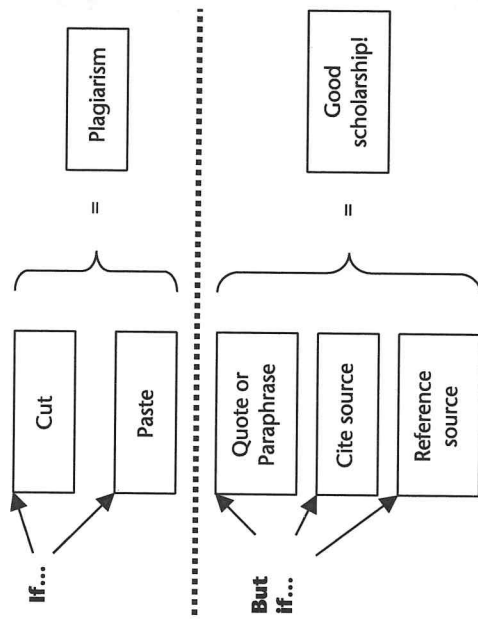


Figure 11.8 From plagiarism to good scholarship

particularly when the original source is cited; and it probably requires education on your part rather than initial punishment.

Although plagiarism is easy to do, it is also easy to detect. You should be aware that many universities are now turning to the use of plagiarism-catching software such as Turnitin (www.turnitin.com). Staff submit a student's essay to the Turnitin facility and within minutes an Originality Report is produced, providing a 'similarity index' of matching text (e.g. 80%), with colour-coding of text that was found elsewhere. The software does not accuse the student of plagiarizing. That is left to the institution. Turnitin is proving a useful resource in the efficient detection of incidences of plagiarism. Biggam and McCann (2010) also used Turnitin as a broader educational tool, allowing students, throughout the duration of their dissertation, to freely submit their individual dissertation chapters and to learn from the Turnitin feedback without fear of punishment from university authorities. Staff also had access to the student submissions and results and took the opportunity to discuss specific examples of suspected plagiarism, including consultation on more academic issues: dissertation development, evidence of critical evaluation, referencing, grammar, and so on.

It may be that if you are more aware that your institution is using software to detect incidences of plagiarism then you might pay more attention to the correct citing of sources! That is not to argue that technology is the solution to the thorny problem of plagiarism – the problem is far more complex than that, involving student education, ethics, cultural issues, law, staff training, what it means to learn, concepts of ownership, and so on. Supervisors are key players in reducing any student tendency to sleep-walk into plagiarism: your supervisor can inform you of the university rules on plagiarism, what is allowed and what is not allowed and should offer guidance on how to paraphrase as well as

Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE), a service which is free to UK students (www.oiahe.org.uk). If a student writes to her office (now led by Robert Behrens), complaining that he is the victim of a false accusation of plagiarism or that he has been treated unfairly (e.g. too severe a punishment), her office will in turn communicate directly with the student's institution, requesting the following information (Deech 2006):

- How is plagiarism explained to students?
- How were disciplinary procedures brought to the student's attention?
- Were mitigating circumstances considered (e.g. bereavement, ill health, disability, plagiarism not explained to student, cultural issues, financial problems, computer failure)?
- Minutes of disciplinary hearing (to ascertain if student was treated fairly).
- Reasons for decision (are they reasonable, based on evidence and communicated to student)?
- Penalties applied to other offenders in the past (to find out if punishment is consistent and not arbitrary).

The reason behind this request is to assist in determining if the student has been treated fairly and in line with natural justice (no bias, charge explained and both sides allowed to argue their case) and that the institution has applied its regulations properly and that its decision was reasonable.

Interestingly, when Dordoy (2002) surveyed 600 new graduates from Northumbria University (about 22% response rate) on the reasons why they plagiarized, top of the list came 'to get a better grade', next on the list was 'laziness or bad management', followed by 'easy access to Internet material'. Students *unclear about university regulations on plagiarism and accidental plagiarism* – the reasons attributed by some staff for students plagiarizing work – came a distant fourth and fifth, respectively, on the list. Hart and Friesner (2003: 191) with reference to these results – particularly the top two reasons given by students – observed that 'the pressure to plagiarise may increase if students leave their academic writing until the last moment'.

Hopefully this discussion has added to your understanding of plagiarism, at different levels. At the root of all this is the simple fact that you need to give credit where credit is due!

Research ethics

When we are young, our parents teach us how to behave. As we grow older, our conduct becomes shaped by other influences: friends, religion, the law of the land, colleagues, sporting allegiances, etc. When we adopt a *moral stance* on how we think we, and others, ought to behave under certain circumstances then we

are entering the world of *ethics*. Ethics is essentially a code of conduct on how we ought to lead our lives: sometimes it can appear in written form – as reflected in the laws of the land – but it can also be present in our unwritten philosophical and social beliefs that manifest themselves in everyday behaviour. Ethics is not a science, i.e. it is not absolute – people can, and often do, disagree on what is acceptable and unacceptable conduct. For example, one country's citizens may believe that hanging is unethical whereas another country may hold a different point of view; similarly, one student may consider that cheating is an efficient use of her time while another student might argue that such behaviour is wholly unethical. Ethics is now a popular concept that impacts on many diverse strands of our lives, from banking, shopping to environmental issues.

Research ethics refers to the application of a moral code of conduct when human participants are the focus of empirical research. As you design your approach to carrying out your own empirical research (e.g. focus groups of employees in a particular company), you need to give serious consideration to the matter of research ethics. There are a number of core ethical principles that your research should meet, which are captured in Figure 11.9.

Transparency: The purpose of your research should be clearly explained to your research subjects (e.g. 'to ascertain employee views on *whistleblowing*') as

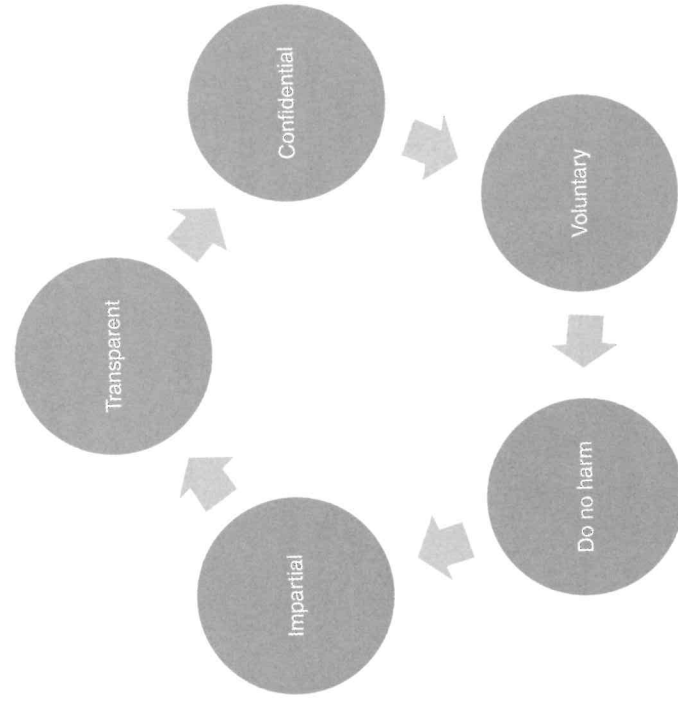


Figure 11.9 Core ethical research principles

should how you will conduct the primary research (e.g. interviews) together with the intended use of your findings (e.g. as part fulfilment of a Master's dissertation). There may be occasions – and these should be rare – where 'giving the game away' will substantially influence the conduct of your research subjects, in which case you can legitimately hold back information (without lying); however, one has to be very careful in such circumstances as you may lose the trust of your research participants if they feel they are being deceived, thus jeopardizing your research work and leaving yourself open to the charge of unethical conduct. Providing participants with a Participant Information Sheet is good practice, showing a professional approach to your dissertation. The Participation Information Sheet can also double up as a consent form (Figure 11.10). Participants should only give consent after they have been fully informed of the purpose of your research, how they will be involved, together with any health/risk implications: this is called *informed consent*.

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Title:

Research Method(s) (e.g. interviews):

Purpose of this research:

Researcher (including contact details):

Participant statement:
The purpose of this research work has been explained to me, including the use to which this research will be put and my part in this research project. I also understand that my details will remain confidential and that my anonymity will be respected.

Signed:
 Date:

Figure 11.10 Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Confidentiality: You must respect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. If you fail to do so, then you may be in breach of your country's

Data Protection Act. By revealing details that can identify individuals, you may also be placing participants at risk.

Voluntary: Participants must not be coerced to become part of your research work and should be free to withdraw at any time.

Do no harm: Your research work should not place your participants in any danger. Equally important, you should not put yourself at risk (if you intend to interview, for example, drug addicts or criminals, then you need to seek professional advice on safety precautions).

Impartiality: If you are connected to the research subjects in any way (e.g. fellow students or relatives) or it might be perceived that you could be biased (e.g. you do a case study of an organization where you work part-time), then you need to declare your relationship with the research participants.

It is normal practice for dissertation students to complete a Research Ethics Approval Form prior to commencement of their primary research. Depending on the ethical issues, approval can be granted at supervisory/departmental level or may require scrutiny by the University's research committee or call for approval from an external body such as the National Health Service (NHS). The answers to the questions on the Research Ethics Approval Form will dictate at what level approval is needed.

If your research entails human participation and the ethical issues are straight-forward matters where the core ethical principles of *transparency*, *confidentiality*, *voluntary* input, *(no) harm* and *impartiality* are not transgressed, then it is normal for approval to be granted at supervisory/departmental level.

If your research necessitates working with 'vulnerable populations' (Figure 11.11) or is likely, for whatever reason, to breach any of the core ethical research principles (e.g. you require to hide the nature of your research from

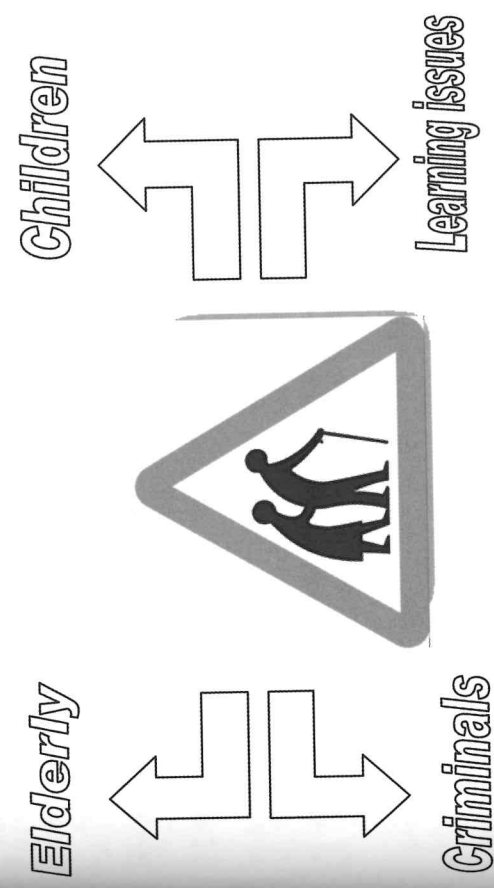


Figure 11.11 Vulnerable populations

12

Summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid

the research subjects or there is some physical risk to yourself or to the participants), then you should seek guidance and approval from your university's research ethics committee. Figure 11.11 highlights groups that are commonly seen as 'vulnerable populations' in the context of research: children, people with learning/communication difficulties, those in custody or probation or engaged in dubious/illegal activities.

Lastly, if your research participants are working for, or are patients of, the NHS (or the equivalent in whichever country the research is conducted), then you will need to submit an application for ethical approval to the NHS National Research Ethics Service (NRES). Forms and information can be obtained from the Centre of Research: Ethical Campaign (<http://www.corec.org.uk/>). Table 11.7 lists links to a selection of national and international bodies dealing with ethical codes of practice in research.

Table 11.7 Ethical codes of practice

Committee	Website
NHS National Research Ethics Service (NRES)	http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/
American Anthropological Association (AAA)	http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm
American Medical Association (AMA)	http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/no-index/physician-resources/2416.shtml
Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)	http://www.hpcsac.co.za/#
National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Australia	http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/r39syn.htm
British Psychological Society (BPS)	http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct_home.cfm
British Sociological Association (BSA)	http://www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm
Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC): Research Ethics Framework (REF)	http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrcinfocentre/images/esrc_re_ethics_frame_tcm6-11291.pdf
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) South Africa	http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct_home.cfm
Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS)	http://www.cioms.ch/
World Medical Association (WMA)	http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/30ethicsmanual/index.html

Forewarned is forearmed • Dissertation writing: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid • Practical issues: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid

Forewarned is forearmed

This book has taken you through the things that you need to do to complete a dissertation. In doing so, it has also highlighted the common mistakes that tutors observe their dissertation students making, again and again, year in, year out. As a memory aid, this information is summarized for easy reference in four tables:

- Table 12.1 Dissertation writing – summary of good practice to adopt
- Table 12.2 Dissertation writing – summary of bad practice to avoid
- Table 12.3 Practical issues – summary of good practice to adopt
- Table 12.4 Practical issues – summary of bad practice to avoid

Tables 12.1 and 12.2 concentrate on, respectively, the good and bad things that occur in the typical phases that go to make up the written dissertation (Research Proposal, Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methods, Findings and Discussion, and Conclusion). Tables 12.3 and 12.4 summarize, respectively, the good and bad things that happen in the presentation of the dissertation and

in the viva. In addition, Tables 12.3 and 12.4 make reference to the dissertation marking scheme and the problem of plagiarism.

There are other matters that you need to consider when completing your dissertation, from picking a topic that is of genuine interest to you, to creating a dissertation template at the start (to give you an idea of what lies ahead), to making the most of meetings with your supervisor, to keeping an eye on your word count. Above all, doing a dissertation ought to be an enjoyable experience, an opportunity to show what you can do, but it requires serious effort on your part. It is an intellectual journey that demands your active participation: passengers rarely pass. Being forewarned about the common pitfalls to avoid, together with the skills required to get through the dissertation process, will allow you to start off on your dissertation odyssey with confidence.

Dissertation writing: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid

Table 12.1 Dissertation writing – summary of *good* practice to adopt

Phase	Summary of good practice to adopt
Dissertation Proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide background information on research topic – Justify the need for your study – Identify overall research aim and specific research objectives – Outline your research methods – Estimate duration of dissertation phases
Abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Write it last! – Identify the problem/issue that you investigated – Outline how you did your research (i.e. your research methods) – State your main findings/conclusion(s) – Indicate your recommendations – Include keywords – Keep to one paragraph (it is not an essay!) – Apply the abstract template!
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – As in Dissertation Proposal, and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Show initiative (in sourcing information) – Produce clear, achievable research objectives – Emphasize the value of/need for your research – Remind the reader of your research objectives – Let the reader know about the topics you intend covering – Develop meaningful discussions, providing evidence of critical evaluation (offer views, support views) – Use wide variety of sources (websites, journals, books, reports, etc.) – Reference sources properly – Avoid dissertation <i>drift</i> – keep focused on your research objectives
Literature Review	

- Summarize main Lit. Rev. findings and highlight emerging issues
- Provide link (and justification) for empirical research
- Frame your research question using PICO
- Find literature to meet your research question, adhering to Evans's hierarchy of preferred evidence
- Exploit online resources (e.g. MEDLINE)
- Justify exclusion of literature
- Pool data
- Place findings in context
- Use AMSTAR checklist

Systematic Reviews

Research Methods

- Identify your research strategy (case study, survey, grounded theory, experimental research, etc.)
- Justify why your chosen research strategy meets your research needs
- Describe your data collection techniques (interviews, questionnaires, documents, observation, types of experiments, etc.)
- Explain where you will get your data, and state your sample size
- Summarize the above, using diagrams where possible
- Explain how you will analyse your collected data (framework for data analysis)
- Outline limitations/potential problems (but explain why your work is valid and reliable)

Findings and Discussion

- Keep it simple: describe the data, compare/contrast with Lit. Rev. findings
- Stick to your framework for analysis (if you have one!)
- Keep focused on relevant research objective(s), thus avoiding *drift*
- Summarize main empirical findings
- Place evidence of (non-confidential) empirical research in appendices (questionnaires, interview transcripts/notes, experiment results, etc.)

Conclusion

- Remind reader of your initial research objectives
- Summarize Lit. Rev. and Empirical Research findings (related to research objectives)
- Elicit main conclusions from your findings
- Offer recommendations (specific to your research objectives), including ideas about implementation
- Include self-reflection (limitations of study, lessons learnt, advice to others)

Table 12.2 Dissertation writing – summary of *bad* practice to avoid

Phase	Summary of bad practice to avoid
Dissertation Proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of subject focus – Vague research objectives – Over-ambitious – Unrealistic timescales – Not justifying need for research
Abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Write it without having a clue what you are supposed to be doing! – Engage in mini Literature Review (not the place for that) – Fail to provide basic information about your work – Write an essay (it is an <i>abstract</i>, not an essay)

Continued

Table 12.2 (Continued)

Phase	Summary of bad practice to avoid
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paying scant attention to Background reading - Too dependent on supervisor for research ideas - Devoting too much attention to Background reading! - Lack of continuity between sub-sections - Unconvincing rationale (or no rationale!) on the value of the work
Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ill-structured - Superficial, skeletal sub-sections (lists, simple descriptions, lack of discussion) - Concentrating almost exclusively on web sources - Not offering, or justifying, your own views (i.e. devoid of critical evaluation) - Lack of development of ideas - Inconsistent referencing styles - Plagiarizing work - No sense of direction - No obvious relevance to research objectives - No evidence of need for empirical research - Ends abruptly with no obvious link to next section (Research Methods)
Systematic Reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vague research question - Unmethodical literature search process - Publication bias - Focusing at the lower end of Evans's hierarchy of preferred evidence (uncontrolled trials, expert opinion, etc.) - Inappropriate pooling of data - Failing to place results in context - Spending the bulk of your time describing a whole realm of research strategies (case studies, ethnography, experimental research, surveys, etc.) - Not justifying your chosen research strategy - Misunderstanding the nature of qualitative/quantitative research - Introducing unexplained philosophical terms! - Producing a long descriptive monologue on the different ways that data can be collected (questionnaires, interviews, etc.) but: - Lack of detail on how and where you will collect data or what you intend doing with the data once you get it
Findings and Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having an unstructured, confusing approach to analysing your collected data or using inappropriate analysis techniques, or using appropriate techniques incorrectly! - Coming to conclusions without any evidence of meaningful discussion - Not relating your findings/discussion to your research objectives/Lit. Rev. - Not revising your research objectives to check on whether or not you have achieved them (as a result of your Lit. Rev. and Empirical Research) - Not linking your conclusions, if you have any, to your Lit. Rev. or Empirical Research findings - Not summarizing your work - Offering no recommendations on the way forward - Treating your Conclusion as if it were another Literature Review! - Ending abruptly!

Practical issues: summary of good practice to adopt and bad practice to avoid

Table 12.3 Practical issues – summary of good practice to adopt

Practical issues	Summary of good practice to adopt
Presenting your work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare and practise for your presentation - Give out handouts of your (e.g. PowerPoint) presentation at the start - Have a logical structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → who you are → what you are going to talk about → your research objectives → how you did your research → what you found . . . Literature Review . . . Empirical Research → your recommendations - Invite questions
The viva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prior to your viva, summarize, for revision purposes, your different dissertation chapters - Anticipate questions (and prepare answers): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → on preliminary issues (e.g. research focus, need for your research, etc.) → aspects of your Lit. Rev. (scope, depth, focus, range of sources, relevance, your interpretation of what other people are saying, etc.) → your research methods and data collection techniques (relevant, justified, clearly explained?) → how you analysed your empirical work → your conclusions (justified?) and associated recommendations - Have a mock viva - Write examiner questions down - Take your time answering questions - Defend your work!
The marking scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get hold of how your dissertation will be marked - Use it as a checklist as you do the work (are your research objectives clear, do you show evidence of critical evaluation? Etc.) - Pick up easy marks (for abstract, dissertation structure, referencing, research objectives) - Make sure that you know what you are getting the big marks for in your dissertation - Before submission, have a go at marking it yourself!
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watch your language! - Know the difference between <i>it's</i> and <i>its</i> - Apply the apostrophe correctly - Keep your infinitives intact - Use the colon and semi-colon properly
Plagiarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand your institution's rules and regulations on plagiarism - Give credit where credit is due!
Research Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complete a Research Ethics Approval Form or NHS equivalent - Adhere to the core principles of <i>transparency, confidentiality, voluntary participation, no harm</i> to your participants (or you) and <i>impartiality</i>

Table 12.4 Practical issues – summary of *bad* practice to avoid

Practical issues	Summary of bad practice to avoid
Presenting your work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Fumbling with the equipment – Rushing through your presentation at break-neck speed! – Cluttering your screen with text – Standing in front of your projector (blocking your presentation!) – Reading directly from your notes
The viva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not anticipating obvious questions – Rushing your answers – Arguing with the examiners (there is a difference between having a professional disagreement and rudeness) – Giving monosyllabic answers – Not referring to your dissertation when answering questions (you are being tested on the work that you have submitted, so it is to your work that you refer when giving answers)
The marking scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ignoring the things that you are getting marked on
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Confusing <i>it's</i> with <i>its</i> – Misplacing the apostrophe – Unnecessarily splitting infinitives – Inappropriate use of the colon and semi-colon
Plagiarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Copying the work of others without due acknowledgement
Research Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Failing to complete a Research Ethics Approval Form – Ignoring the core principles of <i>transparency, confidentiality, voluntary participation, no harm</i> to your participants (or you) and <i>impartiality</i>.

Appendix A: Sample Introduction

Background • Research focus • Overall research aim and individual research objectives

Background

The traditional approach to teaching and learning has, for millennia, rested on the central premise that for instruction to take place, the tutor and student co-exist in the same place at the same time. Aristotle's lectures, preserved in the writings of Plato, are examples of such an approach, where the student is educated on particular topics through the mechanism of illuminating conversations – *dialogues* – between tutor and student (Taylor 1955). However, few universities have the generous resources required to support one-to-one tuition as the prevailing mode of educational delivery; rather, the common method consists of a combination of lectures, seminars/tutorials and, where appropriate, laboratory work; where each of the aforementioned ways of imparting knowledge involves face-to-face instruction and discussion.

At a simple level, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are used frequently to support the traditional teaching and learning paradigm. Academic staff regularly employ presentational software, such as PowerPoint, to facilitate lectures; during laboratory sessions, university networked computer systems are used by students to access applications software and print to a common printer; and email systems are used by students to send messages to one another and receive advice from tutors. Haywood *et al.* (2004) believe that most students about to enter university own a PC with Internet access, and that they use ICT regularly, for a variety of activities, ranging from recreational purposes, such as browsing online music stores or emailing friends, to more complex activities, such as media downloads or shopping; and that as a result, their expectations of ICT-usage at university are high.

Universities not only utilize ICT at a simple level – for emailing, printing documents, student access to common application software – but have