how to
WRITE YOUR NURSING DISSERTATION
Edited by Alan Glasper and Colin Rees

This innovative book for nursing students and nurses provides a clear guide to writing a winning dissertation. It contains advice and guidance in overcoming many of the difficulties students often face during this process. Written by experts in the field, each chapter provides scenarios, with effective solutions and clear principles to follow, to answer the issues raised.

The book guides you through the stages of finding and assessing the right literature to answer a clear dissertation question, together with practical skills for writing and structuring a successful dissertation.

Chapters include:
• Starting your dissertation journey
• Developing a successful dissertation question
• Sourcing and accessing key literature
• Essential research principles and processes
• Critically appraising research articles
• Implementing evidence-based health care in practice
• Taking your dissertation further, including publications and conferences.

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• A range of tools and frameworks
• Sample documents to assist you writing your dissertation
• Reference lists for each chapter plus links for selected topics

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How to Write Your Nursing Dissertation
How to Write Your Nursing Dissertation

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There is a companion website for this book:
www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation
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Foreword

Only twenty years ago, the idea that students should be taught about the evidence that underpins clinical practice was regarded as a dangerously radical one. This book shows how great the change over the intervening period has been. During that time small communities of researchers and methodologists have created alliances with practitioners and patients around specific clinical problems. They have subjected what is known about the clinical and cost effectiveness of different treatments and modes of professional practice to rigorous tests, using primary studies, clinical trials, systematic reviews and meta-analyses. In almost every area of healthcare, the application of evidence has led to a revolution in the quality of care that patients receive.

This book is part of that revolution, and every chapter is written by practitioners with real life experience of understanding and applying evidence. Each chapter is written in a way that emphasises its application to real life problems. This is important because ‘evidence’ isn’t an abstract problem. And it isn’t just a problem for students either. Politicians, policy makers and managers all struggle with evidence, and seek ways to make it meaningful to their own situations. Sometimes this means that evidence isn’t always what it seems. My own research has shown how clinical trials of new health technologies are hard for their sponsors to fathom (May, 2006), and how policy makers seek quite different kinds of evidence for their effectiveness that sometimes fit poorly with wider conceptions of robustness and rigour but very well with the interests and goals of organisations (May, 2007).

So, evidence is important because it offers a rational basis for the allocation of healthcare resources and the provision of patient care. But what is and isn’t evidence isn't just a problem of method. Underpinning that problem is a deeper one, alluded to in almost every chapter in the book – but particularly in Diane Carpenter’s chapter on historical methods and evidence – which is that what counts as evidence is sometimes contingent on time and place.
If evidence is important because it offers a rational basis for practice, it’s worth remembering that much of what we see practiced every day in hospitals and clinics has no evidence base. The challenge for a new generation of students is to change that. This book will start to give you the tools to achieve that.

Carl May  
Professor of Healthcare Innovation  
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Preface

This book provides the reader with a clear knowledge of the fundamental steps needed to write an evidence-based practice healthcare dissertation at honours degree and master's levels.

It aims to bring together key ideas and concepts related to evidence-based practice and research use pertinent to the production of a dissertation. Using practical examples, the book will demonstrate the way in which all the components of evidence-based healthcare, such as research use skills, standard setting, legal and ethical frameworks, audit and benchmarking, are drawn together for the purpose of a dissertation.

Primary target

The main audience for this book is nurses and other healthcare professionals who are required to complete an evidence-based practice dissertation as part fulfilment of an honours or master's degree.

Secondary target

This guide to evidence-based practice will also be used by pre-registration healthcare undergraduates and qualified staff who require this knowledge for their day-to-day clinical activities.

Style of the book

The book is written using a very clear and engaging scenario style. This has been used to provide a logical structure and progression to the ideas embodied within the text that readers will find relevant to their dissertation work.

We are confident that this book will provide you, the reader, with a clear knowledge of the fundamental aspects of evidence-based practice needed to provide accurate and high quality care within current healthcare systems.
About the companion website

There is a companion website available for this book at
www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation

On the site you will find:
• Seven bonus chapters
• Summary of each chapter in the accompanying book
• A range of tools and frameworks
• Sample documents to assist you writing your dissertation
• Useful reference links
• Reference lists for each chapter

The website is signposted throughout the book. Look out for this icon 📐.
Acknowledgements

The author of this book are grateful to Lisa Lewis for permitting the inclusion of her dissertation on the companion website.

Thanks also to Dr Peter Carter, Chief Executive of the RCN for giving permission for the complete RCN document to be hosted on the website and to Professor Dame Christine Beasley (now former chief Nursing Officer for England) for being so supportive of the book and for access to the essential collection.
The scenarios

Sue is a 40-year-old senior staff nurse who works in an elderly care unit of a large tertiary teaching hospital. She entered nursing late after having a family and completed her enhanced diploma in adult nursing four years earlier. Her ward manager has sponsored her to undertake a ‘top-up degree’ programme at her local university. The programme she has enrolled on is specially designed to allow enhanced/advanced diplomate holders to progress towards gaining an honours degree classification. In essence, the course entails attending a number of taught study days, where she will learn about the nuts and bolts of understanding evidence-based practice. The assessment, which if successfully completed, will confer upon her a degree classification that is based on the submission of a 10 000 word dissertation. Sue has not opened a text book for nearly five years and although she tries to keep up to date by reading a nursing journal which her ward subscribes to she is full of trepidation about the course she has enrolled on.

Her good friend and neighbour, Sam, aged 31, works in the local children’s hospital as a ward manager. He is already a graduate, having completed a degree in children’s nursing some 10 years ago. Sam, likewise, has been out of the studying habit for many years. He is now seeking to become a clinical nurse specialist and has been fortunate to receive funding from his hospital to undertake an MSc in Nursing at the same university as Sue. Sam has a ‘learning difference’ and is Dyslexic. The dissertation element of the MSc programme is similar to the undergraduate dissertation; it is in the format of a critical review of the evidence base for practice but this time is 20 000 words in length. Sam is equally worried about completing the dissertation element of the course.

Scenario 1 – Starting the dissertation journey

Sue and Sam are facing the next challenge in their academic journey – the writing and completion of a dissertation. There is something about the dissertation that unsettles the two friends, which might be related to the size of the assignment or the freedom in choosing a project title. In reality, the
dissertation gives them great freedom to choose what excites them as professionals working in clinical domains, but there are some principles that each will have to follow in developing their ideas.

Scenario 2 – Sourcing and accessing evidence for your dissertation

Sue asks Sam for advice. She has some ideal ‘evidence’ for her dissertation but it is from a ‘Sunday Supplement Magazine’; does this count as evidence, she asks? Sam tells her about the work of Professor Andrée le May.

Scenario 3 – Identifying a topic for your dissertation, setting the scene

Sam has selected a likely topic for his dissertation and wants to explore the lived experiences of families with a child with a chronic illness, but wants to ensure that it is suitable for a dissertation. He talks to Sue about her choice, which is the use of larvae therapy for wound healing in older women with varicose leg ulcers (NB: to provide variety and relevance within the book, some of the chapters use different dissertation topics to illustrate key points).

Scenario 4 – Preparing to use research evidence in your dissertation

At this point Sam is looking for qualitative studies to use in his dissertation and Sue is looking for Randomised Controlled Trials that will help her answer her dissertation question. One of Sue’s friends wants to examine historical literature.

Scenario 5 – Critically appraising evidence

Having collected some relevant research articles, both Sue and Sam are faced with selecting an appropriate critical appraisal tool to evaluate their selected papers. Sam has been advised to use Parahoo’s critiquing approach.

Scenario 6 – How evidence-based healthcare is implemented in practice

Over coffee Sam tells Sue that he has a great lead for his dissertation. He has found a range of papers on work done in Sydney Children’s Hospital, where they have had success in implementing evidence-based practice. Additionally, Sue has read some of Professor Peter Callery’s work.
**Scenario 7 – Clinical standards, audit and inspection**

Sue’s clinical area is being audited by the English healthcare watch dog, The Care Quality Commission.

**Scenario 8 – Taking your dissertation further: disseminating evidence, knowledge transfer; writing as a professional skill**

Sam has been asked to present a poster based on his dissertation for a forthcoming hospital conference. Sue wants to write a paper for publication in a well-known national nursing journal.
Section 1  Starting your dissertation journey

Sue is a 40-year-old senior staff nurse who works in an elderly care unit of a large tertiary teaching hospital. She entered nursing late after having a family and completed her enhanced diploma in adult nursing four years earlier. Her ward manager has sponsored her to undertake a ‘top-up degree’ programme at her local university. The programme she has enrolled on is specially designed to allow enhanced/advanced diplomate holders to progress towards gaining an honours degree classification. In essence, the course entails attending a number of taught study days, where she will learn about the nuts and bolts of understanding evidence-based practice. The assessment, which if successfully completed, will confer upon her a degree classification that is based on the submission of a 10 000 word dissertation. Sue has not opened a text book for nearly five years and although she tries to keep up to date by reading a nursing journal which her ward subscribes to she is full of trepidation about the course she has enrolled on.

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Sue and Sam are facing the next challenge in their academic journey – the writing and completion of a dissertation. There is something about the dissertation that unsettles the two friends, which might be related to the size of the assignment or the freedom in choosing a project title. In reality, the dissertation gives them great freedom to choose what excites them as professionals working in clinical domains, but there are some principles that each will have to follow in developing their ideas.
What are dissertations?

There are many different types of student academic assignments that are referred to as dissertations. Normally a dissertation is a major piece of independent research-based study undertaken towards the end of a healthcare programme. The nature of dissertations varies both across academic disciplines and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in terms of length, focus and timing. Healthcare professionals are often required to submit an evidence-based practice dissertation as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate programme. A dissertation is often viewed as the culmination of a programme of learning which helps consolidate the student’s knowledge, skills and understanding of the research base of the discipline.

Scenario

Sue, a senior staff nurse, has an Advanced Diploma in Nursing and is aware of the move to an all graduate profession for new applicants to nursing. This has prompted her to embark on a ‘top-up degree’ programme at a nearby university to enable her to achieve graduate status. To meet the programme requirements she will need to complete a 10 000 word evidence-based practice dissertation.

Her friend Sam, who is a ward manager, graduated with a Bachelor in Nursing degree ten years earlier and now wants to study for an MSc in Nursing. For a Master’s evidence-based practice dissertation, he will have to write a thesis of 20 000 words in length.

Both are chatting together about the task ahead and their feelings about having to complete such lengthy assignments. Neither is yet completely certain what subject to focus on for their dissertation and both are anxious to begin to understand what will be expected of them. The word length required is perceived to be arduous and daunting.
4 Starting your dissertation journey

SUE: ‘Why do we have to write such a long dissertation?’
SAM: ‘That is a good question Sue. We should first explore what evidence-based practice dissertation is so we can understand why it is a significant aspect of our degree programmes and what we need to achieve. This article I have been reading indicates some key aspects of a dissertation.’

First, the learner determines the focus and direction of the work. Second, this work is carried out on an individual basis – although usually with some tutor support and direction provided. Third, there is typically a substantial research component to the project requiring analysis of existing/secondary data. Finally, learners will have a more prolonged engagement with the chosen subject than is the case with ‘standard’ coursework assignments, such as essays or reports, with the work consequently expected to be more ‘in depth’.

(Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004:335)

Activity

Before reading further it will be helpful for you to consider what you think an evidence-based practice dissertation is and what you are expected to do. Talk to others who have completed a dissertation and seek out information from the university where you will study. Try to read sample dissertations. The university where you are studying will normally have a number of examples in its library for you to examine. (The website that accompanies this book hosts a sample top-up degree dissertation. Go to www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation)

Aim to be clear about what is expected of you for your dissertation work.

Dissertations are accepted as a highly valued part of both undergraduate and Master’s degrees. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements for healthcare programmes substantiate the importance of dissertations. In particular, one of the expectations of the QAA (2001) is that the healthcare professional can contribute to the development and dissemination of evidence-based practice within professional contexts. This is what studying for an evidence-based practice dissertation aspires to achieve for the individual student.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN, 2011) has published its strategy to help nurses improve the use of evidence in practice; it helps them to source information, interpret, synthesise and communicate it. (A full PDF copy of this valuable resource is available from the companion website at www.wiley.com/go/glasper/nursingdissertation.) Healthcare practitioners need to be able to ask questions about practice, access healthcare research and evidence and report the key ideas and findings