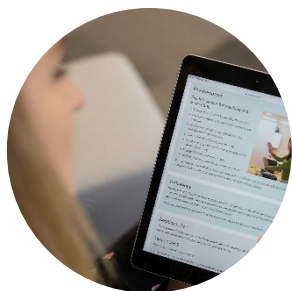


# START THINKING ABOUT YOUR DISSERTATION NOW

IN COLLABORATION WITH PREVIOUS WARWICK STUDENT, KUMAIL JAFFER



If you're a finalist next academic year there's a good chance, you'll have the option to take a dissertation module. Some of you might not have the choice at all! Either way, if a dissertation is something you'll be working on next year, it's never too early to make a start. **Get ahead of the game and start preparing now during your summer break using these tips from Kumail Jaffer.**

Submitting, and then receiving the mark for, my undergraduate dissertation was a fantastic feeling. All the work that had gone into it – dozens of hours of reading, researching, writing and editing – was reflected in a stamp of academic approval. At the same time, I also remember how daunting it seemed initially; a blank word document sat in front of me last November, a half-formed title the only words on it. Books piled up next to me, while in the background, I saw my other assignments ebbing away.

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*...take into account a potential supervisor's specific expertise.*

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As such, I don't wish this feeling upon anyone else. I managed to successfully plan and pull through by the end. Here's some tips on preparing for your dissertation early:

## Tip #1: Is a dissertation right for you?

In many subjects, a dissertation isn't mandatory, but acts as an optional module (usually 30 CATS, or 25% of the year). It perhaps goes without saying, but if you have no interest in such a long-form project and can opt out, there is no reason for choosing to do a dissertation in the first place.



The likelihood is – it'll be a struggle all year, and a lack of motivation to start it may lead to a rushed final project. Unless you intend to pursue a postgraduate degree or a career in writing, journalism or the like, a dissertation should be something that YOU want to do.

## Tip #2: Think about your other module choices

A dissertation is a rare kind of project, and one that is, perhaps, the antithesis of high contact hour degrees. There are very few deadlines and you'll be expected to work according to your own deadlines for the most part. There is, of course, much benefit to this arrangement, namely flexibility.

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*get in touch with a relevant researcher...*

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However, should you have an otherwise packed schedule, this may confine your 'dissertation work' time to the early morning, evening, or squeezed in between classes. Do consider that, if your other modules require numerous contact hours, your dissertation may be left in the background. In all, however, it depends what kind of worker you are.

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### Tip #3: Think seriously about your proposed topic

If you're in a department where you get to choose your dissertation title and topic, a title isn't likely to be necessary until the end of term one (but check with your department to be certain). Whilst this might seem a long way away, it's extremely useful to plan which area, time period, concept (or any other subject-specific category) you intend to write about – but if you've got writer's block already, what's the best way to go about this?

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*you'll be expected to work according to your own deadlines...*

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There are a few options. You could think around the topic(s) that motivated you to study your course in the first place. For me, it was foreign policy, for example. Thereafter, looking thematically at current affairs – whether it be new scientific discoveries, seismic political shifts, or groundbreaking reports on a number of subjects – can spark various questions and ideas. For example, my dissertation idea, which

focused on American foreign policy in Latin America, originally stemmed from an article I read on Venezuela.

### Tip #4: Identify potential supervisors – carefully!

While you won't be spending a huge amount of time with your supervisor, they are vitally important – they are the approvers and the graders of the whole piece. As such, when choosing a topic, take into account a potential supervisor's specific expertise. It goes without saying that a project on, say, Sino-British relations should be supervised by an academic whose work has focused on China or Great Britain.



Another important notion here is to approach them fairly early – most supervisors can only take on a limited number of individuals, and those with expertise in a popular topic will be unavailable shortly into the term. You can find the list of academics in your particular department

(and see details about their expertise) [here](#).

It's also possible that you won't have the opportunity to choose your own supervisor and your department will assign you one. This doesn't mean you can't get in touch with a relevant researcher in your department and ask for advice or suggested readings. Even if they don't end up supervising your dissertation, there's never any harm in reaching out. You may also find it helpful to reach out to the Library's [Research and Academic Support Librarians](#) too.

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*...it's extremely useful to plan...*

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*While it seems far away, your dissertation title will be due in just a couple of months. While it's a little too much to begin reading and devising your extensive project now, it's definitely worth taking on these tips and keeping the dissertation in the back of your mind.*