

How to ...

Develop your dissertation

Candidates often ask for advice on how to develop their dissertation – its subject-matter, content, layout, what needs to be included ...

This guide offers some practical advice to help you develop a good dissertation likely to pass first time.

Choose the right subject

Choose a subject that will illustrate you have achieved your Target Competencies, and will demonstrate your sound basic understanding of UK Government Infosec policy. You should also demonstrate that you can implement some aspect of this using a pragmatic, risk management approach.

Your dissertation could be about almost any Infosec subject, within the context of implementing UK Government policy. It could be technical (such as configuring a system), strategic (such as developing or implementing an aspect of policy) or a combination of the two. It could be about actually doing some Infosec work, or about advising others how to do it - as a consultant or a trainer, for example. The important thing is that it should be a record of your work experience, expanded into a reasoned account of decisions you made in dealing with a security issue.

It does not need to be about some large scale project, nor does it need to be an academic report. Remember that the examiner is looking primarily for your understanding of Government Infosec policy and evidence that you have applied it – at whatever level you work.

Clear focus

The dissertation should be based on a particular project or aspect of your job – not a review of your whole job or career history. Giving it a clear focus generally makes it easier for you to bring out the key points and target competencies.

You should show a clear understanding of key Infosec issues such as risk analysis and risk management, defence in depth and the accreditation process.

Complete in itself

The dissertation should be complete in itself – it may have annexes, but do not include unnecessary supporting material. Keep it concise and remember the guidelines on length (3,500 to 5,000 words) – the examiner should not have to read through additional information.

Only include what you need to so that your project and your approach can be understood by the examiner. Don't include anything else – especially your staff reports, however glowing!

Presentation

Your dissertation will not be failed for poor presentation - it's your argument that counts. But a well ordered and laid out piece of work will certainly help. Remember, communication skills are included in the competencies.

An introduction, giving an overview of the dissertation or placing the subject in context, will help the examiner understand you better. Put supplementary evidence into annexes. Finally, consider a closing paragraph or two on 'lessons learnt', to round it all off.

A reasoned account

Do not simply state what happened and what you did – the dissertation is your chance to show that you understand Infosec concepts and how the subject relates to other internal and external business activities.

Illustrate a risk management approach to Infosec by describing what options were open to you and what conflicts you had to deal with, justifying the decisions you made. Make sure you include the how and why, and the lessons learned.

In the same way, if you refer to discussions with colleagues, make clear what their pressures or needs were, and how you were able to reach an acceptable conclusion together.

Abbreviations and jargon

We all use abbreviations in our work, but it is good practice to keep these to a reasonable minimum, and always to give them in full the first time and also to have a list of abbreviations for reference. In the same way, try to avoid using unnecessary jargon. The examiner should not have to understand your organisational abbreviations and jargon – and should not have to spend time going back through the dissertation to find out what you are talking about.

You might find it useful to ask a colleague who is not so familiar with the subject of your dissertation to read it before submitting it – very often they will spot what you haven't noticed.

Reference your target competencies

If you are a training path candidate, you began with ITPC by developing your target competencies. The examiner is looking for evidence in your dissertation that you have met these.

Similarly, if you are a waiver path candidate, although you have not had to develop target competencies you should still be showing evidence of achieving all the core competencies.

Make it easy for the examiner to find the evidence by referring to the competencies within the text of your dissertation.

For example, if you have influenced negotiations within the organisation by identifying stakeholders and setting up regular meetings with them, then when you describe this add a note "(target competency 3.2)".

Alternatively, if you have numbered your sections or paragraphs, you may prefer to list your target competencies in a table with the relevant section or paragraph numbers beside each, eg "target competency 1.1 – sections 1, 5".

Keep to the point

Avoid padding – keep to the point. Waffling won't get you extra marks!

In the same way, while brief descriptions of your Infosec background are valid, more general descriptions of your family circumstances and extra-curricular activities are not.

Use your candidate number

You are not just a number by any means, but **please** only put your name on the cover sheet. All other sheets should only show your candidate number.

Anonymity between candidates and examiners is vital for the credibility of the assessment process. So make sure your dissertation, learning logs, certificates of attendance and supporter's letter do not show your name. Photocopies of documents are acceptable.

If you leave your name or personal details on the dissertation or supporting documents, other than on the cover sheet, your dissertation will not be forwarded to an examiner but instead will be returned to you unmarked for your name to be removed.

If you are a waiver candidate and have already written your dissertation before registering, please don't send it in until after you have registered and paid the registration fee – you won't have a candidate number until you have registered!

Protective marking

You are responsible for ensuring your submission is not, if at all possible, protectively marked. You should also ensure that your own security function is satisfied you can submit the dissertation to the Scheme. That said, all our examiners have high Government security clearances and are bound by a confidentiality code to safeguard personal and commercial confidentiality

Sometimes, you may need to protectively mark your submission because you need to justify your security decisions against the value of the asset you were safeguarding. In cases like this, the Secretariat can assess your dissertation directly, ensuring maximum confidentiality throughout the assessment process. If you feel you are likely to be in this position, contact the Secretariat as soon as possible to make the necessary arrangements.

Ask for help if you need it

If you need guidance or advice on any part of the process, do contact the ITPC secretariat – we are here to help.

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