Note: these tips are general pointers that will apply to most dissertations (see the handout *Dissertations: a basic introduction* for information on the nature and purpose of dissertations generally).

For more discipline-specific advice it is essential to consult course and unit handbooks and your assigned dissertation supervisor, as well as attending any lectures and seminars on research and dissertations.

1. Start thinking *early* about possible topics, and read through departmental guidelines carefully. Good dissertation choices usually arise from lots of reading, talking and thinking about areas of your subject that you find interesting. You can change your mind several times before finalising your aims. Keep your supervisor informed.

2. Keep full records of all your reading. Referencing tends to be marked very strictly in dissertations, and you can save yourself a lot of time and effort if you assemble the reference list / bibliography as you read, rather than leaving it until the very end of the process. (You can easily delete any sources that you do not ultimately use.)

3. Don’t be too ambitious. It’s usually better to research one very specific idea thoroughly than to attempt to tackle a big theme (or many ideas) and not be able to treat it (or them) in depth.

4. To help you focus your thoughts and devise hypotheses, research questions and objectives, think of answers to this question: what would you like your readers to understand by the end of the dissertation?

5. A dissertation is a major undertaking. Create a timetable that allows you to meet deadlines without putting yourself under unnecessary pressure. Make back-up copies of your drafts as you go.

6. Create clear research objectives and *then* choose appropriate methods that will (hopefully!) enable you to meet those objectives. You could even draw up a table for yourself to link each objective to possible methods.
Before selecting particular research methods, think carefully about how you will analyse (i.e. get results and meaning from) the data that you want your methods to give you. If, for example, you think that interviews might be a suitable method for one or more of your objectives, stop and think about how you are going to summarise and present interview data.

You should be able to justify every choice you make in your dissertation. There should be good, academic reasons for your choice of focus, of reading, of methodology, and of analytical techniques. Know why you did things the way you did, and make sure your reader knows why too.

Don’t worry if you don’t find out what you thought you would. Unexpected results are normally just as valuable as (and sometimes more valuable than) those you anticipated.

Remember to consider the limitations of your research. You are expected to think carefully and write fluently about the reliability and validity of your findings.

Plan for plenty of time to edit and proofread your drafts, and remember to allow time for binding, if that is a requirement.

Feel proud! This will probably be your first ‘publication’, and one day a future student may well read and reference your work for their dissertation.