

# The Dissertation Terrain 2

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Any successful mountain climb, whether actual or metaphorical, requires knowledge of the terrain and the environment. The more knowledge, the better the chance of success. No mountaineer would begin a major ascent without a solid understanding of the unique nature of the mountain and its challenges, characteristics, and vagaries. So, too, must a dissertation writer fully understand the nature of the doctoral dissertation. This chapter describes the essence of the dissertation—its component parts, major steps in the dissertation process, and the roles and responsibilities of those involved.

## What Is a Doctoral Dissertation?

A doctoral dissertation is a formal document that demonstrates your ability to conduct research that makes an original contribution to theory or practice. It is a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree (e.g., an EdD, DBA, PhD, PsyD, etc.). The term *original*, according to the Council of Graduate Schools (1991), “implies some novel twist, fresh perspective, new hypothesis, or innovative method that makes the dissertation project a distinctive contribution” (p. 15).

Several types of doctoral degrees exist, such as a DBA, DPA, EdD, PhD, PsyD, and so on. Historically, the PhD was seen as having a greater emphasis on research, whereas various other doctoral degrees were viewed as professional degrees. In recent years, depending on the university and the field of study, these distinctions have become

somewhat blurred. The contemporary doctorate in the United States and internationally is structured as education that includes rigorous research experiences in the form of a dissertation that requires students to “generate new knowledge and to develop as individuals who use the power of scholarly inquiry to advance society” (Council of Graduate Schools, 2016, p. 20). It should also be noted that there are doctorate degrees (e.g., JD and MD) that don’t require research in the form of a dissertation.

Increased globalization, proliferation of technology, big data, and the need to be agile in a rapidly changing world has given rise to new conversations about the nature, design, and products of the doctorate degree. There are a number of interested groups studying and debating how the doctorate degree should evolve in the coming years. These discussions are likely to result in a combination of new and current features of a doctorate degree, including research that connects scholarship to a greater sense of purpose within a larger context.

The dissertation document may vary in format, depending on the type of study, but essentially, all researchers define a problem with researchable questions, conduct an exhaustive review of the literature, choose an appropriate methodology, collect and analyze data, and present the findings and conclusions.

The length of dissertations can also vary. No set number of pages is required. It helps to follow the rule of thumb illustrated by this apocryphal story: A young boy, after meeting the towering Abraham Lincoln, asked the president, “How long should a man’s legs be?” Lincoln answered, “Long enough to reach the ground.” It’s the same way with dissertations. The appropriate length depends on the degree to which you can responsibly and comprehensively answer your study’s research questions and adhere to the policies of your institution.

Completing a dissertation represents the pinnacle of academic achievement. It requires high-level skills of discernment and critical analysis, proficiency in at least one research method, and the ability to communicate the results of that research in a clear, coherent, and concise manner. No previous writing experiences prepare you for such a challenging and rigorous task. Basically, it’s a learn-and-grow-as-you-go process.

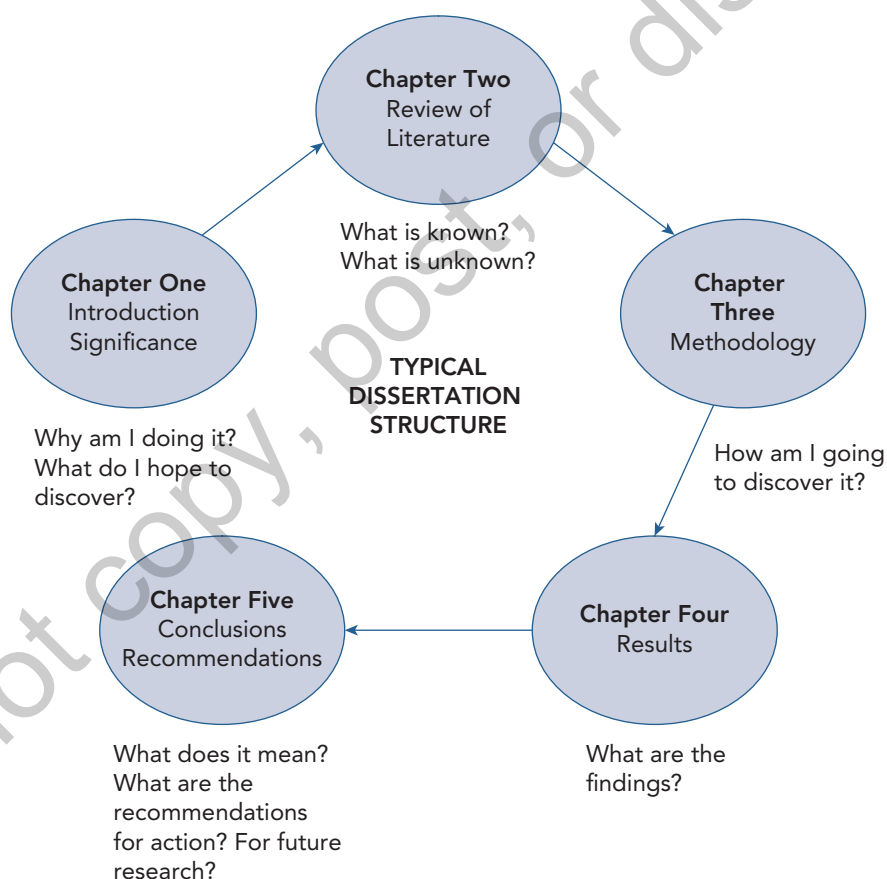
One efficient way to learn the dissertation terrain is to familiarize yourself with dissertations previously published in your chosen field of study. This helps you understand the format and style of accepted dissertations. Also read dissertations chaired by those individuals you are considering for advisors. In this way, you can obtain insight into

that person's expected level of scholarship. Keep in mind that universities may vary in their approaches to dissertation structure and design requirements.

## Typical Dissertation Structure

A dissertation's structure varies with the academic discipline and the methodology used. Chapter names may be different, but in one way or another, the questions displayed as follows are answered. Figure 2.1 is an overview of a typical dissertation's basic structure.

**Figure 2.1 Typical Dissertation Structure**



Most researchers try to resolve a specific problem and advance learning by answering the questions posed in Figure 2.1. Regardless of academic discipline, research usually follows the scientific method and has a similar basic format with some variations. To conceptualize your study,

determine what the overall format will be. We ask our students to create an electronic file identifying the dissertation's major sections. This serves as an outline for the entire study. Students insert their writings into the individual sections within the file.

The following are sample formats of studies using quantitative and qualitative methodologies and some alternative formats. A quantitative study generally adheres to a standard found in statistical research studies, although the order of the various sections may vary.

### **Studies Using Quantitative Methodology: General Sample Format**

#### Chapter 1 Introduction/problem statement

Purpose of the study

Research questions/null hypotheses/hypotheses

Significance of the study

Delimitations/assumptions

Definition of terms

#### Chapter 2 Review of the literature

Topics/subtopics

Summary

#### Chapter 3 Methodology

Type of research

Protection of human subjects

Population and sample (analysis unit)

Instrumentation

Data collection procedures

Statistical analysis procedures, including validity and reliability

Limitations

#### Chapter 4 Results

Findings

#### Chapter 5 Summary

Implications

Conclusions

Recommendations for further research

Varied structures can be seen in qualitative studies. However, they should exhibit a line of logic consistent with the assumptions inherent in the qualitative approach.

### **Studies Using Qualitative Methodology: General Sample Format**

#### Chapter 1 Introduction

- Topic and research problem
- Rationale/purpose of the study
- Guiding questions
- Theoretical/conceptual framework
- Significance of the study
- Delimitations
- Definitions

#### Chapter 2 Review of the literature

- Topics/subtopics
- Summary

#### Chapter 3 Methodology

- Rationale and assumptions for the qualitative design
- Type of design
- Researcher's role
- Protection of human subjects
- Site and sample selections
- Data collection techniques
- Instrument
- Managing, recording, and transcribing or presenting data
- Data analysis procedures, including credibility and dependability
- Limitations

#### Chapter 4 Methods for verification/trustworthiness

- Coding process
- Themes

#### Chapter 5 Results/outcome of the study

- Discussion
- Connections to previous research

Implications  
 Recommendations for future research  
 Conclusions

### Alternative Formats

#### Model-Building Studies

Chapter 1 Problem and purpose  
 Chapter 2 Literature review  
 Chapter 3 Methodology  
 Chapter 4 Analysis of data  
 Chapter 5 Conclusion and model

#### Case Studies

Chapter 1 Problem and purpose  
 Chapter 2 Literature review  
 Chapter 3 Methodology  
 Chapter 4 Case studies  
 Chapter 5 Analysis of themes  
 Chapter 6 Conclusions, implications, and recommendations

### Components of a Typical Dissertation

Your university likely has a format that you are required to follow. The following are some general items in each component.

#### Title Page

The title page—the first page of your dissertation—includes the title, the author, the degree requirements that the dissertation fulfills, and the date. The title of the dissertation is a succinct summary of the topic and generally should not exceed 15 words. Avoid unnecessary words, such as *A Study of*. The title includes key terms that readily identify the scope and nature of your study.

#### Copyright Page

Copyrighting the dissertation, although highly desirable, is optional. Unless your institution requires it, you don't have to formally register your dissertation with the U.S. Copyright Office in order to obtain copyright protection, but it is highly desirable to do so in case of any copyright litigation. Regardless of whether you formally register with

the U.S. Copyright Office, a notice of copyright should appear on the page immediately following the title page. This informs others that your dissertation is not available for unrestricted use.

### **Committee Approval Page**

This page contains the date of approval and the original signatures of your dissertation committee, the outside reader (if one is appointed), and the dean. By signing this page, they attest to the fact that they have read and approved your work.

### **Abstract of the Dissertation**

The abstract is a brief summary of the dissertation that includes the problem, purpose, research questions, methodology, conclusions, and recommendations for action and future research. The abstract should be well organized, concise, and self-contained because it is often printed separately. A copy of the abstract is usually bound in the dissertation.

### **Table of Contents**

The table of contents is essentially a topic outline of your dissertation, including all headings and subheadings, with accompanying page numbers. The following are generally included: acknowledgments, dedication, statement of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, analysis of the data, conclusions and recommendations, appendixes, and references. Each table of contents entry *must* correspond exactly to the title in the text. Consider preparing your table of contents ahead of time as a tentative outline for your study. It provides a good checklist for what needs to be done in writing the dissertation.

### **List of Figures, Illustrations, and Tables**

Separate lists should be created for figures, illustrations, and tables. These lists should include the number and full name of each figure, illustration, or table as it is stated in the text. In addition, they should be listed in order of appearance in the text, followed by the number of the page on which the figure, illustration, or table appears.

### **Acknowledgment Page**

Acknowledgments give credit to others for their guidance and assistance throughout the dissertation process. It generally recognizes the contributions of such individuals as committee members, other significant faculty, helpful colleagues, technical consultants, typists, or family

and friends. Acknowledgments may also express gratitude for the use of copyrighted or other restricted materials.

### **Dedication Page**

You may choose to dedicate your dissertation to a person or persons who have had a significant impact on your work. It gives you the opportunity to give special tribute to those who provided extraordinary support and encouragement. The dedication tribute may be placed at the end of the acknowledgment section or it may be a separate section.

### **Additional Components**

It's important to review your university's dissertation requirements regarding additional components for inclusion (e.g., some universities require a brief CV [curriculum vitae] in their dissertations).

### **Chapter 1: Introduction or Problem Statement**

This section of the dissertation gives you an opportunity to grab readers' attention and bring them on board with interest. It presents the problem addressed by the research, and it supplies a brief summary of the most relevant research and theory pertaining to the subject of the study. The problem statement should tell the story behind the research intent. It should provide the background to the purpose statement and research questions. In addition to the introductory problem statement, this section usually contains the purpose statement, research questions or hypotheses, the significance of the study, a definition of terms, delimitations/assumptions, and the study's organization. As an option, a brief summary of the introduction may appear at the end of the chapter. In addition, summaries may be used to conclude the subsequent chapters.

### **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

The review of literature is a summation of pertinent literature directly related to your study. It provides a background for the important variables or concepts in your study and describes the similarity and difference between your work and that of other authors and researchers in the field. This review of the literature is traditionally your second chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The methodology section describes in detail how the study was conducted. This chapter usually consists of the following sections: the type of research, the sample and/or population, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations of the study.



### Chapter 4: Results or Findings

This section summarizes the data collected and details the statistical treatment of those data (if any). Tables, figures, or illustrations are used to report data clearly and economically. Findings are usually summarized at the end of the chapter. A qualitative study usually consists of narrative descriptions embodied in themes and patterns generated from the data.

### Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This section describes what the findings mean and what conclusions you drew from the research questions that guided your study. It details how your findings compare with those in the literature and with your conceptual framework. Included in this chapter are practical implications for professional practice as well as recommendations for further research.

### References, Endnotes, or Bibliographies

A reference section at the end of the dissertation should list all works cited in the dissertation. A bibliography includes related material that you reviewed and studied but did not cite directly in the text. This helps the reader determine the scope of the research behind your dissertation. However, it should not include every article or book you read. There are distinct formats for citing references (including endnotes) that you may use depending on your university's preference. Once a format is selected, be consistent and follow it throughout the dissertation.

### Appendixes

Materials that document important components of the dissertation that would be too lengthy, awkward, or distracting to include within the text should be included as appendixes. These materials might be raw data, letters of introduction to participants, long or complex tables, items required by your university's Institutional Review Board, and questionnaires. Such detail is useful to anyone trying to replicate your study in the future. Place items in the appendixes in the order they appear in the text. When more than one appendix is used, each must be designated by a letter (e.g., Appendix A, Appendix B) as well as by a title.

## Major Steps in the Dissertation Process

The following is a brief description of the major steps needed to complete a dissertation. Procedures vary from university to university, and

most universities distribute specific directions to their dissertation writers. Be sure to become familiar with these procedures as early as possible.

### 1. Select a Dissertation Topic

Deciding whether a particular topic has the potential for becoming a dissertation is one of the biggest challenges faced by doctoral students. There are no hard-and-fast rules in selecting a topic; however, the following are some criteria that will help in making your decision:

- a. It needs to hold your interest over a long period of time.
- b. It must be manageable in size.
- c. It must have the potential to make an original and significant contribution to knowledge.
- d. It should be doable within your time frame and budget.
- e. It must be based on obtainable data.
- f. It should be of interest to an advisor or committee.

### 2. Prepare a Prospectus

A prospectus is a 3- to 5-page overview of your study. It is basically a research concept paper that includes (1) background information about the topic with a brief commentary on pertinent literature, (2) a purpose statement, (3) research questions, and (4) appropriate methodology. This paper provides the basis for development of the proposal itself. It can also be used for discussions with potential dissertation advisors and committee members. Discussing your prospectus with a potential advisor or with potential committee members helps you obtain advice early in the dissertation process about the suitability of your topic as a worthwhile study and determine if the research questions and methodology are appropriate. A formal proposal expands on the prospectus and includes most of the components found in Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

### 3. Select an Advisor

Spend time getting to know those individuals who are available to be your advisor or committee members. Present your prospectus to those with whom you might like to work and get their views about the topic and proposed methodology. Once you select your advisor, work with him or her to focus and refine your topic into a manageable study.

#### 4. Choose Committee Members

In consultation with your advisor, select your committee members. They should possess earned doctorates from an accredited institution, be considered outstanding in their field, be interested in your topic, have expertise in your topic or methodology, and be willing to spend time reviewing your dissertation document.

#### 5. Complete and Present the Proposal

The proposal is usually written in several drafts in response to feedback from committee members. The proposal varies according to university guidelines and expectations. An acceptable proposal generally consists of Chapters 1, 2, and 3; the proposed research instrument(s) to be used in the study; and a reference list. Whether or not the proposal is written in the future or past tense depends on the requirements of your institution and the preference of your advisor. Generally, when all committee suggestions have been incorporated and your advisor concurs, a formal proposal meeting (also known as a *prelim*) may be held. In most instances, approval of your proposal becomes a contract between you and your committee. You are to satisfactorily conduct the study as described in the proposal, and the committee signs off on the proposal.

#### 6. Conduct the Research

In this phase of the dissertation, you refine your instrument(s) per the recommendations of the committee and conduct, for example, a pilot test for a quantitative study to determine reliability and validity or a beta interview for a qualitative study. You collect, analyze, and interpret your data.

#### 7. Write the Dissertation

The dissertation requires a high level of scholarly writing. You must be able to express yourself logically, clearly, and precisely. If you have difficulty with academic writing, consider hiring an editor. This can save you considerable time and make life easier for your committee by lessening the number of revisions needed. It enables your committee's comments to be directed toward substance rather than style. Editorial assistance for a dissertation is encouraged, but *only in matters of style, not content*.

## 8. Schedule the Final Defense

Your advisor typically leads the final defense meeting in which you present and defend your dissertation in the presence of the committee and other individuals permitted by your university. A final defense is usually considered a public meeting. At most universities, following the final defense, the committee certifies one of the following:

- a. pass with no revisions,
- b. pass with minor revisions,
- c. pass with major revisions,
- d. defense to be continued, or
- e. fail.

## 9. Make Corrections and Resubmit the Dissertation

Incorporate all the changes resulting from the input provided at the final defense. Then, follow the special procedures outlined at your university.

## 10. Graduate and Become a Doctor!

### Roles and Responsibilities

#### Doctoral Candidate

A *doctoral candidate* is usually defined as a student, accepted by the dissertation committee, who has successfully passed the proposal/preliminary meeting and who the dissertation committee then advances to candidacy. Becoming a doctoral candidate is a big step in the dissertation process, as it represents the committee's approval for you to begin collecting your data. It is the candidate's responsibility to get all forms signed in the proper sequence and to submit them to the appropriate individuals.

#### Dissertation Advisor

The dissertation advisor (also known as the *dissertation chair*) is the doctoral candidate's primary advisor during all phases of the dissertation process. The advisor is the leader of the dissertation committee and usually conducts both the proposal and final defense meetings. In conjunction with other committee members, the advisor is responsible for providing technical and content advice and assistance.

## Dissertation Committee

Individuals who hold earned doctoral degrees from an accredited institution are invited to serve as members of the *dissertation committee*. The dissertation committee generally has three to five members, including the advisor. The committee's role is to provide different lenses through which to view your work. It is an opportunity to broaden your perspective by seeing your study from various vantage points. Candidates first select the dissertation advisor and, in consultation with him or her, select the other committee members. It is recommended that committee members reflect the range of expertise pertinent to the topic under study and the methodology likely to be used. Committee members are called on to advise the candidate throughout the process in areas appropriate to their expertise and interests. They also comment on written materials developed by the doctoral candidate. Committee members are responsible for evaluating and approving the proposal and the completed dissertation.

## The Institutional Review Board or Human Subjects Review Committee

This committee is composed of a group of faculty members who review each research proposal for the purpose of safeguarding the rights of human subjects used for research purposes.

## Additional Roles

There are a variety of different roles within each university related to the dissertation process. One important role is played by the department that processes the dissertation forms and makes sure that appropriate procedures are followed. Also, there may be university reviewers responsible for editing and reviewing the dissertation document for the proper style and format.

## SUMMARY

The doctoral dissertation is a formal document that demonstrates your ability to conduct original research that contributes to theory and/or practice. Although variations exist, typical dissertations consist of chapters that provide background to the topic, a literature

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review, a description of the methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations for action and future research. Major steps in the dissertation process include selecting a topic, preparing a prospectus, selecting an advisor and committee members, successfully completing and presenting a proposal, conducting the research, writing the dissertation, participating in the final defense, making corrections, and graduating.

Now that you know the dissertation terrain, it's time to consider the ethical issues in research. It is vital to be aware of the variety of ethical issues that arise in all phases of the dissertation process. The next chapter describes ethical issues, such as the rights of human subjects, the ethics of data collection and analysis, reporting findings, writing up research, and copyright law.

## RESOURCES

### CORE Services

- <https://core.ac.uk/services>

### LexisNexis Uni

- <https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/professional/academic/nexis-uni.page>

### Purdue University, Online Writing Lab (OWL)

- <https://owl.purdue.edu/>

### ResearchBuzz

- <https://researchbuzz.me/>

### Microsoft Academic

- <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/project/academic/>

### Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

- <https://eric.ed.gov/>