

1 Planning Your Dissertation

Objectives

- Readers will be able to:
 1. Describe the dissertation process
 2. Recognize the stage they are at in the dissertation journey
 3. Choose an appropriate dissertation topic

Dissertation Process

Conducting a dissertation is part of doctoral students' research task, which they need to complete before being conferred a doctorate degree. It is part of the induction process – preparing you to join the community of researchers or practitioner-researchers who have expertise in a specific area in your field (Adu, 2011; Petersen, 2007). Completing a dissertation gives you the unique skills of navigating the role of an independent researcher while working within research guidelines and boundaries. The role of your dissertation supervisor (advisor) is to make sure your research actions and decisions are in line with the set guidelines and boundaries. The hope is that, at the end of the induction process, you would be skilled in critically consuming and independently conducting research, with the goal of contributing to the field and/or addressing practical problems (Useem, 1997).

The dissertation process varies depending on the country you are studying in, your field of study and the program or department you are in. However, the following dissertation stages reflect most of the doctoral programs, irrespective of the country and field. The stages include preparing, planning, performing and presenting.

Preparing

Preparation for the dissertation project starts at the moment one begins their doctoral education. However, for some institutions or doctoral programs, it starts at the time prospective students are asked to share their research interest as a part of their application requirements. The first action you need to take (especially after you have been accepted to a doctoral program) is to learn more about the program/department in terms of the kind of courses you will be taking and the

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experience and research interest of the main faculty members. It would be great if you could learn as much as you can about the organizational culture and structure of the program, trying to address the following questions: Who is the head of the department? What are their roles and responsibilities? How do faculty members relate to students? What kind of support do students receive when working on their dissertations? What kinds of topics have students researched when working on their dissertations? What specific research methods courses should students take as part of the dissertation preparation? What kinds of research areas are the faculty members working on? Is there potential funding for dissertation work? Who should you contact if you have issues with choosing a research topic and methodology (Useem, 1997)?

Addressing some of the above questions will help you to understand what is expected of you by the faculty members and the department/program as a whole. This is also a good time to strategize ways of successfully completing your dissertation.

The coursework taken before the start of the dissertation is very crucial in preparing you for the project. It is very important to take the research methods courses seriously, focusing on not only getting good grades in the research method classes but also ensuring that you are gaining skills in consuming research reports and doing research (Useem, 1997). At this point, take the opportunity to learn different research methods, including their strengths and weaknesses and how they are used in studies. It is just like filling your toolbox with good and efficient tools so that when the right time comes, you can select the right tool for your study. Avoiding familiarizing yourself with different kinds of research methods limits what you plan to research and how you want to do it.

Another issue you should pay attention to is the assignments and projects done in the classes you take. This is a great opportunity to explore the topics of interest so that, by the time coursework is completed, you already know the topic you want to explore for your dissertation. However, if by the end of the coursework you haven't chosen a topic, it is not too late. At the early stage of the dissertation process, you may still have the chance to change the topic as you review literature and/or have conversations with your dissertation supervisor.

Having conversation with your fellow dissertation students about their experience, challenges and strategies for conducting their studies can also help you to be better prepared for this journey. It is important to get an idea about how a dissertation defense is organized (in terms of the structure and duration), including the expectations of the dissertation students and the kinds of questions dissertation committee members ask. Lastly, attending such sessions can be a source of inspiration – knowing that a dissertation project can be successfully done and defended.

Planning

Some institutions or doctoral programs allow their students to choose their supervisors and even determine who they want to be a part of their dissertation committee. However, other programs assign supervisors to students. Irrespective

of what dissertation supervisory structure your program has put in place, you are more likely to successfully complete your dissertation if the roles, responsibilities and expectations of you and your supervisor are clearly laid out and followed. Therefore, there is a need to discuss your role and your supervisor's role, responsibilities and expectations – making sure everyone is on the same page.

The supervisors' main role is to guide and support students as they embark on their independent research journey. However, the kind of guidance and level of support differ from one supervisor to another. How can you know the way your supervisor guides and supports students working on their dissertation? You could address this question by engaging in informal inquiry – having a discussion with them and talking to current and previous advisees. Gathering this rich information to help address the above questions would assist in strategizing ways to leverage the expected guidance and support you will receive in accomplishing your dissertation goals.

However, not all supervisors will give you the guidance and support you need. After figuring out what your advisor will provide, you need to reflect on what your needs are and how you plan to meet them, considering the kind of support and guidance you will be receiving. Be flexible, in the sense that, in the course of your journey, there may be times where you feel supported by your supervisor, and at other times you may feel like you are alone in the journey. Learning to figure things out on your own is an effective strategy. For instance, if you are not familiar with a specific research approach you plan to use, and your supervisor is also not totally familiar with it, spend time and learn more about it, and if you are not clear about what is expected in each chapter of the dissertation, review other dissertation document examples. All these experiences improve your problem-solving and research skills and equip you to be an independent researcher.

One of the main strategies you could use to complete your dissertation journey is to act and think like an independent researcher – seeing your supervisor as a coach, but not a co-researcher. Having this mindset will help you to make informed decisions, and take actions with strong reasons behind them, while preparing you to defend those actions. Whenever you fail to convincingly defend your actions and decisions, you open doors of suggestion for potentially unfavorable changes of your topic, purpose and/or methodology. For instance, let's assume that you want to conduct a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach and you don't have good justification for using this approach. Someone may suggest a different approach for you which may not be the best. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't accept suggestions. However, having a reasonable defense behind your decision will help invite valuable suggestions, with good reasons for incorporating those suggestions.

Planning also involves deciding on your topic, determining the specific problem you want to address in the study, constructing the purpose of the study, deciding the right research method and data collection strategy and selecting an appropriate data analysis strategy. We'll discuss each of these areas later in this book. However, at this point, the take-home message is that, when planning, you should consider the norms and expectations in the program. You need to make sure your actions

and decisions are not only in line with how research should be done but also consistent with your research goals (Emelin et al., 2021). Also, thinking about the consequence of your proposed actions, and devising ways of defending them, is one of the keys to successful dissertation completion.

Performing

At this stage, it is expected that structures have been put in place and the needed resources have been made available to conduct the study. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, you use the specified and approved sampling strategy and recruitment channel to access potential participants. Interested participants should then complete a screening questionnaire, which contains questions that help the researcher to determine whether one qualifies to be a part of the study or not. Upon meeting the research recruitment requirements, they are ushered into the research participation phase. But before initiating their participation, participants are presented with a consent form educating them about the purpose of the study, their rights and responsibilities and any potential risks involved.

After agreeing to participate, they provide responses to questions/statements, generating the data needed to address the research questions/hypotheses. Alternatively, or additionally, existing data or documents may be gathered to help address research questions. After data collection, the next step is to analyze the data. It starts with conducting data cleaning – removing any identifiable information and making it ready for statistical analysis, qualitative analysis or both. All the analyses are mainly driven by the research questions or hypotheses.

Presenting

The presentation stage is not only about communicating your findings but also presenting your entire study. Thinking about who will be reading your dissertation document helps in effectively communicating your study. It starts with presenting the background and general information about the topic – preparing a way to make known the research problem of the study. Traditionally, research problems are informed by a gap you have identified in existing literature. Alternatively, the research problem can be informed by the problem generated as a result of a critical review and synthesis of literature. It is important to note that, when conducting action research, you could even just present a practical problem that is related to an issue within your profession or currently happening.

After presenting the problem statement, you state the purpose of the study and research questions/hypotheses. You then write about your theoretical or conceptual framework, which consists of the specific theories or concepts that inform what you are studying. It is important to provide a strong argument in support of your study, reasoning why it is important to conduct your study.

All the components described above are a part of the introduction of your study. Besides the introduction, you are to share the literature you have reviewed and the research methodology, as well as describe and display your results, discussion

and conclusion. We will be discussing these components further in other chapters/sections of this book.

Engaging in Writing

One component of the dissertation process that you will be doing often is writing. Writing is the art of putting your observations, ideas and/or thoughts on paper or electronically, using any writing or typing device. We see the mind as a sophisticated natural machine capable of creating new ideas. The main obstacle preventing us from fully utilizing it to accomplish our writing goal is fear. When the mind is pre-occupied with negative thoughts, it leaves few cognitive resources available for creative activity, including writing (O'Connor, 2017). Some of our thoughts may include: "I don't know how to perfectly write," "I don't know what to write," and "I won't be able to finish writing my dissertation." Having negative thoughts impedes our flow of ideas and inhibits creative writing. As Chintamani (2014) indicates, anticipation of failure dissipates creativity: "[Reluctance to write] ... is most often initiated by conflicted feelings and an attempt to have a perfect draft (perfect draft syndrome) at the very outset" (Chintamani, 2014, p. 3).

During the initial writing process, it helps to focus less on writing perfect ideas and more on documenting your seemingly imperfect ideas. After putting your initial ideas on paper, you can go back to perfect the draft. Finding a quiet place to write, with or without playing calming music, mentally creates a conducive environment that could switch on your creative writing mood.

Using First Person

Writing in the first-person point of view (i.e., I, we, us and our) has been an acceptable way of engaging in academic writing (APA, 2019). However, to engage in scholarly writing, one of the writing practices you should rarely use is the first person when you are describing your thoughts, feelings and personal views (OASIS: Writing Center, 2023). Ideally, the first-person point of view is appropriate when describing your research actions and decisions (OASIS: Writing Center, 2023; Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2023). Also, a consistently active voice is more appropriate to help in knowing the subject who is performing the action (Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2023). Here are examples of sentences with both active voice and first-person point of view:

- I developed the survey questionnaire.
- We interviewed each participant in the morning.
- We conducted an independent *t* test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in job satisfaction between full-time and part-time employees.

However, your institution, department, field or supervisor may require that you write in the third person. So, we advise that you check with your supervisor about an acceptable writing style before you start working on your dissertation. Alternatively,

you could review completed dissertations from your department or program to see how they were written. Lastly, if you have a writing center in your institution, you could contact the center for clarification about the required writing style.

Please note that we have intentionally written some of the example dissertation chapters in the third person for you to see how they are written in case you are required to use this type of writing style (see Chapters 19–23).

Choosing a Topic

The word “interest” comes in mind when thinking about a topic you may want to do a study on. This word sometimes makes its presence known when having a conversation with colleagues and faculty members about what you plan to do in your dissertation. Therefore, one’s level of interest in a topic could be the main determinant for the focus of a dissertation project. However, there are other factors that should be considered when deciding on a topic. But before we come to what these contributing factors are, let’s address the question: What is a topic? A topic is a core idea that has the potentiality to be studied. In other words, it is the main issue that a researcher wants to research. Topics differ based on the level of abstraction, connection to practical issues and relatedness to a research area within your field.

A topic with a high level of abstraction (with no connection to practical issues and no relation to the area of research in your field) becomes challenging to explore. Let’s say you want to study “artificial intelligence capabilities” in the field of education. This topic could be seen as too high in the level of abstraction, since it doesn’t represent a specific issue in education. With this topic, your supervisor may say that it is too broad and ask you about how it is connected to issues in education or educational practices. Thinking about what area, situation and/or event this proposed topic is related to would help in reducing the level of abstraction. For instance, you could revise it to “the role of machine learning on students’ learning.” As you can see, the “artificial intelligence” has been replaced by its sub-area, which is “machine learning,” and “role” has been further added to reduce the abstraction level. In addition, including the phrase “students’ learning” helped to relate the topic to an area in the education field.

We want to emphasize that coming up with a topic is not always linear as discussed above. It may emerge when taking a course, talking to someone, reading an article, doing a course assignment or reflecting on a problem you have encountered. The most important thing is to make sure it meets the criteria of a good topic, which are as follows: It should be less abstract in nature; it should have a connection with practical issues in a field; and it should be related to the research within a field (see Table 1.1). In addition, you may address the following questions: How important is the topic to you? How important is the topic to your field of study? How important is the topic to your future endeavors? Responding to these questions will help you to make informed decisions about what to focus on (Useem, 1997).

Table 1.1 Criteria for deciding on an appropriate topic

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Rating</i>
<i>Level of abstraction</i>	How distant a topic is from an actual and specific happening, situation, behavior, etc.	The level of abstraction of my topic is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very high • High • Moderate • Low • Very low
<i>Connection to practical issues</i>	How close the topic is to what is happening in our day-to-day lives.	How connected is the topic to practical issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very highly • Highly • Moderately • Loosely • Very loosely
<i>Relatedness to research area within your field</i>	How much connection the topic shares with a research area in the field of your study.	How related is your topic to a research area within your field? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very highly • Highly • Moderately • Loosely • Very loosely
<i>Degree of interest in the topic</i>	How much delight and curiosity you have towards the topic.	How interested would you be in the topic? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very • Somewhat • Unsure • Not very • Not at all
<i>Degree of relevance to your experience</i>	How important the topic is to you, considering what you have experienced.	How relevant is the topic to you, considering what you have experienced? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very relevant • Relevant • Unsure • Irrelevant • Very irrelevant
<i>Degree of relevance to your field of study</i>	How important the topic is to your field of study.	How relevant is the topic to your field of study? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very relevant • Relevant • Unsure • Irrelevant • Very irrelevant
<i>Degree of relevance to your future endeavors</i>	How important the topic is to your career ambitions and future research focus.	How relevant is the topic to your future endeavors? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very relevant • Relevant • Unsure • Irrelevant • Very irrelevant

Summary

The dissertation process can be grouped under four stages: preparing for your research journey, planning to carry out your research, performing by implementing the study, and presenting by writing and showing that you conducted your study and what you found, including demonstrating their relevance, interpretation, applications and implications. Throughout the dissertation process, you engage in academic writing. Writing your dissertation is a challenging endeavor, but with adequate support from your institution and dissertation committee it can be done. Besides, with an unwavering determination to complete your research journey, you are more likely to reach your dissertation destination. We encourage you to start thinking about potential topics you could choose from to begin your journey. We did it, and we know you can do it too.

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