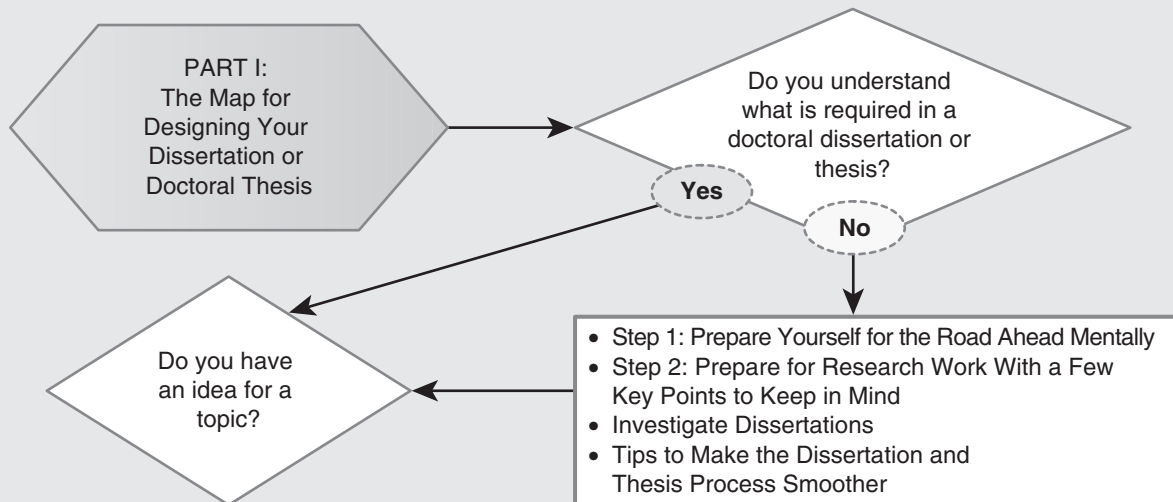


1

Do You Understand What Is Required in a Doctoral Dissertation or Thesis?



The Questions Answered in This Chapter:

1. What do I need to think about as I start?
2. What tools will I need to gather?
3. What is the general layout of a dissertation?
4. What is the underlying logic of a proposal?
5. What is required in a dissertation or thesis?
6. What can I do to make the process easier?

Introduction

If you live in the United States and you are in school to get a doctoral degree, chances are your university will require a “dissertation.” If you live in other parts of the world that were more influenced by the English system of universities, they may call very similar work a “thesis.” Both are seminal pieces of individual research and require the same skills in research, as they produce similar challenges and frustrations for students. We will go over variations in style later in this chapter and throughout the book, but for now let’s discuss why this process is so challenging.

Step 1: Prepare Yourself for the Road Ahead Mentally

Whatever you call it, being required to design and execute a solid body of research is a rite of passage. If you leave your university unchanged, then those of us who are paid to help guide the journey have not done our jobs. What makes doctors different? The way we think—our ability to see the world, pick it apart and re-sort it in new ways—this is THE characteristic that makes us worth paying for a commodity that is priceless. This is not to say that all doctors are equally good at research or that a person without a degree is not skilled, only that the dissertation road is the only highway we know designed as a rite of passage that always ends in a change of worldview.

The part of this path that causes the personal transformation is the data collection and analysis portion. That is where our understanding of the world shifts and we are able to see more deeply. Therefore, one of the great travesties of higher education may be that some leave their dreams behind and finish “all but dissertation” or “ABD” and never make it to the place where they face that potential. Yet it is the dissertation proposal that holds a lot of people back. As one of our students put it, “it took me three years to realize that the dissertation or thesis is also teaching me how I have to be able to present things to other professionals.”

We are positive that you will be successful in designing and writing your dissertation, but it is important that you realize you are embarking on something that many people fail to complete. This is an endurance test—never forget it. What do you do when things get really rough? Do you complain? Whine and give up? Don’t kid yourself that this is hard—this is MUCH harder than merely difficult. There will be obstacles in your path, some of your own creation, some that are the faults of the people or systems you need to rely on, some technical (like losing all your data to a computer crash) and some personal (such as divorce, loved ones getting sick or dying, having babies, or getting married), all of which will assault you along the way. When these come it will be you and only you that determine your outcome and whether you will fall into the 50% that never earn the degree you are starting on.

Step 2: Prepare for the Research Work With a Few Key Points to Keep in Mind

Know the Logic Behind the Dissertation/Thesis Proposal

To the extent you do that preparatory work and learn up front what it is all about, you help ensure a safe passage through the dissertation challenges. To use sports analogy, you do not want to be in a

tight spot with your success depending on how well prepared you are or whether you have the right gear with you.

Your Research Needs to Address a Real Problem

Many students want to study a topic that interests them just because, from their view of the world, it is important. This may be acceptable if you are doing theoretical work, but if your degree is applied then think twice. You first will have to show that the problem you are studying has data that demonstrate the level of the problem. Unless your work addresses a real problem, you may work for years on a body of knowledge that has no “SO WHAT” factor. How your work is judged is determined by the problem it addresses. Who cares? Why do they care? What will they do about it once they hear your answers? These are the foundations of your work.

Think About Scope

Hopefully you are a creative and curious person and you wonder about the big ideas that propel our world. That does not mean you have access to them or the people who can give you the answers you need. We do not want to minimize the size of the task entailed in writing a dissertation. It needs to be big enough to push your limits, cause you pain, and force you to learn endurance, so that you will feel absolute success and accomplishment upon completion. Anyone who has earned their doctorate will tell you that all of these things are part of the journey.

Work On Organization

You may not understand the size of the undertaking and tackle your dissertation or thesis as though it were a normal paper. This results in sadness, unhappiness, and frustration when your doctoral advisor corrects you and sends the document back again and again for updates. Much of this can be avoided by understanding ahead of time what is involved and then preparing yourself for it. You would not climb Mount Everest in shorts and tennis shoes. In the same way, you do not write a dissertation with the same lack of preparation that you may have been able to use on every other college assignment.

Our students tell us the first level of organization is being able to concentrate when you sit down. This requires that you know your learning style and can quickly clear your thoughts and focus on the work. L. E. says, “I have to be in a quiet house or setting. Sometimes my house distracts me and I have to go to the library. I tested out several libraries before I found one big enough with a space in which I could concentrate.” J. B. says “I put my ear phones on and play my music, this drowns everything else out.”

Develop the 15-minute-a-day habit

The best thing you can do for yourself is not allow this process to seem overwhelming, instead develop the “15 minute a day” habit outlined by (Bolker, 1998). The idea is simple—like working out, a small bit all the time will do better for you than one mad rush every now and again. As our student A. J. says, “I would have quit a long time ago if I didn’t have the 15 minute a day routine. It is the only thing that allows this work to go forward when my job and family life go over the top.” Every task can be broken down into small segments. Do a bit in the morning before your family gets up, and you have started every day by building your dream!



Figure 1.1 You will need to prioritize your activities and possibly let go of things that were previously taking your time in order to make time for your doctoral work.

Source: Jupiterimages/Comstock/Thinkstock

Organization also requires that you let go of activities that have previously been taking your time. L. E. again says, “I have to guard my time. I have been very active within my community. I have not been able to be on committees and participate in my church as I used to. I have to allot how much time something needs and not go over it, in order to be able to meet my commitment to writing. I no longer open up my personal email everyday as it distracts me.”

Once you start to write you will also need to organize how you take notes on what you read so that, often years later, you are able to recall the important references you find. This will be covered in detail in Chapter 3.

Gather a Few Good Tools

1. Guidelines from your university as to format and content requirements for your final document. If your university uses a rubric for judging your dissertation, then use it exactly as stated to form your topic headings. Write to these headings from the very beginning and as your content develops.
2. Several dissertations that you can use as models. Find one that is more or less on your topic, a second that uses a methodology you are considering, and a third that is engagingly written, where the author talks directly to you, the audience. More is written on this in the next section.
3. A few good dissertation books or website memberships. Our book is great to guide you through the writing process. You will also need several books on methodology—both general, such as John W. Creswell’s *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, and specific, which meet the requirements of the final methodology you choose (these suggestions will be listed in additional reading in Chapters 5 and 6).
4. The style manual required by your university. Your university will require that your final document follow a very specific publication style. Buy the manual at the beginning and if they are offered, take classes that clarify and illustrate the publication style required by your university. Taking your university’s guidelines seriously from the beginning can save you days of time at the end.

Investigate Dissertations

General Layout

Whether you are required to produce the standard five chapters or some variation on that theme (one of the universities we work with has a five paper option), or even if you choose to elongate some of

the thought process and develop seven or even nine chapters, these documents have more in common than you may notice at the beginning. You might want to investigate other references to hone in on a format that works best for you (Bryant, 2004; Garson, 2002; Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). In general, they all make use of the following five categories of discussion, each containing several components or building blocks upon which the section is constructed:



Figure 1.2 You will be gathering, compiling, and analyzing a large amount of literature for your literature review chapter.

Source: Jupiterimages/BananaStock/Thinkstock

1. **Chapter 1 Summary**—A relatively brief (10–20 page) explanation of the problem to be studied, the context you are working in, and the methodology that you either are proposing or (after data collection and analysis) you used to answer the questions you raised.
2. **Chapter 2 Literature Review**—a review of the research and/or theoretical literature into which your study will be embedded. This chapter helps your reader understand what work has gone before; it establishes the importance of the work in the field and uncovers either the gaps your research will address or discusses the work your study will replicate in a new setting. The reader also will understand how your methodological choices developed and lead to your study.
3. **Chapter 3 Methodology**—a discussion of your methodology and your research design. Depending on those choices, this writing will discuss some of the following: the problem you face, the questions you ask, of whom you ask the questions (or what documents you will study for them) and the form they take, how you will analyze your data (the answers you receive), how you will protect any human subjects who are involved, how your study design ensures accuracy and credibility in your findings, and its importance in your field and perhaps to your larger community.
4. **Chapter 4 Data Collection and Analysis/Findings**—a neutral discussion of your process, the data that developed or were collected, the way in which you analyzed these data and themes that were apparent in those answers. This discussion maintains its neutrality by including an equal discussion of all data that appear to differ from the majority findings.
5. **Chapter 5 Conclusions**—a conclusion that draws the study together and in which you get a chance to tell your reader what outcomes your work achieved, what it means to your field of study or your community of practice, steps you believe would take the work further in the future, and the limitations you see as you look back on what was done.

Each and every one of these components needs to be addressed from multiple angles, teasing the intellectual juice out of each topic (commonly known as displaying critical thinking). The difficulty in meeting this standard arises in that, until now, most of you have only been required to write up projects for class, or essays from a single viewpoint. A great dissertation is one in which the author looks at every building block of their study from multiple directions.

Does this seem daunting? In one sense that is good, it gives you a high standard to shoot for. In order to break your dissertation or thesis into manageable parts and begin to construct in your own

mind how you will address both the sections and the building blocks, we recommend that you carefully examine how it was done in the model dissertations you will soon be collecting.

Dissertation Variations

There are many variations within the art form that is the thesis/dissertation. Some will be suggested as options or guidelines by the university, some you might suggest and get permission to use from your advisor. We recommend that you also ask them for a model of a dissertation they worked on that they felt was particularly well done. This will show you the standard that you need to meet.

Students writing for an applied degree are likely to study the development or evaluation of projects or programs that are ongoing in their or a similar work environment. Doctors of philosophy or any students focused on the theoretical components of their subject, on the other hand, may propose a new treatise and work to defend their ideas.

Pragmatic and applied degrees require scientific research with an outcome that moves the field of study ahead, perhaps developing new models for behavior or designs that will be implemented later. Evaluation studies rigorously research a project that has currently been implemented and generally include a design that includes different measures over time. Random control trials are within the class of experimental design and require a rigor, participant size, and so forth that is often held as a gold standard of positivistic research but is often outside the limitations of doctoral candidates. Science has moved on as well to consider complex adaptive systems, and measuring life as we find it requires research to be flexible in outlook and methodology. Action research forms another part of that continuum, is within everyone's grasp in size and scope, but is best used to solve a particular problem or to improve practice. In other words, this path will take you through many choices, each of which will have implications for the methodology you choose.



Alana says: A dissertation may feel like you are building a complex structure one brick at a time. I like to use the analogy about five blind men all trying to understand an elephant. Each had a hold of a different section: a leg, the tail, the trunk, and so forth. One said an elephant is like a wiggly snake. Another said an elephant is like the solid base of a tree. Of course they all "knew" the elephant differently and they were all right! The books you read and the feedback that is given you are all like the separate men—seeing one section about which they comment. Your job is to know and build coherency between not only the main subject of each of the five sections listed above but also each of the building blocks within that subject, from each and every angle.

How to Find Model Dissertations

Doctoral students sometimes find it challenging to find model dissertations from which to work. Part of this may be the relative strength of their university library. It may not be clear how one sets out to find

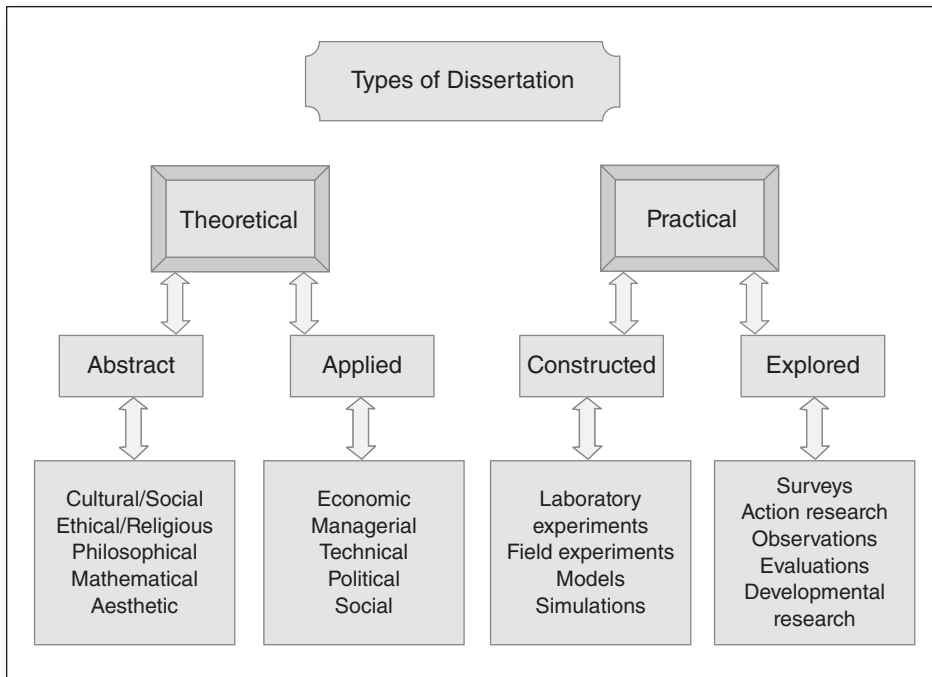


Figure 1.3 Types of dissertations.

Source: Reprinted by permission from Sage, www.sagepub.com/upm-data/9668_023128ch02.pdf

Note: This is where the author begins to sort out some of these complexities by looking at first theoretical versus practical considerations and then whether the research is either abstract versus applied or simulated/constructed or explored/evaluated.

one dissertation that matches your topic, one that uses your methodology, and one that is well written. This section will discuss the process of finding models in these three areas and offer suggestions.

Finding the dissertation that matches your topic area is probably the easiest of the three. ProQuest is the database most students use, but there may be others, all accessible through your university library. It may be as simple as typing in the keywords you yourself would use for your topic, but if that produces few results, then discuss your topic area with your professors, librarians, other students, or in an online forum. Others can help you expand your keyword search for both journal articles and dissertations. An example of this would be the many students who have, over time, wanted to study education for at-risk students. Discussing their interests with people who have worked in the field, they were able to expand their keyword search to include terms such as resiliency and strengths-based education and to search out the evaluation reports from programs funded through federal sources aimed at disadvantaged study participants. When you are new to a topic area, you do not understand the history it may have or how funding choices over time may have influenced where you will find the documents you search for. However, once you have a set of keywords that regularly produces journal article results, you can apply them to your dissertation search.

But is every dissertation a good dissertation? And what do the good ones look like as you search for one that is well written? One doctoral student we worked with addressed this issue by going to the research association's website in her field. Because the association held regular conventions and because they were supporting doctoral candidates or recent graduates, they sponsored a contest for the best dissertation published each year. This proved to be an excellent source for quality work.

Quality is in the eye of the beholder, and different configurations of professors will have a different influence on the final output of a dissertation. Therefore, assuming that you have one person on your committee who is knowledgeable about your topic area and another who knows your methodology, you can ask each of these people for examples of their favorite dissertations. These will give you a clear idea about what they are looking for. Some universities demand that final work is judged against a rubric—you would then use that as an additional guide regarding the quality they are looking for.

Many of our students tell us that this type of search actually netted them 20 or more dissertations that they found useful and that they printed and kept around while they were writing both their proposal and their final chapters four and five. Remember, you are not gathering these to copy or plagiarize someone's work but to use them as exemplars, models from which to work. Taken together they become a cookbook for the person who is learning to put a decent meal on the table and, along with books on writing dissertations, they will help steer you towards a solid, defensible piece of writing.



Tracesea asks: *Besides ProQuest, where can I search for model dissertations? Can I use Google?*

Answer: Quality methodology dissertations can be searched for in a manner similar to topic area work; so yes, use your web browser but also your local library resources. In the search fields, you simply enter your general field of endeavor and then use the Boolean search terms *+Qualitative*, or *+Quantitative*, and so forth. It is also wise to narrow the methodology as appropriate, such as *+Concurrent Mixed Method Design*, or *+Action Research*, or *+Narrative Inquiry*, and so forth. Don't forget to search online for award winning dissertations as well. You might as well see for yourself right away what makes a dissertation worthy of that level of accolade.

Activity 1.1 Three Model Dissertations

One of the biggest mistakes doctoral students make when they start to work on their dissertation is that they don't do enough background checking on what is involved in these documents. You have to read finished dissertations. This activity helps you establish a solid foundation of understanding about dissertations documents, which will aid you as you build your own. By the end, you will have

gathered at least three model dissertations that can serve as a guide to how others addressed and answered the same issues you will face. Look for high quality dissertations that focus on each of the following areas, all of which are important for you to consider. At the end you will have at least one dissertation from each of these three categories:

1. Your topic
2. Your methodology
3. Your writing

When looking for dissertations focused on your topic area, do a broad search and then narrow it down. For your methodology, you want as tight a choice as is possible for you to find, preferably one that uses a similar population, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis procedures. If you can't find one that matches in all of these areas, find different dissertations, one that matches each portion. Finally, as you are looking through reading all these different dissertations, collect those that impress you because of the way they are written. You may like how engaging the story was told, the way the author used tables and graphic organizers, or any other number of reasons that would set the writing above others.

Students have suggested the following as avenues that have proven helpful for finding the models they needed:

- Award winning dissertations from previous years. Many professional organizations take entries and give awards for “best” dissertations or thesis of the previous year.
- Look for work within and outside your own geographic context. Different parts of the world hold to different standards, and you can learn from all of them. This is especially true as to how they approach both the style of writing and the methodology.
- Work sponsored by professors or writers working within institutions whose work you admire.

Remember, you're on the hunt for exemplars that you will use when the going gets rough and you can't think of how to do the section you're faced with writing. Remember, many others have done this way before you, the process is never simple, but examples of their finished work and the lessons they learned can help you.

Dr. E. Johnson tells us that by the end she had 20 or more dissertations from others on a big stack on her floor. Each had been highlighted with the bits of writing she liked best and were well annotated with her notes as to how they transferred to her own work. Others in her class charted topics and methodologies, wrote them up in their bibliographic software, and so forth. While for E. J., a pile on the floor worked best, each student needs to develop a system that will work in his or her environment over the multiple years it will take to finish his or her research.



Figure 1.4 Searching for dissertations from all around the world will increase your understanding of the full range of possibilities.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/Beboy_ltd



Tracesea asks: Should I make notes of what I liked in these dissertations? I'm afraid I might forget why I kept a dissertation if I don't write it down somewhere. Do you have any suggestions or examples on how to organize the dissertations that I gather in this exercise so that I can better use them as I write my own dissertation?

Answer: Make notes, write all over them, give yourself Post-it comments—whatever it takes so that when you come back to them six months to a year later you have some twig in your memory about what you are thinking today. In later areas we will discuss taking notes in your bibliographic software as well.

Throughout this book we will discuss what to look for as you go back and use these models in future activities. You'll start by comparing the headings they use in different chapters. The style and form each author uses, what you enjoy in their writing, how they use tables, all of these things will become important at different stages of your process.

Next, investigate dissertation/thesis author's use of headings and subheadings and how they guide the work. The next activity gives you multiple options for source material.

Activity 1.2 Pull Headings From Four Sources

This activity should, in our opinion, be the very first thinking/writing you do when starting your dissertation. Remember though, if your university has a rubric or some other means of directly assessing your writing, then those headings form the base of your work.

Source One

Appendix A has a proposal template—use it as an example of the headings that are frequently used for the first three chapters. Consider this the framework on which you will build.

Source Two

The second source will be at least two of your model dissertations or theses. You found these in the activity in the previous section. For now just look at their tables of contents and compare them to the headings in your basic list. Consider the importance of the flow of logic as determined by the way these headings nestle together.

Source Three

The third and often defining source is the set of guidelines from your university. Even if they offer a rubric or set of headings they expect you to follow, there will be some leeway for you to make changes with the approval of your advisor in order to better support the logic of your proposal. Of course, you have to include what they are looking for, but that does not preclude additions to it, and in some cases, rearranging their prescribed content areas. Remember, dissertations are an art form, and there are a lot of differences in the world regarding how they are done. If you cannot find guidelines for headings from your university then use those from several published dissertations from your university in this step.

Taken together, these sources will provide you with a clear framework on which to build your dissertation/thesis.

What I found was that I needed to schedule time on a calendar for my family, myself, work time and then school work. This was very beneficial to me to stay on target for due dates and other commitments. I would suggest not letting one day go by without doing something that places you closer to the finish line. That may be just simply reading an article, but the more days you let go by without taking a step toward your tangible goal will make it that much easier to let another day go by (Dr. Brenda Finger, DoctoralNet, 2012).

Tips to Make Your Doctoral Dissertation or Thesis Process Smoother

Guidelines for a Smoother Process

Several guidelines will advance your dissertation process:

1. Work in a group. Often, groups outside of your university can offer you a range of ideas from people with whom you have no competition for resources. When you find your attention to detail or inspiration lagging, go find other groups. You can find online support groups for doctoral students all over the world. There are also many groups on LinkedIn, Twitter feeds, or Facebook pages as well. Manage your process, set a firm timeline, and move ahead on it. Let your feelings be your guide—if you come away from an interaction not only happier but also more inspired to push yourself and do a great job, then it meets your needs for the moment.
2. Communicate. Let others know where you are in the process and don't be afraid to ask lots of questions. Solid feedback and answers to your questions help to move you forward more than any other means because both are targeted to your specific circumstances.
3. Know your university's process. Leave lots of time every time your work needs to be reviewed by others. Your professors are busy, but if they take over 2 to 3 weeks to return your documents with substantive comments then take this as an invitation to build a stronger relationship with them or to look for another relationship.
4. Be prepared to keep growing. Nothing is static, and you will make lots of mistakes,—so might your advisor. This is why having multiple sources of input will help guide you safely through these waters.

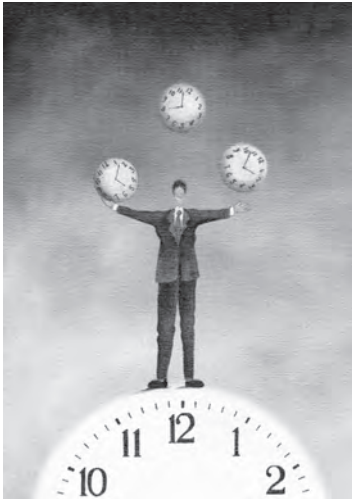


Figure 1.5 Spending a little time each day is often more beneficial than spending the same amount of time but only once a week.

Source: Digital Vision/Photodisc/Thinkstock

5. Work on your time management. Like any muscle we build, 15 to 30 minutes of work every day means a lot more than the same total minutes worked once a week.

Working With Your Committee

Your advisor needs to have enough communication with you to know you are not off track; on the other hand, they will get tired if they are asked to read your material too often. This is a challenging part of the relationship. Remember, they are not there to tell you what to do. You manage your own process with their advice.

The specific process of working with your broader committee is up to the protocols established by your university. Most call the second and third readers in to review your work only after your advisor has deemed it ready for their attention. Others have you submit to the wide group more frequently. Check with your university as to what is considered best practice and proceed accordingly. You can also use group input from your networks outside of your school.

As with all feedback, you have to judge for yourself whether and to what extent you will incorporate it. Even if your advisor is telling you a course of action to take, you should have negotiation power, as you are the one who best sees the entire context and understands the complexities you face in bringing your study to fruition. The worst mistake you can make is to work with feedback from this committee in the same way you may have worked with feedback from professors on single assignments, by simply doing what was required and moving on. With the exception perhaps of the ethical review boards, who set the standards for how you will interact with the public to do no harm, and even then, thesis work requires that you understand the reasoning behind the suggestion and can be counted on to apply that reasoning from that point on.



Alana says: Generally, I have found that the students who are always telling me what they are doing are the ones most likely to get through the process quickly. Throughout this book, when appropriate you will find pullouts suggesting that, when the activity discussed in that section is complete, it will be a good time to discuss your ideas/work with your advisor or mentor.

I recently was on a committee where the student's work was outstanding. I quizzed her and her advisor about their relationship, which had allowed and supported this level of creativity and excellence to develop. The section below summarizes their input.

Case Study Example of Advisor Student Relationship

Recently graduated Dr. Wakefield says:

My first introduction to David was when I opened up the 2001 narrative methods book, which is now a staple when I write. I was really green, naive, and steeped in the positivist mindset I had held for most of my life. I didn't like the book one bit. The reality was that I just didn't understand yet, was not sufficiently open to new ways of thinking nor sufficiently well read. I whined. A few days later, across the table at a faculty-student dinner, we had a tentative (for me) discussion about whether or not David had any students working on complexity theory. Again, I had no idea that David was a world expert in my newfound areas of interest, or that knowing him would forever change my mode of thought. A day later, he became my mentor and over the course of the next few years he opened my eyes and my mind to third order cybernetic thought, storytelling, and myriad other mind-bending ideas.

If I had to identify the greatest element of this lifelong partnership born of serendipity, I would have to say it's how David handled my more obtuse moments. Each time I would excitedly draw his attention to the obvious, including good ideas that had blossomed and withered years before, he would kindly indulge me. Then he would gently, with the utmost sensitivity, point me toward literature that would help me see my own folly and in the process open several new lines of inquiry. This art of guiding without dictating, shaping one's intellect without humiliating, and fostering life-changing growth, is the essence of good mentoring in my opinion. This gentle guidance built sufficient trust between us so that when I was on the verge of abandoning my early concept of fractal management theory, he was able to get me back on the path to seeing it through. I am truly grateful for that nudge.

Sure, there are the mechanical aspects of good mentoring that I was the happy recipient of as well. Quick turns on my writing, always with very good, thorough, actionable feedback were the norm. Deep answers to emails containing off the wall theoretical questions in the wee hours of the morning were typical. He even supported me for a good cry when I was terrified to quit a job where I was unhappy. Yet those are the ontic matters. Ontologically speaking, "Being" a mentor, and I use the word in the Heideggerian sense, involves an attunement to the student that goes much deeper than what is in the books. He knew my mind, believed in me (sometimes more than I did), and gave me the tools to make my own contribution to the body of knowledge.

These days, students often ask me questions about David's work. I tell them it's like Cognac. That first sip can knock you flat, but you soon develop a taste for it and it becomes a much sought after luxury.

Advisor Dr. Boje points out:

Tonya is one of those rare people you can depend upon to read the material, take it deeper, in new directions. In that case, a mentor can go deeper, make the challenges greater, loosen up and see where it goes. Tonya is also someone who expresses herself clearly in writing, and in oral presentation. With someone who wants to keep exploring, being a sounding board is part of the process. Lots of emails every day, keeping me informed, asking about how to play out opportunities in the

dissertation. At one point Tonya got some feedback that made her doubt the direction of her study. It was early on as I recall. As she was trying out new ideas, she could have turned to an easier, safer topic. I am glad she stayed with it.



Alana says: As I was finishing the writing on my own dissertation I visited a middle school in the United States. On the wall was a poster of a rock climber, spread an unbelievably long distance from one leg to the other and reaching for a handhold almost out of reach. In huge letters at the bottom was the word: ENDURANCE.

Time Management

Old adages, such as “Rome wasn’t built in a day” or “Every journey starts with a single step,” bear on the daily grind of writing and rewriting, reading, developing new ideas, discussing, and then rewriting again—that is the process of dissertation or thesis development.

It is harder to stop and restart than to keep going—hence the importance of regular work, it builds a momentum under you that will help you past the rough spots. Specific tips that will help you develop and keep strong time management include the following:

1. Work every day! Get up 30 minutes earlier every day and do something that moves the work ahead.
2. Set up accountability structures. Work in a group; keep tabs on each other and how the work is progressing.
3. Keep in touch with your advisor. Set a timeline, discuss it with your advisor, and leave a copy with him/her.
4. Read dissertations and about dissertation writing. This keeps your creative juices on target to the task at hand.
5. Start with a template that illustrates the proper style as set by your university. Write every section with the whole in mind.

You are in charge of your dissertation/thesis; don’t be afraid to be somewhat pushy, as it is appropriate to the role of project manager. Ask for and set appointments, share your agenda and the work you want to discuss before the meeting, keep asking questions until you either understand the answers or have been given resources to help you do so.



Alana says: Of all the 50+ doctors who have graduated with my advising, those who drove themselves and the process finished faster and with less difficulty than any who did not. This does not mean they never faced having to go back and do it again, but they finished without stalling out or losing faith. There is a lot to be said for setting and keeping momentum.

Emotional Support

Any life experience that is a rite of passage will, by definition, take us to our personal limits. It will feel traumatic at times, and the best way to soothe yourself past those moments is to preplan and make use of emotional support systems.

We believe you should look for three kinds of support:

1. Friends and family members who know you well
2. People who have already achieved the same goal
3. Colleagues who are facing the same or similar challenges at the same time

Friends and family can “cheerlead” for you, reminding you of other times you faced adversity and got through it. People who have their doctorates (no matter what the field) can share battle plans and stories from their experiences and help you feel as though the challenges you face are within the norm. They also can offer suggestions that may have merit. Colleagues, whether they are attending class with you or are working elsewhere, can offer a similarity of outlook and may also offer suggestions. Whether you take suggestions from any of these people is always your decision, but it will be nice to know your challenges and your feelings about them are not unique—they are just part of the process you have undertaken. Remember that the Internet is always a great place to connect with all three of these types of support. If you can’t connect in person or on the phone, establish routine conversations with others online to ensure you have the support you need on your dissertation journey.

Activity 1.3 Create a Backwards Planning Timeline or Personal Policy Option Brief

Elmore (1979) changed the face of NYC education by introducing backward mapping. You can change the amount of difficulty you will face in getting done in



Figure 1.6 Family obligations can make it difficult to find time to work.

Source: BananaStock/BananaStock/Thinkstock

When I started the program, I had a 3-year-old and an 18-month-old. Midway through, I had another baby. Needless to say, my hands were full. As an adult, I realized that successful completion would require sacrifice and shuffling priorities. I worked full time at a regular job and then had family responsibilities. I had to carve out time within each day for school, which meant very early mornings and/or late nights. I took advantage of breaks and lunch periods at work and had my kids on a rest schedule that allowed a few hours during the day on weekends. Other than much-needed sleep, I sacrificed family fun outings for research and writing. I advise anyone beginning the doctoral journey to find his or her own groove. Observe your daily routine as if an outsider looking in. Determine the optimal time to devote to your studies, what you can delay/reschedule, and when to say “No.” It sounds cliché but real friends will not be upset when you are not able to participate. Finally, for those with children, lean on your spouse, significant other, or other close family members for support. It’s okay to schedule a date night where you are locked up in your bedroom, a library, or coffee shop with a very well-dressed laptop!

Dr. T. McNeal

Planning is a great time to begin to build a relationship with your advisor. Why not discuss Table 1.1 Backward Mapping Your Way to Doctoral Success with your advisor and make changes as they suggest?

the time frame you want by instituting it as well. Following is a general chart to help you get started. Other authors we suggest in our “dig deeper” section at the end of the chapter offer other suggestions as to specifics to consider as milestones (Brause, 2000; Mauch & Park, 2005; Roberts, 2004). Mimic the chart below, using the column to the right to fill in the dates of your expected graduation and the preceding deadlines. Fill in the chart by planning backwards from the day you want to graduate through to first items you must accomplish. Ancillary items for this book held on the doctoralnet.com website will also offer you a downloadable version to fill in for yourself. Then take it to your advisor and ask whether it matches their experience of student work at your university. Adjust to make your projected milestones match their experience. Be as specific on the dates as you can.

Table 1.1 Backward Mapping Your Way to Doctoral Success

Graduation date	Yea! You're done.	Your dates
Dissertation complete as per reader/committee requirements	One month to 6 weeks before graduation (this allows time for university requirements).	
Final defense	Your committee meets and decides to pass you with a few recommended changes (this is what happens to the majority of students)—approximately one month before you will finish those changes.	
Writing your conclusions (chapter 5)	One month before your final defense. This month presupposes that you are working with an editor in order to maximize the success of your writing to the minimum amount of time + add time for advisor review and revisions.	
Analyzing your data and writing your findings (chapter 4)	Two months before you are writing your conclusions + add time for advisor review and revisions.	
Data collection	At least two months, and if you have the time, three months	
IRB	Depending on the university, anywhere from two weeks to two months—check with your advisor on what to expect.	
Rewriting your introduction to reflect final drafts of your literature review and methodology chapters	This usually takes about one month + add time for advisor review.	

Graduation date	Yea! You're done.	Your dates
Rewriting your literature review and methodology so that they reflect a one-to-one correspondence of ideas or variables	This usually takes about one month + add time for advisor review.	
Writing your review of the literature needed to support your methodology	This can take students anywhere from one month to six, depending on their time and their literature search + add time for advisor review.	
Writing your methodology chapter	This usually takes a month or two, depending upon how much the student understands research methodology before they start, + add time for advisor review.	
Reading and collecting literature relative to your topic	Six months of regularly collecting three or more references a week + add time for advisor review.	
Writing your first draft of the introduction	You may want to start here, because this is an overview of what you intend to do, and you will feel as though you've accomplished something when it is done. This draft will have to be rewritten because you will have made many changes through the rest of the process. If you are short on time, I recommend you start with your methodology chapter while you are reading literature + add time for advisor review.	



Alana says: *One of our administrators at Teachers College had us add to Elmore's process by creating a "Personal Policy Option Brief," which I found to be a great way to look at the risks presented by dissertation work to my personal life.*

Activity 1.4 Personal Policy Option Brief

1. Looking over your relationships and support systems, identify the ones that will be greatly strained by you being largely unavailable for the 3 or 4 years it may take to write your doctoral dissertation thesis?

2. Who can you count on to be available for support?
3. What will you do if faced with a serious life transition or challenge, such as hospitalized loved ones, having children, enjoying marriage, or going through a divorce?
4. What pressures might derail this work, and how can you plan around them?
5. If you were to develop a personal policy that would guide when and how you used these resources to ensure that you would not fail—what would that policy entail?
6. If you are not 150% sure that you have the personal resources you will need, then begin now, when the pressure is not great, to develop those resources. Consider online support systems as well as in-person support.

Now you have options to fill in the help you may need before you need it. For example, you can have frank discussions with those people who will feel the greatest strain, working out compromises when necessary. The challenges you may face will seem less daunting if you have developed safety nets prior to their happening. Finally, you can see the importance of downtime and can begin to take the unnecessary components out of your schedule so that as the stress mounts, you will not have to make sudden adjustments.

Chapter 1 Checklist

Can You Say . . . ?

- I've thought about what I need to do to be successful.
- I've gathered tools to support me.
- I understand the layout of the dissertation.
- I have found at least three model dissertations.
- I have examples of headings from four sources.
- I understand what I need to do to make the process easier.

Where Should I Go to Dig Deeper? Suggested Resources to Consider

Brause, R. S. (2000). *Writing your doctoral dissertation: Invisible rules for success*. London: Routledge. On pages 17 through 29, Brause discusses terms, stages, and the general process of doctoral research in the United States in detail.

Hadjioannou, X., Shelton, N. R., & Fu, D. (2007, March). The road to a doctoral degree: Co-travelers through a perilous passage. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 160–177. Retrieved from ERIC Educational Resources Information Center website, http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ765415&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ765415 Hadjioannou et al. researched the value of their doctoral study team on themselves and their ability to finish.

Mauch, J. E., & Park, N. (2003). *Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation: A handbook for students and faculty*. New York: Marcel Dekker. On pages 13 through 23, Mauch and Park outline the qualities of a successful doctoral thesis.

Roberts, C. M. (2004). *The dissertation journey*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. On pages 18 through 30, Roberts discusses “What is a dissertation?” as well as going through the process in greater detail than allowed here.

Group Exercises

We find that groups developed around a specific goal have the best chance of helping all the members find success. Therefore we do not suggest you look for a group who will support you for the full writing process (although some members may continue that long), rather, we suggest groups form around specific goals and meet weekly for about a month to complete that milestone.

The challenge addressed in this chapter is getting started, figuring out your destination (a finished dissertation or thesis) and what it looks like, and gathering the support you need to give you a probable chance of finishing your work within the timeline you develop. To these ends, many people will work more efficiently than a person by themselves because a group can divide up the resources, proceed to investigate them, and bring back to the group a unique slice of knowledge or ideas. It is helpful if you have someone to facilitate and someone else to take notes, although those people need not always be the same each meeting. As an example, this chapter would start with a group who all discussed the ideas and made plans as to how they would cope. Group members could share the model dissertations they found. The group might even stay together through the next chapter, which covers your first attempt at coming up with a basic topic, set of research questions, and possible methodology.



Figure 1.7 Form groups with other doctoral students around specific goals.

Source: Thomas Northcut/Digital Vision/Thinkstock

