

Research Proposal and Dissertation Guidelines

Kathy Hytten, Professor
Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations (ELC)
University of North Carolina Greensboro
kahytten@uncg.edu

This document serves as an overview of broad guidelines for dissertations that I have developed from teaching advanced research classes for many years, studying the literature on proposal and dissertation writing, and serving on the committees of 125+ doctoral students in over a dozen different academic departments. While most advisors and departments welcome and encourage creativity with your dissertation, regardless of department or program, at minimum, you will need to address the following:

- what your research interests and questions are,
- the scholarly/theoretical conversations of which your study is a part,
- why your study is important,
- the methods you used to collect data and why they make sense for your study,
- your findings (putting your empirical data in conversation with the literature or developing arguments from the literature),
- answers to your research questions,
- recommendations for additional research (and sometimes practice), and
- a reflection on what you learned.

Typically, a dissertation is least 100 pages, not including the references and appendices. Often it is more than double that length, but the average in my experience tends to be about 150-200 pages (though quantitative studies can be much shorter). For empirical studies, it is common that you will spend at least 20 hours collecting data (which may include interviews, observations, and/or data and document analysis) – in some programs you will do much more than this.

I list page lengths below that are typical based on my experiences and in looking at dissertations in a range of disciplines. It is important to remember that this document represents one possible (and hopefully useful) guideline; you may not need to cover every section and there may be some reasons for some of your sections to be longer or shorter than listed. You also may have a completely different set of guidelines or expectations available for your program or in your department. These guidelines are particularly useful for qualitative and non-empirical research studies, though you certainly should be working with your advisor and committee to adapt the format of your document. Most of the underlined items can make sense as section headings.

Chapter 1: Introduction

15-25 pages

- Introduction to the study (the way you hook your reader in – this usually doesn't need a section heading, you can just write a few paragraphs that draw your reader into the broad topic).
- Statement of the problem that motivates your dissertation (2-3 pages). This is likely connected both to existing research and your practice. Many studies come out of problems/issues you experience in your everyday life and/or professional practice.

- Purpose of the study (1-2 paragraphs).
- Research questions (listed in order – you generally should not have more than 3-4, in many cases, but especially for qualitative and non-empirical research, one broad question is fine). If you have multiple questions, consider their order and how they are related (for example, do have one central question with several sub-questions?).
- Background context (what does your reader need to know to understand the context for this study– 6-10 pages; often this is related to the conversation around your topic in popular presses and practitioner-oriented journals).
- Brief description of methods (1-2 paragraphs, a quick & broad summary as you typically have a whole chapter devoted to methods).
- Conceptual/theoretical overview/framework (several paragraphs up to several pages – depends on how much theory influences your study and whether you describe the theory in detail here or somewhere else in your dissertation).
- Researcher experience/perspective/your role in the study (typically several paragraphs – sometimes more – you may also sometimes cover this as part of your introduction to the study and thus don't need it here; this section is not common in non-empirical studies).
- Significance of your study (a few paragraphs – as succinctly and directly as you can, answer the “so what” question – why should anyone care about this research).
- Overview of chapters/argument (typically at most a paragraph on each, or several paragraphs for a non-empirical study).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

25-40 pages

- Introductory overview – broad description of the literature that informs your study, how you organize this review, basically a roadmap of the logic of the sections to come (a few pages). You do not need a section heading for this.
- 3-5 major sections of key themes in the literature (sometimes more sections, but rarely less). Typically, each topic/theme is a section heading.
- An introduction to each major section with a roadmap to that section (including naming subsections when useful).
- Thematic organization (do not simply just describe study after study, each in turn).
- Focus is this chapter is often mostly on what we know from empirical research studies (not from practitioner-oriented journal articles or non-research-based studies, program descriptions, or models; this information is more commonly/usefully included in your first chapter section on background context).
- Conclusion to the review – what we know about the topic, how it informs your study, what we still don't know, and how your study will contribute to the scholarly conversation you have entered through this literature review.
- A note on literature: while most empirical dissertations have a chapter called literature review, in good studies, you bring literature into every chapter – it is not simply isolated in one chapter. Often in the first chapter, you bring in the broadest, most accessible literature on the topic (e.g., how the topic is talked about in the news, popular culture, and/or among practitioners), while in the second chapter, you focus on scholarly research studies. It is common to cite methodological literature in chapter 3, and to bring research literature back into your discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 3: Methods

10-25 pages

- Brief reiteration of the goal/purpose of your study (1 paragraph, you typically don't need a section heading for this).
- Description of preliminary/pilot study (what you did for the pilot and why, how it influenced design choices, what you learned from it) (2-5 pages).
- Research questions (list).
- Brief description of the specific methodology you employed (e.g., basic qualitative study, narrative inquiry, case study, phenomenology, policy analysis). Include citations to texts or articles about methods.
- Setting (this is needed for bounded studies involving a specific location – you will need to describe also how you gained access to that site, but only if it is relevant – you likely do not need this for interview-based studies).
- Sample population/unit of analysis (brief description of the subjects and selection criteria. If it is a case study design, what are the cases of? If it is a policy or document analysis, what did you examine) (several paragraphs – you may also have a paragraph description of each interview participant that you add after you conduct the study; tables with relevant information about your participants can also be helpful).
- Data collection methods (what you did, how, and why). If you have more than one method (e.g., interviews and observations) you should have subsections on each. Citations are useful.
- Data analysis strategies you used (a few paragraphs) – typically citations are helpful.
- Trustworthiness/ethical considerations (several paragraphs – at least one paragraph with citations for each of the methods you will use to ensure trustworthiness – describing the method and how you will employ it. If you haven't discussed your positionality in depth in your first chapter, and it is relevant to your study, you should discuss it further here, sometimes linking it to your discussion of trustworthiness).
- Limitations (a few paragraphs).
- Description of how you will report the data (1-3 paragraphs, serves to conclude this chapter and transition to the next chapter).

Chapter 4: Findings

30-40 pages; if you write more than 40 pages (which is common in some fields), you should consider dividing your findings into more than one chapter

- Review your study thus far and overview of key findings (provide a road map or organizational description for the reader regarding how the chapter will proceed, briefly outlining the key insights you gained from the empirical portion of your study as an introduction to describing them in more detail in ensuing sections – you don't need a section heading for this section).
- Findings organized into 3-5 key themes/topics, with 5-8 pages on each theme/topic, with supportive information (quotes, descriptions from observations) from your data. Typically, your sections are organized by topic and within that section, you talk about themes (a topic is a category which you develop from a series of codes; it is useful to think of a theme as a full sentence about a topic).
- Summary (1-3 paragraph overview of key insights).

Chapter 5: Analysis and Recommendations

20-30 pages

- **Summary of Key Findings/Argument.** Begin with a reminder of the problem and purpose of the study – try not to simply repeat the exact wording of the first chapter, and then a succinct description of key findings (the trick here is not to be too repetitive, especially if you summarized findings at the end of your final data chapter). You can generally just start this chapter with this summary, without a section heading.
- **Research Questions Answered.** Succinctly answer your research questions as you worded them – typically at least a few paragraphs on each question (it is useful to discuss where your findings are similar and different than the findings from other important studies you cited in Chapter 2 on this topic).
- **Discussion/Implications.** Answer the question of so what? You can be creative here in putting your findings back in conversation with the literature – and pulling out what you think was most important or salient about the study. Sometimes this is organized into several topical/thematic sections.
- **Limitations.** This is a common section, though not always necessary – especially if you covered this in your first or third chapter. However, you might have uncovered some new limitations that are worth talking about here – also things that didn't quite work out as you expected.
- **Recommendations for Practice:** Based on the nature of your study, think of specific stakeholders to whom you might provide recommendations. Don't just list these recommendations – give some details about what and why.
- **Recommendations for Future Research.** Remember these should come directly out of your study – not a pipe dream of things that could be researched.
- **Final Thoughts.** End personally (e.g., what did you most learn from doing this study, how did it change you, what surprised you, what are you left thinking about, what might you do differently now in your own practice). This is your opportunity for a kind of last word...for now.

References

Appendices

Notes on Your Dissertation Proposal

Your proposal introduces your committee to your goals and desires for your dissertation research. You will work closely with your advisor to craft a clearly-articulated, carefully-developed, and doable research study. Usually narrowing the contours of your study takes at least several months and several drafts. It requires extensive reading of the research on your topic so that you develop a solid understanding of the academic conversations that you hope to contribute to with your research. The proposal document allows your committee members to provide you supportive feedback and suggestions to enhance/strengthen your work. It also acts in some ways like a contract; once approved, your committee members will not ask you to collect a significant amount of additional data, to change your questions, or to do something substantially different from what you propose. The stronger your proposal, the easier it will be to execute your study and write your dissertation, especially as a good proposal is essentially a roadmap for your study.

For many students (especially if you are doing an empirical study), the dissertation proposal is comprised of drafts of the first three chapters of your dissertation and should be written in future tense (as you have not yet done the study). After you have collected your data and written up your findings, you will need to revise these chapters for the final draft of the dissertation, making at least the following changes:

- Update the tense (from future to past).
- Revise your description of your methods from what you proposed to what you actually did (e.g., describe the participants and setting more fully – tables are helpful; discuss your actual process of data analysis; detail your coding schemes and how they led to categories; describe how you enacted trustworthiness, for example how a peer reviewer influenced your thinking).
- Address any comments and additions requested by your committee at your proposal defense.
- Add any important new references.

I recommend that you update your first three chapters after you have written your findings chapter(s) but before you write your final chapter. Doing so helps to generate ideas for your final chapter and ensures all your chapters flow together well.

Notes on Dissertation Writing

These are some things to keep in mind related to writing mechanics:

- Use the most up-to-date style guide/manual for the citation style you use (APA is probably the most common style in the social sciences, MLA or Chicago in the humanities).
- Aim for clear and direct sentences. Don't try too hard to sound scholarly, though avoid writing too casually – like you might speak (this typically results in sentence fragments).
- Avoid overly complex sentences.
- Use parallel construction.
- Write in active voice (it is okay to use “I” in almost all fields;” most contemporary scholars avoid a construct like “the researcher”).
- Use section and subsection headings, following style manual heading level guidelines.
- Avoid redundancy (while you might repeat your research questions exactly in your first and third chapters, almost nothing else should be repeated exactly).
- Introduce and unpack quotes (quotes should help you to make points, they should not make those points for you).
- Avoid excessive quoting (many quotes can easily be paraphrased and cited).
- Always include page numbers with direct quotes.
- Watch out for unclear modifiers (this, these, it).
- Provide transitions between sections.
- Quote your interview participants strategically so as to avoid a “data dump” (lots of long participant quotes strung together). You need to analyze your data, not simply present it.
- Comply with the dissertation formatting expectations listed on the graduate school webpage.

Notes on Non-Empirical Studies

An empirical study involves the systematic collection of data (surveys, tests, questionnaires, interviews, observations, documents, etc.), while a non-empirical study primarily involves making arguments based on existing published research. Non-empirical research is sometimes referred to as conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, or analytical, and in the simplest sense, can be thought of as making an argument based upon an extensive review of published sources. Typically, the proposal for a non-empirical study is just one chapter (which becomes the first chapter of the dissertation), and includes many similar sections as the first chapter of an empirical study. Instead of outlining methods, you discuss how you are going to build the argument for your study. It generally includes at least the following sections (see the fuller description of these sections as they are described in the empirical study guidelines):

- Introduction to the study
- Statement of the problem that motivates your dissertation
- Purpose of the study
- Research question(s) (you often only have one main research question for a non-empirical study and sometimes sub questions)
- Background context (broad – how your study speaks to a non-specialist audience and then some of the narrow context – who do you most directly address your study to/what scholarly conversations is this a part of)
- Conceptual/theoretical overview/framework (what are your assumptions or lenses going into the study, or the ways you define important ideas)
- Significance of your study
- Overview of chapters (here you would provide a substantive description of each chapter – typically at least a few paragraphs where you explain what you doing in that chapter, the scholars or bodies of literature you draw upon, tentatively how you will organize the chapter, and why it is important to your overall goals)

In the remaining chapters of a non-empirical study, you build an argument from literature. As each of the chapters emerges from reviewing literature, it is unlikely that you would have a traditional literature review chapter. Most non-empirical dissertations are at least 5 chapters, with the first as an introduction, the final as a conclusion, and the middle chapters each dedicated to building a different aspect of your argument.