

Writing a Thesis or Dissertation

Writing a thesis or dissertation is perhaps the most daunting part of graduate education. A thesis or dissertation marks the culmination of thousands of hours of training, research, and writing, and it represents you for years after graduation.

Some of the stress related to writing your thesis or dissertation, however, is unwarranted. Dissertation writing is not unrelated to the rest of the academic writing you've done throughout your graduate career. Many of the skills you already possess can be applied to the dissertation writing process. Identifying the purpose of your project, expressing originality and significance, setting appropriate goals, and maintaining strong organization will help you as you develop a high quality dissertation or thesis.

We outline here a general guide, adapted from Lovitts and Wert's *Developing Quality Dissertations in the Social Sciences* (2009), for writing your dissertation. Though this booklet presents examples from the social sciences, the guidelines they put forth are applicable across disciplines. Please contact your DGS or the Yale Graduate Writing Center to borrow a discipline-specific copy.

1. Identifying the Purpose of your Dissertation

What is the purpose of your dissertation? It is but one part of your overall degree fulfillment. While it should reflect the standards and goals of other dissertations in your field, it should also prepare you for whatever career you decide to pursue.

The Purpose of the Dissertation: Descriptions from Faculty in the Social Sciences (Table 1.1 in Lovitts and Wert 2009, p. 1)

The purpose of the dissertation is to prepare the student to be a professional in the discipline. Through this preparation the student learns and demonstrates the ability to conduct independent, original, and significant research. The dissertation thus shows that the student is able to

- identify/define problems,
 - generate questions and hypotheses,
 - review and summarize the literature,
 - apply appropriate methods,
 - collect data properly,
 - analyze and judge evidence,
 - discuss findings,
 - produce publishable results,
 - engage in a sustained piece of research or argument,
 - think and write critically and coherently.
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It is important to maintain an ongoing conversation with your advisors about their expectations for these goals. For example, how can you best demonstrate competency in your field? What parts of the dissertation are most important in your field? Take a moment to step back and look at the dissertation writing process as an outside observer. How would you expect a student to succeed?

2. Understanding Originality and Significance

“Originality” and “significance” are terms that come up frequently when discussing dissertations and theses. What do professors mean when they use these terms?

Defining Originality

Lovitts and Wert (2009) define originality using the results from a series of faculty surveys.

An original contribution offers a novel or new perspective. The faculty in the social sciences who participated in the study described an original contribution as 'something that has not been done, found, proved, or seen before. It is publishable because it adds to knowledge, changes the way people think, informs policy, moves the field forward, or advances the state of the art.'

To achieve this goal, you might develop an original insight or advance, or you might borrow a contribution from another discipline and apply it to your field for the first time. It is important to understand that the contribution is not necessarily your entire dissertation but something that is part of it (p. 4).

It is important to clarify, in early discussions with your advisors, what is expected of you in terms of originality. Consider asking for samples of exemplary completed dissertations, and think critically about how you can most clearly display your original contribution to the reader.

Defining Significance

What is significance?

The faculty who participated in the [Lovitts and Wert] study described a significant contribution as something that is useful and will have an impact, and is therefore publishable in top-tier journals because it

- offers a nontrivial to a very important breakthrough at the empirical, conceptual, theoretical, or policy level;
- is useful and will have an impact;
- causes those inside, and possibly those outside, the community to see things differently;
- influences the conversation, research, and teaching;
- has implications for and advances the field, the discipline, other disciplines, or society.

As with originality, there are degrees of significance. At the highest level, significance is a function of the field's long-term interest in the problem, the difficulty involved in solving the problem, the influence of the results on further developments in the field, as well as the degree to which the results affect other fields, disciplines, and even society (p. 5).

Again, it is important to talk with your advisors early in the process about their expectations for significance. Are you expected to make a significant contribution in your dissertation, or are you expected to demonstrate that you're capable of making a significant contribution in later work?

3. Aiming for Excellence in the Dissertation

Quality varies across dissertations. As you plan and evaluate your own dissertation, think about appropriate markers for important components of the project. If you answer “yes” to most of the following questions, you are probably working towards a strong dissertation.

Originality and Significance

Does your dissertation ask new questions or address important problems? Does it use current or new tools or methods? Does it expand the boundaries of the discipline? Does it have practical or policy implications? Would an interdisciplinary community find your project interesting?

Understanding of the Discipline

Does your dissertation display a strong understanding and command of preexisting literature? Is the literature challenged or advanced by your research? Does your dissertation clearly state the problem it addresses and explain its importance?

Research Design

Is your research project well-planned and well-executed? Does your dissertation utilize reliable data from multiple sources? Is your dissertation theoretically sophisticated?

Writing

Is your dissertation well-written and organized? Does it clearly explain your project and your findings? Does your writing engage the reader and advance their understanding of your research?

4. Maintaining Consistent Quality within the Dissertation

Again, expectations are crucial as you work toward a high quality dissertation. It is important to talk with advisors about what exactly they mean when they refer to the overall form (e.g., a series of essays or a book) and the smaller components of your dissertation. A typical dissertation is comprised of an introduction, a literature review, a theory section, a method section, a results or data analysis section, a discussion of these results, and a conclusion. With your advisors, discuss expectations for each section and map out a plan for tackling them.

5. Achieving Excellence

After years of training, you are probably already prepared to write a competent dissertation. The guidelines we've already discussed will help you turn that dissertation into an excellent one. We close with some tips for promoting that forward progress.

Practice Academic Honesty

Honesty is the keystone to academic work. The strength of your presentation and contribution are worthless if you plagiarize or misuse data.

Develop Professional-Level Writing Skills

The quality of your writing matters. Brilliant ideas and findings are easily lost in poor writing, not only in your dissertation but throughout your career. Your writing demonstrates your ability to speak to peers in your field.

Take Action to Improve Your Writing

Students often have trouble with grammar and composition, yet most faculty members (with good reason) do not want to devote hours to improving student writing. If the feedback on your drafts indicates that your writing could use some improvement, consider the following steps.

- *Know good scholarly writing* by familiarizing yourself with the writing style of authors recommended by your advisors.
- *Plan your dissertation* by mapping or outlining what you want to express prior to writing it. Show this plan to advisors and peers before you begin writing.
- *Plan the pieces of your dissertation*. Map or outline the order and content of each chapter before actually writing.
- *Write and revise* in separate steps to improve efficiency. After drafting a section, give it a break before going back to review and revise it. You will likely spot more errors than if you revised it while writing.
- *Follow convention*. There are norms for the form and style of dissertations in your field. Use handbooks of grammar and style; read books about academic writing; and understand the formatting conventions of your field.
- *Get feedback*. The feedback of others is extremely important. At Yale, go to the Graduate Writing Center for writing tutoring. Ask peers and faculty advisors for help with short revisions. Join a writing group.
- *Practice writing and presenting your research*. Take opportunities to practice both written and oral presentation.

Set the Bar

We've said it before, but it's worth repeating: set clear expectations. Setting worthy, transparent, and achievable goals will help any project.

Engage Your Advisors

Be sure to speak with your advisors throughout the process of writing your dissertation. Be clear about goals and deadlines. When you meet, have questions prepared and make sure you understand their directions. Be proactive about solving problems, rather than withdrawing. If you are not getting the guidance you need, consider talking with another professor or administrator who can help.

Engage Your Peers

Sharing your work with your peers is useful. Setting up regular appointments to discuss your research will not only keep you on track with your dissertation, but it will ensure that you have helpful colleagues in the future.

Applaud Yourself

Though you may feel like you are making incremental progress, you have already come so far in your academic career. Be sure step back along the way and acknowledge the work you have done. Writing a dissertation is an enormous endeavor, and you deserve credit for all you've achieved!

Work Cited

Lovitts, B. and Wert, E. (2009). *Developing Quality Dissertations in the Social Sciences: A Graduate Student's Guide to Achieving Excellence*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.