

Guidelines for Writing a Dissertation in GSE

The key to successfully writing a dissertation in a timely manner is your (the student's) own effort and subsequent collaboration with your major advisor with whom you will work closely on all aspects of your project. Please note from the onset that there is considerable variation in the form and shape of doctoral dissertations and completed proposals. Each advisor has his/her own expectations, strengths, and style related to the production of a dissertation. You should discuss these expectations prior to choosing a dissertation advisor.

The first step in the dissertation process is to choose a topic, something you do in concert with your major advisor. Once you select a topic, you thoroughly investigate it, primarily by reviewing the literature, and prepare a draft of a research proposal that describes the problem based on a *comprehensive review of current related literature*, and how you propose to study it.

You submit your draft to your advisor for feedback, revise it, resubmit it, revise it again, resubmit it again, etc., until your advisor approves it for dissemination to your dissertation committee. (Note: When you submit a draft of your proposal or your dissertation to your advisor or to your committee members, you should always allow them about 14 days to read and respond to it. Please keep in mind your time frame may vary depending upon the time of year.)

Depending on an advisor's judgment, some proposals are 15 to 25 pages in length while others consist of virtually the introduction, literature review, and methodology chapters of the dissertation and may be 40 to 80 (with some exceptions) pages in length. The proposal should demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the research and clearly define a research problem and methodology.

While you're working on your proposal, you and your advisor should select two faculty to serve on your dissertation committee. Once your advisor approves your proposal, you submit it to your committee members, give them time to read it, meet with them to discuss it, revise it as per their suggestions, resubmit it to them, revise it again if needed, resubmit it again, etc., until each committee member approves it. Then and only then, you arrange for the Oral Proposal Defense by selecting a date acceptable to your advisor and committee and going to your appropriate departmental secretary who will help you find a room, promulgate announcement to the faculty (which must go out one week before the defense), and identify any necessary paperwork that needs to be done.

The Oral Proposal Defense usually is attended only by you and your committee, though interested faculty, students (who may wish to see what it's like as they prepare for their defense), and others are eligible to attend and on occasion do so. It usually lasts between 60 and 90 minutes, sometimes less, rarely more. Your major advisor will begin the defense by asking you to present your proposal—usually focusing on the purpose and methodology—for 10 to 20 minutes. Having just read and approved it, your committee is very familiar with it, and your presentation is intended merely to re-familiarize them with it. Following your short presentation, your advisor will invite your committee to ask you questions and make comments about your proposal. When the committee has completed its questioning, your advisor may summarize the proceedings and ask you to step out of the room while the committee formally deliberates on the acceptability of your proposal. You will then be invited back into the room and told the result of their decision.

There are usually four possible outcomes of the Oral Proposal Defense: (a) proceed as per your proposal with no alteration; (b) the committee will require some relatively minor revisions in what you propose to do and your advisor will meet with you to discuss them; (c) the committee will require some relatively major revisions requiring you to revise certain aspects of your proposal which must be resubmitted either to your advisor or to the whole committee who will approve them in individual discussions with you; (d) the committee will require you to revise your proposal and hold another Oral Proposal Defense meeting. (Of these options, "b" is the most common and "d" is the least common.) Although you may submit your

IRB proposal to the IRB prior to the Oral Proposal Defense, please note that you may have to amend your IRB proposal based on the outcome of the Oral Proposal Defense.

Once approval to proceed has been granted by the committee, you carry out your research staying in close contact with your advisor. You may consult with other committee members as student and advisor deem desirable. As your research proceeds toward completion, you write the chapters of your dissertation, submitting drafts of each to your advisor as required, receiving feedback, etc., until your dissertation is written and approved by your advisor. Most dissertations (quantitative and qualitative) consist of five sometimes overlapping sections: Introduction, Review of Literature, Method, Results, and Discussion. This might vary depending on the field of study. Most qualitative dissertations tend to be somewhat longer than quantitative dissertations.

Upon approval by your advisor, you submit your dissertation to your committee. While most committee members prefer to receive the completed dissertation for their review, some prefer to see each chapter as you go along, so check with your committee about what they would like. As with the proposal, you receive feedback, revise, etc., until each committee member tells you your dissertation is ready for the Final Oral Dissertation Defense. Then and only then, do you schedule your Final Oral Dissertation Defense through the department secretary as you did with your proposal defense. All dissertations must be accompanied by an abstract of no more than 350 words. The abstract should contain the following elements:

- Short statement about the area of investigation and the purpose of the study including hypothesis tested or major questions addressed.
- Brief discussion of the methods or approach used in the study
- Condensed summary of the findings.
- Conclusions reached in the study.

The Final Oral Dissertation Defense is attended by your committee, interested faculty and students, and anyone else you care to invite including family members. It usually lasts between 60 and 90 minutes and follows the same format as your proposal defense, except your presentation focuses on what you found and should take about 10 to 25 minutes. Aim for parsimony and brevity; time flies when you're talking about a project around which your life has recently been centered. As with your proposal defense, when all discussion is completed, all but your committee will be asked to leave the room while your committee deliberates. The possible outcomes are the same as with the proposal defense, with "b" and "a" the most likely.

As a final note, the most frequent problem encountered in the process of completing a dissertation is poor planning and time management. To graduate in May, your completed dissertation is usually due in the Graduate School around May 1. Faculty are always busier in the spring than in the fall. Your advisor will need to receive your final dissertation draft by February 1 to have the best chance of ensuring a May graduation. Accordingly, to allow time for reading and revision, you should get your completed dissertation to your committee by March 15 and preferably earlier considering spring vacation, professional conventions, etc. The Final Oral Dissertation Defense should be held by April 15 at the very latest. Of course, these dates depend on how much revision is needed. To march in the May graduation ceremony, a completed M form must be filed in the Graduate School of Education's Dean's Office by May 1.

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