

Suggestions for Writing Theses and Dissertations

A thesis or dissertation is a requirement for academic degree programmes that include a research element. It must be written such that the results presented can be validated and form the basis for further investigations. Writing theses and dissertations requires thought, planning and organization. Theses and dissertations concentrate on a particular subject and require a great deal of time, effort, research, and an extensive bibliography.

First, it is important to check the guidelines and regulations governing the layout for theses or dissertations set by your institution. For students at the University of Manitoba, see:

Thesis Guidelines for the University of Manitoba Masters and Ph.D. Students:
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/registration/137.htm

Choosing a topic

Choosing a topic is often the most difficult part of the writing process. Try to:

- Develop a topic that has interested you throughout your graduate or undergraduate career.
- Think about the top three issues you want to study, then turn them into questions.
- Review papers you have written for classes, looking for a pattern of interest.
- Look at class notes; professors may have pointed out potential research topics or commented on unanswered questions in the field.
- Talk with professors or advisors about possible topics.
- Replicate somebody else's study.
- Conduct research on a broad topic to discover gaps in the literature.
- Keep the following cautions in mind:
 1. Get feedback on a potential topic from your advisor; your topic may not interest others in the field as much as it interests you.
 2. Do research to discover why your topic has not been studied before.

Writing the proposal

The proposal serves as a recipe for the thesis or dissertation. Be as detailed and specific as possible. Remember to:

- Identify gaps in the literature.
- State your thesis clearly.
- Outline the questions you plan to address in the dissertation or thesis.
- Establish a strong research design or theoretical framework for your study.
- Describe the topics you plan to cover in each chapter of the thesis or dissertation.
- Speculate upon potential results of your study.
- Discuss the importance of your study to the field.

For detailed information on writing proposals see our list of suggested publications attached at the end of this handout.

Conducting research

Writers often have difficulty maintaining their own voice when they work with sources. The strategies listed below will help you to use your sources effectively:

- Keep a researcher's notebook in addition to taking notes on specific sources. The notebook keeps you in continual dialogue with your sources and your topic.
- Take summary notes as well as specific information notes.
- Discuss your ideas with others as you conduct research.
- Think about how each source specifically applies to your topic. The authors of your sources are advancing their argument, not yours. Carefully consider which source material you will use.

Writing the thesis or dissertation

Finding model theses or dissertations can help you gauge how much (or how little) you have to do. A good model can also serve as an inspiration for your project. Look at theses or dissertations that your department has accepted.

Maintaining your focus is the key to completing your dissertation or thesis. Try the following strategies:

- Type a copy of the proposal, asking yourself if you have expanded on all of the ideas advanced in the proposal.
- Work "within" your proposal, adding key words and concepts and then expanding upon them.
- Write your first chapter early in order to make sure that subsequent chapters fulfill promises made in the introduction. This strategy helps some writers to focus their writing; for others, however, writing the first chapter proves difficult. See what works for you.
- Know your thesis and let it dictate what you include; refrain from writing everything you know.

Organizing both your workspace and your ideas will help the research and writing process proceed smoothly. You may want to:

- Purchase a file cabinet just for the thesis or dissertation; each drawer may contain drafts and research notes for each chapter. Write explanations of the contents of each file folder and file drawer.
- Date drafts to remember the order in which you worked on chapters.
- Set deadlines for submitting drafts of each chapter. Meet your deadlines even if you cannot deliver everything you promised.
- List what each chapter or section should cover, including both general ideas and specific examples.
- Look at style guides; they may provide an organizational formula for your field.
- Use outlining software or the outline tool on your word processor.

Obtaining feedback from advisors and colleagues will help refine your ideas as you write. Try the following strategies:

- Present sections of your thesis or dissertation as conference papers or submit them for publication. Audience members and editorial boards frequently provide valuable comments.

- Meet regularly with committee members to get feedback on your work-in-progress.
- Get advice on your work throughout the writing process (while developing and organizing ideas, during the drafting phase, as you revise).
- Form a dissertation or thesis group that focuses on presenting and critiquing work-in-progress.
- Bring your dissertation or thesis to a writing center consultant for feedback.

Revising is essential to the thesis/dissertation writing process. Often, you will discover new ideas as you write, or your ideas will change as you research your topic and receive feedback on your work.

Managing your time

Finding time to write is often challenging for students with jobs, families, and other commitments. The following techniques should help you manage time effectively:

- Make the completion of your thesis or dissertation a top priority. Do not waste time on points or questions outside the scope of your research.
- Spend time on your dissertation at least five days a week. Even if you only have one hour on some days, consistent work will help you keep ideas and source material fresh in your mind.
- Know your personality and choose a working style that goes with it. For example, if you are a social person, you may want to work in a computer lab instead of at home.
- Know your distractions and schedule your work time when distractions are at a low level.
- Give yourself time to think; you often will need more time to think than to write.
- Set aside time for yourself, your partner and your children (negotiate the time together so that you will be available at the same time). It is important to communicate with those around you.
- Try out different schedules, for example, shifting from morning to evening hours.

Working with your advisor or a committee

For information about the roles and responsibilities of graduate students and faculty see the guide prepared by the University of Manitoba Faculty of Graduate Studies:

http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/roles_and_responsibilities.pdf

Information presented here is taken from the Web page created and maintained by The Claremont Colleges Writing Centers:

http://thuban.ac.hmc.edu/www_common/writing/centweb/diss.html

Proposal Writing for Theses and Dissertations: A List of Selected Resources

- Bell, Judith. ***Learning from research: getting more from data***. Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002.
Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Mezzanine, Call Number: LB 2369 B345 2002
- Brause, Rita S. ***Writing your doctoral dissertation: invisible rules for success***. [electronic resource] London ; New York: Falmer Press, 2000.
BISON Online Access.
- Common, Dianne L. ***Seminar: planning and writing a thesis proposal***. [videorecording] [Winnipeg: Dept. of Educational Administration and Foundations, 1987].
Education Library, Call Number: LB 2369.C65 1987 Vid
- Common, Dianne L. ***Writing at the graduate level***. [videorecording] [Winnipeg : Dept. of Educational Administration and Foundations, 1986].
Education Library, Call Number: LB 2369.C659 1986 Vid
- Fraenkel, Jack R. ***How to design and evaluate research in education***. New York: McGraw-Hill Pub. Co., c1990.
Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Mezzanine, Call Number: LB 1028 F665 1990
- Francis, J. Bruce. ***The Proposal cookbook: a step by step guide to dissertation and thesis proposal writing***. 3rd ed. Naples, FL: Action Research Associates, 1979.
UML Management Library, Call Number: Q 180.55 P7 F72 1979
- Gardner, David C. ***Title: Dissertation proposal guidebook: how to prepare a research proposal and get it accepted***. Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, c1980.
Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Call Number: LB 2369 G26
- Garson, G. David. ***Guide to writing empirical papers, theses, and dissertations***. [electronic resource] New York: Marcel Dekker, c2002.
BISON Online Access.
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Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Call Number: LB 2369 G27 2002
- Gorn, Janice L. ***Style guide for writers of term papers, masters' theses, and doctoral dissertations***. New York: Simon and Schuster, c1973.
Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Call Number: LB 2369 G67 1973
- Krathwohl, David R. ***How to prepare a dissertation proposal: suggestions for students in education and the social and behavioral sciences***. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005.
Elizabeth Dafoe Library. Call Number: LB 2369 K723 2005
- Locke, Lawrence F. ***Proposals that work: a guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals***. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, c2000.
Architecture/Fine Arts Library, Reference, Call Number: Q 180.55 P7 L63 2000
Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Reserve desk, Call Number: Q 180.55 P7 L63 2000
NJM Health Sciences Library, Call Number: W 20.5 L814p4 2000

- Locke, Lawrence F. ***Proposals that work: a guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals.*** Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, c1993.
 NJM Health Sciences Library, Call Number: W 20.5 L814L3 1993
 Sciences and Technology Library, Reference, Call Number: Q 180.55 P7 L63 1993
- Mauch, James E. ***Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation: a handbook for students and faculty.*** [electronic resource] New York: M. Dekker, c2003.
 BISON Online Access.
- Mauch, James E. ***Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation: a handbook for students and faculty.*** New York: Marcel Dekker, c1998.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Call Number: LB 2369 M377 1998
 Engineering Library, Reference, Call Number: LB 2369 M377 1998. NJM
 Health Sciences Library, Call Number: Z 5053 M447g4 1998
- Mauch, James E. ***Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation: a handbook for students and faculty.*** New York: M. Dekker, c1993.
 NJM Health Sciences Library, Call Number: WZ 345 M447g 1993
 Sciences and Technology Library, 5th Floor, Call Number: LB 2369 M377 1993
- Rossman, Mark H. ***Negotiating graduate school : a guide for graduate students.*** Thousand Oaks, Ca : Sage Publications, c2002.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Mezzanine, Call Number:LB 2371 R67 2002
- Sternberg, David Joel. ***How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation.*** New York: St. Martin's Press, c1981.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Mezzanine, Call Number: LB 2369 S74
- Swales, John M. ***Academic writing for graduate students: essential tasks and skills: a course for nonnative speakers of English.*** Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, c1994. Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Mezzanine, Call Number: PE 1128 T78 1985
- Teitelbaum, Harry. ***How to write a thesis.*** [Australia ; United States]: Thomson/Arco, c2003.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Reference, Call Number: LB 2369 T36 2003
- Thomas, R. Murray. ***Theses and dissertations: a guide to planning, research, and writing.*** Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 2000.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Reference, Call Number: LB 2369 T458 2000
- Webster, William G. ***21 models for developing and writing theses, dissertations and projects: a book of practical approaches, ideas and solutions for conceptualizing, organizing, developing and finalizing your graduate research requirements.*** San Ramon, CA: Academic Scholarwrite Pub., c1998.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Call Number: LB 2369 W43 1998
- Webster, William G. ***Developing and writing your thesis, dissertation or project: a book of sound advice about conceptualizing, organizing, developing and finalizing your terminal graduate research.*** [San Ramon, Calif.]: Academic Scholarwrite, c1998.
 Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Call Number: LB 2369 W386 1998