The Elements of an Effective Dissertation and Thesis

A Step-by-Step Guide to Getting It Right the First Time

Raymond L. Calabrese

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Contents

Preface: How to Use This Book ix
Acknowledgments xiii
Dissertation Title xv
Dissertation Abstract xvii

1 Introduction and Rationale 1
   Introduction 1
   Background to the Study 3
   Problem Statement 3
   Purpose of the Study 5
   Significance of the Study 6
   Overview of Methodology 8
   Research Questions 9
   Research Hypotheses 10
Contents

Objectives and Outcomes 11
Limitations 12
Delimitations 13
Assumptions 14
Definition of Key Terms 15
Organization of the Dissertation 16

2 Review of Literature 19
   Introduction to the Literature Review 20
   Body of the Literature Review 22
      Competing Perspectives 23
      Conceptual Framework 24
      Theoretical Framework 25
      Synthesis of the Research 27
      Critical Analysis 27
   Conclusion of the Literature Review 28
   Other Important Terms and Issues 29
      Theory 29
      Scholarly Publications 30
      Relevant Research 30
      Criteria for Selection of Research Included in a Literature Review 32
      Organizing the Literature Research Search 36

3 Methods 37
   Introduction 37
   Research Perspective 39
   Research Design 40
Contents

Research Questions and Hypotheses 41
Subject, Participants, Population, and Sample 43
Unit of Analysis 46
Research Variables 47
Research Instrument 48
Pilot Study 50
Data Collection Procedures 51
Data Collection and Statistical Analysis 53
Setting and Environment 55
Bias and Error 57
Validity 58
Trustworthiness 59
Reliability 61
Summary 63

4 Results 65
Introduction 66
Organizing the Results Chapter 67
Methodology Summary 71
Population, Sample, and Participants 73
Results 73
Summary of Results 75
Summary and Transition to Chapter 5 77

5 Interpretation and Recommendations 79
Introduction 80
Summary of Results 82
Discussion of Results 83
Contents

Summary Statement 85
Implications for Further Research 87
Implications for Practice and Recommendations 88
Relationship of Results to Theory 91
Limitations 92
Summary and Conclusion 94
Appendix: Advice on References and Plagiarism 97
References 101
About the Author 123
Preface

How to Use This Book

The Elements of an Effective Dissertation and Thesis is for researchers who want to solve the puzzle of writing their doctoral dissertations or theses. Unlike other books that describe how to write a dissertation, this book separates the elements of the dissertation and provides you with a description, definition, and example of each dissertation element. It presents multiple viewpoints that include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. When using this book, you will understand what belongs in the dissertation and where it belongs.

The model for The Elements of an Effective Dissertation and Thesis is the traditional five-chapter dissertation and thesis. There are many variations of this model. Even in cases where the model is different, many of the components are similar. I have included many components commonly found in dissertations and theses. I present the components
in a traditional five-chapter format for ease of use and not to indicate a preferred format for a dissertation. As a result, you will find a great deal of information you need to be successful in completing your dissertation.

In general, many doctoral dissertations or theses follow a similar five-chapter format:

1. an introduction, statement of the problem, and research questions
2. a review of the literature
3. the methodology used in the study
4. a presentation of results
5. discussion of the results

Within each chapter of the book, you will find elements for that chapter. The elements in chapter 1, for example, include an introduction, background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, significance of the study, overview of methodology, research questions, research hypotheses, objectives/outcomes, limitations, delimitations, assumptions, definition of key terms, and organization of the dissertation.

To facilitate the process of writing a dissertation or thesis, the table of contents and index are user-friendly; you can look for guidance with any particular phase of the dissertation by consulting the index. If you need to see an example of a research question, you can go to the table of contents, look under chapter 1, and find the section for research ques-
tions, or refer to the index. Since dissertations and theses share many of the same features, I use the term dissertation throughout the book for ease of reading.

This book contains samples from more than one hundred completed dissertations from well-known universities and colleges. Each of the scholars who wrote these dissertations has completed the journey. I have quoted from their dissertations not as exemplars, but as a guide, indicating how they completed a task that met the rigorous academic standards of their department and institution, leading to completion. These samples are contained in the highlighted Dissertation Examples sections of each chapter.

In reviewing an exhaustive array of dissertations, I have concluded that there is no one standard format that fits all. There is, however, general agreement to the elements that comprise excellent research. In the end, you must take personal responsibility for conducting your research and writing your dissertation. The Elements of an Effective Dissertation and Thesis allows you to concentrate on what makes sense and is important to completing your dissertation. Good luck.
Acknowledgments

My students’ entry into the long journey to earn a doctoral degree inspired this work. I am grateful to them as well as to doctoral students, advisors, and committee members at numerous institutions whose work I reviewed. The students’ success in earning their doctorate degrees and examples from their dissertations are at the core of this work.

In this digital age, I am in debt to those who initiated the Web-based Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD). Because of their efforts, I was able to access and review dissertations from universities throughout the world.

I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Sally J. Zepeda of the University of Georgia, who spent a significant amount of time commenting on this work and providing invaluable insights and advice regarding her experiences in guiding qualitative and mixed-methods dissertations.
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I also want to thank Babe Hampton for her copyediting and myriad of suggestions for this work.
The dissertation title briefly informs the reader of the content and intent of the researcher’s study. According to the American Psychological Association (2001), “The title is a concise statement of the main topic and should identify the actual variables or theoretical issues under investigation and the relationship between them” (pp. 10–11). It is important to use caution when choosing your title. A long rambling title, for example, may not convey the essence of your study. Remember, too, that the dissertation title’s descriptors aid in indexing the dissertation to facilitate electronic access by other researchers interested in the study (Colorado State University, 2001; University of the Witwatersrand, 2005). The following questions are a guide to creating an effective title:

• Does the title present the focus of the study’s research?
• Does the title give the reader a sense of anticipation that the study is important?
Dissertation Title

• Does the title indicate the study’s methodology?
• Does the title contain only essential words?

Dissertation Examples

1. “The Effects of an Interdisciplinary Project on Student Learning of Natural Selection.” (Durand, 2004)

Dissertation Abstract

The dissertation abstract is a brief description of the researcher’s dissertation. It is accurate, self-contained, concise, and specific (American Psychological Association, 2001). The abstract requires you to condense your work to less than two pages. Many dissertation abstracts are no more than 350 words, so brevity is important. Conceptualizing and writing the abstract assists you in informing the reader about the study, methodology, results, and conclusions.

A well-written abstract effectively summarizes the study. Some contend that a well-written abstract contains five basic components: problem statement, rationale for the study, methodology, results, and conclusions (Koopman, 1997). In many dissertations where brevity is an issue, the abstract is comprised of just four sections: purpose of the study, methodology, results, and conclusions. The following schema takes the researcher through a systematic process in
writing the abstract and concludes with a complete abstract with the four basic features mentioned above. Begin the abstract by briefly restating the problem statement.

Dissertation Examples: Abstract—Study's Problem Statement

1. “This ethnographic in nature study explores how two middle school science teachers who have classes populated by urban African Americans teach their students and how their students perceive their teaching.” (Bondima, 2004, para. 1)
2. “This study was conducted to investigate the possible relationship between exercise lifestyles and the overall experience of anxiety in a college setting.” (Preiss, 2004, para. 1)
3. “This study examined emotion management skills in anxious children and their mothers and investigated factors within the child and the parent, and the child-parent relationship that may relate to the development of adaptive emotion management.” (Suveg, 2003, para. 1)

Next, provide a brief rationale of why the study is important.

Dissertation Examples: Abstract—Study’s Rationale

1. “In the dynamic, competitive environment of the leisure and recreation industry it is becoming increasingly im-
important to understand employees’ work motivation in order to increase employee effectiveness. Managers in leisure and recreation organizations must understand those elements that influence work motivation, especially as related to seasonal and part time employees. As this segment of the leisure and recreation industry continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to overall organizational success. Yet, there has been little research done in any discipline pertaining to the motivation of seasonal and part time employees.” (DeGraaf, 1992, para. 1)

2. “Throughout the nation, many political and industrial leaders are urging a technological transformation of America’s educational system. Various current publications and articles have identified this transformation of our schools as necessary for continuation of our status as a world leader. A key element in the transformation of schools is the implementation of an intervention and the continued attention to the user’s needs regarding the intervention’s implementation.” (McEachern, 1990, para. 1)

Identify the methodology and include variables, population, methods, and data analysis.

*Dissertation Examples: Abstract—Study’s Methodology*

1. “The causal-comparative research method was used. A questionnaire was mailed to fifty-eight school systems in
Massachusetts, which were identified by the State Department of Education as having experienced a change in grade structure during 1981–82. A total of forty-three responded constituting a return rate of 74%. Part I of the questionnaire requested demographic, factual information regarding the school system. Part II requested information regarding the specific nature of the grade change and an opinion regarding the educational value of the change. The respondents in Part III were asked to identify the environmental factors they perceived to have influenced the decision. Analysis of variance was used to test the null hypotheses at a .01 level of significance.”

(Charlton, 1986, para. 2)

2. “There were 10 participants in the experimental (forgiveness education) group and 10 participants in the control (alternative education) group. Participants had all been divorced or permanently separated for at least two years from their former abusive spouse or partner. Ages ranged from 32 to 54 years, with a mean age of 44.95 (SD = 7.01). A matched, yoked, randomized, experimental-control group design was used. Participants were matched on age, duration of abusive relationship, time since permanent separation or divorce, current contact with the former abuser, and categories of psychological abuse. Each participant had weekly one-hour sessions (both forgiveness and alternative treatment) with the intervener based on a protocol specific to each treatment. The Enright For-
giveness Process Model was adapted to an intervention manual for this population as a protocol for the forgiveness intervention sessions.” (Reed, 2004, para. 1)

In the next section of the abstract, identify the study’s results.

**Dissertation Example: Abstract—Study’s Results**

“Regression analysis revealed that AS predicted depression over time, and each specific factor of AS predicted depression across time. A longitudinal relation between AS and panic approached significance across time, and the Mental Incapacitation Concerns and Social Concerns factors of AS significantly predicted panic endorsement over time. Panic severity and anxiolytic alcohol expectancies were not predicted by AS. Finally, AS scores were stable across time points, though small fluctuations in scores were noted.” (Carpiniello, 2004, para. 2)

Complete the abstract by identifying the conclusions.

**Dissertation Examples: Abstract—Study’s Conclusions**

1. “In summary, the results confirm that migraine sufferers are more sensitive to intense visual stimulation than controls, but do not support the contention that exposure results in widespread autonomic changes. Since interictal visual
discomfort is a common in migraine, further research is needed to clarify how it can be incorporated into models of migraine pathophysiology.” (Crotogino, 2002, para. 5)

2. “Analysis of the data suggests a strong, positive relationship among (1) the nature of the change (a re-branding that was viewed positively by participants), (2) the credibility of the leaders was evident in their communication throughout the change process, and (3) the change communication process was perceived as well structured by participants.” (Gradwell, 2004, para. 3)

The following is an example of a complete abstract.

Dissertation Example: Complete Abstract

“The purpose of this study was to examine the supervision and evaluation of principals by superintendents in light of accountability and low performing schools. The researcher sought to understand both the policy and implementation of principal evaluation through a survey administered to gain knowledge of implementation of policy. Superintendents from school systems across the state of Georgia (N = 146) were surveyed about their supervisory and evaluative practices related to principals of low performing, Title I schools before and after the school received the low performing (‘in needs of improvement’) status. Additionally, data were collected for superintendents’ supervisory and evaluative prac-
practices of principals of Title I performing schools so that comparisons could be made. The mixed method approach allowed for the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. Structured interviews of five superintendents were conducted to gain perspectives of the superintendents’ practices of supervision and evaluation of principals of Title I schools. The qualitative data collected from the interviews were combined with the current related literature of principal evaluation and supervision for the formulation of a survey instrument called the Survey of Superintendent’s Supervisory and Evaluative Practices of Principals. The responses from the statewide survey plus demographic data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings of the qualitative data collected from the interviews (N = 5) aided in understanding the quantitative data collected from the surveys (N = 105) which yielded statistically significant results finding that both the superintendents’ supervisory and evaluative practices changed after a Title I school became low performing. Moreover, superintendents’ supervisory and evaluative practices of principals of Title I schools that remained performing did not change to the same degree as did for the low performing schools. The findings of the study will assist superintendents as they respond to schools in need of improvement and accountability policy mandates. For policy makers, an understanding of the supervisory and evaluative practices of superintendents in light of accountability are better understood.” (Mattingly, 2003, p. 2)