

Fred C. Lunenburg ~ Beverly J. Irby

Writing a
Successful
Thesis or
Dissertation



Tips and Strategies for
Students in the Social
and Behavioral Sciences

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CORWIN PRESS

A SAGE Company

Thousand Oaks, CA 91320

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For information:



Corwin Press
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
www.corwinpress.com

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B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lunenburg, Fred C.

Writing a successful thesis or dissertation : tips and strategies for students in the social and behavioral sciences / Fred C. Lunenburg, Beverly J. Irby.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4129-4224-9 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-4129-4225-6 (pbk.)

1. Dissertations, Academic--Authorship. 2. Academic writing. 3. Social sciences--Authorship. I. Irby, Beverly J. II. Title.

LB2369.L814 2008

808'.066378—dc22

2007031656

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

07 08 09 10 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acquisitions Editor: Elizabeth Brenkus
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Editorial Assistants: Ena Rosen, Desirée Enayati
Production Editor: Jenn Reese
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Paulette McGee
Indexer: Nara Wood
Cover Designer: Monique Hahn

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Preface

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

We have written this book to help graduate students write the dissertation from beginning to end successfully. Each of us has taught courses focused on writing the dissertation. We have a combined total of more than 40 years of experience supervising doctoral dissertations. Together we have chaired more than 100 dissertations. In addition, we have been external examiners of doctoral dissertations for several universities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the United States. Thus, we have written this book to compile the best of our wisdom on how to make the process of writing the dissertation a less mysterious and more rewarding experience. Our approach is applicable also to writing master's theses, which we view as limited-scope dissertations.

From our combined experience, we have found that if the key elements of each dissertation/thesis chapter are clearly identified with corresponding examples of those elements (or sections), it takes the mystery out of writing the dissertation. Thus, we have designed this book to explicitly describe and define the elements (sections) of each dissertation chapter and provide examples of completed dissertations that illustrate typical ways to write the sections of each chapter. We have extracted examples from more than 100 completed dissertations from well-known universities. We present multiple viewpoints that include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches. Our writing style throughout is intentionally conversational, as if we were talking directly to the student.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Our goal is to provide advice to those learning how to write the major elements (sections) of a dissertation. Thus, in each chapter of the book, we provide specific information about sections commonly found in dissertations, such as how to write research questions or hypotheses, how to select a sample for the study, how to write descriptions of instruments, how to write results of data analyses, how to interpret the results, and so forth. Our goal

is to define and explain the rationale for the common elements (sections) of each chapter of the dissertation. Then we support our advice with numerous examples to illustrate how previous doctoral students have written those sections. The model we use is the traditional five-chapter dissertation. We realize that there are many variations to this model. Students and faculty who are chairing dissertations should feel free to modify the approach to reflect advising style, unique subject area, and institutional requirements.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

This book should be of special interest to students in the social and behavioral sciences, including education, psychology, social work, and business. Its contents should be applicable also to those studying nursing and other health sciences with a behavioral base, certain aspects of anthropology, sociology, and criminal justice. Other students will find the book useful as a dissertation guide. As mentioned previously, our approach is applicable also to writing master's theses.

The book can be used as the principal text in courses focused on writing the dissertation or master's thesis. It may be used also as a supplementary text in seminars that introduce students to graduate education or in research methods courses, particularly those in the social and behavioral sciences.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book contains 12 chapters in four major parts and 10 appendixes. In Chapter 1, we discuss how to go about selecting a suitable topic for a doctoral dissertation or master's thesis. We suggest that students begin their search for a suitable topic at the outset of their graduate programs. Good sources of possible topics include: textbooks, professional journals, dissertations, theories, current employment, and existing databases. The characteristics of a good research topic include: whether it is of personal interest, significant, feasible in terms of available data, appropriate to knowledge and skill level, manageable, and attractive for funding.

Chapter 2 includes valuable tips about selecting a chairperson and other committee members. Issues to consider in the selection process include: the reputation of the faculty members, their interest and expertise in the topic, their accessibility, the feedback they provide the student, and the goodness of fit between the student and the dissertation chair and the other committee members. The chapter also deals with ways to identify prospective chairpersons and committee members, including the student's own experience with the faculty member, other students' opinions, and an examination of completed dissertations and faculty Web sites.

Chapter 3 contains quantitative research designs, including descriptive research, correlational research, causal-comparative research, quasi-experimental, and experimental research. In Chapter 5, we discuss qualitative and mixed methods designs, including case study, ethnography, ethology, ethnomethodology, grounded-theory, phenomenology, symbolic interaction, and historical research. The overall purpose of these two chapters is to provide an overview of the two basic approaches to conducting research: quantitative and qualitative. Sandwiched between Chapters 3 and 5 is Chapter 4, which deals with basic statistical procedures.

The overview of basic statistical procedures in Chapter 4 includes descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Parametric and nonparametric tests are discussed, as are the statistical procedures commonly used in social and behavioral science research. The focus is on the application of the common statistical procedures used in the social and behavioral sciences for given research designs.

Chapter 6 contains the structure and writing of the introduction chapter of the dissertation or master's thesis, including the elements (or sections) that comprise that chapter. These sections include: background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, theoretical framework, research questions or hypotheses, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. The section organization of the study, concludes the introduction chapter of the dissertation. We follow specific guidance on what to include in each section of the chapter with examples from completed dissertations.

Chapter 7 is divided into three parts. In the first part of the chapter, we provide an introduction on how to systematically search and review the literature. We discuss six sources: handbooks and encyclopedias, annual reviews, review articles, abstracting and indexing services, government documents, and public search engines. In the second part of the chapter, we discuss eight techniques to help the student write a clear and effective review of the literature chapter. They include: organizing material in a funnel, being specific, making an outline, writing the introduction, using headings, using transitions, writing a summary, and being careful not to plagiarize. The chapter concludes with several additional strategies to help the student critically synthesize the body of literature. We provide examples from dissertations and published articles throughout the chapter.

Chapter 8 includes the structure and writing of the methodology chapter, including the elements (sections) that comprise that chapter. These sections include: selection of participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. We provide pertinent information related to each of the sections of the methodology chapter, as well as numerous examples of each of these sections from completed dissertations.

Chapter 9 contains information on how to write the results chapter. Each element (or section) of the chapter is described, followed by

examples from completed dissertations. We discuss different methods of organizing results for both quantitative and qualitative studies: by research questions or hypotheses, variables, or themes.

Chapter 10 consists of information on how to structure and write the discussion chapter of a dissertation or master's thesis. We discuss each element (or section) that should be included in the discussion chapter, and provide examples of each section of the chapter from completed dissertations.

Chapter 11 contains advice on the steps to be taken to ensure a successful proposal defense and final oral defense of the dissertation. These steps include: preparing a well-written document, knowing the format of the defense, preparing the presentation, practicing the presentation, and anticipating questions. We provide an explanation of how decisions are made by dissertation committees at the defense, and what students should do after a decision has been reached.

Chapter 12 includes suggestions on seeking a wider audience for the completed dissertation. Issues explored include preparing a paper for a professional conference or job interview, finding a publisher for the manuscript, or converting the dissertation into a journal article, monograph, or book.

Appendixes A, B, and C are sample letters used in survey research. Appendix A is the initial letter sent to a prospective participant requesting participation in a study. Appendixes B and C are follow-up letters designed to increase response rate of the study sample.

Appendixes D, E, F, and G contain dissertation proposal outlines for quantitative and qualitative studies. Each dissertation proposal outline uses a different method of analysis. The dissertation proposal outline is the first step in writing the dissertation proposal.

Appendix H contains guidelines used to critique a qualitative research study. Much can be learned from critiquing a qualitative study using the guidelines provided.

Appendix I is a typical agreement between a doctoral student and a dissertation chair, which has been used by the authors of this book. Among other things, it describes guidelines the authors use when agreeing to chair a dissertation. It has been field tested for the past 10 years.

Appendix J is a detailed checklist used by the student for monitoring the quality of a dissertation. The checklist is structured for a traditional five-chapter dissertation and conforms to the elements (or sections) contained within each dissertation chapter.

Acknowledgments

This book has been a cooperative effort between scholars of the field and experienced editors and publishers. We wish to express our appreciation to the reviewers and others whose suggestions led to improvements in this book.

We also wish to thank the people at Corwin Press whose contributions made this a much better book.

We are grateful to our dean, Genevieve Brown, for creating an environment conducive to research and contributing the necessary resources to complete this book. Special thanks are also extended to Alicia Raley and Dacey Ellington, who typed portions of this book.

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Corwin Press gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following people:

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Gevirtz School of Education
University of California—Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Sharon Toomey Clark, Educational Consultant
Clark & Associates
Claremont, CA

Randy L. Joyner, Adjunct Professor
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Maria Piantanida, Adjunct Associate Professor
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PART I

Getting Started

1

Selecting a Suitable Topic

The selection of a suitable topic is the first major step in writing a thesis or dissertation. For some students this is an easy task. They have known what they wanted to study from the time they entered graduate school and perhaps even before, but for many others, selecting a thesis or dissertation topic is one of the most difficult parts of their graduate programs. The thought of developing a “completely original” idea for such a large-scale project may seem overwhelming to them.

The notion that a dissertation must be completely original is a misconception, for no research is completely original. All research is based on the work of others to some extent. In fact, the most useful kind of research simply builds on research that has already been done. Some of the most successful theses and dissertations simply extend the knowledge base one step further in an area by examining a new variable within a well-established line of inquiry, collecting data on a different sample, testing a new methodology, or introducing a new statistical technique. Thus, as you begin to focus progressively on a broad search for a topic, you gain a more thorough understanding of what has been done in an area and what needs to be done. Afterwards, originality may cease to be an issue. The Council of Graduate Schools (2002) clarified the point. The term *original* “implies some novel twist, fresh perspective, new hypothesis, or innovative method that makes the dissertation project a distinctive contribution” (p. 10).

Students often ask when the search for a topic should begin. In some universities students do not begin to search for a thesis or dissertation topic until after they have passed the comprehensive examination. We recommend that a serious search for a dissertation topic start as soon as doctoral study begins. By selecting a dissertation topic early in the graduate experience, you can then use assigned course research papers as a means of doing preliminary work on your projected research.

As soon as you select a broad area of study, you need to immerse yourself in the literature in that area, with an eye toward the dissertation (thesis) proposal. Also, you should read and review your university's doctoral handbook, to see if there are guidelines concerning what goes into the proposal and how long it is expected to be.

Most universities have very definite requirements for the dissertation proposal. These requirements can range from a 10- to 20-page description of your proposed study to the completion of the first three chapters of the dissertation. In some universities, the dissertation chair (or advisor) is the only one who has to approve the proposal. Other universities may require a formal oral defense of the proposal before the entire dissertation committee. The purpose of the proposal is to get agreement on the merits of the proposed study before the student begins to collect data and makes formal application to the university's Human Subjects Committee. Even schools or colleges within the same institution may have different requirements. The proposal requirements for master's theses may be less rigorous than they are for doctoral dissertations.

Our institution decided that most dissertation proposals should consist of Chapter One, Two, and Three of the dissertation. Typically Chapter One is titled "Introduction," Chapter Two, "Review of the Literature," and Chapter Three, "Methodology." However, for some qualitative dissertations, the proposal may appear differently. In most cases, after you collect and analyze your data, your Chapters One, Two, and Three will require only minor revisions to be ready for the final dissertation. Even if you must edit some later, you should be writing the proposal and the dissertation simultaneously. For those of you who are doing a qualitative dissertation, you may have to do some major rewriting of the first three chapters as your data emerge.

SOURCES OF TOPICS

As mentioned previously, you should begin your topic selection by identifying two or three broad areas in which many different types of research may be pursued. Examples of what is meant by broad topic areas are: teaching methods, leadership styles, bilingual education, school improvement, and so forth. Sources of ideas for broad topic areas include: (a) textbooks,

(b) professional journals, (c) dissertations, (d) theories, (e) current employment, and (f) existing databases.

Textbooks

Textbooks that you are currently using in your courses or that you have used in previous courses can be a source of ideas for broad topic areas. Often, the authors of textbooks point out areas of controversy or gaps in the research on specific topics. For example, in the first chapter of their textbook *Educational Administration: Concepts and Practices*, Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) identified some current issues in assessment, which include testing minority students and confidentiality of test data. In a subsequent chapter, they discussed current and emerging issues in the measurement of disabled children. In another chapter, they shared problems with the validation of some leadership theories and the use of majority samples in the development of some of these theories. In each of these chapters, the authors pointed out several broad areas in need of further research.

Professional Journals

Although reading textbooks will give you a broad overview of topic ideas for your thesis or dissertation, you need to steep yourself in the literature in your field and related fields. (If you are an education student, related fields are psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and business management.) This will enable you to examine the specifics of how other scholars have conducted research. These specifics can be found in reports of original, empirical research (which include both quantitative and qualitative studies) published in professional journals. Such reports can be accessed electronically. If you are unfamiliar with conducting such searches, consult the research librarian at your university. Some electronic databases provide the full text of research articles; others provide abstracts only. If an abstract interests you, obtain copies of the full article and carefully read it through.

As you read, pay particular attention to the purposes, research questions, or hypotheses that are stated in the articles. Consider the methods used to examine the research questions or test the hypotheses, including participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis the researcher(s) used, and, of course, the findings. Consider reliability and validity issues of the studies you review. You should also pay particular attention to the discussion sections. In their discussions, researchers often describe implications of their research for theory and practice, discuss limitations of their studies, and suggest possibilities for further research. Such an examination of the specifics of empirical research will assist you in developing and refining your own thesis or dissertation proposal.

Reading professional journals related to your field will help you keep abreast of research trends in your discipline and enable you to explore broad topic areas at the same time. Pay particular attention to periodicals that publish review articles, such as the *Review of Educational Research*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Sociological Review*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, and *Review of Research in Education*. Review articles are helpful to you because they organize a great deal of literature efficiently. A topical review represents the analytical thinking of some scholar who has examined existing literature, interpreted it, and pointed out the theoretical issues it raises. These reviewers are invited to write reviews, because they are considered to be among the best scholars in their fields. A review article also provides you with an extensive reference list that can form the basis for a complete review of the literature once you select a topic for your thesis or dissertation. The review article is also a good model for the dissertation proposal and the abstract of your dissertation. It is relatively short and usually includes the purpose, research questions or hypothesis, methods, results, implications, and limitations.

In some fields, books are published annually that are devoted to the review of significant recent theoretical and practical research developments. Four such annual publications include the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, and *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (NSSE). Each yearly volume of the annual reviews contains highly comprehensive and integrated reviews of numerous research areas in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and education, respectively. Some topics contained in these volumes are reviewed annually, while others are reviewed every five years. The researcher should look over the six or seven most recent volumes to get an idea of topical coverage. Other useful sources of reviews of research include the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration*, and *Encyclopedia of Educational Leadership and Administration*. The articles contained in these documents are written by distinguished scholars in specific content areas. The topics are selected for their timeliness at the time of writing and their theoretical or practical value to researchers. Because these volumes are not published annually, some of the contents may not be as current as the aforementioned annual reviews, but may be appropriate for the selection of broad topic areas.

Dissertations

Other completed dissertations can serve as another good source of topic selection. Be sure to secure exemplary projects to serve as models. Try to find: (a) award-winning dissertations in your field or related fields, (b) recent dissertations in the selected field at various universities, (c) good

recent dissertations suggested by faculty in your department, and (d) the best dissertations suggested by your dissertation chair.

Examine the titles of these dissertations, as well as titles published in *Dissertation Abstracts International*. If a title interests you, read the abstract of the study. If you are still interested, get a copy of the document and read specifically the review of the literature and the suggestions for further research. Dissertations are now online through most university libraries.

There are certain advantages of searching for a topic from completed dissertations that go far beyond topic selection. For example, a recently completed dissertation includes a comprehensive review of the literature up to the point of completion. Updating the most recent studies will be an easy task. Your study might include a different population, other variable(s), or another methodology. However, other dissertations can help you in identifying acceptable approaches to: (a) writing research questions or hypothesis, (b) choosing an appropriate sample size, (c) examining how data were collected and analyzed, and (d) observing what kinds of conclusions can be drawn from the results, and/or (e) formulating a theory. These specifics of conducting research can be valuable information learned from examining completed doctoral dissertations.

Theories

Theories are developed to explain phenomena in a field or to provide structure or framework to the knowledge base in a field. A new theory may be developed, or an existing theory may be modified or extended. For example, Paul Hersey (1976) did a theory dissertation in which he developed with his dissertation chair, Ken Blanchard, a new leadership theory known as the *situational leadership theory* (see Hersey & Blanchard, 2007 for an explanation of the situational leadership theory). One of our doctoral students, Salvatore Pascarella (1985), did a field test of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory in a school setting using a sample of elementary school principals (see also, Pascarella & Lunenburg, 1988). Doris Delaney (2005), another one of our doctoral students, completed a dissertation that further field-tested Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory using a sample of prekindergarten principals.

The development and testing of theory is important work and can make an important contribution to the field. Many theories have received only limited empirical testing. In addition, many theories have been tested using only majority populations. For example, many of the management theories developed in industrial settings between 1900 and 1960 used only men as participants.

One of the authors of this book has developed a new gender-inclusive theory of leadership called the *synergistic leadership theory* (SLT) (Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2002). The theory can be applied to any organization. Developed through a qualitative approach, the SLT has been