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EDITION

Completing Your **QUALITATIVE DISSERTATION**

A Road Map From Beginning to End

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A Complete Dissertation

The Big Picture

Chapter 1 Objectives

- Provide a *cursory glance* at the constitution of an entire dissertation.
- Offer a comprehensive outline of all key elements for each section of the dissertation—that is, a precursor of what is to come, with each element being more fully developed and explained further along in the book.
- For each key element, explain reason for inclusion, quality markers, and frequent or common errors.

Overview

Following is a road map that briefly outlines the contents of an entire dissertation. This is a comprehensive overview, and as such is helpful in making sure that at a glance you understand up front the necessary elements that will constitute each section of your dissertation. Reasons for inclusion, quality markers, and frequent errors are included for each element of the dissertation. This broad overview is a prelude to the steps involved in each of the chapters that are described and demonstrated in Part II. While certain elements are common to most dissertations, please note that dissertation requirements vary by institution. Toward that end, students should always consult with their advisor and committee members to ascertain any details of any of the elements that might be specific or particular to institutional or departmental requirements. Finally, a rubric for evaluating a complete qualitative dissertation and a rubric for specifically evaluating the quality of a literature review are included.

Front Matter

Order and format of front matter may vary by institution and department.

- Title page
- Copyright page (optional)
- Abstract
- Dedication (optional)
- Acknowledgments (optional)
- Table of contents
- List of tables and figures (only those in chapters, not those in appendices)

Title Page

The title gives a clear and concise description of the topic and/or problem and the scope of the study. The title page will show the title; the author's full name; the degree to be conferred; the university, department, and college in which the degree is earned; and the month and year of approval. Margins for the title page and the entire document are left—1.5 inches; right, top, and bottom—1 inch. Also, the title should be in all capitals.

Reason The title both guides and reflects the purpose and content of the study, making its relevance apparent to prospective readers. The title is also important for retrieval purposes enabling other researchers to locate it through a literature search.

Quality Markers A well-crafted title conveys the essence and purpose of the study. The title should include the type of study (“An Analysis”) and the participants. Use of key-words will promote proper categorization into databases such as ERIC (the Education Resources Information Center) and Dissertation Abstracts International.

Frequent Errors Frequent title errors include the use of trendy, elaborate, nonspecific, or literary language, and grandiose or unrealistic expectations (e.g., “Finally, a Solution to . . .”).

Copyright Page (optional)

Copyright is the legal right of an owner of created material to control copying and ownership of that material. Authors of research documents who wish to protect their writing through copyright may do so. A student may file a claim to copyright by corresponding directly with the U.S. Copyright Office (Library of Congress, 101 Independence Avenue S.E., Washington, DC 20559-6000).

The copyright symbol (©) should appear with author's name and year centered between the margins on the lower half of the backside of the title page. Below the copyright line, include the statement “All Rights Reserved.”

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Abstract

The abstract, limited to 350 words, is a concise summary description of the study, including statement of the problem, purpose, scope, research tradition, data sources, methodology, key findings, and implications. The abstract is written after the dissertation is completed and is written from the perspective of an outside reader (i.e., not “My dissertation examines” but “An examination of...”).

The page numbers before the text are in Roman numerals. The abstract page is the first page to be numbered, but as iii. All Roman numerals should be centered between the left and right margins, and 1 inch from the bottom of the page. The title of the page, “ABSTRACT,” should be in all capitals and centered between the left and right margins and 2 inches from the top.

Reason The abstract’s inclusion in Dissertation Abstracts International (which mandates a 350-word limit) makes it possible for other researchers to determine the relevance of this work to their own studies. Over 95% of American dissertations are included in Dissertation Abstracts International.

Quality Markers Marks of quality include conciseness and accuracy. The abstract should also be written in the third person (active voice without the personal pronouns *I* and *we*). Generally, the first sentence of an abstract describes the entire study; subsequent sentences expand on that description.

Frequent Errors Inclusion of irrelevant material (i.e., examples, information extraneous to the dissertation itself), exclusion of necessary material (i.e., problem, purpose, scope, research tradition, data sources, methodology, key findings, and implications), and incorrect format are frequent abstract errors.

Dedication and Acknowledgments (optional)

These pages are optional, although most dissertations include a brief acknowledgment of the contributions of committee members, colleagues, friends, and family members who have supported the students’ research. “ACKNOWLEDGMENTS” should be capitalized and should appear centered between the left and right margins, 2 inches from the top. Text should begin two line spaces after “ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.”

The dedication page is separate from the acknowledgments page. If included, the dedication text should be centered between the left and right margins and between the top and bottom margins; it should also reflect a professional nature. Do not include the title “DEDICATION” on the dedication page.

Table of Contents

An outline of the entire dissertation, listing headings and subheadings with their respective page numbers, the table of contents lists all chapters and major sections within chapters and all back matter with page numbers.

The heading “TABLE OF CONTENTS” is centered between the left and right margins, 2 inches from the top of the page. The listing begins one double space below and even with the left margin. Leader dots are placed from the end of each listing to the corresponding page number. All major titles are typed exactly as they appear in the text. When a title or subtitle exceeds one line, the second and succeeding lines are single-spaced and indented two spaces. Double spacing is used between major titles and between each major title and its subtitle.

The table of contents may be followed by any of the following, if needed, and any of these subsequent lists are formatted in the same manner as the table of contents:

- List of tables
- List of figures
- List of illustrations
- List of symbols

Reason The table of contents assists the researcher in organizing the material while promoting accessibility for the reader.

Quality Markers The headings and subheadings clearly and concisely reflect the material being presented. Headings and subheadings are parallel grammatically (i.e., “Introduction,” “Review of Literature” not “Introduction,” “Reviewing the Literature”). The headings and subheadings in the table of contents are worded exactly the same as those headings and subheadings in the text.

Frequent Errors Frequent errors include lack of parallelism in headings and subheadings, as well as wording in the table of contents that does not match wording in text.

Dissertation Chapters

Order and format of dissertation chapters may vary by institution and department.

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
4. Findings
5. Analysis and synthesis
6. Conclusions and recommendations

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter makes a case for the significance of the problem, contextualizes the study, and provides an introduction to its basic components. It should be informative and able to stand alone as a document.

- **Introduction:** The introduction includes an overview of the purpose and focus of the study, why it is significant, how it was conducted, and how it will contribute to professional knowledge and practice.
- **Problem statement:** The problem indicates the need for the study, describes the issue or problem to be studied, and situates it in a broader educational or social context. The problem statement includes a brief, well-articulated summary of the literature that substantiates the study, with references to more detailed discussions in Chapter 2.
- **Statement of purpose:** Describing the research purpose in a logical, explicit manner, the statement of purpose is the major objective or intent of the study; it enables the reader to understand the central thrust of the research.
- **Research question(s):** Research questions are directly tied to the purpose. They should be specific, unambiguously stated, and open-ended. These questions cue readers to the direction the study will take and help to delineate the scope of the study.
- **Overview of methodology:** This section outlines the methodological type or approach, the research setting, the sample, instrumentation (if relevant), and methods of data collection and analysis used.
- **Rationale and significance:** Rationale is the justification for the study presented as a logical argument. Significance addresses the benefits that may be derived from doing the study, thereby reaffirming the research purpose.
- **Role of the researcher:** This section explains the role of the researcher in planning and conducting the study.
- **Researcher assumptions:** This section makes explicit relevant researcher assumptions, beliefs, and biases (if applicable).
- **Definition of key terminology:** Some terms may be unfamiliar to readers. In addition, the meanings of certain terms can vary depending on the context, conceptual framework, or field of study. Making terms explicit adds precision and ensures clarity of understanding. These terms should be operationally defined or explained; that is, be sure to make clear how these terms are used in *your* study.
- **Organization of the dissertation:** This brief concluding explanation delineates the contents of the remaining chapters in the dissertation.

Reason The introduction sets the stage for the study and directs readers to the purpose and context of the dissertation.

Quality Markers A quality introduction situates the context and scope of the study and informs the reader, providing a clear and valid representation of what will be found in the remainder of the dissertation. Discussion is concise and precise.

Frequent Errors Errors occur when the introduction does not clearly reflect the study and/or its relationship to the proposed problem and purpose, or it does not stand alone as a document.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter situates the study in the context of previous research and scholarly material pertaining to the topic, presents a critical synthesis of empirical literature according to relevant themes or variables, justifies how the study addresses a gap or problem in the literature, and outlines the theoretical or conceptual framework of the study. A dissertation does not merely restate the available knowledge base of a particular topic, but adds to or augments it.

- **Introduction:** The introduction describes the content, scope, and organization of the review as well as the strategy used in the literature search.
- **Review of literature:** This section accomplishes the following:
 - is clearly related to the problem statement, purpose, and research questions;
 - states up front the bodies of literature that will be covered, and why;
 - reviews primary sources that are mostly recent empirical studies from scholarly journals and publications, as well as secondary sources;
 - is logically organized by theme or subtopic, from broad to narrow;
 - synthesizes findings across studies and compares and contrasts different research outcomes, perspectives, or methods;
 - notes gaps, debates, or shortcomings in the literature and provides a rationale for the study; and
 - provides section summaries.
- **Conceptual framework:** The conceptual framework draws on theory, research, and experience, and examines the relationship among constructs and ideas. As such, it is the structure or heuristic that guides your research. In essence, the conceptual framework provides the theoretical and methodological bases for development of the study and analysis of findings. When appropriate, a graphic depiction of the model is included, showing the relationships between concepts, ideas, or variables to be studied.
- **Summary:** A comprehensive synthesis of the literature review should complete this section.

Reason This chapter provides a strong theoretical basis for the dissertation by analyzing and synthesizing a comprehensive selection of appropriate related bodies of literature. The review of literature should build a logical framework for the research,

justify the study by conceptualizing gaps in the literature, and demonstrate how the study will contribute to existing knowledge. The review serves to situate the dissertation within the context of current ongoing conversations in the field. The conceptual framework guides the research and plays a major role in analysis of findings.

Quality Markers A comprehensive and thoughtful selection of resources that cover the material directly related to the study's purpose and background, not the full scope of the field, is considered a mark of a quality literature review. All relevant primary sources and empirical research studies are cited (these are preferable to secondary sources, which are interpretation of the work of others). The writer adopts a critical perspective in discussing the work of others and provides a clear analysis of all available related research. Relevant literature is critiqued, not duplicated, and there is a clear connection between the purpose of this study and the resources included. The conceptual framework's role and function are clear: The conceptual framework clearly draws on theory, research, and experience, providing conceptual coherence to the research. Another quality marker is the correct use of American Psychological Association (APA) format, citations, and references throughout.

Frequent Errors Frequent errors include insubstantial breadth of review (i.e., insufficient number or range of resources; failure to include relevant primary sources) and insubstantial depth of review (i.e., use of nonscholarly material; inability to demonstrate clear understanding of resources). Another error is that the review reads more like a catalog of sources than a synthesis and integration of relevant literature. There is also a tendency to eliminate literature that contradicts or questions the findings of the dissertation's study. Other errors include incorrect or insufficient citation of sources, resulting in accidental plagiarism, and presentation of a diagrammatic conceptual framework with no accompanying narrative explanation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter situates the study within a particular methodological tradition, provides a rationale for that approach, describes the research setting and sample, and describes data collection and analysis methods. The chapter provides a detailed description of all aspects of the design and procedures of the study.

- **Introduction:** The introduction restates the research purpose and describes the organization of the chapter.
- **Rationale for research approach:** This section describes the research tradition or paradigm (qualitative research) and the research methodology (phenomenology, case study, action research, etc.) with a rationale for their suitability regarding addressing the research questions, and citing appropriate methodological literature.
- **Research setting and/or context:** This section describes and justifies selection of the research setting, thereby providing the history, background, and issues germane to the problem.

- **Research sample and data sources:** This section
 - explains and justifies the sample used and how participants were selected (including population and sampling procedures);
 - describes the characteristics and size of the sample and provides other pertinent demographic information; and
 - outlines ethical considerations pertaining to participants, shedding light on how rights of participants were protected, with reference to conventions of research ethics and the IRB (institutional review board) process.
- **Data collection methods:** This section describes and justifies all data collection methods, tools, instruments, and procedures, including how, when, where, and by whom data were collected.
- **Data analysis methods:** This section describes and justifies all methods and tools used for analysis of data (manual and/or computational).
- **Issues of trustworthiness:** This section discusses measures taken to enhance the study, as well as credibility (validity) and dependability (reliability).
- **Limitations and delimitations:** This section identifies potential weaknesses of the study and the scope of the study. Limitations are external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or may affect its outcome. Delimitations are conditions or parameters that the researcher intentionally imposes in order to limit the scope of a study (e.g., using participants of certain ages, genders, or groups; conducting the research in a single setting). Generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research; rather, the focus is on transferability—that is, the ability to apply findings in similar contexts or settings.
- **Summary:** A comprehensive summary overview covers all the sections of this chapter, recapping and highlighting all the important points. Discussion is concise and precise.

Reason The study is the basis for the conclusions and recommendations. In many ways, it is what makes the difference between a dissertation and other forms of extended writing. A clear description of the research sample, setting, methodology, limitations, and delimitations and acknowledgment of trustworthiness issues provide readers with a basis for accepting (or not accepting) the conclusions and recommendations that follow.

Quality Markers A quality study achieves the purposes outlined in the introduction's research problem and research questions. The relationship of the research paradigm and type of data collection and analysis used in this study is clear. All relevant information is clearly articulated and presented. Narrative is accompanied by clear and descriptive visuals (charts, figures, tables).

Frequent Errors Errors occur when data are not clearly presented; the study is not applicable to purposes outlined in the introduction; and methods of gathering and analyzing data and trustworthiness issues are insufficient or not clearly explained.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter organizes and reports the study's main findings, including the presentation of relevant quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (narrative) data. Findings are often written up in different ways depending on the research tradition or genre adopted.

- **Introduction:** The introduction provides a brief summary of and rationale for how data were analyzed. It describes the organization of the chapter according to research questions, conceptual framework, or thematic categories.
- Findings build logically from the problem, research questions, and design.
- Findings are presented in clear narrative form using plentiful verbatim quotes, and “thick description.” Narrative data are connected and synthesized through substantive explanatory text and visual displays, if applicable, not simply compiled. Some tables and figures may be deferred to the appendices.
- Headings are used to guide the reader through the findings according to research questions, themes, or other appropriate organizational schemes.
- Inconsistent, discrepant, or unexpected data are noted with discussion of possible alternative explanations.
- **Summary:** This section explains in summary form what the chapter has identified and prepares the reader for the chapters to follow by offering some foreshadowing as to the intent and content of the final two chapters.

Reason The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of large amounts of data, reducing raw data, identifying what is significant, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal. The researcher, as storyteller, is able to tell a story that is vivid and interesting and at the same time accurate and credible. This chapter is the foundation for the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations that will appear in the next and forthcoming chapters.

Quality Markers Markers of a quality findings chapter include clear, complete, and valid representation of the data that have emerged as a result of the study and effective use of graphs, charts, and other visual representations to illustrate the data. Findings are presented objectively, without speculation—that is, free from researcher bias. Presentation and structure in this chapter are neat, precise, and related to the study's qualitative tradition or genre.

Frequent Errors Errors occur when study findings are manipulated to fit expectations from research questions, or when researcher bias and/or subjectivity is apparent. Other frequent errors include poor or invalid use of visual representation and findings not overly generalized.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Synthesis

This chapter synthesizes and discusses the results in light of the study's research questions, literature review, and conceptual framework. Finding patterns and themes

is one result of analysis. Finding ambiguities and inconsistencies is another. Overall, this chapter offers the researcher an opportunity to reflect thoroughly on the study's findings and the practical and theoretical implications thereof.

- **Introduction:** The introduction provides an overview of the chapter's organization and content.
- **Discussion:** This section provides an in-depth interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the results and/or findings.
 - Analysis is a multilayered approach. Seeking emergent patterns among findings can be considered a first round of analysis. Examining whether the literature corresponds with, contradicts, and/or deepens interpretations constitutes a second layer of interpretation.
 - Issues of trustworthiness are incorporated as these relate to and are applied throughout the analysis process.
 - Discussion may include interpretation of any findings that were not anticipated when the study was first described. Establishing credibility means that you have engaged in the systematic search for rival or competing explanations and interpretations.
 - This section restates the study's limitations and discusses transferability of the findings to broader populations or other settings and conditions.

Reason Analysis is essentially about searching for patterns and themes that emerge from the findings. The goal is to discover what meaning you can make of them by comparing your findings both within and across groups, and with those of other studies. Interpretation that is thoughtful and compelling will provide the opportunity to make a worthwhile contribution to your academic discipline.

Quality Markers There is no clear and accepted single set of conventions for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. This chapter reflects a deep understanding of what lies beneath the findings—that is, what those findings really *mean*. Interpretation is presented systematically and is related to the literature, conceptual framework, and interpretive themes or patterns that have emerged. A key characteristic of qualitative research is willingness to tolerate ambiguity. As such, examining issues from all angles in order to demonstrate *the most plausible* explanations is an indication of high-level analysis. Integrity as a researcher is given credence by inclusion of all information, even that which challenges inferences and assumptions.

Frequent Errors Frequent errors include analysis that is simple or shallow. Synthesis is lacking; there is no clear connection to other research literature or theory. Credibility and/or plausibility of explanations is in question. The chapter is poorly structured, presented, and articulated.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter presents a set of concluding statements and recommendations. Conclusions are assertions based on findings and must therefore be warranted by the findings. With respect to each finding, you are asking yourself, “Knowing what I now know, what conclusion can I draw?” Recommendations are the application of those conclusions. In other words, you are now saying to yourself, “Knowing what I now know to be true, I recommend that . . .”

- Conclusions are based on an integration of the study findings, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis.
- Concluding statements end the dissertation with strong, clear, concise “takeaway messages” for the reader.
- Conclusions are not the same as findings; neither are conclusions the same as interpretations. Rather, conclusions are essentially conclusive statements of what you now know, having done this research, that you did not know before.
- Conclusions must be logically tied to one another. There should be consistency among your conclusions; none of them should be at odds with any of the others.
- Recommendations are actionable; that is, they suggest implications for policy and practice based on the findings, providing specific action planning and next steps.
- Recommendations support the belief that scholarly work initiates as many questions as it answers, thus opening the way for further practice and research.
- Recommendations for research describe topics that require closer examination and that may generate new questions for further study.

Reason This chapter reflects the contribution the researcher has made to the knowledge and practice in his or her field of study. In many ways, it provides validation for the researcher’s entrance into the ranks of the body of scholars in the field.

Quality Markers Clearly stated and focused concluding statements reflect an integration of the study findings, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis. Recommendations must have implications for policy and practice, as well as for further research, and *must* be doable. The reasonableness of a recommendation depends on its being logically and clearly derived from the findings, both content and context specific, and most important, practical and capable of implementation.

Frequent Errors Overgeneralization of importance or relevance sometimes leads to grandiose statements. Other frequent errors include the lack of a clear link to the review of literature, or recommendations that have no clear usefulness for practice and future research; that is, they are not “doable.”

Epilogue, Afterword, or Final Thoughts

This final section offers the researcher an opportunity to reflect on the overall process, review the findings that have emerged, and share any new learning and insights

that she or he has developed over the course of the research and writing process. How do you personally value the research experience? What are the lessons you have learned from conducting the study? What insights, knowledge, and inspiration have you derived from conducting this study?

Back Matter

Appendices

Appendices contain all research instruments used, as well as any relevant additional materials such as sample interview transcripts, sample coding schemes, summary charts, and so forth. Each item that is included as an appendix is given a letter or number and listed in the table of contents.

References

The list of references includes all works cited in the dissertation in alphabetical order by author and in proper APA format. All sources that are quoted, summarized, or paraphrased, as well as all other sources of information (text, visual, electronic, personal, etc.), must be correctly cited using APA parenthetical citation format within the dissertation. All sources must also be correctly listed on the references page. Proper citation serves several purposes: It attributes work fairly to the author, places the dissertation within the context of the literature in the field, and provides readers with a quick resource for locating and accessing sources that were used.

Evaluating the Quality of a Qualitative Dissertation

Now that you have some idea of the core elements that are required for the various sections of your dissertation, two rubrics are included for your convenience. These will hopefully provide you with useful information pertaining to the different levels of quality of a qualitative dissertation. In undertaking a research study the intent is to produce findings that will make a contribution to knowledge and ultimately make a difference in a discipline, practice, or policy. Quality must be evident in both the processes of the research, as well as in the final product; that is, your dissertation.

These two rubrics are by no means exhaustive since, as stressed previously, different institutions have different requirements and criteria, and there is no “one size fits all.” The intention is that these are tools that will provide you with some idea of what the evaluation of a completed dissertation may involve. Appendix A is a rubric for evaluating a completed qualitative dissertation. Appendix B is a rubric for evaluating a completed literature review. Please use these rubrics as guides only in assessing or evaluating the quality of your own work and in determining where limitations may lie and where improvements can be made.