Tips for Completing Your Dissertation

Document for use by
Auburn University Counseling Psychology students
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Overview

This document serves as a guide to help Auburn University Counseling Psychology program students complete the dissertation. The document is not a policy document; rather, it provides some general tips. The document does not replace any guidelines available within the program handbook or the Graduate School and program section of the student bulletin. Instead, it helps students get some quick information about strategically planning their dissertation. The program faculty members recommend students review all other program documents and make additional notes on this form regarding timelines, deadlines, and sequences within the program that may bear on the process of completing the dissertation and graduation.

The document assumes that students will plan to apply to internship in the fall term of their fourth year. Information in this document reflects the developmental trajectory of such a student. Students are encouraged to focus on the tasks listed for someone in their year of training. All students are encouraged to speak with their advisors early on to determine whether the advisor(s) have additional recommendations or preferences that may differ from these general guidelines.

Dissertation

The dissertation is part of the process of earning a Ph.D. and serves as documentation that the individual holding this doctorate is capable of producing quality independent research. (NOTE: other doctoral degrees such as the Psy.D. may not require a dissertation.) By definition, the Ph.D. is a research degree. Although there may be disciplinary differences in how the dissertation is completed and what is considered acceptable for a dissertation, the individual who has a Ph.D. will have completed an independent research project that meets the standards of the particular discipline within which the degree was earned. The standards of the particular discipline are defined, in part, by what would be potentially publishable in a journal within the discipline.

Although not all graduates of the Auburn University Counseling Psychology program will pursue a career that emphasizes research, all individuals admitted to the program entered a program to earn a Ph.D.; therefore, they must demonstrate the capacity to conduct independent research that meets the standards of the field. For the purposes of this program, that means that the dissertation must be a data-based project that fits within the scope of one or more journals you would find included within psychology databases (e.g., PsychINFO).

Organization of Dissertation

The dissertation itself has five (5) chapters; only three (3) chapter appear in the proposal document.

1) The first chapter is an introduction that functions much like an Executive Summary. It is generally 8-15 pages in length and provides basic information about study constructs. It may be somewhat similar to a mini literature review and more similar to the length you find in typical data-based published manuscripts within the field. It specifies the purpose of the study and identifies research questions or hypotheses. Although not commonly found in the introduction that is included in the typical data-based publication, many
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faculty members in the department prefer that this chapter also include two things: (1) an operationalization of constructs and (2) an explicit description of the relevance of the study to counseling psychology. The desire for these two components may vary some by the composition of the committee.

2) The second chapter is a full literature review. Additional detail about the literature review is provided later in this document. In many ways, this chapter may read like an article from a journal such as Psychological Bulletin.

3) The third chapter describes the study methodology.
   a. In the dissertation proposal, this chapter is the proposed methodology and includes a data analytic strategy section. Although not commonly retained in this chapter for the defense, if the data analytic strategy is complicated, the final defense document may include an overview of the strategy as part of the methodology.
   b. When students defend their dissertation, the Methodology Section includes a description of what was actually done (which ideally is similar to the proposal but may have changed due to requirements of the committee and challenges/obstacles that developed during the process of executing the study). Furthermore, in the proposal document, language is often in the present or future tense (e.g., “participants will read three vignettes…”). For the final defense, language must be changed to the past tense (e.g., “subjects participated in three separate interventions…”).

4) The fourth chapter describes the study results in the level of detail needed to understand the findings. Students may wish to restate hypotheses throughout the results (rather than just referring to them by number) to help the reader understand exactly what question is being answered by the analyses and findings discussed. Tables and/or figures should be included to assist with interpretation of the results.

5) The fifth chapter is a formal discussion. This will be similar in style to what is typically found in a data-based journal article, but it is typically longer and more thorough. The discussion will include a review of the findings, placement of the findings within the literature, implications, limitations, and future directions. It is critical that students do not attempt to draw conclusions beyond what they can actually conclude based on their study design.

6) Appendices are often included in the dissertation. In general, you should avoid including material that is protected by copyright in the final document. You may need to provide copies of measures protected by copyright to your committee members and outside reader as separate documents. You should include measures you developed (if applicable) and tools used for data collection (consent form/information letter, demographics questions, other stimuli, etc.) as appendices.

Dissertation Proposal

Most students find that writing a proposal takes between three months to more than a year. Although advisors may differ in the specifics, typically students will meet with advisors to discuss their plans and ideas. In some cases, this may include weekly meetings to discuss the dissertation, and such meetings may continue for months. Most students find that these discussion meetings with advisors, done in preparation of their proposal, will occur across multiple months or semesters. In all cases, students should initiate such meetings and come prepared with ideas or questions. Students who write more and are able to be self-disciplined about writing tend to finish it more quickly. Advisors will vary in how many drafts they require a student to send them prior to moving forward. Students are strongly encouraged to use the Auburn University Miller Writing Center in order to avoid situations in which advisors/committee
members are unable to focus on content and method due to lack of clarity with the writing itself. Failure to edit the document adequately reduces the usefulness of the feedback the advisor can give. Furthermore, poor grammar and editorial style may [1] lead the advisor to need more time to review drafts, or [2] lead to the advisor or committee to requiring additional drafts (i.e., failing to pass the proposal/defense the first time).

In most cases, students require about one year from the time they propose to the time they defend. Factors which may speed along the process include focused efforts toward securing IRB approval quickly after approval to do so, having an “easily carried out” data collection strategy, working on the dissertation regularly (note, regularly may be as frequently as daily and certainly would be weekly at a minimum). The IRB process typically takes more than one month, so any delays in submitting a well-prepared IRB protocol will delay the completion of the dissertation. The data collection process itself is often the portion of the dissertation that is least under the control of the student, given that participants cannot be made to participate or do what is expected. Students typically find that they need a few months after the completion of data collection to analyze their results (more time is needed when analyses are more complex or when students struggle with statistics) and to write up their findings.

In most cases, the student will submit the entire document one or more times to the advisor for approval before sending the document to the dissertation committee. The committee must then approve the document to go to the outside reader (in the case of the defense). The outside reader must approve the dissertation to go to defense at least one week before the defense. All individuals get at least two weeks to review a document, which means that the dissertation itself must go to the advisor at least 4 weeks before the proposal and to the committee at least 5 weeks before the defense (this assumes no need for any edits).

As students work on their dissertation, they should ensure they remain aware of the program policies regarding deadlines that apply to them. Because deadlines may differ for cohorts, the policies in place at the time a student entered the program should be consulted. In addition, students are encouraged to consult the newest set of policies to determine if there have been changes made that apply to all cohorts. Some changes may be optional; others may not. Typically, mandatory changes that apply to all cohorts will be made because faculty believe the changes are either relatively easy for students to meet, necessary for the program (required by the university, college, department, or accrediting body), or sufficiently beneficial that they should apply to all students.

Students should also ensure that they know when their advisors are available. Faculty who are not teaching during the summer are not under contract and may be gone for the entire summer. Similarly, sometimes faculty may be on sabbatical, which makes them unavailable for one or more semesters. Faculty do their best to communicate plans about availability to students, but sometimes emergent and changing circumstances make it difficult to provide students advance warning. In addition, faculty may not be aware of assumptions by students (e.g., sometimes students expect that faculty may respond to email when the university is closed for Thanksgiving or winter break, and some faculty might respond to emails while others will not and would not be aware that students might expect responses during such times). Regular meetings and good communication can help ensure progress and avoiding erroneous assumptions that cause delays.
Timeline

First Year:

Most first-year students will not directly work on their dissertations. In fact, they generally will not have a specific idea in mind, though some may be exploring different areas of interests. Tasks for first-year students involve:

1) discussing the process with their advisor (including preferences in timeline and advising style),
2) exploring areas of interest,
3) getting involved in psychology research by working with one or more faculty members on research, and
4) taking advantage of writing opportunities in their courses.
5) Students are encouraged to write on different topics in their courses and as part of a research team. This is a helpful part of exploring their interests. Students should think about class papers as opportunities to
   a. develop multiple studies for publications,
   b. obtain feedback about their ideas and writing,
   c. identify how they best write,
   d. explore their interests,
   e. become familiar with research in the field and the writing style of the field (including APA format),
   f. identify their strengths and weaknesses as a writer, and
   g. hone their ability to write in a scientific format.

Second Year:

Second-year students benefit from continuing to use writing opportunities in classes in ways that mirror those of first-year students. In other words, they continue to do things described above for first-year students (with regard to developing the dissertation). They also benefit from taking on leadership roles in research projects in faculty research labs because this provides them with the experience of completing an IRB submission, proposing ideas, and modifying study design. Tasks for second-year students involve:

1) continuing to have conversations with their advisors,
2) reading widely within areas of interest,
3) collecting articles that they find particularly interesting and considering what is involved in the design of the studies,
4) identifying some key areas of interests that fit for them,
5) discussing with their advisor how capable that advisor is of overseeing key areas of interest,
6) taking full advantage of opportunities to be involved in research and to hone their writing skills (This includes the use of opportunities to write papers in classes), and
7) volunteering to write portions of manuscripts and taking the lead on the data analysis for a project (Both of these can be particularly helpful in gaining the skills needed to complete a dissertation).

Third Year

Third-year students benefit from narrowing their ideas into one area and starting the writing process. They have taken advantage of class opportunities to explore their areas of interest and meet regularly with their advisor to discuss the narrowing down of their topic. They
also benefit from continued involvement in research with faculty, where they can observe and practice the research strategies used by faculty as they design and revise studies. Tasks for third-year students are those that include writing sections of the dissertation proposal. Below is an outline of what these tasks tend to include and strategies third-year students may use.

1) They tend to write sections of what may be a literature review throughout this year.
2) They develop some general idea of hypotheses they hope to test, and remain open to modifying those hypotheses as they formulate a detailed review of the literature.
   a. They may extend existing research within a topic area,
   b. combine different topic areas, or
   c. integrate new methods of research into a topic area.
3) Often, students struggle to determine the appropriate scope of literature to cover in the literature review. Consultation with advisors is critical in this phase.
   a. In particular, students must identify a study that is feasible to do within their limited budget and within a few years of time.
   b. Studies that have the capacity to solve large-scale questions that have eluded the field are typically beyond the scope of a dissertation.
4) Frequently, good dissertations may involve adding to well-done existing studies within a domain, integrating lines of research within a broad area that fit together based on theory, or building on research done by the advisor.
5) Students are encouraged to go beyond the idea that no prior research on their exact topic is sufficient reason for conducting a study. Instead, they should demonstrate their ability to use literature and psychological theory to construct questions, hypotheses, and study designs.
6) Students meet regularly with their advisor to discuss their idea, explore design options, and update the advisor about their progress.

Although the length of literature reviews varies, typically they are between 20 to 50 pages in length. The literature review should be thorough (though it may not be exhaustive). The literature review should build an argument and should NOT read as an annotated bibliography. In general, good literature reviews will be similar to the type of writing seen in published articles in top psychology journals. Such writing
   1) emphasizes the building of an argument,
   2) explores the gaps and conflicting areas of research,
   3) flows from theory, and
   4) does not include extraneous information.

Good literature reviews answer the question of, “what do I need to know.” A well-written literature review will make the research questions and hypotheses obvious to readers without requiring the author to state them explicitly (note, the authors still make the explicit statement). Essentially, good literature reviews lead the reader to say, “well someone needs to look at X and Y,” which is exactly what the author intends to do.

Good literature reviews also chiefly use primary sources. Introductory textbooks such as introduction to theories of psychotherapy are rarely appropriate to cite in a dissertation because it is expected that if it is important enough to inform a dissertation, the author has read from the original source. Good literature reviews often come from reading widely, conceptualizing the ideas, and then going back and writing a good argument.

Literature reviews that require additional work (i.e., more revisions) are those that get lost in unrelated ideas and details. This is often the result of attempts to write by summarizing
other scholarly articles and then placing the summaries together. Rarely is a huge amount of detail needed. Often, providing too much detail or summary interferes with the goal of making the research questions/hypotheses obvious to the reader. Such unnecessary detail might include providing extraneous information about numbers of participants, locations of participants, measures, etc. when these are not major areas of concern that the proposed dissertation is designed to address. In general, we do not need to know how many participants were in each study, and in most cases, individual studies are not reviewed one at a time. When most studies reviewed are done in a way that says “So and So did a study and,” the key messages within the literature review are likely to be lost among all the details. Generally, students should name only major theorists and pioneers in an area within the text. For example, “Ainsworth’s study …” referring to the key work that resulted in Ainsworth delineating types of attachment would be appropriate. In contrast, a few researchers who made incremental contributions to an idea or concept generally do not need to be identified as part of the text; rather, the idea appears in the text with the cited source appearing in parentheses. In general, you can identify people who meet this criterion because lots of people will identify those same people as influential (and they show up in textbooks). Exceptions may occur when the design of the dissertation very closely follows or builds on one or two other studies that are going to be more extensively discussed as a result of the very purpose of the study itself.

Towards the end of the third year (i.e., in late spring or summer of the third year), students finalize their research questions/hypotheses and begin developing their methodology. This can require time to identify and secure permission to use measures, so students spend some time

1) determining what type of design (experimental or descriptive or qualitative or mixed-method) will answer their research questions or test their hypotheses most appropriately and in a meaningful way,
2) identifying who their participants will be (setting inclusion and exclusion criteria) and the number needed (this includes the source of participants),
3) securing measures and/or apparatuses needed, and
4) developing specific procedures.

Students should meet regularly with their advisors as they work to finalize their methodology.

As students are finalizing their methodology, they also begin to write the first chapter of their dissertation. As outlined in the general information provided above, the first chapter will draw from the literature review and the methodology chapters. This chapter also includes information only found in this chapter.

**Fourth Year**

Fourth-year students work to finalize their proposal and then move forward in the process of completing the dissertation. They work closely with their advisor at this time. Tasks of fourth year students include

1) submitting the proposal to the advisor and following the advisor’s policies and preferences for preparing the document for submission to the committee,
2) submitting a polished draft of the dissertation proposal to the committee,
3) scheduling a proposal meeting,
4) making changes required by the committee during the proposal (or revising the proposal and redoing the proposal meeting if needed),
5) submitting the IRB (if needed) after approval by the committee, and
6) collecting data.
In cases where students have proposed and finished data collection early enough, activities completed during the fourth year may also include data analysis and, once done, development of Chapter 4 (i.e., writing up the results). Fourth-year students continue to benefit from involvement in research with faculty members, where they may have opportunities to continue to hone writing skills and study design skills as they complete their project (or work toward completion if they are waiting until their 5th year to apply for internship).

**Fifth Year**

Fifth-year students work to finish data collection and finalize their dissertations. Often, these students may be away from Auburn and may not be as involved in research labs; however, they continue to work on their dissertation, ensuring that they remain involved in research and are now able to conduct research independently. Tasks for fifth-year students involve

1) continuing to keep their advisor updated about progress,
2) completing data collection,
3) analyzing findings,
4) reviewing results with advisors,
5) consulting as needed to complete the analyses in the way needed to adequately evaluate research questions or hypotheses,
6) writing up the findings in the results section of the dissertation manuscript,
7) revising the methodology section as needed to reflect what was actually done, and
8) developing the discussion of the dissertation.

They work with their advisors throughout the process, and work to submit a formal and finalized version of the dissertation to their committee for review. After the committee has approved the dissertation for defense, students work with their advisor to follow university policies around the scheduling of the defense (including the use of the outside reader). Following the defense, they make final changes that are required and submit the document in the format required by the Graduate School.