

## **Some Help in Completing Your Dissertation**

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#### **Preface**

I am writing this document to help you navigate the sometimes turbulent and always confusing time when you are proposing, writing and defending your dissertation. I am doing this as an individual faculty member and not as a representative of the College or Graduate School so that I can include my views and recommendations even if at times these are derived more from my experience than from official rules and regulations. I have written this for my doctoral students but this is not to say that other students can't use this document (and it is available to anyone). I must emphasize, however, that you should always check with your dissertation chairperson and committee about their interpretation of the rules and their views on the way things should be done. This document is not intended to be inspirational or dogmatic; it is intended to be pragmatic. The best dissertation is a completed dissertation.

Even though this is a personal presentation of the dissertation process, I have tried to present as clear a presentation as I could of the relevant rules and regulations regarding not only the dissertation but the end game of your doctoral program. Your dissertation chairperson will try and help you at all times, but faculty are not always correct in their remembrance of the rules, so, ultimately, it is your responsibility to become aware of requirements that are unique to your program and to find the means to fulfill these requirements. As in all matters relevant to doctoral study, you should check with your academic advisor if there are questions about program, College or Graduate School requirements. When in doubt, ask.

There are a number of books and articles which have been published that might be of help in completing the dissertation. Several of these are listed in the reference section. I have also created a short document that contains some words of advice about writing issues in proposals and dissertations. This is contained in Appendix A. I should mention that quite a bit of this document was taken verbatim from a handbook created by a previous Director of Graduate Programs in the College (Jan Greenough) and I acknowledge her contributions to this endeavor. In addition, the Graduate School has published a dissertation handbook which covers the current regulations on formatting and style required for submitting the dissertation. It is invaluable and can be found at:

<http://www.temple.edu/dissertationhandbook>.

## **A. What Exactly is a Dissertation?**

Here is a direct quote from the previous dissertation handbook for College of Education students:

The dissertation is the defining component of a doctoral education. It is expected to make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge and demonstrate that the author understands and is capable of original, high-quality research.

There are some basic questions you should consider in formulating your topic and in conducting the research for your dissertation. These questions might reasonably be asked of you at the final defense, so should be born in mind from the outset. The Graduate Bulletin lists the following as characteristics of a “defensible” dissertation:

- Meet the standards for original research or other creative work in the field
- Uphold the ethics and standards governing research or creative work in the discipline
- Demonstrate mastery of the research methodology and subject matter
- Demonstrate an understanding of the contribution of the body of knowledge in the discipline or disciplines involved
- Meet the standard of writing and presentation expected in any academic or scholarly publication or production, including grammar, spelling, formatting, and general readability

To put this another way, at many dissertation defenses the question of "So what?" is raised about the research. All students should have an answer to this question.

While I agree with everything listed above, whether your dissertation has met, upheld and demonstrated all of the characteristics listed above is finally a subjective judgement on the part of your dissertation examining committee (see below for a definition of what constitutes this committee). I think I should also add a couple of qualifications. First, for many students, the dissertation is the first, or is at least among the first, pieces of research that you have completed and written up. It is, therefore, basically an amateur production judged against professional standards. Moreover, while it is your first dissertation defense, for some members of your dissertation examining committee it is perhaps their third or fourth that week. Most members of your committee understand that; most will make allowances for this; most will be kind. Still, the last event in your doctoral program is called a “dissertation defense” and being in a defensive mode is never comfortable. Remember, that you understand your dissertation, including its strengths and weaknesses, better than anyone else at the oral defense.

## **B. Steps in the Dissertation Process**

While there is no single set of steps that characterize all dissertations, there are elements and procedures which are more-or-less common to all. These steps are listed below (parts of which are taken from the previous Dissertation Handbook). I am assuming that you have finished or are close to finishing all of your required coursework although some of the comments (especially # 1) are relevant at any time in your program.

### ***(1) Choose the topic in consultation with your advisor***

Sometimes the most difficult part of the dissertation is choosing a topic, and sometimes the reason for this is that many students wait until the end of their coursework to begin thinking about the issue. Ideally, a dissertation should be the logical culmination of the courses and experiences which constitute your program. As such, the search for a dissertation topic could begin with the first course that you take and continues until the dissertation proposal has been signed by the Dissertation Advisory Committee. Throughout, it is critical that you begin to work closely with the faculty member who will chair your dissertation as soon as possible, since this person is the key to a successful dissertation experience.

Ideally, the chair of your dissertation will be someone who actively publishes or is recognized for expertise in the topic area of your dissertation because he or she will know what gaps in knowledge exist for that area and what methodologies are judged to be acceptable for examining the topic. Having said that, it should also be said that the dissertation chairperson should be somebody with whom you are comfortable and have a good working relationship. Most of the time this will be the person who has served as your academic advisor, but this doesn't have to be the case. If there is another faculty member who is better suited to help you with your dissertation, go ahead and talk to that person about serving as your dissertation chairperson. Be sure, though, to talk to your academic advisor about this first.

### ***(2) Choose the Dissertation Advisory Committee***

After the selection of the topic for the dissertation, the next step is to obtain the additional members of the Dissertation Advisory Committee who will guide you through the dissertation process. This committee must include at least three members of the Temple University Graduate Faculty, two of them, including the Chair, must be members of the candidate's degree program or approved to serve in that capacity with the advanced written approval of the Graduate School. It should be mentioned, however, that the major criterion for membership on the Dissertation Advisory Committee is that all members are knowledgeable about the topic. If it should be the case that the ideal set of faculty do not meet the rule listed above, exceptions can be granted by the Graduate School with the approval of the Director of Graduate Education in the College (i.e., Dr. Michael Smith).

Take, as an example, the Dissertation Advisory Committee for a student in Educational Psychology. The criteria for a Dissertation Advisory Committee specify that the chairperson

and one of the remaining two committee members must be from Educational Psychology, while the final member could be from Education Psychology or could be from any of the other program areas in the College, or from other any program, department or college in the University as long as the person is a member of the graduate faculty.

Choosing the two additional members of the Dissertation Advisory Committee is something you should discuss with your chairperson. In general, you should attempt to find additional members who are knowledgeable about and interested in the topic of the dissertation. But, as mentioned above, perhaps the most important characteristic is that the members of the committee work well together and have a common sense of what makes a dissertation acceptable. Your dissertation advisor is crucial in this decision.

My experience has been that most faculty will agree (or decline) to be on your Dissertation Advisory Committee if you can tell them what you intend to study and what methodology you intend to employ. Some faculty members require at least a brief written overview; some require the complete proposal. Your dissertation advisor will generally know this and will advise you accordingly.

### ***(3) Complete an Initial Draft of the Dissertation Proposal***

Dissertation proposals take many forms depending on the nature of the dissertation and the requirements of the Dissertation Advisory Committee. In some cases, the proposal will be very similar to what constitutes the first three chapters of the dissertation. In other cases, the proposal is relatively brief (10 - 20 pages) and contains only the core elements necessary for the Dissertation Advisory Committee to evaluate the proposed work. There are, however, certain elements of a dissertation proposal which are fairly common. Minimally, every dissertation proposal should contain the following elements:

- a statement of the purpose of the study, including such topics as the need for the study
- the research questions which the dissertation will attempt to answer
- a literature review containing at least a brief presentation of relevant research so that the proposed study is placed in a meaningful context (which could be theoretical or practical)
- a detailed presentation of the methods that will be used in the study
- a proposed timeline, containing a best guess estimate of when each of the separate parts of the dissertation (data collection; data analysis; completion of first draft; oral defense, etc.) will be completed.

In general, the more information provided in the proposal, the more effectively the Dissertation Advisory Committee will be able to evaluate the proposed work. The “long form” of the proposal, comprising a completed first three chapters of the dissertation (introduction, literature review, and methodology) gives the most complete background available and potentially reduces the amount of work needed later on. The “short form” of the proposal provides the basic information, but will need expansion when the dissertation is

completed. As in all things, it is critical that you check with your advisor and committee members for their preferences.

While all Dissertation Advisory Committees work differently, the most common practice is for the student and his or her dissertation chairperson to develop an initial draft of the proposal. When both you and your advisor believe the proposal is ready for review by the other members of the Advisory Committee you will then distribute it. It is always wise to ask the faculty if they prefer the draft as a hard copy or electronically. In general, you should expect feedback by all members of the Advisory Committee within two weeks.

#### ***(4) Schedule and Hold the Proposal Defense***

When all members of the Dissertation Advisory Committee have agreed that the proposal is ready to defend, you must find a time when all three can meet. In general, proposal defenses take about an hour, although some take longer. As always, check with your dissertation chairperson and Advisory Committee members about what they prefer for the defense. Sometimes these can be formal, requiring a presentation that might include PowerPoint. Sometimes it is just a discussion. If all goes well at the defense, you should make sure that the Dissertation Proposal Transmittal Form is signed by the members of the Dissertation Advisory Committee. This form can be obtained by going to the Graduate School's link through TUPortal. You can fill in parts of this form before the defense and bring it with you. The form must also be signed by the department chairperson of your department (Dr. Christine Woyshner for the Department of Teaching and Learning, Dr. Catherine Fiorello for the Department of Psychological Studies in Education, and Dr. Richard Englert for the Department of Policy and Organizational Studies), and by the Director of Graduate Education (Dr. Michael Smith).

Here are some additional issues that must be handled:

- (a) When you have a signed proposal, and when you have passed what the Graduate School calls the Preliminary Exam, you will be raised to Candidacy. The Preliminary Exam takes various forms in the College: some programs require what they call a Comprehensive Exam which can be written, oral or both; some programs require an exam that has different names (e.g., the major area exam, the qualifying exam); some programs require the completion of a portfolio; some programs use the proposal defense as the exam. As always, check with your advisor as to what is required in your program. Whatever this is, when you pass this evaluation the form indicating this completion must be signed. This form is called the Preliminary Exam Form and can be obtained through the Graduate School's link.
- (b) When you submit your proposal, you must include an official document indicating that you have submitted your research to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). You do not have to have approval; the requirement is only that the request has been submitted. Some comments on the IRB process are contained in Appendix B.

- (c) The issue of submission to the IRB is, again, one where discussion with your advisor and committee is important. Technically, the system is designed so that submission to the IRB occurs after your proposal has been signed by the Dissertation Advisory Committee. However, the submission process sometimes takes longer than you planned and it is often advantageous to submit the IRB request prior to the formal meeting to approve the proposal. Since you cannot start data collection without IRB approval, getting ahead of the game is a good idea. You must, however, discuss this with your committee and obtain their approval if you do this.
- (d) When all members of the Dissertation Advisory Committee have signed the proposal, the proposal represents an agreement between you and the Committee that the theoretical and methodological approach being taken will be considered acceptable as long as the work is conducted appropriately and within the time-line proposed. The Dissertation Advisory Committee may not unilaterally require significant theoretical or methodological changes. The Committee and the student may jointly agree on such changes but are advised to put these changes in writing.

***(5) Submit the signed Proposal Transmittal Form and one copy of the proposal to Doreen Conway.***

Assuming that Doreen has the signed form indicating that you have passed the Preliminary Exam (in whatever form this takes for your program) she will submit the paperwork to the Graduate School and you will be raised to candidacy.

***(6) Figuring out what course to register for***

I have included this as a separate step because this can be one of the more confusing aspects of completing the dissertation process. Here is the way the system is supposed to work:

- (a) After you have completed your coursework, you can register for one of two courses: 9994 (which is called Preliminary Exam Preparation: 1 – 3 credits) or 9998 (which is called Dissertation Proposal Writing: 1 – 3 credits). If you are taking a semester to prepare for and complete your Preliminary Exam, you can register for 9994. Even one credit of this course is considered full-time by the Graduate School. When the Preliminary Exam has been passed, you would then take a semester to complete your proposal and do this by registering for 3 credits of 9998 (which is also considered full-time.)
- (b) When the proposal has been signed and when you have been raised to candidacy, you can then register for 9999 (Dissertation Research). The Graduate School's requirement about credits for the dissertation process is this:

You must complete 6 credits of some combination of 9994, 9998 and 9999, but at least 2 of these credits must be in 9999 taken after being raised to candidacy.

The problem with this requirement is that all of our lives are more complex than the rules would allow. So, for example, take the case of a student who has taken 9998 during the fall semester who has not as yet obtained a signed proposal. The student believes that the proposal can be signed by mid-February, and the student hopes to graduate in May. Unfortunately, the student will not be allowed to register for 9999 in the spring since the Graduate School requires that a student must be raised to candidacy before the Drop/Add date for a semester (which is about at the second week of the semester) in order to register for 9999. As such, the student has no choice but to register again for 9998 (probably for 1 credit) and then either graduate in the summer (and register for the 2 credits of 9999 in the summer) or pay for the additional 2 credits of 9999 retroactively.

I have no wisdom about this except to say that you have to be aware of these deadlines and requirements in order to avoid paying additional tuition and also to graduate on time.

### ***(7) Implement the study and complete the dissertation***

Here is where I could include an entire book of motivational aphorisms about working hard and keeping your nose to the grindstone and your eyes on the prize and your butt in gear, but I won't. My experience has been that everyone works differently, so you have to find the way that works for you. I think it clearly helps to create a timeline and to stick to this as closely as you can. I realize that many of you have full-time jobs and families and that the dissertation is seldom at the top of your priority list (and almost never at the top of their priority list). Despite this, you have to find the time to complete your dissertation. Some students have found that the only way to do this is to set aside dedicated time (11 to 12 at night; Friday afternoon; Sunday morning, whatever) and to never use that time for anything else. Whatever it takes, do it.

### **(8) Form the Dissertation Examining Committee and Schedule the Final Oral Defense**

When you have completed a draft of your dissertation the usual process is to submit it to your dissertation chairperson for review. As mentioned above, Dissertation Advisory Committees are all different, and some committees work in such a way that all members are reviewing drafts of the dissertation at the same time. Also, your chairperson or the Committee might want to see drafts of the individual chapters rather than the entire dissertation. Whatever they want, do it. The more common procedure is for you and your chairperson to get the dissertation into an acceptable draft that is then submitted to the other two members of the Advisory Committee. After they review the document and after you make the revisions that they require, you can then schedule the oral defense. The Graduate School requires that a Dissertation Examining Committee must be created which consists of the Dissertation Advisory Committee and one additional graduate faculty member who is not from your academic program. The outside examiner can be from any program in the College (but not yours), or from any department in the University or, with permission of the Graduate School, from outside the University.

The Graduate School requires that it receives notification of the date and time of your oral defense no less than 10 working days before the oral defense. Finding a time when all five members of the Examining Committee are available can sometimes be daunting, but this is something that it will be up to you to do. Generally, you should start with your dissertation chairperson and find out when he or she is available and work from there. Sending out some form of meeting schedule or Doodle poll or something of this nature is a good way to get this accomplished. You need to schedule a two hour block of time for the oral. Doreen Conway will help you maneuver through the Oral Defense scheduling process. Here are a few things to remember:

- (1) All members of the Examining Committee must have a complete copy of the written, formatted dissertation at least two weeks before the oral defense. Be sure that everyone has the same draft since most dissertations have gone through multiple revisions. As mentioned above, check with each member of the Examining Committee to see if he or she would prefer a hard copy or one sent electronically.
- (2) There is a form that must be signed by the Dissertation Advisory Committee prior to the oral defense indicating that they believe the dissertation is of sufficient quality to be defended (The Announcement of Dissertation Defense Form which is available on the Graduate School's website). The Graduate Bulletin says explicitly that approving the holding of a defense does not signify approval of the dissertation. While this is technically true, my experience has been that your committee will not allow the defense to be held if they believe the dissertation is not ready for the defense.

### **(9) Getting Ready for the Defense**

You will have at least two weeks to worry about the defense, so instead of spending sleepless nights there are some activities that will take your mind off the looming interrogation.

- (1) Go over every line in your dissertation to make sure that it says and does what you want. If you find trivial errors like punctuation mistakes or misspellings (and you will), write these down and bring them to the oral defense. If you find serious errors, send an email immediately to the Examining Committee indicating what you have found and how you have fixed it.
- (2) Almost all oral defenses use a PowerPoint presentation, so create one. This should be about 15 – 20 minutes in length. As always, check with your dissertation chairperson as to what he or she prefers. Generally, your chairperson will review the PowerPoint for you before the oral.
- (3) This is a somewhat controversial point, but I think it should be mentioned: decide whether or not you will bring snacks (cookies, muffins, coffee, soda, etc.) to the oral defense. There are differences of opinion about this, but my experience has been that



a majority of students bring something for the Committee to eat during the oral. There are some reasonable things to consider. First, if the oral is scheduled at noon, most of the committee will be hungry and most will not have eaten lunch. Bringing something to a noon oral is considerate and will be appreciated. On the other hand, bringing a three-course, catered meal is way over the top (this has actually happened). As always, check with your dissertation chairperson.

#### **(10) Surviving the Oral Defense**

The oral defense will be one of the best experiences of your life, full of intellectually stimulating conversation where the four members of the Examining Committee will fall over themselves praising the work you have done. So, if you believe that I have some land in Florida I would like you to buy. Seriously, my experience has been that most oral defenses are not stressful and, as I mentioned before, most faculty are going to be on your side. As I also mentioned, however, it is an oral defense, so the members of the Examining Committee will ask you questions and will require that you “defend” your dissertation. Here is what you should expect:

- (1) The outside member of the Examining Committee (the one who is not a member of the Dissertation Advisory Committee) will be designated as the chairperson of the oral defense. He or she will open the defense typically by asking you to introduce yourself and to indicate how you got interested in the topic.
- (2) After the introduction, your dissertation chairperson will take over and will ask you to go over your PowerPoint. Almost always, questions will be generated during the PowerPoint presentation. Always answer whatever question is asked if you can. If you can't, just say so and indicate that you will try and find an answer after the oral. Never become defensive or aggressive. If the questioning becomes too negative, your chairperson will generally step in and help you out. Your chairperson will usually take notes about the questions and issues raised during the defense.
- (3) When the oral defense is over, you will be asked to leave the room. The Committee will then vote on whether you have passed the oral defense and whether the dissertation is acceptable. This will usually take between 5 and 10 minutes.
- (4) Your chairperson will typically come out and ask you to come back into the room where he or she will indicate the vote of the committee. If all goes well (and it usually does) you will have passed. There will almost always be revisions which your chairperson will review with you.
- (5) Make sure that the two forms required by the Graduate School are signed by all members of the Examining Committee. These forms will have been sent to your chairperson prior to the oral and he or she should have brought them to the oral. It is a good idea to check about this before the oral starts in case your chairperson forgot the paperwork.

## **(11) Making the Final Revisions and Graduating**

The Graduate School gives you 30 days after the oral to complete all revisions and to submit your dissertation electronically. If you need help with formatting, you can obtain this assistance through the Graduate School. There are specific dates when the dissertation must be submitted to the Graduate School to graduate in December, May or August. These dates can be found by going to the Graduate School's website. While it is preferable to graduate in the semester in which you have completed the oral defense, this is largely a technicality. If you don't meet the deadline, your name will simply be moved to the next graduation list.

## **(C) Additional Rules and Regulations**

I realize that the rules and regulations may seem overwhelming, but there are a few additional ones that you should be aware of:

### **(1) Change in Committee Members**

You may change the composition of the Dissertation Advisory Committee after it has been created. This is not typical and is not recommended, but sometimes faculty resign or retire or sometimes there is a disagreement about how the dissertation is progressing. To change the Committee you must complete the "Request for Change in Dissertation Committee Form" which can be found on the Graduate School website.

### **(2) Registration During the Dissertation Defense**

You must be registered during the semester in which you defend your dissertation. Deadlines for registration have been determined for each academic period. Specifically, you must register:

- In the fall semester if the oral defense of the dissertation is held from the first day of classes in the fall semester to the day before the beginning of classes for the spring semester.
- In the spring semester if the oral defense of the dissertation is held from the first day of classes in the spring semester to the first day of the Summer Session
- In the summer if the oral defense of the dissertation is held from the first day of Summer Session I to the day before the beginning of the fall term.

### **(3) Oral Defenses During the Summer**

Students are discouraged from attempting an oral defense of the dissertation during the summer since it is often difficult to obtain an adequate Dissertation Examining Committee. Under unusual circumstances, however, an oral defense may be held during the summer. In this case, you must register for the appropriate section of 9999 for at least one credit.

## **(D) Some Final Words of Advice**

To repeat a comment made several times in this document, there is no single set of steps which will guarantee that the dissertation process will be smooth or trouble-free. There are, however, several guiding principles which should help.

- **Always meet deadlines**

It is perhaps obvious to say that deadlines should be met, but experience has shown that one of the most common reasons that students have problems completing the dissertation is a failure to get things done on time. You should remember that certain critical parts of the dissertation process are not under your control. For example, a draft handed in to a committee member for review will not always be returned within a reasonable time period. If the draft was handed to the committee member shortly before Graduate School deadlines for completion, it is quite likely that the dissertation oral cannot be scheduled in time to meet this deadline. The most reasonable way to avoid this sort of problem is to allow more than enough time for each step in the dissertation process.

- **Complete the dissertation proposal early in the process**

This is a similar point to the first, but is presented separately since the dissertation proposal has proven to be one of the major obstacles to completing the dissertation. Many students wait too long to obtain a signed dissertation proposal. Students should remember that no data should be collected before the proposal is signed by the Advisory Committee and approved by the University's IRB. This process often takes at least a semester. This time must be considered when the schedule for completing the dissertation is created.

- **When in doubt, ask.**

It is evident that there are many regulations and rules which govern the dissertation process. The best way to avoid problems is to ask.

The central person in the dissertation for the student is the dissertation advisor, and this person should always be contacted first if questions arise. While the dissertation advisor and other committee members are the primary resource for substantive and research oriented issues, the following people can help you with administrative and procedural matters regarding the rules, regulations and requirements of the dissertation process:

Doreen Conway  
Assistant Director of Graduate Programs  
1-215-204-5631  
[drconway@temple.edu](mailto:drconway@temple.edu)

Marge Pippett  
Assistant Dean of the Graduate School  
1-205-204-1383  
[marge.pippet@temple.edu](mailto:marge.pippet@temple.edu)

## Bibliography

### Books and Articles Specifically About the Dissertation

There are many fine books that address researching and writing the dissertation. We've assembled a partial list for you. The ones indicated with an asterisk are held in the Graduate Programs Office and are available for your use.

Balian, E.S. (1982). *How to design, analyze, and write doctoral research: the practical guidebook*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

\*Becker, H. (1998). *Tricks of the trade: how to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

\*\_\_\_\_\_. (1986). *Writing for social scientists: how to start and finish your thesis, book or article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

\*Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising and finishing your doctoral thesis*. New York: Henry Holt Publishers.

Cone, J. D. & Foster, S. L. (1993). *Dissertations and theses from start to finish: psychology and related fields*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

\*Garman, N. B. and Piantanida, M. (2006). *The authority to imagine: the struggle toward representation in dissertation writing*. New York: Peter Lang Press.

\*Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage Publications.

\*Krathwohl, D. R. and Smith, N. L. (2005). *How to prepare a dissertation proposal: suggestions for students in education and the social sciences and behavioral sciences*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Lory, T.J., Convey, J.J. and Chwalek, A.R. (1985). *Completing dissertations in the behavioral sciences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Madsen, D. (1992). *Successful dissertations and theses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

\*Roberts, C. M. (2004). *The dissertation journey: a practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin

## **Appendix A: The Twenty-Five Most Common Writing Problems in Doctoral Proposals and Dissertations**

### **A. Introduction**

After more 40 years of reading doctoral dissertations, I have found that there are several writing issues that many students find problematic. The purpose of this brief document is to help you avoid these problems. There are several assumptions I have made in writing this document:

- (1) I am assuming that you will use the APA style for formatting. Although the Graduate School allows students to choose from three style manuals (APA, Chicago and MLS), almost all students in the College of Education use APA.
- (2) I am assuming that, like all knowledgeable graduate students, you will check with your advisor whenever in doubt. Although some rules are advisor-independent (for example, sentences have to be grammatical), there are some matters where advisors differ: when in doubt, ask.
- (3) I am assuming that this is the first proposal or dissertation that you have written, and that you approach this task with a certain amount of trepidation. This is completely understandable. I have found, however, that some students make the mistake of treating a dissertation as if it is unlike anything else they have ever written (see # 20 below). While a dissertation may be one of the longest documents you have written, it is still essentially an example of your thinking and your writing. Like all writing, dissertations have to be logically ordered, they have to present a coherent argument, and they should compel the reader to turn the page.
- (4) I am also assuming that formatting, punctuation and grammar are not the major issues you are concerned with in writing your proposal or dissertation. Having said this, it should also be said that some proposals and dissertations are rejected simply because there are so many errors in basic writing and formatting. As mentioned below (#23), a rough draft does not mean anything goes.

### **B. Issues in Using APA Style**

The following is a short list of issues involving the use of the APA style manual. You should either purchase or review this manual (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association- 6<sup>th</sup> Edition) since it covers almost everything you will need to know to make your proposal or dissertation acceptable in terms of formatting. There is an easy-to-use short version of this manual titled “Concise Rules of APA Style” that can be purchased from the APA or on Amazon.com. If you go to the homepage of the APA there are several brief documents and videos that are available for easy use.

#### **(1) Connecting the Names of Multiple authors**

In text, multiple authors are connected with an “and”; in parentheses they are connected with an ampersand (“&”).

*Smith and Jones (2006) have shown.....*

*The research has shown (Smith & Jones, 2006).....*

## **(2) Citing a Work with 3 - 5 Authors**

Identify all authors the first time you cite the source.

*The research in this area is extensive (Amos, Black, Cooper, Davidoff & Eastman, 2005).*

In subsequent citations, use the first author’s name followed by et al.

*The research, however, has notable problems (Amos et al., 2005).*

In the above example you should pay special attention to the punctuation of “et al.” since this seems to be a problem I encounter far too frequently. All of the following are NOT correct:

Amos, et al., 2005

Amos et al, 2005

Amos et. al, 2005

## **(3) Citing a Work with 6 or more Authors**

Use the et al. convention at all times.

## **(4) Several citations within a parenthesis**

APA requires that multiple citations should always be in alphabetical order.

*The research in this area is extensive (Amos, 2003; Black, 1994; Smith & Jones, 2006).*

## **(5) Page Numbers**

All direct quotations require a page number. Summaries or paraphrases do not require a page number. There are occasions, however, when you are citing a specific point that, while paraphrased, contains the basic thoughts or conclusions of an author. In such a case it is often worthwhile to include a page number.

## **(6) Quotations**

Quotations of less than 40 words should be placed in the text as follows:

*Jones found that “The highest incidence occurred in males” (p. 200).*

Quotations of 40 or more words should be indented in a block which is single spaced and which does not use quotation marks.

*Jones found the following:*

*The highest incidence occurred in males. It was also found, however, that females displayed high levels of aggressive behavior when placed in a situation where they had to compete with males. This gender effect was shown to generalize to a wide variety of situations where males and females were placed in competitive situations. (p. 200)*

(Note: This is one area where the APA rules conflict with the Graduate School's. The APA now requires that indented quotations must be double spaced for its publications. The single space rule still holds for Temple dissertations. Note also that the period in this type of quotation goes after the last word, not after the page number. This is different from the punctuation of quotations in the text. )

## **(7) Numbers**

While there are several APA rules about numbers (see pages 111 - 113 of the APA Publication Manual- Sixth Edition) the general rule is that numbers less than 10 are expressed as words while numbers 10 and above are expressed as figures.

*There were six subjects used in the study.*

*The study employed 46 subjects.*      However,

Never start a sentence with a figure, no matter what it is.

**INCORRECT:**      *66 subjects were used in the study.*

**CORRECT:**      *Sixty-six subjects were used in the study.*

## **(8) Decimals, p levels and zeros**

There are several rules in the APA Manual about decimals and related issues. The most relevant ones are:

- Use a zero before a decimal fraction with numbers that are less than 1 when the statistic can exceed 1, for example: *Cohen's d = 0.70*
- Do not use a zero before a decimal fraction when the statistic cannot be greater than 1, for example: *r = -.43*
- When reporting *p* values, report them as exact figures (e.g., *p = .031*), generally to three decimal places. However, report *p* values less than .001 as *p < .001*. As mentioned in the APA Manual, the tradition of reporting *p* values in the *p < .01* or *p < .05* format was appropriate in a time when only limited tables were available in statistics text books. Since almost all statistics

are now computed with software packages that report exact probabilities, the traditional format is no longer appropriate.

## (9) Headings

APA recommends the following:

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Level 1: | Centered, Upper Case and Lower Case                                    |
| Level 2: | Center, Italicized, Upper Case and Lower Case                          |
| Level 3: | Flush Left, Italicized, Upper Case and Lower Case                      |
| Level 4: | Indented, italicized, lowercase paragraph heading ending with a period |

|                              |                     |         |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------|
|                              | External Validation | Level 1 |
|                              | <i>Method</i>       | Level 2 |
| <i>Participants</i>          |                     | Level 3 |
| <i>Sleep-deprived group.</i> |                     | Level 4 |

## (10) Tables

The APA rules for tables are described in Chapter 5 of the Publication Manual (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). There are also several websites that provide excellent guidance on creating tables that meet the APA formatting rules. The following is a brief summary of the basic principles:

- All tables must be numbered. There are two basic ways to do this in a dissertation: number the tables consecutively throughout the entire dissertation; or, number the tables consecutively within each chapter (for example, the first two tables in Chapter 4 would be Table 4.1 and Table 4.2). The second method is easier as it avoids the problem of having to renumber every subsequent table in a dissertation if a new table is added.
- Each table must have an individual title, italicized and presented with each word capitalized (except words such as *and*, *in*, *of*, *with*, etc.).
- Horizontal lines should be used to separate information and make it clearer. Do not use vertical lines in an APA formatted table.
- All elements of the table must be double spaced.
- All tables must be referenced in the text.

### C. Graduate School Rules

In general, the Graduate School accepts almost all of the formatting guidelines described in the APA Manual. There are, however, a few exceptions. You should access the Graduate School's Dissertation and Thesis Handbook ([www.temple.edu/dissertationhandbook](http://www.temple.edu/dissertationhandbook)) for a complete list of rules and regulations from the Graduate School.

### D. Issues about Writing



The following is a list of issues in writing that I have found occur commonly. I have stated these as commands to indicate my strength of conviction.

**(11) Always use “data” as a plural noun.**

*INCORRECT: The data is clear on this point.*  
*CORRECT: The data are clear on this point.*

**(12) Never use “their” as a singular pronoun.**

*INCORRECT: A student who finds it difficult to attend to the teacher may also find it difficult to complete their homework.*  
*CORRECT: A student who finds it difficult to attend to the teacher may also find it difficult to complete his or her homework.*

As presented above, neither of these sentences is particularly great since the first is grammatically incorrect and the second is rather clumsy. Moreover, the repeated use of “his or her” (or the newly created, and equally clumsy, variants of this like s/he) becomes quickly annoying. One option is to try to make all sentences such as the one presented above use a plural noun, as follows:

*Students who find it difficult to attend to the teacher may also find it difficult to complete their homework.*

An axiom of the above rule is to try and keep the singular-plural issue consistent. Take for example, the following:

*Students who find it difficult to attend to the teacher may also find it difficult to complete their homework. A teacher who is working with a student who has attention problems may find it annoying.*

While the above two sentences are both correct, the change from plural to singular within the same paragraph is typically not good writing.

**(13) Use “Who”, “Which” and “That” properly.**

I have included this issue since it is one I find personally problematic. (Whenever I put my own writing through a grammar check, it seems I am never correct. On the other hand, Microsoft Word’s suggested corrections seem to be written in some form of Chaucerian Olde English). I think the following nested rules help:

- (1) If the text is referring to a person, use “who”; if it is referring to an object, use “which” or “that”.
- (2) If “which” or “that” is appropriate, use “which” if there are real or implied commas and “that” if there aren’t.

To help clarify this last point, one of the style manuals I used (Ultimate Style by Emma Chastain) gives the following example:

“The leopard-skin chair, which haunts my dreams, belongs to my husband.”  
“The chair that looks as though a leopard died on top of it is my husband’s.”

As Chastain points out, the first sentence retains its meaning if the “which” clause is removed. The second sentence, however, does not retain its meaning if the “that” clause is removed.

#### **(14) Use commas, semi-colons and colons as God intended.**

It seems to me that punctuation is becoming something of a lost art. While it is true that there is more flexibility today than there was when I was in school (do not ask when that was since I have no intention of telling you) about where commas, semi-colons and colons are appropriate, it is also true that not all rules have been eliminated. There are several excellent websites that demonstrate where to use and where not to use each of these types of punctuation. One of the best that I have found is the Purdue Online Writing Lab. Some of the more consistent problems that I have encountered are the following:

- Using commas in places where you would pause in speech. For example, the following is not correct:
- Using a comma at the beginning of a clause but not at the end.
- Using a comma where a semi-colon is more appropriate. Remember that a semi-colon should be used to separate two related, but somewhat independent clauses.
- The failure to use a colon when presenting a list. The following is the way I think lists should be presented:

*She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken.*

*There are several problems with the study: the sample is too small; the statistics are wrong; and, the writing is incoherent.*

#### **(15) Use “e.g.” and “i.e.” correctly**

I have found that some students use these two abbreviations interchangeably. This is not correct since they mean different things. The abbreviation “e.g.” means “for example”; the abbreviation “i.e.” mean “that is”. (If you want to impress your friends, you can tell them that e.g. comes from the Latin *exempli gratia* and i.e. comes from *id est*). The following are correct uses of these terms:

*There are several valuable statistical tests that all students should learn (e.g., the Pearson correlation, and the t-test).*

*I am going to the place where I work best, i.e. the computer lab.*

**(16) Be consistent.**

There are several usages in English where more than one format is appropriate. A good example of this is the term “African American”. I have seen this used with and without a hyphen (African American versus African-American). I don’t think it matters which way you do this, but whichever way you do it, do it consistently. Moreover, you should be consistent across terms. If you use African-American, you should also use European-American, Asian-American, etc. If you are going to use terms interchangeably, it is always a good idea to state this somewhere near the beginning of the document. A good example of this issue occurs when the terms “African-American” and “Black” are both used in a document. If you mean these terms to indicate the same thing, you should tell this to the reader.

**(17) Use percent and % appropriately**

Another common problem I have found concerns the use of “percent”. There are two ways to do this: twenty percent or 20%. As mentioned above, you can’t start out a sentence with a number so the first way would always be correct in this position. My own preference, keeping with the consistency rule, is to either always write this out (twenty percent) or to always use numbers (20%), except, of course, at the beginning of the sentence. APA prefers the use of the numeric (i.e., 20%) form in text, so this is probably the best alternative.

**(18) Don’t start a sentence with a quotation.**

There isn’t really a rule about this, but I find sentences that start with a quotation to typically be clumsy. In my opinion, quotations should usually be introduced by text.

**(19) Don’t repeat the same citation over and over again**

One of the writing issues that I find annoying is to have the same citation referenced repeatedly within the same page or the same paragraph. I suspect one of the reasons for this is that students are worried about any possibility of plagiarism. Still, using the same reference at the end of every other sentence in a paragraph is simply not necessary. In general, if you are basing an argument on a specific source, one citation at the end of the paragraph should usually be sufficient.

**(20) Keep Track of whether you mean *affect* or *effect*.**

Affect is usually a verb: *Alcohol affects reaction time*. Affect is only occasionally a noun in psychological writing: *The child’s affect was flat*. Effect is usually a noun: *The effects of alcohol vary depending on dosage*. Effect is only rarely a verb: *A change in reinforcement can effect a change in response rate*.

**(21) Use comprise and compose correctly.**

Comprise means “is composed of”.

*CORRECT: The class comprised three- and four-year-olds.*

*INCORRECT: The class is comprised of three- and four-year-olds.*

**(22) Don’t repeat in the text everything that is included in a table**

I do not believe that it is necessary to repeat all statistical results in the text if these results have already been reported in a table. This is especially annoying when a table includes a large number of correlations, all of which are repeated again in the text. This type of redundancy is one of the fastest ways to lose your reader. In my opinion, it is far better to present a table, and then to focus the reader’s attention on the results that you think are most important.

**(23) Pay attention to what your 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher told you about sentences and paragraphs.**

This should not really have to be included in a document on dissertations but, unfortunately, I have read too many dissertations where some really basic rules about writing have been violated. Obviously, every sentence has to be grammatically correct. Beyond this, remember the rule about the perfect five sentence paragraph. While this rule is often violated, in general, one sentence paragraphs are not acceptable. I think a valuable policy is to always have someone else read your work before you hand it in to your committee. Another valuable policy is to remember that the term “rough draft” does not mean a draft in which there are misspellings, ungrammatical sentences, and incoherent paragraphs.

**(24) Don’t be weird.**

I have found that many students approach writing a dissertation as if it is something completely unrelated to anything else they have ever written. This is a mistake. Like any writing, a dissertation should present a set of logical ideas in a coherent fashion. Also like any writing, you as the writer should find a voice that reflects the way you think and talk. I think the most egregious example of weird writing is a sentence like: “This researcher coded all of the data without reference to the subject’s name.” Whoever speaks of themselves in the third person? In my opinion, either the sentence “I coded all of the data without reference to the subjects’ names” or the sentence “The data were coded without reference to the subjects’ names” are both clearly better. As a general rule, the APA prefers that the passive voice should be avoided if possible. Some excellent suggestions about appropriate and inappropriate usage are presented in Chapter 3 of the APA manual (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). Two additional examples of what I consider weird writing are presented below.

*We decided to measure intelligence by using the Binet test.*

Who is “we” in this sentence: you and your advisor; you and God (thus making this the royal “we”); you and your mother? Having said this, there are occasions when writing about research where “we” is appropriate as, for example, when reporting on the actions of a team of researchers. Since it is very unlikely that your dissertation is a team effort (or, at least, it is very unlikely that you would admit this), “we” is typically not appropriate.

*There is an acknowledged problem with **our** schools.*

While the above sentence could be appropriate at times, you should remember that your dissertation might be read by people from a wide variety of countries. If someone in Swaziland is reading your dissertation, the word “our” is no longer appropriate.

*Last year’s data are included in Table 1.*

The issue here is that in ten years’ time when someone is reading your dissertation, the data in Table 1 will no longer be last year’s. This is a little less problematic since the reader can always find out when the dissertation was written, but you should remember that you are writing your dissertation for an audience broader than your committee.

## **(25) Name your poison**

I have deliberately left this last section blank since I am sure that everyone has their own personal, most hated writing issue. Whatever this is, you can fill it in here. In fact, since I try to revise this document every year (or so) if you have some great examples of writing issues that drive you crazy, please send them to me and I will include them in the next iteration.

## **Appendix B: Submitting the Proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

All research involving human subjects must be approved by Temple's Institutional Review Board. A section of the *Guidelines and Policies and Procedures of the IRB* is reproduced below:

To assure the protection of human subjects and to comply with federal law, Temple University requires that, **prior to initiation**, all research projects involving human subjects or human materials be reviewed and approved by the IRB. This policy applies to all biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects or human materials conducted by faculty, staff, and students of Temple University. If the research program or study is a part of an application to a Sponsoring Agency, the human protocol must be submitted for either Subcommittee B's or Subcommittee A's review prior to or when the application is processed by the Office of the Vice Provost for Research.

Research involving human subject(s) is defined as research involved with any living individual about whom an investigator (whether faculty, staff, or student) conducting research obtains data through an intervention or an interaction with that individual or acquisition of identifiable private information. "Intervention" includes both a manipulation of the human subject's environment or physical acquisition of data performed for research purposes. "Interaction" includes any communication or interpersonal contact between the investigator and the subject for research purposes. "Private information" includes all information about an individual or the behavior of an individual that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation is taking place, and/or information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual who reasonably expected would not be made public. Such information must be individually identifiable by the investigator to constitute research involving human subjects.

Human research is defined as any activity initiated by Temple University faculty, staff, or student which has the intent of securing information from humans for the purpose of advancing generalized knowledge. There is no distinction whether the activity is funded or non-funded. The IRB of Temple University must review all research protocols involving human subjects. It is assumed by the IRB that the investigator has included in the submission of the research protocol explicit objectives and formal procedures of the research so suitable review can be undertaken.

Any student proposing research which involves the use of human subjects as defined above must submit his or her proposal to the IRB. To avoid unnecessary delays, the proposal should be submitted to the IRB as early as possible, but minimally no later than after approval by the Advisory Committee at the Proposal hearing. Since the Graduate School will not accept a proposal unless the IRB approval has been requested, it is desirable for the student to submit a request to the IRB immediately upon approval of the proposal at the proposal hearing.

If you start your research before you receive final IRB approval, and it is not approved, your research will be invalidated and you will have to start over. Please be sure you have IRB approval before you start.

### Appendix C: Checklist for Completing the Dissertation

| <b>A. Obtaining a Signed Proposal</b>   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| <b>Step</b>   | <b>Date Completed</b> |
| (1) Select the dissertation chairperson & discuss topic   |                       |
| (2) Select members of the Dissertation Advisory Committee   |                       |
| (3) Submit first draft of proposal to dissertation chairperson & discuss revisions  |                       |
| (4) Submit revised proposal to other members of the DAC and meet to discuss   |                       |
| (5) Schedule the Proposal Defense.  |                       |
| (6) At the Proposal Defense, have the 'Dissertation Proposal Transmittal' form signed.  |                       |
| (7) Submit proposal and signed form to Doreen Conway  |                       |
| (8) Elevation to candidacy  |                       |
| <b>B. Obtaining Approval from the Institutional Review Board</b>  |                       |
| (9) Submit proposal to IRB - note that the DAC chair is the PI for this purpose.  |                       |
| (10) Final approval by IRB will be sent to student and dissertation chair   |                       |
| <b>C. Researching and Writing the Dissertation</b>  |                       |
| (11) Meet annually with the DAC   |                       |
| (12) Submit first draft to dissertation chair and Advisory Committee  |                       |
| (13) Revise and re-submit as required   |                       |
| <b>D. Scheduling the Dissertation Oral Defense</b>  |                       |
| (14) In consultation with the dissertation chair, select the members of the Dissertation Examining Committee (DEC)                                  |                       |
| (15) Members of the DAC and the DEC indicate that they have read the dissertation and that the final defense may proceed                            |                       |
| (16) Submit the 'Announcement of Oral Defense' form to Doreen Conway in enough time to meet the 10 day notification required by the Graduate School |                       |
| (17) Submit one copy of the dissertation to Doreen Conway two weeks prior to the defense  |                       |
| (18) Be sure all members of the DAC and DEC have a copy of the latest version   |                       |
| <b>E. Completing the Process</b>  |                       |
| (19) Prepare for the oral defense   |                       |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| (20) The 'Final Examination Report for Doctoral Candidates' form as well as other necessary forms from the Graduate School will be sent directly to the Dissertation Advisor       |  |
| (21) Oral defense - usually 1 1/2 to 2 hours   |  |
| (22) Submit signed 'Final Examination Report for Doctoral Candidates' to Doreen Conway   |  |
| (23) Finalize all editing, final revisions, etc.,  |  |
| (24) Submit the dissertation electronically as a pdf file, along with appropriate fees to: <a href="http://dissertations.umi.com/temple/">http://dissertations.umi.com/temple/</a> |  |
| (25) Complete the online 'Application for Graduation' available at EdPortal  |  |