

Writing Your Dissertation

Will Forde-Mazrui, USF Writing Studio Coordinator

Some Myths About Writing

- My writing should hit the page perfectly the first time.
- I have to write my Dissertation from Intro to Results/Conclusions/Implications, in order.
- My “thesis” or “argument” is fixed.

As we go, hopefully we will debunk these myths.

Common Dissertation Sections

- Dedication/Acknowledgments
- Abstract
- Table of Contents
- Figures/Tables
- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Theory/Methods
- Results
- Discussions/Conclusions/Implications

Introduction - The Basics

- Aside from the abstract, this is your opportunity to show your readers what they will learn in the coming sections.
 - General overview, yet comprehensive.
 - Aside from future research/implications (the “so what?”) of your work, everything important should be here.
 - Do not surprise the reader later!

Literature Review - Balance is Key

- *If you go to Style and Substance, this will be familiar*
 - We will do a more comprehensive discussion of this then!
- Large Amounts of Research Can Cause Problems
 - Can lead to regurgitation
 - Often, trying to show the work done, leave out yourself
- Trying to Insert Your Own Beliefs Can, Too
 - These are published scholars for a reason
 - The graduate student desire to “prove them wrong”
- Finding the Balance
 - While scholars often claim [blank], I have found [blank] (Cite 2-3 authors who have made this claim)

Theory/Methods/Methodology

- Is this ONE section? Are they Separate?
 - Set expectations EARLY with your committee. These are USUALLY separate, and separate from Lit Review
 - I have worked with Doctoral students who are struggling with committee members over what belongs in which section (we will talk about the struggle soon)
- This is the HOW section
 - What did I do?
 - How did I do it?
 - What lens am I using to investigate my results?

Results/Conclusions

- This is ALL YOU
 - You have already told us what other scholars think, now is the time to tell us what your research, experiment, study found.
 - Bring in other scholars if you are adding to their work, or refuting it, otherwise, this should be as much of you as possible.
- Again, we should not get a surprise
 - While we should not have the SPECIFICS of your findings before now, the intro should have clued us in about what it is you have found
 - But NOW is the time for the nitty-gritty specifics

Implications/Future Research

- So What?

- Implications is a good time to tell your reader why you did all of this work
- What do your findings mean for the field
- Are you adding to the conversation? If so, what?

- More to do?

- If your research has shown there are additional “holes” in the research, here is where you mention them
- It is also where you can express any limitations of your work

- This is where “surprises” can occur

Now, Let's Talk WRITING: Common Pitfalls

As graduate students, we have a tendency to:

- Try to “sound smart” or use “overly” academic prose
 - Watch word choice (limit your use of the thesaurus! (do NOT use words you do not know))
- OVER research (I am guilty of this)
- LIMIT THE SCOPE OF YOUR PROJECT

Academic Writing - A Couple of Basics

Do

- Use full, grammatically correct sentences
- Present a clear argument, and proceed logically from that argument.

Do NOT

- Use slang or colloquial language, overly flowery prose, contractions (do not instead of don't)
- Attempt to prove a vague thesis/argument

Writing: The PROCESS

- **NOTHING** is perfect the first time
 - Writing is a PROCESS. Just get your thoughts on paper.
 - Each successive draft will improve
- **Schedules/Routines**
 - Give yourself the time to write
 - Make that time a routine, same time, same place (same sweatpants if you're superstitious)
- **Defeating the Fear/Writer's Block**
 - Tip #1: If you feel stuck, write the parts that you feel most comfortable with (for me, it is close reading)
 - Tip #2: This is a giant project made up of small(er) parts. Think of them as pieces you can put together.
 - Tip #3: Have an argument/or "working thesis" in mind, but do NOT see it as concrete

Penultimately, Committee Struggles

Your Committee is full of amazing, smart, supportive scholars (of course), but this is YOUR project.

- Your dissertation is your work, it is the real beginning of your future as an independent scholar.
- Make sure that you do not cave to your committee, unless you DO agree with them. If you do not agree, find a way to incorporate their advice, or convince them you are right!
- One of the unwritten “jobs” of grad school we struggle with:
 - As PhD candidates, we are in the liminal space between student and scholar, one of our jobs is to prove to our committees that we are ready to be their colleagues.

Lastly, Questions?