How to Write a Dissertation

Friday, February 20, 2015
10:00am – 12:00pm
WHAT PROGRAMS ARE REPRESENTED TODAY?
How to write a dissertation ...

1. Definition

- Merriam-Webster Dictionary:
  - “a long piece of writing about a particular subject that is done to earn an advanced degree at a university”

- A formal document to investigate a scientific thesis
  - Original
  - Substantial
How to write a dissertation...

1. In general a dissertation:
   - Defines the problem
   - Explains the importance
   - Reviews what we already know
   - Describes what’s missing
   - Describes method used for study
   - Analyzes/discusses results
   - Draws conclusions

Definition
Definition of a dissertation ...

1. Title & Signature Page
2. Application to Graduate
3. Acknowledgements
4. Table of Contents
5. Abstract - Offers an Overview of the Research, its issues and methods
1. Literature Review
2. Data Collection Organization Methodology
3. Findings and Conclusion

Varies by disciplines

Topic Introduction
How to write a dissertation ...

1. **Chapter 1** - Introduction
2. **Chapter 2** - Literature Review
3. **Chapter 3** - Methodology
4. **Chapter 4** - Results & Data
5. **Chapter 5** - Findings, Conclusion, Recommendations

*Layout Varies by Discipline*
How to write a dissertation ...

1. Bibliography
2. References
3. Appendices
4. Tables & Charts
5. CV
How to write a dissertation ...

1. Layout

• Sample Dissertation Table of Content
Recommendations for the Beginning

What is your dissertation topic about?
What are your contributions?
What will be new or different?
Why is it significant?
Can you clearly explain your topic?
Literature Review or Historiography

What is a literature review? What is historiography?
LITERATURE REVIEW / HISTORIOGRAPHY

A DESCRIPTION OF THE LITERATURE RELEVANT TO YOUR FIELD OR TOPIC

OVERVIEW OF WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN

KEY RESEARCHERS & ARGUMENTS

KEY THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES IN THAT FIELD OR TOPIC
THE LITERATURE REVIEW/HISTORIOGRAPHY

✓ Perform a thorough literature search (all available databases)
✓ Identify and evaluate only those relevant to your topic
✓ Summarize the work and highlight the missing parts
Collecting Data & Organizing a Database

- Large amounts of data/information/sources
- Adjust, expand and improve the database
- Keywords, themes, categories
- Emphasize accessibility
- Advantages:
  - Become better acquainted with your research
  - It can help you see major and minor trends
  - Statistical analysis of various sub-topics
You can spend months collecting data / sources but it does not mean you are ready to write. You need to process and organize your research before the writing process can begin.
• Get Organized from Day #1
• Digital sources, data sets, search terms, etc.
• Multiple levels of accessing your material
  – A) secondary source material by topic
  – B) research (how can you organize your material in such a way that you can locate data quickly?)
  – Suggestion: organize your research based on the argument you are making in each chapter
• General outline of the dissertation
  – How many chapters?
  – What aspect of your argument is covered in each chapter?
  – Organization of chapters? This matters greatly!
• Outline each chapter before writing
  – Primary sources? Secondary sources?
  – Historiography/ literature review?
Introduction

- Places the project in its historical context
- Historiography and contributions to the field
- Discusses the sources / texts used
- Outline of chapters, major argument(s)
- You might address methodology here or discuss this chapter by chapter, per various methodologies
Humanities Dissertation

• Chapters
  – Should advance a new argument and material
  – You will still have to revisit and expand discussion of relevant historiographical works and theories that you briefly discussed in the introduction.

• Write your chapters in order
  • It will save effort and time later on in making each chapter transition smoothly from one to the next.
Humanities Dissertation

• Conclusion
  – Summarize the main arguments of each chapter
  – Contribution, implications, significance.
  – Answer the “why should academics outside your immediate specialty care about your findings?”

• Detailed and precise footnotes
  • Excellent footnotes are invaluable when turning the dissertation into a book.
Time Management: Making Writing a Priority

- Self-discipline
- Schedule writing time (ex: MWF 10 to 3pm)
- No other commitments!!!
- Do not access email or Facebook during your writing time. Treat them as a reward.

Think About
Time Management: Making Writing a Priority

- Set writing goals and take them seriously.
- Enlist the aid of your advisor.
- Commit to a conference and present a paper based on a chapter.
- The pros and cons of dissertation writing groups
  - Imposes another kind of writing deadline
  - Time consuming and not always helpful
TIMELINES AND DEADLINES

• Possible defense dates
  – Allot time before graduation
  – Paperwork, signatures
  – Submit a draft 3-4 weeks before defense

• Communicate with committee
  – Does the timeline work for them?

• Revisions can take a long time
  – Conceptual, organizational, grammatical

• The best dissertation is a finished dissertation
SAMPLE TIMELINE

• CHS PhD program: RA funded full-time student
  • Spring 2011: Started PhD program
  • 1st year: Developed area of interest
  • Spring 2012: Wrote a literature review publication
  • Summer 2012: Developed research question
  • Summer 2013: Proposed (chapters 1-3)
  • Collected data Fall 2013 & Spring 2014
  • May 2014: Conference presented prelim. findings
  • August 2014: Defended dissertation
Writing a Dissertation

Concluding advice

- Read a few dissertations first
- Talk with advanced students
- Develop professional habits
- Be consistent and focused
- Don’t get depressed
- Be reasonable with expectations
Thank you for your mention!