Planning and Sustaining a Dissertation/Thesis Handout from the University Writing Center

Page one

**What are some ways to get started on a dissertation/thesis?**

Before beginning your project, it can be helpful to think through these questions:

* What will you ultimately try to accomplish as a scholar?
* What questions will you explore?
* In what ways will you engage in scholarly conversations in your field?

**What are some common features of a dissertation/thesis?**

A successful thesis or dissertation usually has the following elements:

* Research questions: your major curiosities that drive the project.
* Data: texts and other sources of information that help you address your questions.
* Methods: your approaches to gathering your data, interpreting it, and using it to address your questions.

Chapters in a dissertation or thesis have particular rhetorical functions:

* Introduction: introduces questions, makes claims, and provides a “roadmap” for the project.
* Literature Review: situates your work in ongoing scholarly conversations and provides necessary theoretical frames.
* Methods: explains how and why these methods were chosen, affordances and limitations of your methods, and any ethical considerations.
* Content chapters: discusses what happened in your research, why it happened, how it connects to scholarly context, and the conclusions you draw.
* Conclusion: explains big-picture conclusions, limitations, areas for future research, and implications for your field.

Page two: common features of a dissertation/ thesis continued

In your dissertation/thesis, try to avoid the following:

* Writing to prove common or background knowledge.
* Accumulating citations for confidence-building.
* Over-quoting: large block quotes, too many fragment quotes.
* Quoting without contextualizing the material with your analysis.
* Reporting without analysis or argument.
* Not being willing to limit the focus of your project.

**What are some useful ways to approach writing a dissertation/thesis?**

* Make writing a habit: keep a writing schedule, and keep yourself accountable.
* Trick yourself to keep writing by meeting word counts or using timers.
* Write “off the grid” – turn off your phone, internet, etc.
* Write what you know, in chunks if necessary, and put it together later.
* Don’t try to make your drafts perfect, and be flexible about what you change.
* Write out of sequence (e.g., write the chapter introduction last).
* Visit the University Writing Center to discuss your progress.
* Finally, remember that you’re not writing one large project – you are writing several smaller projects.