

Planning and Sustaining a Dissertation/ Thesis



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.

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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.