The Doctoral Dissertation Proposal[1]

Prepared by
Catherine G. Burke
University of Southern California
School of Policy Planning and Development
cburke@usc.edu

Purpose: To assist doctoral candidates in the preparation of their dissertation proposals.

Caveat: This is *not* an attempt to usurp the prerogatives of doctoral committees, but simply to provide some ideas on getting started. Candidates should check with their Committee, especially the Chair, to determine what that particular committee wants as a proposal. *Always follow your committee's instructions!*

Introduction: Many doctoral candidates have some difficulty getting started on their dissertation and are uncertain as to what constitutes an adequate dissertation proposal. Often the proposal is treated as a single step in the dissertation process, one that precedes the "real work" of the dissertation. In fact, the proposal *is* the real work of the dissertation. To get started, it is useful to think of the proposal as a series of steps, each one of which can be tested with the Committee before going on to the next one.

Each step involves writing a paper that can then be critiqued by the writer, the Committee and friendly colleagues. This allows you to set clear deadlines to reach each milestone, a real help in planning the entire dissertation. It also allows you to get feedback before you go too far with a proposal that at the end turns out to be unworkable. By following these steps, you and your committee should be in agreement at every stage – the best formula for a successful and expeditious dissertation.

By the end of this process you will have a complete dissertation proposal and be ready to conduct your research. You will also have good drafts of several dissertation chapters.

Purpose of the Dissertation Proposal: To ensure you have a viable topic for a dissertation – one which is original, significant for the field of Public Administration, "doable" by one person and clearly grounded in the existing literature.

The proposal is a systematic (and extended) exploration of a topic from problem statement through anticipated analytic procedures and methodology as indicated in the

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[1] This paper is based upon my own experiences working with doctoral candidates over the years. Most of the articulation of this experience has been taken from the written work of others who are cited in footnotes. The syllabus of Professor Philip H. Birnbaum-More prepared for his Seminar in the Strategic Management of Technology in the USC Graduate School of Management provided a great deal of the content of each step. The final version is mine, and my responsibility, but I have drawn extensively on the work of others, especially Prof. Birnbaum-More with only slight modification to suit the purpose of this paper. Thanks also to Gerald Caiden, Rich Callahan, Martin Krieger, and numerous doctoral students for their encouragement and advice on how to improve this document.

steps below. Some sections of the proposal will be used, almost intact in the final dissertation, e.g., the literature review. [It should be noted that the literature review may be narrowed and refined after the research is complete, but the preponderance of the work will have been completed at the proposal stage.]

Once a proposal is complete and approved, the hardest part of doing the dissertation is over, and you are at least 50% done (believe it or not). After that, all you have to do is execute the research and perform the analysis based on your prior work from the proposal.

Step 1. Orienting Questions for Exploring a Dissertation Topic in Public Administration

To begin your search for a dissertation topic, prepare a paper for your committee which describes a set (one or more) of general orienting questions that will serve to define an area of study. Include an initial bibliography to be explored in order to give you greater familiarity with such questions and with studies and formulations pertaining to them. If your orienting questions are very general (e.g., "What causes innovation in government agencies?"), you may have difficulty putting together an adequate and manageable bibliography, and you will need to provide greater focus.

On the other hand, if your orienting questions are highly specific (e.g., "How many members of the Senior Executive Service in Los Angeles value a highly trained Public Administration doctoral graduate?), you may find it impossible to assemble a suitable bibliography for quite different reasons. You will need to pose a question that has more theoretical substance to it.

If your orienting questions have a lot of theoretical "meat" to them but there is no relevant literature, you may have identified a gap in current theoretical explanations, which may be worth pursuing as a dissertation topic. It may also suggest an area you would prefer to avoid since original theory development is the most difficult type of dissertation to produce.

Note: This first paper may be used to give potential committee members an idea of your area of interest and what you are contemplating for a dissertation. This can give both you and the faculty a better idea of whether or not you want to work together.

You may do more than one paper of this type as you examine an area and decide it is not suitable for one or another reason. E.g., you do not like the topic; decent research in this area would be too time-consuming or costly; your Chair and Committee members suggest revisions. Even if you decide not to pursue a topic for your dissertation, you may want to keep the papers you write to get you started when you are ready to do further research after your dissertation is complete.

Step 2. Literature Review and Reformulation of Orienting Questions

This paper should summarize and critically evaluate both the findings and the theoretical formulations relevant to your initial orienting questions. On the basis of this review, it may be appropriate to reformulate your questions, or to drop some and sharpen others. In any case, this paper should conclude with a focus on a single question or a set of closely related questions that appear to constitute a useful focus for research.

The Literature Review and the formulation of your question(s) may be revised based on the comments of your Chair and committee members.

Notes on the Literature Review

The Literature Review is not something to be tacked on when the real work of the dissertation is complete. On the contrary, its primary purpose is to shape the research and link it to the larger field of study. Although you must create something new in a dissertation, you do not have to create everything. Prior arguments and data can provide pieces of the argument that you do not have to repeat. A thorough literature review will let you know what pieces are available, so you do not waste time doing what has been done.[2]

[2] Howard S. Becker, Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 142.

Sternberg suggests the literature review needs to accomplish 4 things:[3]

?? Establish a picture in the eyes of your readers that you have a full grasp of your subject.

?? Connect the specifics of the dissertation subject with the larger themes of the discipline.

?? Indicate how your topic will make an original contribution to the field.

?? Generate the dissertation bibliography.

A long thorough literature review of prior research in your topic area is intended not only to demonstrate your mastery of this particular field of research, it will help you zero in on the specific questions which are relevant to advance knowledge in the field.

At the earliest stage of the literature review, the classic works are a source of fundamental ideas in the field. From this you narrow into the particular area(s) which are of interest to you and from there to research relevant to your particular problem. All this reading should provide you with ideas, hunches, potential hypotheses which might be worth testing.

If your research is to be of interest to the larger community of practitioners and academics, it is important that you demonstrate continuity between your project and important work that has gone before. On the other hand, you must not let that literature distort your own thinking to the point where you feel you cannot state your own case. Often the most interesting research disputes the conventional wisdom. Serious scholar seek out alternative ways of thinking, alternative theoretical and empirical ideas as they develop their own theoretical stance and research to test it. By reading examples of good research, you will also learn what professional work should look like in order to contribute to the discipline.

As should be obvious from this discussion, the literature search makes very clear the significance of your topic and problem, thus dealing with that important element of the dissertation. It also allows you to demonstrate the originality of your topic. Finally, by selecting the problem before developing a methodology, the methodology and analysis will flow out of your questions rather than the reverse where the questions are determined by the methodology and data available (it happens more often than you would think, and almost always leads to difficulty).

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[3] David Sternberg, How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981, p. 93.

Caveat: A long thorough review of the literature is essential in order that you master your subject. It is not necessary, however, to report on everything you have read. In your proposal and your dissertation you must select those classics and specific research which are relevant to your chosen subject not simply ramble on about everything you have read.

Step 3. Formulating a Research Problem

In this paper you will determine the substantive focus of the comprehensive research design you will build. It should consist of more than simply designating a general topic and more than simply stating a question or hypothesis. This paper should review the literature relevant to some topic or problem and show very explicitly how a specific question emerges as an intellectual issue of relevance and substantive importance to the field of Public Administration.[4] At this stage, your review of the literature should be exhaustive.

The goal is to develop a coherent weaving together of ideas and findings relevant to the main issue, rather than a long list and summary of loosely connected references. The core of the paper, ideally, will consist of a theoretical argument that leads to some implications about matters of fact, or alternatively, different theoretical arguments that lead to contrasting implications about matters of fact. The basic argument should be original though it may be drawn from existing formulations.

A research problem should also state what is *not* to be included -- the *delimitations*[5] of your proposed study. Delimitations are those limits you choose to place on your study, e.g., limiting your study to federal agencies, programs which have been in existence for at least three years, only social service agencies, public institutions not private institutions, etc.

You can state these briefly, but you must justify each of them as to why you have cut off your research as you have.

Note: The *limitations* of your study are concerned with the limits which are beyond your control, the limits inherent in your methodology – sources of data, sampling errors, your research instrument, generalizability, etc.

Step 4. Basic Plan of Data Organization

In this paper you will present a basic plan for organizing data so as to draw conclusions relevant to the problem formulated in Paper #3. This plan must bridge the gap between the general problem are articulated in Paper #1, the specific problem identified in Paper #3 and the more detailed research procedures to be elaborated in the next paper. As such, it will serve as a general guide for the next paper and the dissertation.

Ordinarily it is appropriate to conceive of such a plan for organizing data by considering independent variables, dependent variables, and control variables as basic components of the plan. There also needs to be some procedure for exploring the relations among the components being specified.

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[4] This will become your statement of purpose that will go into Chapter 1 of your dissertation.

[5] Virginia M. Sugden, The Graduate Thesis: The Complete Guide to Planning and Preparation. New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1973, p.28.

The mode of assessing or creating variation should be described. (E.g., will you manipulate the independent variable? If so, how will you assess variation -- by asking questions, observing, etc.?) You should also outline the general mode of analyzing such variations in a general way. (E.g., will you compare two groupings, use multiple regression, rely on tabular analysis, etc.) It is not expected that this paper will include a specification of all details – that will be the task for the next paper.

Step 5. The Production and Analysis of Data

This paper has three parts.

1) In the first part you should resolve the following issues:

   a) What constitutes a case? Is it a person, an innovation, a company, a nation, etc.?

   b) To what class of cases is your formulation intended to apply? For example, federal government agencies, middle management, high level bureaucrats in the U.S., British and German governments, etc.

   c) How are the cases to be studied to be selected? E.g., cluster sampling, stratified sampling with one judgmental and one random strata, inside experts, outside experts, etc.

      Do not assume that the selection of cases is handled by simply stating that "a simple random sample will be drawn" – typically it will not. If this is the case, then, from what sampling frame? Why this sampling frame and not another? How many cases? Are controls to be incorporated by selecting only cases falling in certain classes (e.g., only males or females, agencies in state governments above or below a certain size)?

      Your selection plan should be tailored to the requirements of the problem, the setting of the study and the resources available.

2) In the second part of the paper, describe the production of data.

   Data are said here to be "produced" rather than "collected" to emphasize the active role of the investigator. To speak of "collecting" or "gathering" data implies that bits of information are hanging around waiting to be picked up like shells on a beach.

   Actually, in most, if not all research in Public Administration, information must be elicited or produced by some action of the investigator, e.g., asking questions, presenting a situation and requesting some action, etc. Even when using existing

data bases, the investigator must figure out which questions can, and should be, asked; whether or not the data is appropriate to the questions being researched; etc.

The questions to be answered in this second part of the paper are:

a) What is the required information?

b) What is to be done by the investigator to obtain the required information?

c) How will that information be used to classify cases or to locate them along a continuum that represents a variable of interest.

d) What procedure will allow a check for the adequacy of such classification or placement of cases along continua (i.e., reliability and validity)?

e) What are the limitations inherent in your methodology?

If any of these matters are resolved by specifying procedures that are not very simple and direct, a rationale for the procedures should be provided.

3) In the final part of this paper describe the organization and analysis of data. For the purpose of writing this section, it may be useful to conceive of the data production as completed and all information recorded in the form that the procedures of the second part indicate. The question to be answered then is, what is to be done with this information so as to emerge with empirically based conclusions relevant to the original problem? How are the data to be summarized in a form that bears on the problem as formulated? How can potential threats to internal validity be ruled out in the analysis?

   It may be convenient to build this section around a set of dummy tables with a clear specification of:

   a) What the variables are.
   b) How the raw data have been transformed to generate these variables (unless that has already been specified in detail in the previous section)
   c) What general patterns of outcomes in the tables are to be anticipated from the underlying reasoning (Papers 1 and 3).
   d) What questions are to be performed to allow a judgment about the degree to which actual outcomes support the original reasoning?

Step 6. Self-critique

Note: This paper is *not* necessary as part of a dissertation proposal, but you may find it useful to carry out before presenting Step 5 which completes the proposal to your committee.

This paper allows you to "take stock" of your previous work and to allow you to begin to develop a critical perspective on your own work. In this paper you should take the position of an impartial outside reviewer either from a funding agency or a journal editor or reviewer. You will need to evaluate your work on how well it advances knowledge within the field, how well it has controlled for alternative explanations, and what questions it logically would lead to in future research.

The Dissertation

As you have undoubtedly figured out, when you have completed the proposal, you will have most, if not all, of the content for the first three chapters of your dissertation complete. There will be some reorganizing to get the first chapter with its introduction, statement of purpose, significance together. The literature review chapter should be essentially complete (though in the course of your research you may refine it or discover new material) along with the specific statement of your problem and hypotheses, though you will have to add beginning and summary paragraphs. The methodology chapter will also be complete, and you will know exactly what you are going to do to gather your data and then analyze it.*

More important, if you discuss each of the steps with your committee as you go along, you will know what you are doing has a very high probability of successful completion and defense.

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* This last statement is true as you begin gathering data, but it is unlikely to remain true as your research progresses. As you gather your data, you are likely to make discoveries that cause you to modify your hypotheses or methodology to take into account what you learn in the process. Few, if any, significant research projects progress in a linear fashion. You will find yourself circling back, re-examining issues, and perhaps re-formulating theory. You may have to administer a new instrument, expand to gather comparative data, analyze your data in novel ways. No dissertation travels an "ideal" linear path from start to finish. Crises are normal and they will require you to use your ingenuity and resourcefulness to get through them. You are not the first, nor the only one, to experience such obstacles.

Bibliography on Writing a Dissertation

Each of these books takes a slightly different approach to writing a dissertation, but you do not need to read all of them! One or two is probably enough. Just take a look to determine which one seems most congenial to you. I have marked with an asterisk the ones I like best.

* Kenneth Atchity, A Writer's Time: A Guide to the Creative Process, from Vision through Revision. New York: An L/A House Book, W.W. Norton & Co., Ltd., 1986. [An excellent map through the process of writing a book, or dissertation.]

* Howard S. Becker with a Chapter by Pamela Richards. Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986

* Wayne C. Booth, Gregory g. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, The Craft of Research. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995

John D. Cone and Sharon L. Foster, Dissertations and Theses from Start to Finish. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1993.
[This book is intended for psychology and related fields. It seems to have enough relevance for our fields that I have included it here.]

Kjell Erik Rudestam and Rae R. Newton, Surviving Your Dissertation. A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992.

* David Sternberg, How to Complete *and Survive* A Doctoral Dissertation. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981. ISBN 0-312-39606-6

* Virginia Sugden, The Graduate Thesis: The Complete Guide to Planning and Preparation. New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1973.
[This book is out of print, but you may be able to find a copy in a university library. It gives a very traditional approach to writing a dissertation proposal and a dissertation. Its first chapter on moving from a problem area to a problem to getting the title of your dissertation right (at which point you are about 50% complete) has been very helpful to many doctoral students, including me, many years ago.]

William Zinsser, Writing to Learn. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.