



## Doctoral Dissertations & Proposals: Social Sciences & Humanities

This guide online: [go.iu.edu/3LVb](https://go.iu.edu/3LVb)

### 1. About

A doctoral dissertation or thesis is a professional necessity; in order to finish your graduate degree and begin your professional career, it is necessary to write and defend one.

Your dissertation is a document that demonstrates your professional proficiency in a discipline or subject.

For many beginning writers, the word dissertation conjures unrealistic visions of an industrious year spent in the university library before miraculously emerging with five polished chapters. Since this is certainly not the case for most students, this pamphlet will offer advice about the dissertation writing and revising process, suggest ways that Writing Tutorial Services can help dissertation writers, and highlight other useful resources.

### 2. Choosing a Topic

Most disciplines require that students write and defend a dissertation or thesis proposal before they begin research and writing. The **dissertation proposal** is a document that presents the main questions or ideas your project will investigate, reviews relevant literature on the topic, explains the necessity of further research, and, finally, discusses expected hypotheses and their significance to the topic and in the larger discipline.

Choosing your topic can be frightening: you will probably be working on this project for several years. Talking with faculty in your department can help you begin to focus your thinking.

In your field of study, you will come to be identified by your project and may revise your finished dissertation to publish in article or book form. But just because a dissertation hasn't been written doesn't mean it should be written. You need to justify why your proposed project is both personally meaningful and professionally important. It can be helpful to ask yourself several questions in order to choose a topic:

- What scholarly ideas, concepts, or debates do I find most interesting? What issues am I most drawn to and why?
- Are there distinct gaps or problems in my field that need further study?
- What research methodologies and writing styles do I find most compelling?

When you are considering possible topics, it's also important to think about who will advise your dissertation. Meeting with your prospective advisor will be important for narrowing and refining the central questions of your project. Since he or she has most likely advised previous dissertations, it's also a good idea to ask your advisor to suggest a model dissertation that you can use to help realistically frame your own topic

### 3. Researching and Writing your Dissertation

The dissertation research and writing process varies by discipline. For students in the sciences, the research process and experimental findings can sometimes be more important than the final written document produced. Students in the social sciences often have to conduct intensive field or archival research before focusing on writing in a concentrated way.

Below are some general strategies to help you through the dissertation process.

#### Write every day

As the saying goes, even if you wrote just a page every day, you would have over 365 pages after a year—that's almost a finished dissertation!

Although this timetable is slightly unrealistic, habitual writing is important for completing your dissertation. Writing can help you generate complex ideas and process information. Don't put off writing until you have what you consider to be fully formed ideas and chapters—writing even while you're conducting research, for example, will allow you to refine your research questions and begin envisioning how your data will fit together.

Daily writing, no matter how short, will ensure consistent engagement with your dissertation ideas. Nothing is more difficult—or frustrating—than returning to your project after having spent weeks or months completely away from it.

Set realistic short-term and long-term deadlines and construct a timetable. In order to make your project more manageable, break down your dissertation into workable chunks that could be shared with your writing group or brought to Writing Tutorial Services for feedback. Set realistic chapter deadlines and meetings with your advisor and establish a policy for dealing with missed deadlines. Feeling stuck and missing multiple deadlines is an important reason to seek out your advisor, not a reason to avoid him or her.

#### Form a dissertation writing group

Having a group of other dissertating students in your field can create a supportive environment in which to discuss ideas, present writing, and get feedback before submitting chapters to advisors or committees.

Group meetings can also help motivate you to write regularly. It's a good idea to form a writing group early in the process, establish clear expectations concerning what members hope to get out of the group, and set a realistic writing and meeting schedule..

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Services for feedback. Set realistic chapter deadlines and meetings with your advisor and establish a policy for dealing with missed deadlines. Feeling stuck and missing multiple deadlines is an important reason to seek out your advisor, not a reason to avoid him or her.

#### **Own your writing.**

Remember that your doctoral dissertation belongs to you. It demonstrates your disciplinary proficiency, defines your professional identity, and will likely be published. Therefore, now is the time to develop the professional skills necessary for success in your discipline, including having your work read and reviewed by peers (for example, in your writing group), learning to self-diagnose and get advice for your writing weaknesses, and, if necessary, contacting a professional editor to help with language or grammatical difficulties.

#### **Decide whether you need revising or proofreading**

When you are thinking about the revision process, be clear about the differences between revising and proofreading.

Revising a dissertation means much more than editing for grammar, clarifying word choices, or cutting and pasting. The goal when revising your dissertation should be to make your ideas as developed and as clear as possible. Revising allows you to think in a concentrated and holistic way about your topic, to trace out larger connections and realize further implications of your ideas, and to organize your material in the most logical fashion. Things like word-level editing, transitions between paragraphs, and grammar issues are all part of the proofreading process that you may want to save until the very final stages of your project.

#### **Seek help if you get stuck**

Everyone gets stuck. When this happens, ask yourself why you're getting stuck. Are you giving yourself enough quality writing time every day? Do you have a quiet and conducive writing environment? Can you create a revised timeline to break up what seems like an unwieldy chapter into manageable sections? Can you meet with your advisor to discuss your dissertation-writing block?

## **4. Using Writing Tutorial Services Successfully**

Writing Tutorial Services is available to help with all stages of the dissertation writing process. When making an appointment, mention your dissertation topic and department so that you can be matched with a tutor familiar with your discipline if possible. Below are some helpful suggestions for making the most out of your tutoring session.

#### **Know that you are your best critic**

You know your project better than anyone else; it is therefore your responsibility to make the most out of your appointment by establishing clear and reasonable goals to focus on in the tutorial. What do you think are the main analytical weaknesses of this section of your dissertation? Why? Anticipate and locate potential problems in your analysis and discuss these with your tutor at the beginning of your appointment.

#### **Identify your stage in the revision process.**

Are you in the early stages of revision or have you already revised this section and submitted it to your committee for acceptance? Have you shown this section of your dissertation to anyone else or your advisor? If so, what comments or feedback did they provide?

#### **Bring previous feedback to your appointment**

If you have feedback from your advisor, writing group, or previous tutoring appointment and are trying to incorporate suggested changes, it's a good idea to bring this feedback with you.

#### **Be ready to explain how the section of writing fits into your chapter and the larger project**

Since your tutor will most likely be unfamiliar with your work, it's a good idea to be ready to explain exactly how the section of writing you bring to your appointment fits into the larger project. Often it can be helpful to write a short paragraph or abstract explaining your dissertation's main questions and arguments so that your tutor can provide careful feedback.

Doing this extra work before you come to Writing Tutorial Services will help you make the most out of your tutoring session.

#### **Be aware that tutors can read only about ten pages of a dissertation in a 50-minute tutoring session**

Trying to include more pages will leave too little time for careful feedback and productive discussion. Remember, the goal of the appointment is not to go over every aspect of the section you bring in, but rather to develop strategies that you can apply to other sections of your dissertation as well.

## **Revise your work between appointments**

Feedback from WTS is most helpful when you incorporate it into your writing immediately following the appointment. Working between appointments will help you to focus your questions for the tutor and foster a sense of ownership over your own work.

## **5. Other Helpful Resource**

### **University Resources**

Indiana University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers a dissertation support group that helps students finish their dissertations by focusing on issues like time management, writer's block, and stress reduction. Contact CAPS to make an appointment.

The IU GradGrants Center offers free grant proposal assistance, including help with fellowship proposal writing. Visit their website at [go.iu.edu/3LYm](http://go.iu.edu/3LYm) to make an appointment or browse online resources.

### **Bibliography**

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Semenza, Gregory. Graduate Study for the Twenty-first Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010.

Silva, Paul J. How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

**Writing Tutorial Services**  
**Wells Library Information Commons**  
**Indiana University**  
**Phone: (812) 855-6738**  
**Website: [go.iu.edu/3LXG](http://go.iu.edu/3LXG)**  
**Support WTS: [go.iu.edu/3LXI](http://go.iu.edu/3LXI)**

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.