

THE "THINKING ABOUT IT" STAGE

The "thinking about it stage" is when you are finally faced with the reality of completing your degree. Usually the early phases of a graduate program proceed in clear and very structured ways. The beginning phases of a graduate program proceed in much the same manner as an undergraduate degree program. There are clear requirements and expectations, and the graduate student moves along, step by step, getting ever closer to the completion of the program. One day, however, the clear structure begins to diminish and now you're approaching the thesis/dissertation stage. This is a new and different time. These next steps are more and more defined by **you** and not your adviser, the program, or the department.

✓ **1. Be inclusive with your thinking.** Don't try to eliminate ideas too quickly. Build on your ideas and see how many different research projects you can identify. Give yourself the luxury of being expansive in your thinking at this stage -- you won't be able to do this later on. Try and be creative.

✓ **2. Write down your ideas.** This will allow you to revisit an idea later on. Or, you can modify and change an idea. If you don't write your ideas they tend to be in a continual state of change and you will probably have the feeling that you're not going anywhere. What a great feeling it is to be able to sit down and scan the many ideas you have been thinking about, if **they're written down.**

✓ **3. Try not to be overly influenced at this time by what you feel others expect from you** (your colleagues, your profession, your academic department, etc.). You have a much better chance of selecting a topic that will be really of interest to you if it is your topic. This will be one of the few opportunities you may have in your professional life to focus in on a research topic that is really of your own choosing.

✓ **4. Don't begin your thinking by assuming that your research will draw international attention to you!!** Instead, be realistic in setting your goal. Make sure your expectations are tempered by:

... the realization that you are fulfilling an academic requirement,

... the fact that the process of conducting the research may be just as important (or more important) than the outcomes of the research, and

... the idea that first and foremost the whole research project should be a learning experience for you.

If you can keep these ideas in mind while you're thinking through your research you stand an excellent chance of having your research project turn out well.

✓ **5. Be realistic about the time that you're willing to commit to your research project.** If it's a 10 year project that you're thinking about admit it at the beginning and then decide whether or not you have 10 years to give to it. If the project you'd like to do is going to demand more time than you're willing to commit then you have a problem.

I know it's still early in your thinking but it's never too early to create a draft of a timeline. Try using the 6 Stages (see the next item) and put a start and a finish time for each. Post your timeline in a conspicuous place (above your computer monitor?) so that it continually reminds you how you're doing. Periodically update your timeline with new dates as needed. *(Thanks to a website visitor from Philadelphia for sharing this idea.)*

 6. If you're going to ask for a leave of absence from your job while you're working on your research this isn't a good time to do it. Chances are you can do the "thinking about it" stage without a leave of absence. Assuming that there are six major phases that you will have during your research project, probably **the best time to get the most from a leave of absence is during the fourth stage* - the writing stage**. This is the time when you really need to be thinking well. To be able to work at your writing in large blocks of time without interruptions is something really important. A leave of absence from your job can allow this to happen. A leave of absence from your job prior to this stage may not be a very efficient use of the valuable time away from your work.

Stage 1 - Thinking About It

Stage 2 - Preparing the Proposal

Stage 3- Conducting the Research

Stage 4- Writing the Research Paper*

Stage 5- Sharing the Research Outcomes with Others

Stage 6- Revising the Research Paper

 7. It can be most helpful at this early stage to try a very **small preliminary research study** to test out some of your ideas to help you gain further confidence in what you'd like to do. The study can be as simple as conducting half a dozen informal interviews with no attempt to document what is said. The key is that it will give you a chance to get closer to your research and to test out whether or not you really are interested in the topic. And, you can do it before you have committed yourself to doing something you may not like. Take your time and try it first.

PREPARING THE PROPOSAL

Assuming you've done a good job of "thinking about" your research project, you're ready to actually prepare the proposal. A word of caution - those students who tend to have a problem in coming up with a viable proposal often are the ones that have tried to rush through the "thinking about it" part and move too quickly to trying to write the proposal. Here's a final check. Do each of these statements describe you? If they do you're ready to prepare your research proposal.

I am **familiar** with other research that has been conducted in areas related to my research project.

(___ Yes, it's me)

(___ No, not me)

I have a clear **understanding** of the steps that I will use in conducting my research.

(___ Yes, it's me)

(___ No, not me)

I feel that I have the **ability** to get through each of the steps necessary to complete my research project.

(___ Yes, it's me)

(___ No, not me)

I know that I am **motivated** and have the **drive** to get through all of the steps in the research project.

(___ Yes, it's me)

(___ No, not me)

Okay, you're ready to write your research proposal. Here are some ideas to help with the task:

 **8. Read through someone else's research proposal.** Very often a real stumbling block is that we don't have an image in our mind of what the finished research proposal should look like. How has the other proposal been organized? What are the headings that have been used? Does the other proposal seem clear? Does it seem to suggest that the writer knows the subject area? Can I model my proposal after one of **the** ones that I've seen? If you can't readily find a proposal or two to look at, ask your adviser to see some. Chances are your adviser has a file drawer filled with them.

 **9. Make sure your proposal has a comprehensive review of the literature included.** Now this idea, at first thought, may not seem to make sense. I have heard many students tell me that "This is only the proposal. I'll do a complete literature search for the dissertation. I don't want to waste the time now." But, this is the time to do it. The rationale behind the literature review consists of an argument with two lines of analysis: 1) this research is needed, and 2) the methodology I have chosen is most appropriate for the question that is being asked. Now, why would you want to wait? Now is the time to get informed and to learn from others who have preceded you! If you wait until you are writing the dissertation it is too late. You've got to do it some time so you might as well get on with it and do it now. Plus, you will probably want to add to the literature review when you're writing the final dissertation. *(Thanks to a website visitor from Mobile, Alabama who helped to clarify this point.)*

 **10. With the ready availability of photocopy machines you should be able to bypass many of the hardships that previous dissertation researchers had to deal with in developing their literature review. When you read something that is important to your study, photocopy the relevant article or section.** Keep your photocopies organized according to categories and sections. And, most importantly, photocopy the bibliographic citation so that you can easily reference the material in your bibliography. Then, when you decide to sit down and actually write the literature review, bring out your photocopied sections, put them into logical and sequential order, and then begin your writing.

 **11. What is a proposal anyway? A good proposal should consist of the first three chapters of the dissertation.** It should begin with a statement of the

problem/background information (typically Chapter I of the dissertation), then move on to a review of the literature (Chapter 2), and conclude with a defining of the research methodology (Chapter 3). Of course, it should be written in a future tense since it is a proposal. To turn a good proposal into the first three chapters of the dissertation consists of changing the tense from future tense to past tense (from "This is what I would like to do" to "This is what I did") and making any changes based on the way you actually carried out the research when compared to how you proposed to do it. Often the intentions we state in our proposal turn out different in reality and we then have to make appropriate editorial changes to move it from proposal to dissertation.

 **12. Focus your research very specifically.** Don't try to have your research cover too broad an area. Now you may think that this will distort what you want to do. This may be the case, but you will be able to do the project if it is narrowly defined. Usually a broadly defined project is not do-able. By defining too broadly it may sound better to you, but there is a great chance that it will be unmanageable as a research project. When you complete your research project it is important that you have something specific and definitive to say. This can be accommodated and enhanced by narrowly defining your project. Otherwise you may have only broadly based things to say about large areas that really provide little guidance to others that may follow you. Often the researcher finds that what he/she originally thought to be a good research project turns out to really be a *group* of research projects. Do one project for your dissertation and save the other projects for later in your career. Don't try to solve all of the problems in this one research project.

 **13. Include a title on your proposal.** I'm amazed at how often the title is left for the end of the student's writing and then somehow forgotten when the proposal is prepared for the committee. A good proposal has a good title and it is the first thing to help the reader begin to understand the nature of your work. Use it wisely! Work on your title early in the process and revisit it often. It's easy for a reader to identify those proposals where the title has been focused upon by the student. Preparing a good title means:

...having the most important words appear toward the beginning of your title,

...limiting the use of ambiguous or confusing words,

..breaking your title up into a title and subtitle when you have too many words, and

...including key words that will help researchers in the future find your work.

 **14. It's important that your research proposal be organized around a set of questions** that will guide your research. When selecting these guiding questions try to write them so that they frame your research and put it into perspective with other research. These questions must serve to establish the link between your research and other research that has preceded you. Your research questions should clearly show the relationship of your research to your field of study. Don't be carried away at this point and make your questions too narrow. You must start with broad relational questions.

A good question:

Do adult learners in a rural adult education setting have characteristics that are similar to adult learners in general ?

A poor question:

What are the characteristics of rural adult learners in an adult education program? (too narrow)

A poor question:

How can the XYZ Agency better serve rural adult learners? (not generalizable)

- ✓ 15. Now here are a few more ideas regarding the defining of your research project through your proposal.
- ✓ a. Make sure that you will be **benefitting those who are participating in the research**. Don't only see the subjects as sources of data for you to analyze. Make sure you treat them as participants in the research. They have the right to understand what you are doing and you have a responsibility to share the findings with them for their reaction. Your research should not only empower you with new understandings but it should also empower those who are participating with you.
- ✓ b. **Choose your methodology wisely**. Don't be too quick in running away from using a quantitative methodology because you fear the use of statistics. A qualitative approach to research can yield new and exciting understandings, but it should not be undertaken because of a fear of quantitative research. A well designed quantitative research study can often be accomplished in very clear and direct ways. A similar study of a qualitative nature usually requires considerably more time and a tremendous burden to create new paths for analysis where previously no path had existed. Choose your methodology wisely!
- ✓ c. Sometimes a **combined methodology** makes the most sense. You can combine a qualitative preliminary study (to define your population more clearly, to develop your instrumentation more specifically or to establish hypotheses for investigation) with a quantitative main study to yield a research project that works well.
- ✓ d. Deciding on **where you will conduct the research** is a major decision. If you are from another area of the country or a different country there is often an expectation that you will return to your "home" to conduct the research. This may yield more meaningful results, but it will also most likely create a situation whereby you are expected to fulfill other obligations while you are home. For many students the opportunity to conduct a research project away from home is an important one since they are able to better control many of the intervening variables that they can not control at home. Think carefully regarding your own situation before you make your decision.
- ✓ e. What if you have the opportunity for **conducting your research in conjunction with another agency or project** that is working in related areas. Should you do it? Sometimes this works well, but most often the dissertation researcher gives up valuable freedom to conduct the research project in conjunction with something else. **Make sure the trade-offs are in your favor**. It can be very disastrous to have the other project suddenly get off schedule and to find your own research project

temporarily delayed. Or, you had tripled the size of your sample since the agency was willing to pay the cost of postage. They paid for the postage for the pre-questionnaire. Now they are unable to assist with postage for the post-questionnaire. What happens to your research? I usually find that the cost of conducting dissertation research is not prohibitive and the trade-offs to work in conjunction with another agency are not in favor of the researcher. Think twice before altering your project to accommodate someone else. Enjoy the power and the freedom to make your own decisions (and mistakes!) -- this is the way we learn!

✓ 16. Selecting and preparing your advisory committee to respond to your proposal should not be taken lightly. If you do your "homework" well **your advisory committee can be most helpful to you.** Try these ideas:

✓ a. If you are given the opportunity to select your dissertation committee do it wisely. Don't only focus on content experts. **Make sure you have selected faculty for your committee who are supportive of you** and are willing to assist you in successfully completing your research. You want a committee that you can ask for help and know that they will provide it for you. Don't forget, you can always access content experts who are not on your committee at any time during your research project.

✓ b. **Your major professor/adviser/chairperson is your ally.** When you go to the committee for reactions to your proposal make sure your major professor is fully supportive of you. Spend time with him/her before the meeting so that your plans are clear and you know you have full support. The proposal meeting should be seen as an opportunity for you and your major professor to seek the advice of the committee. Don't ever go into the proposal meeting with the feeling that it is you against them!

✓ c. **Provide the committee members with a well-written proposal** well in advance of the meeting. Make sure they have ample time to read the proposal.

✓ d. **Plan the proposal meeting well.** If graphic presentations are necessary to help the committee with understandings make sure you prepare them so they look good. A well planned meeting will help your committee understand that you are prepared to move forward with well planned research. Your presentation style at the meeting should not belittle your committee members (make it sound like you know they have read your proposal) but you should not assume too much (go through each of the details with an assumption that maybe one of the members skipped over that section).

WRITING THE THESIS OR DISSERTATION

Now this is the part we've been waiting for. I must assume that you have come up with a good idea for research, had your proposal approved, collected the data, conducted your analyses and now you're about to start writing the dissertation. If you've done the first steps well this part shouldn't be too bad. In fact it might even be enjoyable!

✓ 17. The major myth in writing a dissertation is that you start writing at Chapter One and then finish your writing at Chapter Five. This is seldom the case. The most productive

approach in writing the dissertation is to **begin writing those parts of the dissertation that you are most comfortable with**. Then move about in your writing by completing various sections as you think of them. At some point you will be able to spread out in front of you all of the sections that you have written. You will be able to sequence them in the best order and then see what is missing and should be added to the dissertation. This way seems to make sense and builds on those aspects of your study that are of most interest to you at any particular time. Go with what interests you, start your writing there, and then keep building!

(David Kraenzel - North Dakota State University - wrote in describing the "A to Z Method". Look at the first section of your paper. When you are ready go ahead and write it. If you are not ready, move section-by-section through your paper until you find a section where you have some input to make. Make your input and continue moving through the entire paper - from A to Z - writing and adding to those sections for which you have some input. Each time you work on your paper follow the same A to Z process. This will help you visualize the end product of your efforts from very early in your writing and each time you work on your paper you will be building the entire paper - from A to Z. *Thanks David!*)

✓ 18. If you prepared a comprehensive proposal you will now be rewarded! Pull out the proposal and begin by checking your proposed research methodology. Change the tense from future tense to past tense and then make any additions or changes so that the methodology section truly reflects what you did. You have now been able to **change sections from the proposal to sections for the dissertation**. Move on to the Statement of the Problem and the Literature Review in the same manner.

✓ 19. I must assume you're using some form of word processing on a computer to write your dissertation. (if you aren't, you've missed a major part of your doctoral preparation!) If your study has specific names of people, institutions and places that must be changed to provide anonymity don't do it too soon. Go ahead and **write your dissertation using the real names**. Then at the end of the writing stage you can easily have the computer make all of the appropriate name substitutions. If you make these substitutions too early it can really confuse your writing.

✓ 20. As you get involved in the actual writing of your dissertation you will find that conservation of paper will begin to fade away as a concern. Just as soon as you print a draft of a chapter there will appear a variety of needed changes and before you know it another draft will be printed. And, it seems almost impossible to throw away any of the drafts! After awhile it will become extremely difficult to remember which draft of your chapter you may be looking at. **Print each draft of your dissertation on a different color paper**. With the different colors of paper it will be easy to see which is the latest draft and you can quickly see which draft a committee member might be reading. *(Thanks to Michelle O'Malley at University of Florida for sharing this idea.)*

✓ 21. The one area where I would caution you about using a word processor is in the initial creation of elaborate graphs or tables. I've seen too many students spend too many hours in trying to use their word processor to create an elaborate graph that could have been done by hand in 15 minutes. So, the simple rule is to **use hand drawing for elaborate tables and graphs for the early draft of your dissertation**. Make sure your data are presented accurately so your advisor can clearly understand your graph/table, but don't waste the time trying to make it look word processor perfect at this time. Once you and your advisor agree upon how the data should be graphically represented it is time to prepare "perfect" looking graphs and tables.

- ✓ 22. Dissertation-style writing is not designed to be entertaining. **Dissertation writing should be clear and unambiguous.** To do this well you should prepare a list of key words that are important to your research and then your writing should use this set of key words throughout. There is nothing so frustrating to a reader as a manuscript that keeps using alternate words to mean the same thing. If you've decided that a key phrase for your research is "educational workshop", then **do not** try substituting other phrases like "in-service program", "learning workshop", "educational institute", or "educational program." Always stay with the same phrase - "educational workshop." It will be very clear to the reader exactly what you are referring to.
- ✓ 23. **Review two or three well organized and presented dissertations.** Examine their use of headings, overall style, typeface and organization. Use them as a model for the preparation of your own dissertation. In this way you will have an idea at the beginning of your writing what your finished dissertation will look like. A most helpful perspective!
- ✓ 24. A simple rule - if you are presenting information in the form of a table or graph **make sure you introduce the table or graph in your text.** And then, following the insertion of the table/graph, make sure you discuss it. If there is nothing to discuss then you may want to question even inserting it.
- ✓ 25. Another simple rule - **if you have a whole series of very similar tables try to use similar words in describing each.** Don't try and be creative and entertaining with your writing. If each introduction and discussion of the similar tables uses very similar wording then the reader can easily spot the differences in each table.
- ✓ 26. We are all familiar with how helpful the Table of Contents is to the reader. What we sometimes don't realize is that it is also invaluable to the writer. **Use the Table of Contents to help you improve your manuscript.** Use it to see if you've left something out, if you are presenting your sections in the most logical order, or if you need to make your wording a bit more clear. Thanks to the miracle of computer technology, you can easily copy/paste each of your headings from throughout your writing into the Table of Contents. Then sit back and see if the Table of Contents is clear and will make good sense to the reader. You will be amazed at how easy it will be to see areas that may need some more attention. Don't wait until the end to do your Table of Contents. Do it early enough so you can benefit from the information it will provide to you.
- ✓ 27. If you are including a Conclusions/Implications section in your dissertation **make sure you really present conclusions and implications.** Often the writer uses the conclusions/implications section to merely restate the research findings. Don't waste my time. I've already read the findings and now, at the Conclusion/Implication section, I want you to help me understand what it all means. This is a key section of the dissertation and is sometimes best done after you've had a few days to step away from your research and allow yourself to put your research into perspective. If you do this you will no doubt be able to draw a variety of insights that help link your research to other areas. I usually think of conclusions/implications as the "So what" statements. In other words, what are the key ideas that we can draw from your study to apply to my areas of concern.
- ✓ 28. Potentially the silliest part of the dissertation is the Suggestions for Further Research section. This section is usually written at the very end of your writing project and little energy is left to make it very meaningful. The biggest problem with this section is that the

suggestions are often ones that could have been made prior to you conducting your research. **Read and reread this section until you are sure that you have made suggestions that emanate from your experiences** in conducting the research and the findings that you have evolved. Make sure that your suggestions for further research serve to link your project with other projects in the future and provide a further opportunity for the reader to better understand what you have done.

✓ 29. Now it's time to write the last chapter. But what chapter is the last one? My perception is that **the last chapter should be the first chapter**. I don't really mean this in the literal sense. Certainly you wrote Chapter One at the beginning of this whole process. Now, at the end, it's time to "rewrite" Chapter One. After you've had a chance to write your dissertation all the way to the end, the last thing you should do is turn back to Chapter One. Reread Chapter One carefully with the insight you now have from having completed Chapter Five. Does Chapter One clearly help the reader move in the direction of Chapter Five? Are important concepts that will be necessary for understanding Chapter Five presented in Chapter One?

THE THESIS/DISSERTATION DEFENSE

What a terrible name - a *dissertation defense*. It seems to suggest some sort of war that you're trying to win. And, of course, with four or five of them and only one of you it sounds like they may have won the war before the first battle is held. I wish they had called it a dissertation seminar or professional symposium. I think the name would have brought forward a much better picture of what should be expected at this meeting.

Regardless of what the meeting is called, try to remember that the purpose of the meeting is for you to show everyone how well you have done in the conducting of your research study and the preparation of your dissertation. In addition there should be a seminar atmosphere where the exchange of ideas is valued. You are clearly the most knowledgeable person at this meeting when it comes to your subject. And, the members of your committee are there to hear from you and to help you better understand the very research that you have invested so much of yourself in for the past weeks. Their purpose is to help you finish your degree requirements. Of course other agenda often creep in. If that happens, try to stay on course and redirect the meeting to your agenda.

The following ideas should help you keep the meeting on your agenda.

✓ 30. The most obvious suggestion is the one seldom followed. Try to **attend one or more defenses prior to yours**. Find out which other students are defending their research and sit in on their defense. In many departments this is expected of all graduate students. If this is not the case for you, check with your adviser to see that you can get an invitation to attend some defenses.

At the defense try and keep your focus on the interactions that occur. Does the student seem relaxed? What strategies does the student use to keep relaxed? How does the student interact with the faculty? Does the student seem to be able to answer questions well? What would

make the situation appear better? What things should you avoid? You can learn a lot from sitting in on such a meeting.

- ✓ 31. Find opportunities to **discuss your research with your friends and colleagues.**
Listen carefully to their questions. See if you are able to present your research in a clear and coherent manner. Are there aspects of your research that are particularly confusing and need further explanation? Are there things that you forgot to say? Could you change the order of the information presented and have it become more understandable?
- ✓ 32. I hope you **don't try circulating chapters of your dissertation to your committee members as you are writing them.** I find this practice to be most annoying and one that creates considerable problems for the student. You must work closely with your dissertation director. He/she is the person you want to please. Develop a strategy with the dissertation director regarding how and when your writing should be shared. Only after your dissertation director approves of what you have done should you attempt to share it with the rest of the committee. And by then it's time for the defense. If you prematurely share sections of your writing with committee members you will probably find yourself in a situation where one committee member tells you to do one thing and another member says to do something else. What should you do? The best answer is not to get yourself into such a predicament. The committee meeting (the defense) allows the concerns of committee members to surface in a dialogical atmosphere where opposing views can be discussed and resolved.
- ✓ 33. It's important that you have the feeling when entering your defense that you **aren't doing it alone.** As was mentioned earlier, your major professor should be seen as an ally to you and "in your corner" at the defense. Don't forget, if you embarrass yourself at the defense you will also be embarrassing your dissertation director. So, give both of you a chance to guarantee there is no embarrassment. Meet together ahead of time and discuss the strategy you should use at the defense. Identify any possible problems that may occur and discuss ways that they should be dealt with. **Try and make the defense more of a team effort.**
- ✓ 34. **Don't be defensive at your defense** (this sounds confusing!). This is easy to say but sometimes hard to fulfill. You've just spent a considerable amount of time on your research and there is a strong tendency for YOU to want to defend everything you've done. However, the committee members bring a new perspective and may have some very good thoughts to share. Probably the easiest way to deal with new input is to say something like "Thank you so much for your idea. I will be giving it a lot of consideration." There, you've managed to diffuse a potentially explosive situation and not backed yourself or the committee member into a corner. Plus, you've not promised anything. Try and be politically astute at this time. Don't forget that your ultimate goal is to successfully complete your degree.
- ✓ 35. Probably the most disorganized defense I've attended is the one where the dissertation director began the meeting by saying, "You've all read the dissertation. What questions do you have for the student?" What a mess. Questions started to be asked that bounced the student around from one part of the dissertation to another. There was no semblance of order and the meeting almost lost control due to its lack of organization. At that time I vowed to protect my students from falling into such a trap by helping them **organize the defense as an educational presentation.**

Here's what we do:

I ask the student to prepare a 20-25 minute presentation that reviews the entire study. This is done through the help of a series of 10-12 large pieces of paper, wall charts, that have been posted sequentially around the walls of the room. Each piece of paper contains key words regarding each of the different aspects of the study. Some pieces of paper contain information about the study setting, questions and methodology. Other pieces of paper present findings and finally there are those pieces that present the conclusions and implications. By preparing these wall charts ahead of time the student is able to relax during the presentation and use the pieces of paper as if they were a road map toward the goal. No matter how nervous you are you can always let the wall charts guide **YOU** through your presentation. Lettering is done with a dark marking pen and extra notes are included in very small printing with a pencil (that no one can really see). We've also tried it with overhead projected transparencies but it doesn't work as well. With the transparencies they're gone from view after a few seconds. The wall charts stay up for everyone to see and to help focus attention.

Following this structured presentation the committee begins to ask questions, but as can be expected the questions follow along with the wall charts and the whole discussion proceeds in an orderly manner. If guests are present at the defense, this form of presentation helps them also follow along and understand exactly what was accomplished through the research.

 36. Consider **tape recording your defense**. Using a small portable recorder, record your entire presentation and also the questions and comments of the committee members. This helps in two ways. First, the student has documentation to assist in making suggested changes and corrections in the dissertation. The student can relax more and listen to what is being said by the committee members. The tape recorder is taking notes! Second, the student has a permanent record of his/her presentation of the study. By keeping the paper charts and the tape together, they can be most useful for reviewing the research in future years when a request is made for a presentation. (Bring out the tape and the pieces of paper the night before your presentation and you can listen to *you* make the presentation. What a good way to review.)

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