

## **SAMPLE**

# **Dissertation Proposal Outline for Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods Dissertations**

*\*Adopted from materials developed by Drs. Brennan & Blaess*

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## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will include a statement of the problem and its significance; a brief description of your specific study (i.e., your research questions and design), and will provide a road map for your reader in terms of how you will investigate the topic. Aim for *10-12 pages* for this chapter using the following subheadings as a guide.

### **1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

What is your study about? What problem(s) is your study going to address, how, and why?

This should include a brief identification of and introduction to the problem that motivates the study. Identify the purpose of the study (i.e., why is this an important area of inquiry). This section is usually 2-3 paragraphs.

### **2. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

Statistical information and/or evidence from practice to describe the history of the problem and a rationale for why it needs to be investigated. Professional literature must be cited and integrated into this discussion.

### **3. CONCEPTUAL OR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

What is the conceptual or theoretical framework informing this study – i.e., what theoretical assumptions are you making and/or from what perspectives are you going to approach this problem?

All dissertations are rooted in a theoretical framework. Pick one. Identify it here and then you can go into more details about the support for the connection of this theory to your topic in the next chapter.

### **4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The specific research questions should be included here. Research hypotheses (when applicable) are included after the research questions under a separate heading. Your reader should have been 'led' to these questions in previous sections and should not be surprised to learn what your questions are. A sentence to connect these questions to your conceptual or theoretical framework (and your field of study) may be helpful here.

### **5. DEFINITION OF TERMS**

Key terms that are central to the dissertation topic and those that readers need to know to understand the proposed project must be defined. Do not assume that readers know what is meant by a term. Any acronyms or abbreviations must be written out in the text the first time they are used, as well as defined in this section.

### **6. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF \_\_\_\_\_**

What potential contributions/implications can this study have for your field of study/practice?

Describe the rationale for this study and clearly identify the unique contribution(s) the project will make to the field. Be realistic about what the proposed study may achieve, but convince readers that addressing the problem with the proposed approach is feasible and worthwhile.

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## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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The purpose of this chapter is to describe a substantive, thorough understanding of what is already known about your topic of inquiry by offering a synthesized review of prior research on the topic. The literature review should be an orderly, cohesive, well-sequenced narrative that relates the problem under investigation to a body of scholarly work. This review should offer a scholarly dialogue from your perspective, not simply a summary or list of what has been done on the topic. You will present the main theories, explanations and findings that are generally represented in the literature along with evidence and points of view that may be contradictory or contrasting.

The entire chapter should be organized by unique subheadings of the main themes or categories that impact your study. Subheadings also shape the material into shorter, more easily comprehensible blocks of information for the reader. Transitions from one theme or category to another should be smooth and appropriate. Use a topic sentence for each paragraph and then include materials in each paragraph that specifically relate to that topic sentence.

All materials should be from scholarly, peer-reviewed sources. It is recommended that the literature review focus on work published within the past five years, whenever possible and appropriate. Exceptions to this recommendation are works that are considered “classics” or “seminal” in the field. Try to avoid the overuse of direct quotes and instead focus on synthesizing across studies and paraphrasing. Most of what is reported should be cited. Aim to prepare your *best 25 pages* for the first draft of this chapter by addressing the following questions in your writing:

**1. What does this literature review cover, why, and how is it organized?**

This introduction is critical to orient the reader and allow you to make explicit upfront the organization of your review.

**2. What support for your conceptual/theoretical framework can you find in the literature?**

What are the most essential elements of your theoretical framework? Use this as an opportunity to identify key elements of your theoretical framework that have implications for your study, and make those implications explicit. You must demonstrate how your research questions connect to your conceptual or theoretical framework based on previously published research. A significant task of the literature review is to develop and share this framework with the reader.

**3. What do we already know about the problem under study from existing research, and what implications does this knowledge have for the study?**

Organize the review around your variables of inquiry/key topics using subheadings. Describe how the topic is typically approached by others. You may want to describe conflicts from various authors and researchers, or how the conceptualization of your topic has evolved in this section.

**4. What are the “gaps” in the literature? What do we NOT yet know about the problem, and how is the proposed study going to address some of these gaps?**

Include at least one paragraph at the conclusion of this chapter to highlight what you believe is missing from the existing body of knowledge. This may help you transition your writing to the closing paragraph to

conclude with the rationale for your study. The purpose of your study was already mentioned in Chapter 1, but you may want to re-focus the reader here before you move into the description of your actual study. The significance of your proposed study in light of the reviewed research should be emphasized. The readers should feel that your review of literature has created a logical justification for the direction of your study and its contributions to the field.

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## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

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This chapter will describe, in very specific detail, exactly why, how and what you are planning to do in your study to answer your research questions. You must include the rationale for your methodological decisions including the research design, sampling plan and research instruments. Please include citations from prior course materials and textbooks when describing methodological issues.

You are encouraged to use the headers included below, although depending on whether you are completing a qualitative, quantitative or mixed method study, not all headers will apply. This chapter is usually about *10-12 pages*, not including appendices.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

How is this chapter organized, and what is the function or goal of this chapter? Begin this chapter with a restatement of the purpose of the study. Next, provide a road map for your reader of what this chapter includes.

### **2. RESEARCH DESIGN**

Describe the overarching approach for your study (i.e., qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods), the specific choice of design (i.e., case study, phenomenology, grounded theory; survey research, between groups, quasi-experimental, correlational; triangulation, explanatory, embedded, etc.) and why these design choices are the best fit for addressing your research questions. You may want to include flow diagrams, figures or charts to display the sequencing and key components of the design.

### **3. INSTRUMENTS (OR DATA COLLECTION TOOLS)**

What data are you going to collect? Provide a description of each of the materials or instruments you plan to use in your study, with careful justification for each tool. You will also need to include actual instruments (i.e., interview protocols, surveys, rating scales, tests, observation logs, etc.) in the appendix when possible.

If an instrument is copyrighted, discuss permissions granted to use materials and include documentation of such in your appendix. If applicable, include psychometric statistics to support the reliability and validity of an instrument. Specify if this information is not available. If you are developing an instrument, such as a survey or interview protocol, describe the methods used to create it including the theoretical foundation upon which it is based and any pilot testing.

### **4. SAMPLING PLAN**

First, describe the characteristics desired in the participants of your research. How have these characteristics been determined? Who (or what) do you hope to include in your sample and why? How will you identify eligible participants for your study? State the desired sample size for each of the various data

collection methods and/or phases of your study. Describe and define the specific sampling strategies you will use. Include a justification of your choices based on research course materials and/or research literature.

Next, detail how you will recruit and select participants and ensure all Human Subject regulations are met. Include as much detail as possible in this section. Identify key gatekeepers for secondary data (if applicable) and how information will be provided in a way that will maintain the privacy and confidentiality of records. Attach clearly labeled recruitment flyers, text for email recruitment, letters seeking approval from organizations, districts, programs, etc., and informed consent documents in your appendix.

## **5. PROCEDURES**

This is a very detailed section describing the exact step-by-step procedures to be taken in carrying out your study. It may be useful to include a flow chart and/or timeline to show the order and flow of activities that will take place in your research (esp. if you are using mixed methods). List all activities needed to complete the study and describe each activity in enough detail so another researcher could duplicate the research.

## **6. DATA ANALYSIS PLAN**

When taken together, how will these data allow you to address all your research questions? Describe how data will be recorded, scored and analyzed. How will you analyze these data to address each research question? Discuss in general terms how you would begin to process and analyze data. If at all possible, identify some initial codes or coding strategies you will be using to organize the qualitative data, and identify potential descriptive and/or inferential statistics that will be used to test your quantitative hypotheses.

## **7. LIMITATIONS**

All studies carry inherent limitations, and these should be identified and discussed. Limitations are conditions, restrictions, or constraints that may affect the validity, reliability or trustworthiness of a study's outcomes. A limitation is a weakness in the study that could not be avoided or corrected, but is acknowledged. This may relate to sampling, data collection tools, design or analysis. This section does not weaken your dissertation, but is included to strengthen the readers' confidence in the writer's judgment as a scholar and researcher.

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## **REFERENCES**

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A list of all references, in APA style, must be included with the proposal. This separate document includes citations referenced in your document.

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## **APPENDICES**

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Additional documentation is needed to support the points you have made in your writing. These appendices will show specific research tools you will be using, recruitment strategies, figures, tables, and consent forms. Additional appendices may be indicated. Each appendix must be labeled alphabetically (i.e., Appendix A, Appendix B) and titled, per APA guidelines.

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*Please refer to the CUC Doctoral Program Guide for specific information and formatting requirements for the dissertation. This document has been prepared as a sample working document, and is not the required structure for your dissertation. You may want to discuss this outline with your Dissertation Committee prior to beginning to write your dissertation proposal. Additional style guides for preparing a dissertation can be found online.*

With minor modifications, the dissertation proposal will be the first chapters of your dissertation, to which you will add:

**CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

**CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

IMPLICATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

*Sample Prepared  
10/12/11*