

TAKING CHARGE OF YOURSELF AND YOUR WORK

- Chapter 1** A Complete Dissertation: Viewing the Big Picture
- Chapter 2** Gearing Up: There is Method in the Madness
- Chapter 3** Choosing a Qualitative Research Design
- Chapter 4** Ensuring Rigor and Ethics in Qualitative Research
- Chapter 5** Achieving Alignment Throughout Your Dissertation

The intent of this book is to demystify and clarify the dissertation process while maintaining intellectual rigor and the highest ethical standards of research. Part I presents the initial steps involved in thinking about and preparing for the complex dissertation process by expanding appreciation and understanding of both the content and the process pertaining to conducting qualitative research and producing a sound defensible dissertation. This work is intellectually rigorous, requiring intensive thinking, preparation, and planning and is very much a matter of having tenacity, perseverance, and patience. Completing a dissertation is, in fact, a process of continuous learning because for most people, conducting research and writing a document such as this is a first-time endeavor, an undertaking for which there is little experience. By the end of the process, you will indeed have learned as much about yourself and how to conduct research as you will have learned about the subject of your inquiry. Having read Part 1, with a researchable problem in mind and a clear idea of the core elements of qualitative research, including criteria for rigor and trustworthiness, ethics and reflexivity, as well as the criticality of alignment and methodological integrity, you will be in a position to consolidate these ideas in terms of developing a feasible dissertation proposal.

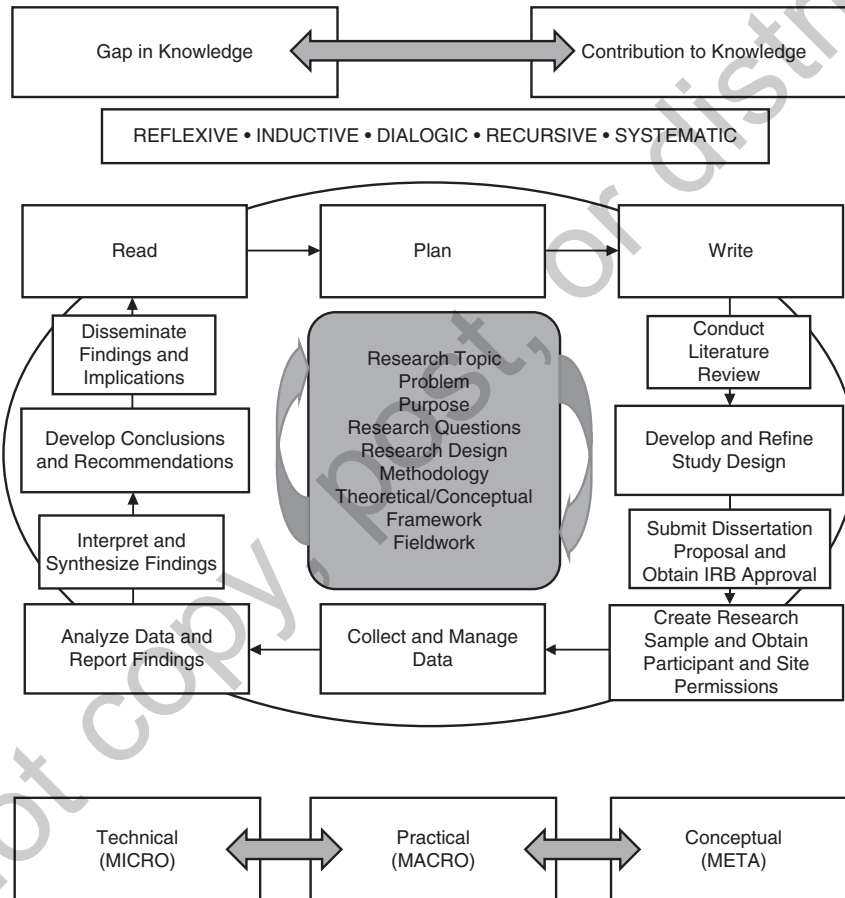
- Chapter 1 provides an overview of all key elements for each section of the dissertation; that is, a precursor of what is to come further along in this book. Understanding the elements that constitute each section of your dissertation is a necessary first step, which means becoming familiar with the relationships between and among the multiple components that constitute a dissertation, including process and content. The chapter addresses one of the critical points in the dissertation process; that is, developing a sound and comprehensive research proposal, the approval of which enables you to

move toward IRB approval and the implementation of your research. The chapter also includes an emphasis on ensuring inclusive academic writing skills, and a section regarding evaluating the overall quality of a qualitative dissertation by highlighting all the key components that are required.

- Chapter 2 addresses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to successfully complete the required work and covers areas that should be addressed in the preliminary stages of the dissertation process. This includes strategies for organizing and managing the project, identifying and developing a researchable topic, working with your advisement committee to address all necessary expectations, responsibilities, and procedures, and establishing a realistic timeline. The time commitment involved in doing your dissertation is substantial given the volume of work, so you are provided some strategies to plan your time thoughtfully and productively. Considering that your audience is primarily the academic community, the chapter offers guidelines for academic writing and strategies to ensure inclusivity and academic integrity, and also covers issues and requirements regarding institutional review board (IRB) approval.
- Chapter 3 provides an overview of the landscape of qualitative inquiry and discusses the implications of choosing an appropriate qualitative design (tradition or genre) in an attempt to develop conceptual understanding of the logic behind the choices made. Selecting an appropriate research design is based on the nature of your research problem and the study's purpose and research questions. You will then be able to proceed to plan and develop a study within the framework of the research design, with the components of the design process aligning with and reflecting characteristic principles and features.
- Chapter 4 addresses the intertwined concepts of rigor and ethics. The need to focus more keenly on trustworthiness criteria and ethical practices has grown out of the recent emergence of needs and awareness brought about by the pandemic and its aftermath, and the added challenges facing qualitative researchers as they navigate new and uncharted waters. The chapter also discussed the role of the qualitative researcher in relation to the dissertation research process, with emphasis on power and positionality, intersectionality, criticality, and reflexivity.
- The focus of Chapter 5 is on clarifying all key elements and concepts that must be strongly and clearly aligned throughout the dissertation to ensure methodological congruence and, therefore, high academic standards. Demonstrating alignment is extremely important for the dissertation defense when the overall congruence of your research is finely scrutinized by your committee members to ensure that you have taken all necessary steps to ensure methodological integrity. As such, be well prepared for questions in this regard!

Figure I.1, *Visualizing the Dissertation Process*, depicts the cyclical and complex qualitative dissertation process in its entirety. This figure demonstrates the iterative nature of qualitative research by illustrating the relationships between and among multiple components. The figure also sheds light on the continuum of movement between technical (micro), practical (macro), and conceptual (meta) levels of thinking and explains the inherent hierarchy of activities that constitute the complex dissertation process.

FIGURE I.1 ■ Visualizing the Dissertation Process



Source: This figure is based on the work of Bloomberg (2009), and first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2010). *Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process* (Part II). Unpublished manuscript.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

1

A COMPLETE DISSERTATION

Viewing The Big Picture

CHAPTER 1 OBJECTIVES

- Provide a *cursory glance* at the constitution of an entire dissertation.
- Offer a comprehensive outline of all key elements for each section of the dissertation—that is, a precursor of what is to come, with each element being more fully developed and explained further along in the book.
- For each key element, explain reason for inclusion, quality markers, and frequent or common errors.
- Explain the logic and reasoning behind developing a sound and feasible research proposal.
- Provide an overview of each of the sections that constitute a three-part proposal and explain how these parts will ultimately be incorporated in the dissertation.
- Outline key criteria or indicators to evaluate the quality of a qualitative dissertation.

OVERVIEW

Following is a road map that briefly outlines the contents of an entire dissertation. This is a comprehensive overview and as such is helpful in making sure that at a glance you understand up front the necessary elements that will constitute each section of your dissertation. Reasons for inclusion, quality markers, and frequent errors are included for each element of the dissertation. This broad overview is a prelude to the steps involved in each of the chapters that are described in Part II. While certain elements are common to most dissertations, please note that dissertation requirements vary by institution. Toward that end, students should always consult with their advisors and committee members to ascertain any details of any of the elements that might be specific or particular to institutional or departmental requirements. Finally, a rubric for evaluating a complete qualitative dissertation and a rubric for specifically evaluating the quality of a literature review are included.

FRONT MATTER

Order and format of front matter may vary by institution and department.

- Title page
- Copyright page
- Abstract
- Dedication
- Acknowledgments
- Table of contents
- List of tables and figures (only those in chapters, not those in appendices)

Title Page

The title gives a clear and concise description of the topic and/or problem and the scope of the study. The title page will show the title; the author's full name; the degree to be conferred; the university, department, and college in which the degree is earned; and the month and year of approval. As per APA 7 guidelines, margins for the title page and the entire document are one inch. Also, the title should be in all capitals.

Students often labor over coming up with a dissertation title at the early stages of dissertation work. It is a good idea to create what is, in effect, a “working title” as you think about your topic and hone your problem and to refine this title as your study proceeds. A title generally captures the major thrust of your research. A working title becomes a guiding focus as you move through your study. Keeping notes or journaling about how and why your title changes over time is a useful exercise because it tracks developments in your thinking as your study progresses. A more extensive discussion regarding selecting a final dissertation title is included in Part III of this book.

Reason

A compelling title should clearly and concisely convey the contents of your research manuscript. The title both guides and reflects the purpose and content of the study, making its relevance apparent to prospective readers. The title is also important for retrieval purposes, enabling other researchers to locate it through a literature search.

Quality Markers

A well-crafted title conveys the essence and purpose of the study, including the central phenomenon and research participants. The research site or study location is included without compromising any confidential details. The title should also include the type of study and the research design used (e.g., “A Qualitative Case Study”). Use of keywords will promote proper categorization into databases such as ERIC (the Education Resources Information Center), ProQuest, and Dissertation Abstracts International.

Frequent Errors

Frequent title errors include the use of trendy, elaborate, nonspecific, or literary language and grandiose or unrealistic expectations (e.g., “Finally, a Solution to . . .”). Conversely, errors can also occur when the title is vague and misses important details. Acronyms should not be included in the title.

Copyright Page

Copyright is the legal right of an owner of created material to control copying and ownership of that material. Authors of research documents who wish to protect their writing through copyright may do so. A student may file a claim to copyright by corresponding directly with the U.S. Copyright Office (Library of Congress, 101 Independence Avenue S.E., Washington, DC 20559–6000).

The copyright symbol (©) should appear with author’s name and year centered between the margins on the lower half of the backside of the title page. Below the copyright line, include the statement “All Rights Reserved.”

© Linda Dale Bloomberg

All Rights Reserved

Abstract

The abstract is a concise summary description of the study, including statement of the problem, purpose, scope, research tradition, data sources, methodology, key findings, and implications. The abstract is written after the dissertation is completed and is written from the perspective of an outside reader (i.e., not “My dissertation examines” but “An examination of . . .”). The abstract is the only place where you will be writing in the third person—using terms like the author and the researcher instead of I. Because the research has already been conducted, the abstract is generally written in the past tense. An exception—the ethnographic present—is deliberately chosen to place the reader in the middle of the action that occurred during the study, because in this context, present tense causes these types of written scenes to be more realistically experienced and life-like. You are writing for as broad an audience as possible, so it is important to avoid jargon and colloquialisms. Repeat key constructs and phrases naturally. Write in complete sentences. Do not use citations. All details pertaining to writing the Abstract, including word limit, are laid out in the American Psychological Association (2021). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.), and you should also check with your institution’s format and style requirements. The page numbers before the text are in Roman numerals. The abstract page is the first page to be numbered, but as iii. All Roman numerals should be centered between the left and right margins, and one inch from the bottom of the page. The title of the page, ABSTRACT, should be in all capitals and centered between the left and right margins and two inches from the top.

Reason

The abstract's inclusion in *Dissertation Abstracts International* (which mandates a 250-word limit) makes it possible for other researchers to determine the relevance of this work to their own studies. Over 95% of American dissertations are included in *Dissertation Abstracts International*.

Quality Markers

Marks of quality include conciseness and accuracy. The abstract should also be written in the third person (active voice without the personal pronouns *I* and *we*), making use of active verbs where possible, and avoiding jargon, colloquialisms, and citations. Generally, the first sentence of an abstract describes the entire study; subsequent sentences expand on that description.

Frequent Errors

Inclusion of irrelevant material (i.e., examples, information extraneous to the dissertation itself), exclusion of necessary material (i.e., problem, purpose, scope, research tradition, data sources, methodology, key findings, implications), and incorrect format, incomplete sentences, or use of citations are other frequent errors.

Dedication and Acknowledgments

These pages are optional, although most dissertations include a brief acknowledgment of the contributions of committee members, colleagues, friends, and family members who have supported the students' research. "ACKNOWLEDGMENTS" should be capitalized and should appear centered between the left and right margins, two inches from the top. Text should begin two line spaces after "ACKNOWLEDGMENTS."

The dedication page is separate from the acknowledgments page. If included, the dedication text should be centered between the left and right margins and between the top and bottom margins; it should also reflect a professional nature. Do not include the title "DEDICATION" on the dedication page.

Table of Contents

An outline of the entire dissertation, listing headings and subheadings with their respective page numbers, the table of contents lists all chapters and major sections within chapters and all back matter with page numbers.

The heading "TABLE OF CONTENTS" is centered between the left and right margins, two inches from the top of the page. The listing begins one double space below and even with the left margin. Leader dots are placed from the end of each listing to the corresponding page number. All major titles are typed exactly as they appear in the text. When a title or subtitle exceeds one line, the second and succeeding lines are single-spaced and indented two spaces. Double spacing is used between major titles and between each major title and its subtitle.

The table of contents may be followed by any of the following, if needed, and any of these subsequent lists are formatted in the same manner as the table of contents:

- List of tables
- List of figures
- List of illustrations

Reason

The table of contents assists the researcher in organizing the material while promoting accessibility for the reader.

Quality Markers

The headings and subheadings clearly and concisely reflect the material being presented. Headings and subheadings are parallel grammatically (i.e., “Introduction,” “Review of Literature” not Introduction, Reviewing the Literature). The headings and subheadings in the table of contents are worded exactly the same as those headings and subheadings in the text.

Frequent Errors

Frequent errors include lack of parallelism in headings and subheadings, as well as wording in the table of contents that does not match wording in text.

DISSERTATION CHAPTERS

Order and format of dissertation chapters may vary by institution and department. As mentioned throughout this book, you should follow the guidelines as set forth by your institution. Dissertations can follow various formats, including the traditional five- or six-chapter dissertation, or a three-section dissertation which is now typical of some applied doctoral programs. Below is a sample outline for a traditional six-chapter dissertation.

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Methodology and Research Approach
4. Findings
5. Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis
6. Conclusions and recommendations
7. Final Thoughts or Reflection

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter makes a case for the significance of the problem, contextualizes the study, and provides an introduction to its basic components. It should be informative and able to stand alone as a document.

- **Introduction:** The introduction includes an overview of the purpose and focus of the study, why it is significant, how it was conducted, and how it will contribute to professional knowledge and practice.
- **Problem statement:** The problem indicates the need for the study, describes the issue or problem to be studied, and situates this within a broader social context. The PhD has as its focus a contribution to theory, whereas the EdD focuses on addressing a researchable problem that has practical applications (i.e., real-world implications).
- **Statement of purpose:** Describing the research purpose in a logical, explicit manner, the statement of purpose is the major objective or intent of the study; it enables the reader to understand the central thrust of the research. Once the problem is clearly stated, the purpose will then need to evolve to align with the problem. One way of assuring that is to have one—and only one—wording for the purpose. Once you settle on the wording, use that exact wording throughout whenever you present the purpose.
- **Research questions:** Research questions are directly tied to the purpose. They should be specific, unambiguously stated, and open-ended. These questions cue readers to the direction the study will take and help to delineate the scope of the study. In qualitative studies, research questions are developed at the start of a project and become modified as the research process proceeds to address emergent issues. It is therefore important that the researcher remain responsive to the phenomena and contexts of the study so that the research questions may (and often do) evolve over time.
- **Overview of research design:** This section outlines the research approach (qualitative research), research design (qualitative genre or tradition), research setting, population and sample, instrumentation (data collection tools, as relevant), and methods of data collection and analysis.
- **Rationale and significance:** Rationale is the justification for the study presented as a logical argument. Significance addresses the benefits that may be derived from doing the study, thereby reaffirming the research purpose.
- **Researcher positionality:** This section explains the role of the researcher in planning and conducting the study, with reference to the researcher's reflexive stance vis-à-vis their positionality, so that all subjectivities are addressed. Any relevant prior experience, biases, or assumptions that may potentially impact the research process or the actual study are explained to ensure full transparency and research ethics.

- **Definition of key terminology:** Some terms may be unfamiliar to readers. In addition, the meanings of certain terms can vary depending on the context, conceptual framework, or field of study. Making terms explicit adds precision and ensures clarity of understanding. These terms should be operationally defined or explained; that is, be sure to make clear how these terms are used in *your* study.
- **Summary:** Finally, you will provide a brief summary of the key points made in the chapter as well as a concluding explanation to delineate the contents of the remaining chapters in the dissertation so that the reader has an idea of what to expect. Discussion is concise, precise, and easily understandable.

Reason

The introduction sets the stage for the study and directs readers to the purpose and context of the dissertation, which must be aligned with the degree program, EdD or PhD.

Quality Markers

The research problem and purpose are clearly aligned with the focus of the degree. As such, for the PhD, the findings will ultimately be centered on theory as a way of furthering knowledge in the field or discipline, and for the EdD, the findings will ultimately be focused on addressing and resolving a contextual problem that is rooted in applied professional practice. A quality introduction situates the context and scope of the study and informs the reader of all components of the study, including the role and positionality of the researcher. Discussion is concise and precise, and all choices and claims are logically explained. All key elements are clearly aligned, including the problem, purpose, research questions, and the rationale with regard to research design, methodology, and methods.

Frequent Errors

Errors occur when the introduction does not clearly reflect the study's components and/or the relationship of methodological choices to the proposed research problem and purpose, or where the discussion is unclear or confusing. A significant limitation also occurs when researcher reflexivity is insufficient, shallow, or not clearly explained.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter situates the study in the context of previous research and scholarly material pertaining to the topic, presents a critical synthesis of empirical literature according to relevant themes or variables, justifies how the study addresses a gap or problem in the literature, and outlines the theoretical or conceptual framework of the study. A dissertation does not merely restate the available knowledge base of a particular topic but adds to or augments it.

- **Introduction:** The introduction describes the content, scope, and organization of the review as well as all the strategies used in the literature search.

- **Review of literature:** This section accomplishes the following:
 - It is clearly related to the problem statement, purpose, and research questions;
 - It states upfront the bodies of literature that will be covered, and why;
 - It reviews primary sources that are mostly recent empirical studies from scholarly journals and publications, as well as secondary sources;
 - It is logically organized by theme or subtopic, from broad to narrow;
 - It synthesizes findings across studies and compares and contrasts different research outcomes, perspectives, or methods;
 - It notes gaps, debates, or shortcomings in the literature and provides a rationale for the study; and
 - It provides section summaries.
- **Theoretical or conceptual framework:** This framework draws on theory, research, and experience, and examines the relationship among constructs and ideas. As such, it is the structure or heuristic that guides your research. In essence, the framework provides the theoretical or conceptual basis for development of the study and analysis of findings. When appropriate, a graphic depiction of the model is included, visually illustrating the relationships between concepts, ideas, or variables to be studied.
- **Summary:** A comprehensive synthesis of the literature review should complete this section. This synthesis serves to integrate key themes and issues emanating from the review.

Reason

This chapter provides a strong theoretical or conceptual basis for the dissertation by analyzing and synthesizing a comprehensive selection of appropriate related bodies of literature. The review of literature should build a logical framework for the research, justify the study by conceptualizing gaps in the literature, and demonstrate how the study will contribute to existing knowledge. The review serves to situate the dissertation within the context of current ongoing conversations in the field. The theoretical or conceptual framework guides the research and plays a major role in analysis of findings.

Quality Markers

A comprehensive and thoughtful selection of resources (scholarly peer-reviewed literature) directly related to the study's purpose and background, not the full scope of the field, is considered a mark of a quality literature review. Importantly, the literature is *synthesized* rather than just summarized. All relevant primary sources and empirical research studies are cited (these are preferable to secondary sources, which are interpretations of the work of others). The writer adopts a critical perspective in discussing the work of others and provides a clear analysis of all available related research. Relevant literature is critiqued, not duplicated, and there is a clear connection between the purpose of this study and the resources included. The role and function of the theoretical or conceptual framework are clear: The framework clearly draws on theory, research, and/or experience, providing theoretical or conceptual coherence to the research. Alignment among the framework and the study's problem, purpose, and research

questions is clear. Discussion throughout is concise, precise, and easily understandable. In addition, there is evidence of the correct use of American Psychological Association (APA) format, citations, and references throughout.

Frequent Errors

Frequent errors include insubstantial breadth of review (i.e., insufficient number or range of resources; failure to include relevant primary sources); and insubstantial depth of review (i.e., use of nonscholarly or non-peer-reviewed material; inability to demonstrate clear understanding of resources). Another error is that the review reads more like a catalog of sources than a synthesis and integration of relevant literature. There is also a tendency to eliminate literature that contradicts or questions the findings of the dissertation's study. Other errors include incorrect or insufficient citation of sources, resulting in accidental plagiarism, and presentation of a diagrammatic theoretical or conceptual framework with no accompanying narrative explanation.

Chapter 3: Qualitative Methodology, Research Design, and Methods

This chapter situates the study within the qualitative research approach and also within a particular methodology (qualitative tradition or genre) and provides a rationale for that approach and methodology. The chapter provides a detailed description of all aspects of the design and procedures of the study, including the research setting, population, and sample, and describes all relevant data collection and analysis methods that have been used. Essentially, this chapter should include sufficient information so that the study could be replicated. Traditionally this chapter is presented as an overview of each area including appropriate citations from academic literature:

- **Introduction:** The introduction restates the research purpose and describes the organization of the chapter.
- **Rationale for research design:** This section describes the research approach (qualitative research) and the research methodology (qualitative genre or tradition) with a rationale for their suitability regarding addressing the research questions and citing appropriate methodological literature.
- **Research setting and/or context:** This section describes and justifies selection of the research setting, thereby providing the history, background, and issues germane to the problem.
- **Research population, sample, and data sources:** This section addresses the following:
 - It explains and justifies the sample used and how participants were selected (including target population and sampling procedures);
 - It describes the characteristics and size of the sample and provides other pertinent demographic information; and
 - It outlines ethical considerations pertaining to participants, shedding light on how rights of participants were protected, with reference to conventions of research ethics and the IRB process.

- **Data collection methods:** This section describes and justifies all data collection methods, tools, instruments, and procedures, including how, when, where, and by whom data were collected. In this section, there will be a subheading for each way data will be collected.
- **Data analysis methods:** This section describes and justifies all methods and tools used for analysis of data (manual and/or computational). In this section, you will need to clearly and accurately explain (a) how the data will be organized and managed and (b) the type of analysis conducted, including all the steps that occurred within the analysis, including any data analysis software if used.
- **Issues of trustworthiness:** This section includes two subareas: (1) the major literature you are drawing on to enhance trustworthiness; and (2) the trustworthiness procedures you will conduct in this area. For the first area, qualitative researchers make use of the four criteria put forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The second area includes the specific procedures used to address each of the four trustworthiness criteria, such as triangulation, member checks, reflexivity, and peer review.
- **Ethical considerations:** As researchers, we are morally bound to conduct our research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study. This section of the chapter includes a statement that either you have received permission to conduct the study from the university research ethics board or IRB, or you are in the process of applying for permission. Accompanying documents will be included in the appendixes. Be sure to consider and address any as all areas may present potential ethical issues.
- **Researcher positionality:** Since description, understanding, interpretation, and communication are the primary goals of qualitative research; the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Qualitative research is based on exploration and discovery with the goal of giving “voice” to the research participants. The strongest influence on the research process, including participant reactivity as well as the study’s outcomes, starts and ends with the researcher. It is therefore imperative to consider the ways in which your positionality impacts the research process, and this could occur on multiple levels.
- **Limitations and delimitations:** This section identifies potential weaknesses of the study and the scope of the study; that is, the external conditions that restrict or constrain the study’s scope or potential outcome. Limitations are external conditions that restrict or constrain the study’s scope or may affect its outcome. Limitations represent the inherent weaknesses or flaws given the research design, and which can threaten the trustworthiness of the study in one or more ways. Delimitations are those conditions or parameters that the researcher intentionally imposes in order to limit the scope of a study (e.g., using participants of certain ages, genders, or groups; conducting the research in a single setting). These are the boundaries set by the researcher, often serving to increase the feasibility of the study.

- **Summary:** A comprehensive summary overview covers all the sections of this chapter, recapping and highlighting all the important aspects of the study's methodology. Discussion is concise, precise, and easily understandable. Remember, you do not want to lose the reader!

Reason

The study is the basis for the conclusions and recommendations. In many ways, it is what makes the difference between a dissertation and other forms of extended writing. A clear description of the research sample, setting, methodology, methods of data collection and data analysis, limitations and delimitations, and acknowledgment of ethical and trustworthiness issues provide readers with a basis for accepting (or not accepting) the conclusions and recommendations that follow.

Quality Markers

A quality study achieves the purposes outlined in the introduction's research problem and research questions. It is clearly evident that there is strong alignment between the research methodology (qualitative research), research design (qualitative tradition or genre), and methods of data collection and analysis used in this study. Qualitative thematic analysis is a structured, step-by-step process that is designed for flexibility and ease of adoption, yet there are issues that can prevent a successful thematic analysis. The first is absence of conducting any actual analysis and engaging in a presentation of the themes without digging into the data by way of coding to produce an analytic narrative. Without thorough engagement in data analysis, the findings cannot present an argument to support the research questions. Weakly documented analysis can also occur if the data does not clearly support the identified themes or if there is too much overlap between the themes so that a clear story cannot be adequately developed. To ensure that analysis has indeed been thoroughly conducted, it is essential that each step in the analytic process—including both coding and theme development—be clearly and accurately documented and explained. The four trustworthiness criteria and the way each of these was addressed, as well as all relevant information regarding research ethics and the ways in which ethical considerations were addressed, is clearly articulated and presented. Researcher positionality is thoughtfully and comprehensively addressed. As appropriate, the narrative is accompanied by clear and descriptive visuals (charts, figures, tables). The chapter includes sufficient relevant detail so the study could be adequately replicated. Discussion throughout is concise, precise, and easily understandable.

Frequent Errors

Errors occur when data are not clearly presented, the study is not applicable to purposes outlined in the introduction, and methods of gathering and analyzing data and trustworthiness, ethical, and researcher positionality issues are insufficient or not clearly explained, where alignment between the study's key components is not clear or apparent, or where the discussion is unclear or confusing.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter is the fruit of the dissertation, where all your hard work and that of the participants comes to bear. This also means that Chapter 4 is often much too long. The point of this chapter is not to write such a lengthy piece that no one will finish reading it. Instead, after conducting careful analysis, first highlight the data directly addressing the research questions first. Then, if warranted, a portrayal of data relevant yet unanticipated by the research questions may be discussed. Qualitative research is, to its core, about sharing and respecting other voices. This chapter organizes and reports the study's main findings, including the presentation and representation of relevant data. Findings are written up in different ways depending on the qualitative research tradition or genre adopted.

Introduction: The introduction provides a brief summary of and rationale for how data were analyzed. It describes the organization of the chapter according to research questions, conceptual framework, or thematic categories.

Findings: These build logically from the problem, research questions, and research design and qualitative methodology (tradition or genre).

- Findings are presented to show clearly how these address the study's research problem and research questions.
- Findings are presented in clear narrative form using relevant verbatim quotes and "thick description." Narrative data are connected and synthesized through substantive explanatory text and visual displays, if applicable. Some tables and figures may be deferred to the appendices.
- Headings and subheadings are used to guide the reader through the findings according to research questions, themes, or other appropriate organizational schemes.
- Rather than being ignored or overlooked, inconsistent, discrepant, or unexpected findings are noted with discussion of possible alternative explanations.

Summary: This section explains in summary form what the chapter has identified and prepares the reader for the chapters to follow by offering some foreshadowing as to the intent and content of the upcoming chapters.

Reason

The challenge of qualitative analysis of data lies in making sense of large amounts of material, reducing raw data, identifying what is significant, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal. The researcher, as storyteller, is able to tell a story that is vivid and interesting, and at the same time accurate and credible by authentically portraying the voices of the research participants. This chapter is the foundation for the analysis and interpretation of findings, conclusions, and recommendations that will appear in the next and forthcoming chapters.

Quality Markers

Markers of a quality findings chapter include clear, complete, and credible representation of the data that have emerged as a result of the study and effective use of graphs, charts, and other visual representations to illustrate the data. The study's findings are clearly aligned with the research problem and purpose, and provide a direct response to each of the research questions. Findings are presented objectively, without speculation—that is, free from researcher bias. If relevant, any prior assumptions are addressed as necessary. Presentation and structure of this chapter are neat and precise, and to ensure methodological integrity are directly aligned with the study's qualitative design (tradition or genre). Discussion throughout is concise, precise, and easily understandable.

Frequent Errors

Errors occur when study findings are manipulated to fit expectations from research questions, when researcher bias and/or subjectivity is apparent, and/or when the presentation of findings is not aligned with the study's chosen design (tradition or genre). Other frequent errors include unclear or confusing discussion, poor use of visual representation, and findings that are ignored, overlooked, or are overly or inaccurately generalized.

Chapter 5: Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Findings

This chapter synthesizes and discusses the findings in light of the study's research questions, literature review, and conceptual framework. Finding patterns and themes is one result of analysis. Finding ambiguities and inconsistencies is another. Think of this chapter as the story your data is telling, with the discussion making connections to the literature. Overall, this chapter offers the researcher an opportunity to reflect thoroughly on the study's findings and the practical and theoretical implications thereof. Some institutions or programs may require that this chapter is combined and incorporated with the previous chapter so that presentation of findings and analysis of findings are presented together in one chapter. This requirement should therefore be addressed as necessary.

Introduction: The introduction provides an overview of the chapter's organization and content.

Discussion: This section provides an in-depth interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the results and/or findings.

- Analysis is a multilayered approach. Seeking emergent patterns among findings can be considered a first round of analysis. Examining whether the literature corresponds with, contradicts, and/or deepens interpretations constitutes a second layer of interpretation.
- Issues of trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability) are incorporated as these relate to and are addressed throughout the analysis process.

- Discussion may include interpretation of any findings that were not anticipated when the study was first described in previous chapters. Establishing credibility means that you have engaged in the systematic search for rival or competing explanations and interpretations.
- This section restates the study's limitations and discusses transferability of the study's findings to broader populations or other settings and contexts.

Reason

Transparency of the analysis means that the reader is able to follow the researcher's reasoning, and is provided the necessary information for accepting their interpretations—or challenging them. Repeatability of an analysis means that the process of analysis and interpretation have been presented so clearly that another researcher applying them would reach similar conclusions. One may identify ways of improving the transparency and repeatability of qualitative analysis and the report (a) by dividing the process of interpretation into steps; and (b) making explicit all decisions and choices made in the process. The process of data analysis and interpretation of findings can never be fully formalized, and this is not the goal of qualitative research. It is above all a question of working step by step so that the process in its entirety can be made as visible as possible to both the researcher and the reader.

Quality Markers

Analysis is essentially about searching for patterns and themes that emerge from the findings. Interpretation that is thoughtful and compelling provides the opportunity to make a worthwhile contribution to your academic discipline. This constitutes the necessary *synthesis* that this chapter calls for. The goal is to discover what meaning you as the researcher can make of them by comparing your findings both within and across groups, and with those of other studies. There is, however, no clear and accepted single set of conventions for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, but there are guidelines with respect to each of the qualitative designs (traditions or genres). This chapter must of necessity reflect a deep understanding of what lies beneath the findings—that is, essentially what those findings *mean*. Interpretation is presented systematically and is related to the literature, theoretical or conceptual framework, and interpretive themes or patterns that have emerged. A key characteristic of qualitative research is willingness to tolerate ambiguity. As such, examining issues from all angles in order to demonstrate *the most plausible* explanations is an indication of high-level analysis. Integrity as a researcher is given credence by inclusion of all information, even that which challenges assumptions and expectations.

Frequent Errors

Frequent errors include analysis that is simple or shallow. Other errors include lack of synthesis, no clear connection to other research literature or theory, questionable credibility and/or plausibility of explanations is questionable, and when the chapter is poorly structured, presented, and articulated.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter presents a set of concluding statements and recommendations. Conclusions are assertions based on findings and must therefore be warranted by the findings. With respect to each finding, you are asking yourself, “Knowing what I now know, what conclusion can I draw?” Recommendations are the application of those conclusions. In other words, you are now saying to yourself, “Knowing what I now know to be true, I recommend that . . .”

- Conclusions are based on an integration of the study findings, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis.
- Concluding statements end the dissertation with strong, clear, concise “takeaway messages” for the reader.
- Conclusions are not the same as findings; neither are conclusions the same as interpretations. Rather, conclusions are essentially conclusive statements of what you now know, having done this research, that you did not know before.
- Conclusions must be logically tied to one another. There should be consistency among your conclusions; none of them should be at odds with any of the others.
- Recommendations are actionable; that is, they suggest implications for policy and practice based on the findings, providing specific action planning and next steps.
- Recommendations support the belief that scholarly work initiates as many questions as it answers, thus opening the way for further practice and research.
- Recommendations for research describe topics that require closer examination and that may generate new questions for further study.

Reason

This chapter reflects the contribution the researcher has made to the knowledge, practice, and/or policy in the field of study. In many ways, this chapter provides endorsement for the researcher’s entrance into the ranks of the body of scholars in the field.

Quality Markers

Clearly stated and focused concluding statements reflect an integration of the study findings, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis. Recommendations must have implications for policy and practice, as well as for further research, and *must* be doable. The reasonableness of a recommendation depends on its being logically aligned with and clearly derived from the findings, both content and context specific, and most important, practical and capable of implementation.

Frequent Errors

Overgeneralization of importance or relevance sometimes leads to grandiose statements. Other frequent errors include the lack of a clear relationship to the review of literature or recommendations that have no apparent usefulness for practice and future research; that is, they are not “doable.”

Epilogue, Final Thoughts, or Reflection

This final section, which may or may not be required, offers the researcher an opportunity to reflect on the overall process, review the findings that have emerged, and share any new learning and insights that they have developed over the course of the research and writing process. Questions to ask oneself include: How do you personally value the research experience? What are the lessons you have learned from conducting the study? What might you do differently were you to conduct a study of this nature again? How and in what ways may your positionality have impacted the research process of the study’s findings? What insights, knowledge, and inspiration have you derived from conducting this study? What steps will you take to actualize your study’s findings and recommendations?

BACK MATTER

Appendixes

Appendixes contain all research instruments used, as well as any relevant additional materials that have been referred to in the dissertation manuscript, including all data collection tools, sample interview transcripts, sample coding schemes, and charts. Each item that is included as an appendix is assigned a letter or number and listed in the table of contents, as per APA requirements.

References

The list of references includes all works cited in the dissertation in alphabetical order by author and in proper APA format, which is currently the 7th edition. All sources that are quoted, summarized, or paraphrased, as well as all other sources of information (text, visual, electronic, personal correspondence, etc.), must be correctly cited using APA parenthetical citation format within the dissertation. All sources must also be correctly listed on the references page. Proper citation serves several purposes: This attributes work fairly to the appropriate authors, situates the dissertation within the context of the body of literature in the field, and provides readers with a quick resource for locating and accurately accessing all sources that were used.

THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL: A PRECURSOR TO THE DISSERTATION MANUSCRIPT

You may be thinking, “How do I get to there?”. A necessary first step in the dissertation process is developing a research proposal. A completed proposal is the point at which you present and justify your research ideas to gain approval from a faculty committee to proceed with your study. Once

Copyright ©2022 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

your proposal has been approved, you can apply for IRB approval, and once received you will be ready to embark on the research, and so this represents a vital step in the dissertation process. Approval of the proposal follows a specific format and approval process, which can differ among institutions, and doctoral students should be aware of the process early on in their dissertation journey. While confirmed approval of the proposal to proceed with the study is always required, some universities may require a formal defense of the proposal, but many typically do not.

As Marshall et al. (2022) point out, when writing a proposal for a qualitative research study, three interrelated concerns need to be addressed: “do-ability” (that is, considerations of *feasibility*, including access to the research site, access to potential data collection tools, obtaining consent from site and institutional IRBs, obtaining consent from potential research participants); “should-do-ability” (that is, consideration of potential significance and value of the proposed study, and ability to uphold all required ethical standards); and want-to do-ability (that is, considerations of sustained and sustaining interest). The concept of feasibility is addressed in greater detail in Chapter 6 of this book. In essence, a well-planned and logical proposal should indicate (a) whether the research design is clearly explained, credible, and achievable; (b) why others should be interested in or find value in the proposed research; and (c) whether you as the researcher are capable and willing to conduct the proposed research in a responsible and ethical manner.

The proposal is a well-thought-out written action plan that identifies (a) a narrowly defined and clearly written problem statement; (b) a purpose statement that describes how the problem will be addressed; (c) research questions that are tied to the purpose, and when answered will shed light on the problem; (d) a review of the literature and relevant research and theory to determine what is already known about the topic; and (e) data collection and data analysis methods. Rather than merely describe specifications of what you will do, a qualitative proposal should present a clear argument that explains and justifies the logic of your study. In effect, a dissertation proposal is a “working document” on the way to the production of a dissertation. Although a proposal is mandatory, it also is the means to obtain feedback from advisors before implementing your study, and this feedback will be useful in improving the proposed study. Typically, you will write multiple drafts of your proposal. Based on the feedback you receive, you will continue to work toward an increasingly more integrated presentation of the different components guiding the proposed study.

The approved proposal describes a study that, if conducted competently and completely, should provide the basis for an extensive research report (the dissertation) that will meet all the standards of acceptability. However, remember that design flexibility is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research. Although you are expected to make a convincing and persuasive case for the research in the proposal, and while the proposal is a contractual document, it is also a working document—a preliminary and evolving outline of the research plan. Therefore, as the research progresses, you should remain open to the possibility that some changes or modifications will, in all likelihood, have to be made along the way.

PROPOSAL COMPONENTS

At the outset, please note that while most institutions will approach the proposal and dissertation in common ways, at the same time there are differences in terms of the organization and presentation, and distinct differences in terms of what and how qualitative language and

terminology are used. This book presents information as guidelines that are meant to be flexible per institutional expectations and requirements and are subject to modification depending on your institution, department, and program.

Some universities make specific demands regarding the format of proposals, whereas others provide more general guidelines for form and content. You will no doubt have to attend carefully to the variations that reflect the expectations and requirements of your particular institution. The chapters in Part II of this book provide more elaboration on each of these sections. At the proposal stage, you will be proposing your methodology as clearly as possible. The goal is to provide as much clarity for the dissertation committee as possible. Once you have conducted the study, you will go back and update anything that occurred in the process that was different from what you anticipated, providing examples when possible. Therefore, a proposal is written in the future tense because you are proposing research that has not yet taken place. Once you have carried out your study and proceeded to write up your dissertation, be sure to change your writing to the past tense. Refer to Appendix Z, *Dissertation Manuscript Cheat Sheet*.

The first three chapters as outlined here will apply to the dissertation proposal:

Introduction to the Study

The introductory chapter includes the context or background for your study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, your research questions, the research design, researcher assumptions and expertise, significance of and rationale for the study, and explanation of key terminology. All of these components are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6 of this book. As you are developing your proposal, ask yourself two key questions:

- Will this proposed study fit best with a quantitative or a qualitative methodology, and why?
- Then, within those two broad methodologies, what type of research design (qualitative tradition or genre) will be most suitable?

The introductory chapter of the proposal serves three major purposes. First, it orients your readers by providing them with the context leading to the problem that you are addressing, the researcher's "positionality" with regard the research context and research participants, and the overall purpose of your inquiry. Second, it identifies your research questions and the research approach you are adopting. Third, it begins to frame the study by explaining what has led you to focus on your topic, conveying a personal orientation as well as a more general sense of the rationale and significance of the study. In summary, the introduction sets the stage for explaining and justifying the research. It should draw readers into your inquiry while orienting them to its nature, purpose, and potential value.

Literature Review

Developing a scholarly literature review utilizing academic writing is a vital component of your research process and of your dissertation. The literature review chapter identifies what is already

known about your topic and research problem. Literature is thoroughly and comprehensively reviewed to identify other relevant research so that you can situate your work within the current body of literature, as well as draw from existing literature to inform your study. The literature review helps develop the argument for your study by showing how your study is part of a broader conversation. In order for a literature review to support your research, you will need to examine and articulate the various aspects of relevant peer-reviewed literature in an integrated and critical way, making central connections and asking the kinds of questions that will shed new light on key issues related to your study.

Following the review, you will present a well-thought-out theoretical or conceptual framework, which is designed to guide your study and situate it within its appropriate theoretical, conceptual, and practical contexts. Development of this framework is an evolving, iterative, and reflexive process that integrates all aspects of the study in an explicit and transparent way. The categories of this framework are tied directly to the research questions. These are the same categories under which your data are sorted. The conceptual framework is not an abstract model, but rather, a working analytic tool. These categories continue to evolve and become further refined as data emerge.

To establish a solid framework for doctoral study, you are required to discuss the theory (or theories) or concept that support each of the presented constructs in your aligned problem and purpose statements and research questions. As a doctoral-level candidate, you are expected to include a cohesive, meaningful, and comprehensive conceptual framework in your dissertation proposal. The proposal should include an overview of the broad conceptual and/or theoretical area under which the research falls and discuss how the proposed research fits within the larger body of research in the field. Discussion specifically includes important issues, perspectives, and, if appropriate, controversies and any theoretical tensions in the field. Your discussion should reflect knowledge and familiarity with both historical and current literature. In developing your framework, ask yourself several important questions:

1. Is the theoretical or conceptual material directly relevant to my topic?
2. Are the seminal and contemporary theoretical or conceptual sources appropriately described, supported, and cited?
3. Does the section clearly reflect consideration of my proposed study's theoretical or conceptual assumptions and principles? Have I considered these assumptions and principles from several angles?
4. Is there any theoretical controversy or problematic issue that I may have missed or not adequately discussed?
5. Is the theoretical or conceptual framework presented in a cohesive, integrated, and understandable way?

When the answer to each of these questions is *yes*, it is likely that the framework for the proposed study is appropriate and comprehensive. If the answer is *no* to any of the questions, you

will need to rework this section of your proposal to address any limitations. The theoretical or conceptual framework is, in our experience, one of the most misunderstood pieces in the dissertation puzzle and is a source of anxiety and frustration for many. The expectations and requirements pertaining to your literature review, and the development of an appropriate theoretical or conceptual framework, are discussed in detail in Chapter 7 of this book. Appendix B, *Rubric for Evaluating a Literature Review*, is a useful tool to check your work.

Methodology

The methodology chapter of the proposal helps further develop the argument for your study by showing how and in what ways you will go about conducting your study. This chapter includes an overview of the research design, information needed and sources of data, a proposed research sample, plans and methods for data collection and data analysis, and a rationale for the methods to be used. The strategies you intend to employ for both collecting and analyzing data are determined by the particular qualitative design (tradition or genre) that you have adopted for the study; thus, in your discussion, you need to demonstrate these connections in order to establish methodological congruence. In addition, you will need to explain how you intend to deal with issues of trustworthiness. This includes discussion around credibility (which parallels validity in quantitative research), dependability (which parallels reliability in quantitative research), confirmability (which parallels objectivity in quantitative research), and transferability (which parallels generalizability in quantitative research). You will also need to include ethical considerations and your plans for dealing with these, as well as an explanation regarding any anticipated limitations and delimitations related to the proposed study, and realistic ways of addressing these issues.

While research proposals do not necessitate the collection of data, it is recommended that you include in your proposal intentions to conduct any pilot studies, which will constitute preliminary findings in advance of your actual research. A pilot study or pilot project is a small-scale preliminary study conducted in order to evaluate feasibility (time, cost, or any potential adverse events) in an attempt to improve upon the study design *prior* to the actual study being conducted. The pilot study is a useful basis for making some initial decisions in designing research. Remember, pilot studies that involve human participants will require *the same scrutiny* as full-scale research projects and must be submitted for IRB review and approval. It is important to remember, therefore, that pilot studies, if included in the proposal, will only be conducted *after* the proposal has been approved and IRB permission secured. Details regarding IRB protocol and requirements are discussed further on in this chapter. Please note that, in contrast to pilot studies, field tests involve asking peers or colleagues for feedback and input regarding a proposed research instrument or tool while you are still developing the study and do not require IRB approval, as they do not actually involve collecting data.

Additional Elements to Consider in Developing a Proposal

In addition to the three parts of the proposal outlined previously, you will need to develop a clear title, a tentative chapter outline for the dissertation, and a projected timeline for your research.

Both of the latter elements illustrate that you are able to plan and think ahead. The proposed chapter outline indicates logic, structure, and clarity. The timeline will convince the reader that you have carefully considered all of the tasks involved and the time needed to complete each task. The timeline will help the reader (and you) judge the feasibility of the proposed study and may suggest implications for logistics and practicality that might not be immediately apparent in the body of the proposal. In addition, you will need to attach as appendixes all necessary and relevant information, such as a copy of site permission documents (if any), consent form with a clear template that outlines the steps you will take to protect research participants, projected instruments and forms to be used in pilot studies, and any other appropriate documents that may pertain to the proposed study.

Of course, proper use of references and citations is necessary, too. It is important to note that citations from the literature constitute the beginning of a more comprehensive list of references that is continuously being developed as you proceed through each chapter and will culminate in a final set of references at the end of the dissertation. Attention to updating your list of references throughout your study is indeed a critical discipline in carrying out research. This task can be accomplished manually, but should you prefer, there are also software programs that can assist in creating a list of bibliographic references including EndNote (www.endnote.com), ProCite (www.procite.com), and RefWorks (www.refworks.com). These programs can be thought of as an online filing cabinet and can be used to store citation information and format bibliographies in APA style.

Importantly, a proposal requires a logical structure. The conceptual and methodological elements of the proposal need to make sense in relation to one another, and the writing must be clear and concise. Think carefully about the relationship between the various parts of your proposal and how they are aligned. This keen sense of interrelatedness not only provides your readers with a cohesive picture of the proposed project but also helps you, as the researcher and writer, to conceptualize the entire process involved.

It should be pointed out that this understanding of structural interrelationship, while implying clear definition and cohesiveness, does not necessitate a rigid framework. It is vital that your proposal preserves the design flexibility that is characteristic of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers need to remain flexible and attuned to emergent data. In this regard, you should expect that, before it evolves toward its final form, your proposal will most likely undergo many drafts as you refine your thinking. The thinking, writing, and rewriting involved in developing a sound proposal will help you to develop a logic and a plan that will continue to guide and direct your research. As such, the time and energy spent in writing a clear and persuasive proposal that is carefully explained, theoretically sound, methodologically thoughtful, and practically grounded will reap rewards throughout the dissertation endeavor.

You may have heard the term *elevator speech*. This refers to your ability to clearly and concisely answer the question “What is your study about?” If somebody asks you this, for example in an elevator, you would not have very long to explain the essence or gist of your study. This is where you have to be crystal clear about your research problem and purpose statement, as these convey the study’s context, rationale, goals, and objectives. Preparing this speech at the proposal stage also provides you with clarity about what it is you are seeking to achieve with your study

and reinforces the study's rationale and significance, and ultimate value. Table 1.1, *Dissertation Proposal Alignment Worksheet*, can be used to develop a 1–2 page overview which can become your elevator speech. You will see as you proceed that alignment is critical at every step of the dissertation process. This table walks you through an initial exercise, helping you to begin to understand the importance of alignment and to practice achieving it. It is recommended that you work with your dissertation chair to refine the components of this worksheet based on their feedback and develop a well-aligned and feasible dissertation proposal. Be prepared to read much about the concepts of both alignment and feasibility throughout this book! Begin by completing as much of the worksheet as you can. If you are in the early stages of your program focus on just the first few rows, and as you read and review more and more literature you will be better positioned to fully complete the worksheet. If you are stuck and cannot decide on a research problem, try developing a few different alignment worksheets to help clarify your thinking so you can settle on a research problem that is relevant and timely, and one that resonates most with you both personally and professionally.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Dissertation Proposal Alignment Worksheet

Elevator Speech Components	Questions to stimulate critical thinking
Topic (1-2 sentences):	<i>Ask yourself: Is this the broad overall area that you are interested in.</i>
Working title:	<i>Ask yourself: Does this title convey the central idea of the proposed study? Are major key words included?</i>
The problem is (____), which results in (____). <i>*Further instruction is provided below</i>	<i>Check yourself: The problem is not that there is a lack of literature or research. The problem is that we want to develop a better understanding of an issue, experience, or phenomenon out there in the world.</i>
The purpose of this study is to (____):	<i>Check yourself: The purpose must address the problem. Does this sentence flow logically from the problem statement above? Are you consistently using the same words or terminology you used in the sentence above?</i>
Research Questions 1. (____) 2. (____) 3. (____) <i>**Further instruction is provided below</i>	<i>Check yourself: These are questions intended to guide the study. These are not hypotheses or interview questions.</i>
This study is significant because (____):	<i>Ask yourself: What may happen if this problem is not addressed or resolved? This speaks to the rationale of the proposed study; that is, the overall value and worth of the study.</i>
The target population my study's findings will apply to (____):	<i>Ask yourself: What is the broader group of people from which I will create a sample?</i>

TABLE 1.1 ■ Dissertation Proposal Alignment Worksheet (Continued)

Elevator Speech Components	Questions to stimulate critical thinking
My research sample will include (____):	<i>Ask yourself: Who am I seeking to include in this proposed qualitative study? Remember, you will create a purposeful sample based on specific inclusion criteria.</i>
Data collected will be (____):	<i>Ask yourself: What kinds of data do I need? (demographic, perceptual, theoretical)? Will I be collecting data directly from participants? Will you need any archival data?</i>
Data collection methods 1. (____) 2. (____)	<i>Ask yourself: Are these considered qualitative data collection tools? Will these tools be able to provide me with the information I need?</i>
Definition of Terminology 1. (____) 2. (____) 3. (____)	<i>Define any terms that are aligned to the title or research problem. These terms are essential to be able to search for your study. Definitions are needed only for terminology that is not commonly used and/or understood.</i>
<p>*Prompts for the Problem Statement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is the actual real-world problem as documented in the literature? ● What happens if this problem is not addressed or resolved? ● Can you substantiate the problem with literature and/or previous studies? 	
<p>**Prompts for Research Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop relevant questions to address the research problem. Including too many or extraneous questions leads to lack of alignment and unnecessary complication regarding analysis of findings. ● Alignment will be achieved if you can highlight the link between the key words in the problem, purpose, and research questions. Use a highlighter and try this out! ● Be open to changing or revising your research questions as you delve deeper into the literature. 	

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF A QUALITATIVE DISSERTATION

Right upfront it is critical to acknowledge that there are differences between the evaluation of qualitative and quantitative research. The replicability of a qualitative study cannot be formulated as a problem of reliability, and the accuracy of a qualitative interpretation cannot be compared to the explanatory power of a statistical model. A high quality qualitative dissertation is one that is (a) well-articulated and demonstrates high academic writing skills; (b) demonstrates methodological integrity/alignment and ethical practices; and (c) makes a significant contribution to the knowledge base of a field or area of specialization. Tracy (2010) proposed a series of criteria or “key markers” for evaluating the quality of qualitative research, including worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence—maintaining that “this eight-point conceptualization [of qualitative inquiry]

offers a useful pedagogical model and provides a common language of qualitative best practices that can be recognized as integral by a variety of audiences” (p. 837). Tracy goes on to state that

Perhaps the most controversial part of this conceptualization is the notion of universal criteria for qualitative quality. However I believe that we need not be so tied to epistemology or ontology (or the philosophy of the world) that we cannot agree on several common end goals of good qualitative research (p. 850).

Similarly, O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) propose adhering to a set of core guiding quality principles for both designing and evaluating the quality of qualitative work:

- Transparency (auditability, rigor, and credibility)
- Reflexivity (being aware of the constructed nature of the findings and the impact of the researcher)
- Transferability (the extent to which the study could relate to other contexts)
- Ethicality (significance of contribution, risk and benefit assessment, and worthiness of topic)
- Integrity (epistemological congruence, authenticity, sampling adequacy)

While suggesting that these are useful guiding principles, these authors propose that it is essential that researchers from each methodological framework explicate how these general principles might be applied to their specific context and consider whether particular additional markers are necessary to evaluate work in their area.

Levitt et al. (2021) articulate principles and practices that support methodological integrity in relation to critical qualitative research, and offer criteria for evaluating the rigor and quality of critical research. Critical qualitative research is characterized by a view of subjectivity as embedded in society and as intrinsically influenced by cultural, contextual, and historical forces related to social power and oppression. As these authors suggest central to methodological integrity are the two core concepts of fidelity and utility, which guide the selection and evaluation of methods and procedures (Levitt et al., 2021).

- *Fidelity* is explained as “the ability to represent the phenomenon under study in a manner that reflects an intimate understanding of the complexities and variety of experiences and practices in the phenomenon under study” (Levitt et al., 2021 p. 360). Fidelity in critical analysis is enhanced when researchers develop awareness of how their own perspectives and assumptions not only serve to increase sensitivity, but how and in what ways these might also unduly influence analysis.
- *Utility* is explained as “the effectiveness of the research design and methods, and their synergistic relationship in achieving the study goals as understood in relation to its epistemological values” (Levitt et al., 2021 p. 360). Critical research is conducted with the goal of raising social consciousness, demonstrating the need for social change,

furthering liberation goals, and/or advocating for specific policy changes. Utility is advanced when researchers produce findings that can meaningfully advance the critical agenda, and when difference is critically explored and diversity within the data is coherently represented (Levitt et al., 2021).

Now that you have some idea of the core elements that are required for the various sections of your research proposal and the final dissertation, two rubrics are included for your convenience. These will hopefully provide you with useful information pertaining to the different levels of quality of a qualitative dissertation. These rubrics are by no means exhaustive since, as stressed previously, different institutions have different requirements and criteria, and there is no “one size fits all” approach. The intention is that these are tools that will provide you with some idea of what may be involved in the evaluation of the content of a completed dissertation. Appendix A is a *rubric for evaluating a completed qualitative dissertation*. Appendix B is a *rubric for evaluating a completed literature review*. The suggestion is that you use these rubrics as guides in assessing or evaluating the quality of your own work and in determining where limitations may lie and where improvements and enhancements can be made. Remember, in undertaking a research study, the intent is to produce findings that will make a contribution to knowledge and ultimately make a difference in a discipline, practice, or policy. Quality must be evident not only in terms of content of the final product—that is, your dissertation—but also in the multiple processes inherent in *how well* you conducted the research, indicating criticality, transparency, reflexivity, and rigor.

Following are some recommended resources that you might consider reviewing regarding the criteria to consider in the development of a trustworthy qualitative study.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING AND EXPLORATION

Levitt, H.M., Morrill, Z., Collins, K.M., & Rizo, J.L. (2021). The methodological integrity of critical qualitative research: Principles to support design and research review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 68(3), 357–370. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000523>.

This article articulates principles and practices that support methodological integrity in relation to critical qualitative research, providing clear criteria for evaluating the rigor and quality of critical research. As these authors suggest, central to methodological integrity for critical qualitative inquiry are the two core concepts of fidelity and utility, both of which serve to guide the selection and evaluation of methods and procedures.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.

The author presents and explores eight key markers of quality in qualitative research including (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This eight-point conceptualization offers a useful model that provides meaningful criteria to explore and evaluate qualitative best practices. While making a case for these markers of quality, the article invites ongoing dialogue around these criteria for further expansion and debate.

Additional resources and downloadable materials, including the book's appendixes, that relate to this chapter can be accessed through the book's companion website <https://edge.sagepub.com/bloomberg-qualitative-5e>.

Appendixes that are associated with this chapter include:

- Appendix A: *Rubric for Evaluating a Completed Qualitative Dissertation*
- Appendix B: *Rubric for Evaluating a Literature Review*
- Appendix Z: *Dissertation Manuscript Cheat Sheet*

Do not copy, post, or distribute