

**A GUIDE TO WRITING YOUR  
DISSERTATION IN  
THE HEALTH POLICY PROGRAM AT  
UNIVERSITY OF THE SCIENCES IN  
PHILADELPHIA**

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## A GUIDE TO YOUR DISSERTATION

*“Well begun is half done”*

- Aristotle

### Introduction

Except in unusual circumstances you must successfully complete the doctoral comprehensive examination before seeking formal approval for a dissertation committee. It is not in the scope of this document to describe the process leading up to the comprehensive exam. However, a few comments are relevant to lay the groundwork.

- During your course work it can be useful if you begin to think ahead about your dissertation research interests.
- If possible identify your general wide-ranging policy area of study.
- Then narrow and refine your ideas through your course work experiences.
- Even if you did not select a general dissertation topic or a research area during your course work, do not be discouraged. Read ahead to begin working on your dissertation. With good planning you are off to a good start.

### Selecting your Committee Chair and Forming your Dissertation Committee

The dissertation committee, in general, is responsible for evaluating your proposal for dissertation research, for supervising the preparation of a dissertation on an approved problem, and for evaluating your dissertation. However, it is the chair of your committee with whom you must work most closely to accomplish all of these related tasks.

The chair of your committee will often, but not always, be the person who has been your research advisor since your matriculation. However, it is not a requirement, and it may not be practical or desirable to have your original advisor as your dissertation chair, if your topic is unrelated to your advisor’s area of research or if you do not work well together. Therefore, you should as early as

possible think about a professor who would be a good match for your research interests and working style and start to develop an exchange of ideas with that person. The chair of a Ph.D. dissertation committee must be a member of the USP Health Policy faculty (this can include faculty with secondary appointments in Health Policy). Once your committee chair is in place, you should initiate a conversation with him/her about the selection of your other committee members. Your chair will recommend potential committee members with whom he/she is comfortable working and who will likely be able to offer content or methodology expertise as well. If you have a particular professor in mind, be sure to get your chair's approval before asking that person to serve on your committee. You may have a committee member who is external to USP with approval of your chair and the program director. Furthermore, if he or she has sufficient expertise, an external member need not hold a Ph.D. degree.

#### **FORMAL APPROVAL PROCESS FOR A DISSERTATION COMMITTEE**

To formalize your committee, complete and submit a graduate school Notification Form. It is available at [www.usip.edu/graduate/current/PDF/notifications.pdf](http://www.usip.edu/graduate/current/PDF/notifications.pdf). You may also obtain a copy from the graduate school office by contacting Theresa Rush at 215-596-8886 or [t.rush@usip.edu](mailto:t.rush@usip.edu). Furthermore, it is important that you familiarize yourself with the Policies and Procedures of the USP College of Graduate Studies, which are available from the graduate school office or online at <http://www.usip.edu/graduate/current/PDF/PoliciesProcedures.pdf>.

## WRITING YOUR DISSERTATION

1968: *The Ph.D. is the mark of highest achievement in preparing for scholarship and research.....when the student completes research which is a significant contribution to knowledge.....it is presented as his dissertation.*

- The Council of Graduate Schools

1991: *The dissertation is the **beginning of one's scholarly** work, not its culmination...it should prepare students for the type of research/scholarship to be expected after they earn the Ph.D.*

- The Council of Graduate Schools

It is noteworthy that the expectations of a dissertation have evolved through the years. Academia no longer expects a groundbreaking contribution from a dissertation. It is important that you approach your dissertation as the beginning of your scholarly work and not the pinnacle.

## OVERVIEW OF THE DOCTORAL DEGREE PROCESS

There are three broad stages in your doctoral program:

1. The coursework and comprehensive exams.
2. The proposal planning stage: Forming your committee, preparation of the proposal, the committee meeting to approve the proposal
3. The implementation and defense stage: Implementing the dissertation research plan agreed upon by you and your committee and defending your work (and oh, the final graduation!)

These three stages are packed with crucial interim steps. Completing a doctoral dissertation is more an iterative process rather than a linear one because you are engaging in an investigative path developing hypotheses and refining your hypotheses based on new information. Additionally, you are taking a path that is new to you and can have a number of false starts.

The dissertation process contains formal and informal rules/policies, norms, and standards. Informing oneself of the process, setting realistic goals, and working closely with your committee chair can contribute greatly to successfully completing your dissertation.

When starting to work on the dissertation it is important to transition mentally from your role as inquiring student to a new role as scholar/theorist/practitioner. Transitioning from student to scholar/theorist/practitioner means that you must move from addressing problems that others identify to identifying and solving your own problems.

Developing a proposal is the start of the dissertation. This document describes both the development of a proposal and the dissertation. How is a proposal different from the dissertation? A number of factors differentiate the proposal from the dissertation. A proposal is written as a document of work that you intend to do. A dissertation is written as a document of work that you have completed. The dissertation is the final product, and you are reporting the work that was conducted. In the dissertation you must discuss the results and the implications of your findings. Therefore there are additional sections in the dissertation that are not included in the proposal. For example, the discussion chapter and the results chapter are not part of the proposal but are an important part of the dissertation. The Discussion is based on the results and tied closely to both the introduction and the literature review.

Developing a proposal: A proposal should argue cogently that your proposed research will make a contribution to the existing body of knowledge in health policy. Your contribution can be incremental and not necessarily policy altering. The research method, however, must be designed and carried out in a manner that is rigorous to inform the decision making of policy makers.

Your proposal should concretely demonstrate how you will conduct your study, that it is “do-able”, and that you can complete it within a reasonable period of time. Although you may be interested in tackling vast problems, a dissertation is not the medium to do so. The dissertation is merely the beginning of your scholarly work.

A proposal is not just a summary or description of the proposed research—it must convince the reader that the research is justified, feasible, and has a valid research design. Provide a clear explanation of what data sources you will use or how, when, and where you will collect and analyze your data to answer your policy-related research questions.

In general, the proposal requires that you state your wider policy issue, your research questions, and show where your questions fit in the context of the health policy literature. You will need to describe your research design, methods of data collection, and the type of analysis you will use to answer your questions.

A bibliography of the relevant literature is required in the proposal as well as in the dissertation.

Write clearly, avoid jargon and define technical terms. Write the proposal and dissertation for the “intelligent lay reader”.

The proposal will be discussed and, if appropriate, then approved at an informal committee meeting that you coordinate and the dissertation will be defended at a dissertation defense hearing.

### Important Resources

Use all resources available to you to get tasks accomplished. Here are a few resources including those at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia:

1. College of Graduate Studies Policies and Procedures manual (includes requirements for clearances and graduation)

<http://www.usip.edu/graduate/current/index.shtml>

2. USP Writing Center Phone: 215 596 8909

3. Web resources- many links to journals and associations are posted at

[www.healthpolicy.usip.edu](http://www.healthpolicy.usip.edu)

4. Published (public access) resources- census data <http://www.census.gov/>

MEPS <http://www.meps.ahrq.gov/>, laws and regulations

<http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/fedlaws.html>

5. USP library <http://www.usip.edu/library/>

The USP library is a great resource. The library staff is available for you to set up an appointment for dissertation research guidance, and they can also be a great resource. Use these resources to your advantage. Research materials are accessible both on campus and remotely over the Internet. Library staff can assist you with questions concerning remote access. Some of the library sources of information that are most relevant to health policy research are listed below.

### General Sources

#### *Associations Unlimited*

The Encyclopedia of Associations: all the info you need about societies and professional organizations.

#### *Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe*

Access legal materials, including cases, statutes, regulations, and law review articles. This database also includes newspaper articles from across the country as well as many pharmacy and medical trade magazine articles.

#### *RefWorks*

Create your own database for your online references so that you can

manage and update your references and bibliography. Each user needs to sign up for a personal account (see link on RefWorks Login page).

*Research Library Complete (Proquest)*

Access online articles in general magazines and some journals in many different disciplines. Much overlap with Ebsco.

*Major Newspapers*

Current issues and archives of most major daily newspapers, including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Philadelphia Inquirer, and Washington Post are available through the USP library online.

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**Business Sources**

*ABI Inform*

Full text articles of major business journals.

*R & D Insight*

Drugs in the pipeline. clinical and financial information.

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**Medical Sources**

*CINAHL (Current Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature)*

Access to over 1,700 nursing and allied health journals and publications.

*Facts and Comparisons*

The publishers of Facts and Comparisons offer free remote access to pharmacy students. Details are on the linked page.

*Harrison's Online*

Access the complete text of Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine. Updated monthly. Limited to 2 users at a time.

*King Guide to Parenteral Admixtures*

Information on IV drug compatibility and stability. Quarterly updates.

*Lexi-Comp*

Access to accurate and up-to-date drug information through Lexi-Comp On-line.

*MICROMEDEX® Healthcare Series Online*

Provides access to the following databases:

Alternative Medicine, Diseasedex, Drugdex, Index Nominum, Martindale, MSDS, P&T Quick Reports, PDR, Poisindex, Reprorisk System, TOMES, and USP DI.

*Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database*

Contains natural products monographs, efficacy statements, interactions, and discussions of disease conditions that can be treated with natural products.

*NABPLAW*

The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy's (NABP) online database of Pharmacy Law.

A separate password is needed to access this resource off-campus. Click here to obtain the password. (**Note:** *We have experienced problems accessing this resource in the past.*)

*OTSearch*

*An index to occupational therapy journals (no full text).*

*A separate password is needed to access this resource off-campus. Click here to obtain the password.*

*Ovid*

- *Medline (Ovid's Medline now has links to many more fulltext journals.)*
- International Pharmaceutical Abstracts
- Health & Psychosocial Instruments (HAPI)
- Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews
- EBM Reviews

*PubMed*

Now our recommended way to access Medline. Use our link to PubMed, and you can link to the fulltext articles of 400 journals, not just the 150 in Ovid.

Never used PubMed? We recommend their excellent tutorial.

*R&D Insight*

Drugs in the pipeline. clinical and financial information.

A separate password is needed to access this resource on and off-campus. Click here to obtain the password.

*Stat!Ref*

A collection of medical textbooks, including some drug information sources. Limited to 5 users at a time.

A separate password is needed to access this resource off-campus. Click here to obtain the password.

*US Pharmacopeia Drug Information*

Updates of the US Pharmacopeia Drug Information

A separate password is needed to access this resource on and off-campus. Click here to obtain the password.

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**Science***American Chemical Society Journals*

Online access to articles from over 20 ACS journals.

*BioOne*

Online access to articles from 68 biology journals.

*Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety*

Online access to MSDS sheets, RTECS, ChemIndex, ChemInfo, Oshline. No password is needed; click on the database you want to use.

*Encyclopedia of Pharmaceutical Technology*

Online access to the Encyclopedia of Pharmaceutical Technology.

*Kirk-Othmer Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology*

The highly-acclaimed encyclopedia...the online version is updated regularly.

*Methods in Enzymology*

Online access to full-text articles from the Methods in Enzymology book series.

*Science Direct*

Fulltext articles from 124 Elsevier and 175 Academic Press journals. No password needed; note that Science Direct includes 1800 journals and we subscribe to the fulltext of only 299 of them.

*SpringerLink (formerly Kluwer)*

Online access to fulltext articles from 596 journals.

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**Humanities***Contemporary Authors*

Brief biographical and critical entries.

*FirstSearch*

A collection of databases, including social science, business, and humanities.

A separate password is needed to access this resource on and off-campus. Click here to obtain the password.

*Project Muse*

Fulltext articles from 126 arts and humanities journals

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**Psychology**

*PsycArticles: American Psychological Association Journals*

Fulltext articles from the 38 APA journals online are included in the Journals@Ovid collection.

*Psychinfo*

Search by topic for peer-reviewed articles in psychology. Some articles are available online.

## SELECTING A TOPIC FOR A HEALTH POLICY DISSERTATION

Use the funnel approach - - broad to narrow. Find an area that interests you. If you get bored, the journey gets tough and finishing can become almost impossible.

Initially, you could develop short write-ups (less than one page) of various ideas to be explored as a dissertation topic. Work with your chair to refine your ideas.

Once you have selected an area for investigation then read a lot about the field. Ultimately develop research questions and testable hypotheses.

The topic must be policy relevant and the research questions must address a knowledge gap in the policy issue. Ask yourself the following question when developing your research idea: "What is the policy-related issue that will be informed by my research?"

### *What is a Policy Issue?*

A policy issue informs the decision making of policy makers- legislators, regulators, public and private administrators. Policy-related research is different from addressing a clinical or a basic research question. Policy related research must have the research questions contextualized within a policy issue. It involves how the health care system is administered, rather than how individual patients are treated. A policy issue focuses on factors affecting the delivery of health care and the health status of populations.

### *What is a Research Question?*

An acceptable research question is a question answerable by empirical data. The question must be stated as specifically and concisely as possible and must flow

from the narrative that immediately precedes it. All variables in the research question must be defined.

### *Data*

Asking research questions that interest you and are rigorously worded will not be sufficient unless you are able to find data to answer the questions. You must have reliable and valid data. Additionally, the data must be in a form that is accessible and will lend itself to answering your questions. You may use large databases that may be publicly available, such as MEPS and census data, and that are proprietary but accessible through arrangements that the school or you, the student makes, such as PBM, HMO, and drug company data. Faculty are often able to assist in obtaining access to some of these databases.

If you plan to collect your own data, you must design your study to collect relevant data using valid and reliable methods such as surveys and/or qualitative interviews. Designing and collecting one's own data can be a complex process due to the need for pilot tests, establishment of reliability and validity of measurement tools, access to subjects, response rate issues, and other methodological issues that can pose serious threats to internal and external validity of your study. Qualitative studies such as case study methods are acceptable methods for your dissertation. Although qualitative studies may seem easier to plan initially, these can take much longer in the analysis phase. A rule of thumb is to use methodologies that you are able to comprehend and carry-out on your own or in consultation with experts in the area.

### PROPOSAL QUALITY CHECKLIST

You will want to be sure that your committee will agree with the following statements about your proposal:

- The topic is clearly stated
- Relevant background literature is reviewed and analyzed
- The policy issue is clearly stated
- Research questions are clearly stated and variables defined
- The contribution and importance of the research question(s) with respect to relevant literature, policy and/or practice are articulated in a convincing manner
- The research plan and methods are appropriate and adequate to study the research question(s), and they are described explicitly.
- Careful thought has been given to the sources of data, and they have been deemed viable.

### COMPONENTS OF THE PROPOSAL AND DISSERTATION

Depending on your topic, the following sections do not necessarily have to appear in this order, nor are they all required but they appear in the vast majority of dissertations. Check with your committee chair. The table below shows the sections and in which document i.e., proposal and/or dissertation, these may be included. An introduction to each section follows the table.

	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Dissertation</b>
Title Page	X	X
Abstract	X	X
Dedication		X
Acknowledgements		X
Biographical Sketch (Vita)		X
List of Abbreviations and Symbols		X
List of Figures		X
List of Tables		X
Table of Contents	X	X
Introduction	X	X
Literature Review	X	X
Method	X	X
Proposed conclusions	X	
Results		X
Discussion		X
References	X	X
Appendices		X

### *Abstract*

A proposal abstract is a technical summary of your proposed research in less than one page. There is no minimum or maximum word limit for the proposal. However, the dissertation abstract is limited to 350 words if sent to Dissertation Abstracts at UMI.

Elements in the proposal abstract can include a statement of the larger policy issue, the knowledge gap in this area that you plan to address, the overarching research question you plan to explore, your population and sample, source of information (data). Additionally, the dissertation abstract includes the main results and the major implication of your study.

### *Introduction*

The introduction of the proposal must address what you are writing about, and why you are writing about this issue. The introduction section must answer questions such as the following: What is the policy issue or problem that you will address? What has been the driving force behind the research? Why is it important? What is your relationship to the problem? This section will set up the issues on which you will be working and set expectations for the reader of what you will aim to accomplish in your dissertation. The introduction is your opportunity to draw the readers in and to make them care about your topic. Make the introduction section compelling.

### *Problem Statement*

Include the problem statement in the Introduction section. The problem statement explains why you are conducting this particular research project, and why we should care. It should be the one or two sentences which you use when people ask you on what you are working —the essence of your research.

*Research Questions*

What do you want your research to uncover? Define the larger policy area that you wish to explore. Next, identify the knowledge gap within this area that you wish to address. Then develop research questions. A research question can be described as a question answerable with empirical observation. For example, "Does managed care improve the quality of care?" is not a research question. It is not a research question because it is too broad and general. In particular, it does not define what is meant by "managed care" and "quality". On the other hand, "Do patients enrolled in HMOs receive regular immunizations at a higher rate than patients enrolled in indemnity insurance plans?" is a research question. The terms are narrowly stated and can be defined and measured. The primary variable of interest in this question is the rate of regular immunization. This research question looks to compare the rate of immunization under two conditions—HMOs and indemnity insurance plans. Similarly, related research questions may be written to examine demographic differences in immunization rates such as sex, race, and age, environmental differences such as zip code, and health status such as diagnoses.

Configuring your research questions can be tricky. The overall question must not be too broad, but not too trivial. To accomplish the task of developing rigorous research questions write down a list of everything you could possibly want to discover from your work—and then go back to prune and refine that list. The more you can pinpoint exactly what you want to learn, the easier it will be to focus on specific research. Focus your research questions so that you and your committee clearly understand what you are setting out to accomplish. Most dissertations will address several (2-6) related questions. Keep in mind that these questions may also be refined as you conduct your research. Refining your questions is fine – it is just an example of the recursive nature of the dissertation process.

### *Literature Review*

In the literature review, discuss the research to date on your topic, highlighting the big themes and recurring arguments. Show how the relevant literature informs your study. Include every major article in the area. You do not want someone asking you later on why you did not include an important piece of prior research. Do not merely summarize studies; instead synthesize and critically analyze the literature. The literature review should show how existing work leads to your study—how there are gaps or unanswered questions in the literature that you will address. This is the section to show that your work is original - - either your question has not been addressed before in the literature or it has not been addressed in the same way that you plan to address in your research. Build your case using relevant literature.

When conducting the literature review it may seem as if you can never read enough, but keep in mind that this is meant only to lay the groundwork for your own research; when you have read and collected a depth and breadth of literature on your topic, you can synthesize how it forms your research, and refer back to these pieces as needed.

### *Plagiarism*

The most likely place for plagiarism to occur is in the literature review section. Be mindful of using others' ideas and direct quotes. Always acknowledge others' ideas when you cite or borrow them. If in doubt, ask a colleague or your advisor for guidance.

### *Methodology and Method*

This is the most important part of the proposal - not necessarily in terms of length, but in terms of the thought that goes into it. This is the actual blueprint for completing the research.

You have to show that your choice of methodology is appropriate to your research question. Describe your data sources clearly and with as much detail as possible. Your description should be specific to the analysis methods (i.e., statistics, case study analysis) you intend to use and give as much detail as possible. The study design and analysis methods address reliability and validity of your research. The generalizability of your findings is based on the study design and analyses of your observations.

### *Data analysis*

In your proposal, state how you will interpret what you have learned from your interviews/surveys/databases analysis. Be as specific as possible on this topic; again, although it may seem obvious to you that you are going to administer surveys, collect them, input the data to an electronic medium and analyze them using statistical software, describe in your proposal each step of your analysis plan.

### *Study Limitations*

In your proposal state how you know the data are sound based on your knowledge of the data. In the final dissertation, basically, this issue is addressed in the Discussion section and is an opportunity for you to indicate that, although you have done the best job possible, there is a chance that other factors, out of your control, may have influenced the data. For example, you can state that response biases due to the sample selected or other limitations bear on your findings. You don't want to give the reader the impression that you think your methodology is infallible. Always leave a slight margin for possibilities. Acknowledging study limitations strengthens your statements of implications of your findings. That is, the caveats should be clear but not so negative as to undermine the sense of the value of the research.

### *Conclusions*

In the proposal, this section discusses the major take-away issues you will be addressing. This section is where you discuss implications of your intended work for practice, policy, and academic research.

### *Results*

Presenting the results is both a science and an art. Present only data related to the purpose of the study. Present results in an orderly and logical way. Follow conventions in the field of reporting health-policy related information. Create well-crafted, clear tables and figures. For quantitative studies, results are often divided into descriptive statistics, simple analyses such as comparisons of means, and complex analyses such as multivariate analysis.

### *Discussion*

This is one of the most important sections of the dissertation. In this section you must interpret your findings, place your findings in context, consider the implications of your findings, limitations of the study with internal and external validity issues, measurement issues, statistical problems, and comments about future directions. Give yourself adequate time to craft this last chapter. Use critical thinking skills. In the discussion section, clearly address issues of generalizability, that is how the findings can affect policy and contribute to the body of research in the field. Also, how the findings are “generalizable” in a broader context beyond the sample you studied. Here you can be creative. This is where you can show your committee that you are transitioning from a student to an independent researcher. Because the discussion section is written at the end of your dissertation process it is often where students experience the most fatigue. Give yourself enough time to write the discussion. Address study limitations i.e., what they are, how they were addressed, why the ones that couldn't be addressed don't compromise the significance of the results.

*References*

Develop your references as you go through the process. Do not wait until the end of your writing. Create a library of the sources you use. Utilize electronic software such as EndNote to manage your references.

**COMMUNICATIONS****COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CHAIR AND COMMITTEE**

Ideally, your committee will work to guide your thinking, assisting you with a range of challenges. In some cases your chair will be an extremely active member of your committee, while in others he/she will expect the other committee members to guide your thinking on a regular basis, instead providing final approval on the dissertation. In either instance, communicate with your chair at least once a month to keep him/her informed and ask questions proactively. Plan in advance for each meeting with your chair so that you both know what will be discussed. Although every chair has his/her own style of working with dissertation students, run questions and concerns by your chair. Doing so will save you time by preventing you from going down a dead-end or making wrong turns in the dissertation process. After meeting with your chair, write down notes as you understand what was said and share them with your chair.

It is the responsibility of the student to initiate communications with the chair and other committee members and to set up meetings. The student is expected to check in with every committee member at least once per year. The student is responsible to provide his/her chair some documentation of the meetings with other committee members along with the committee members' approval of the student's work. Certifying your progress is your responsibility and the lack of this documentation can have an impact on satisfying your research credits for the semester. The student must effectively coordinate and manage the dissertation meetings and tasks throughout this process. The student is responsible for

securing the meeting room, scheduling the meeting time, and coordinating all activities to make the committee meeting happen. The College of Graduate Studies prefers that you hold at least one committee meeting per year.

Remember to obtain sign-offs on all meetings as documentation.

### **When your chair makes recommendations, LISTEN!**

So your chair has approved the latest draft of your dissertation proposal. What now? Ask your chair if the draft is ready to go to the rest of your committee members for review. If so, send a copy of the proposal draft to each of them and request their feedback. If they already know that you have a target date for the committee meeting to approve the proposal and are on-board with this, remind them of that date and ask them how much time they will want to review your revisions. If you don't have a target date for the committee meeting, ask them for their feedback in a reasonable time, *e.g.*, 3-4 weeks, by giving them a concrete time frame and goal. It really helps everyone involved if you have target dates for both your proposal committee meeting and your dissertation defense. This kind of planning will enable you to work backwards and efficiently plan the intermediate steps along the way, while also getting your committee members on-board with your timeline.

### **The Committee Meeting To Approve Your Proposal**

You are not expected to have ALL the answers at this juncture; you are expected to be coherent about your topic so far, knowledgeable about your research plan and methodology, and open to a discussion of the next steps. To that end, recognize that you have done a good but unfinished job. If your committee has read your proposal, and has notes on it, they will use the time to share those thoughts and suggestions with you. Although informal, you may want to record the discussion at the committee meeting so that you do not miss any issue raised by your committee. You can use this time to ask any questions you have on your mind, and this is a great time to get the record straight. Your chair is ALWAYS

the final arbiter, but any committee member does have veto power during the proposal approval stage.

The approved proposal can be considered in a sense to be an agreement of understanding between you and your committee. In agreeing to the proposal, the committee is essentially saying that if you perform the work according to the plan that the proposal contains, you will have met the requirements for an acceptable dissertation. It would be much more difficult for a committee member to object later on to the research questions, data source, or methodology that you used. However, if the committee has not yet approved the proposal, members are freer to criticize any element of your work. Therefore, you may want to hold off on collecting and analyzing data until **AFTER** your proposal committee meeting. In some cases, students begin these activities before their proposal has been approved in the interests of time. However, if you decide to begin working prior to approval by your committee, be aware that there is a chance the committee may suggest a different route from the one you have been following. In short, it might be a waste of precious time to proceed too far prior to an approved proposal.

Once the proposal is approved, then proceed with your dissertation as planned. Your proposal may be approved with revisions or without revisions. If revisions are required you may be required to submit revisions to just your chair, or to the entire committee. Ask whether your chair/committee expects a memo detailing your understanding of what is expected by the committee, or a complete revision of the proposal. Remember that your written proposal and the committee meeting are your opportunity to make a case for why your research should proceed (*i.e.*, Why is your topic important? Why should the committee believe that you are prepared to carry out a productive research study?).

**The Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are independent committees that protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects. The IRB may approve, disapprove, or require modifications in order to approve studies being conducted. You may have to seek approval from more than one IRB based on your study method. You may have to submit forms for approval to the USP IRB and to an IRB on the site where you may collect data. Generally if one IRB approves the project the other site(S) will either exempt it or subject it to expedited review.

Because different research carries different risks to the human subjects involved, the review board has several options for review. These include an Exempt from Review approval, an Expedited Review, and a Full Review. The standard requirements for informed consent apply regardless of the type of review. Below are brief explanations of each option.

*Exempt from Review*

If your dissertation involves human subjects, you must file an application with the IRB to determine if your study is exempt from review. Examples include large database studies where subjects are NOT identifiable.

*Expedited Review*

Expedited review is a procedure through which certain kinds of research may be reviewed and approved without convening a meeting of the IRB.

*Full Review*

A full review is required if there is more potential for harm to the human subject than that defined in the expedited review.

Check out the IRB website for more information and guidance:

<http://www.usip.edu/irb/>

### Timeline For The Dissertation

According to current graduate school rules, students have a maximum of 8 years to complete all degree requirements (*i.e.*, course work up to 4 years, comprehensive examination and defense of the dissertation during the remaining time). Therefore, you will need to plan this phase of your doctoral program carefully to ensure that you allow yourself sufficient time to take the exam, seek approval for your proposal, conduct your research, and pass your defense hearing.

To complete your dissertation, you must register for at least 20 research credits (HP899). At least one of these must be taken in the semester in which you defend your dissertation. Generally, students begin taking research credits after they have completed their comprehensive examination, but they can do so sooner, if they are able to begin work related to their dissertation. Students are encouraged to space the research credits as evenly as possible over the course of their dissertation work. Remember that the summer semester counts as a regular semester along with the spring and fall. Of course, the time that the dissertation will take is not always predictable, and it is often not possible to know in advance how your available time for dissertation work will vary. In semesters in which you do not expect to be able to devote substantial time to your dissertation and do not take any didactic course credits, you may register “in absentia”. By doing so, you incur no tuition charges. You are essentially informing the school that you consider yourself still to be actively enrolled. You are required to register for credits or in absentia during every semester in which you are enrolled at USP, including summer. This is extremely important for University recordkeeping. Absent an explanation, there is generally a limit of two consecutive semesters of in absentia registration. In addition, the 8-year time limit for completing the degree continues to run during these times.

If you expect to be unable to work on your dissertation for an extended period of time because of an outside event, you can request a formal leave of absence,

which extends the time limit. Such an event might include birth of a child, illness of a family member, relocation, or unexpected extended work assignment. Generally, leaves of absence last for up to one year, but they may be extended for good cause. During this time, there is no obligation to register in absentia, but you are not able to access University resources.

Setting a timeline for your progress that is agreed upon by your advisor can help you work at a steady pace, and can set realistic goals for the completion of the dissertation. A written timeline is not required but recommended. Having a timeline will give you a sense of structure and accountability. A general timeline can be included in your proposal, and it may be useful to gently remind your chair and committee of upcoming deadlines when you submit drafts.

A four-week turn around of your drafts with feedback from your advisor is generally an accepted timeline. Generally it can be useful to set a “soft” target date for your final dissertation defense, and to create your “to do” list by working backward from that date.

Examine this possible scenario of planning backward and adapt as suitable to your situation:

University and the College of Graduate Studies deadlines:

- May 2006** Degree date.
- May 5, 2006** Final grades and clearance forms
- March 1, 2006** Deadline for degree requirements
- November 1, 2005** Deadline for receipt of petition to graduate

Suggested timeline for the dissertation submission:

Date (CGS)	Submit final manuscript (with a cover letter from your Research advisor/chair) to the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies.
<b>March 20 2006</b>	Submit final manuscript to dissertation chair with any changes requested by the committee
<b>March 1 2006</b>	Final oral defense
<b>December 15 2005</b>	Submit full draft to dissertation committee (if chair approves)
<b>November 30, 2005</b>	Submit full revised draft to dissertation Chair
<b>October 31 2005</b>	Chair returns draft with comments
<b>September 1, 2005</b>	Submit full draft to Dissertation Chair

### **Moving from Data Collection to Analysis**

The analysis stage of the dissertation process can be one of the most rewarding, but with rewards come challenges. The analysis of the data can be enhanced by using software, such as SPSS or SAS. You can obtain detailed product information about data analysis software on the web and from faculty.

Consider setting a fixed time slot every day for analysis and writing. Whether it's 30 minutes or 4 hours, schedule it the same way you schedule time to exercise or attend a meeting. Sometimes knowing when to stop—even if you're on a roll—is important so burnout doesn't strike. This helps you stay focused and look forward to the next day's portion, rather than feeling exhausted and dreading the idea of looking at it again.

Make a reasonable plan for writing your dissertation. For some this may be a chapter every 2 weeks, while for others it might be a chapter a month, or every 2 months. Communicate this plan to your advisor, and work out a timeline for your advisor to review your work.

Your goal is to communicate your findings through your dissertation as clearly and concisely as possible in a reasonable amount of time. This timeframe depends on your questions, your data collection methods, and your work habits. Some students struggle with the decision to analyze bit-by-bit, writing as they go, or analyzing the data all at once, and then sitting down to write. Both styles are effective; it is important to consider, however, whether or not latter stages of analysis could change the outcome of the study. Clearly, in cases where stages of analysis are dependent on one another, it makes more sense to save the writing task until after analysis. You may want to write down thoughts and observations as you go; then you can incorporate them later when you start formally writing, if the observations are still applicable at that time.

### **Dissertation Quality Checklist (An Extension of the Proposal Quality Checklist)**

You will want to be sure that your committee will agree with the following statements about your dissertation:

1. The topic is stated clearly and relevant background literature reviewed and evaluated;
2. The research question(s) are stated clearly;
3. The contribution and importance of the research questions with respect to relevant literature, theory, policy and/or practices are articulated in a convincing manner;
4. The research plan and methods are appropriate and adequate to study the research question(s) posed, and are explicitly described;
5. The research plan and methods are implemented effectively;
6. The research produced trustworthy evidence that bears on the research question(s);
7. The conclusions follow convincingly from the evidence and its interpretation;
8. The dissertation manuscript is coherent, well structured, clearly written and in accordance with the specifications of a standard-style manual

9. With appropriate revisions the dissertation research should be of publishable quality.
10. A student must give at least one presentation and prepare a manuscript based on the research.
11. The manuscript must be submitted to an "appropriate" publication. Your chair will help you determine what this is.

### **The Dissertation Defense**

On average, the defense is one to two hours in duration and you are required to present the dissertation to the committee and any interested persons in attendance. Check with your committee if you plan to provide refreshments at the hearing. Some faculty appreciates the gesture, while others discourage the practice. The defense is an open hearing that is open to anyone. Prepare your presentation in close discussion with your chair.

### **DRAFTS AND REVISIONS**

Before you sit down to write the bulk of your dissertation, it is wise to become familiar with the formatting rules below. In most cases students should expect several revisions (at least 5 to 6) of core chapters before the proposal and dissertation defense. You should forward drafts of chapters or sections of chapters to your chair so that after your chair approves the revisions, you can send the chapters to the rest of your committee for their feedback. Bear in mind, however, that some committee members will read only your completed draft. In many cases, members require one month to review and comment on a chapter submission. Again, this is something to consider when planning your timeline and is certainly a topic to address with your chair or committee member in advance. Although you may believe that your write-up is ready, the chair and the committee may not agree that it is. So be prepared to accept input and make the

requested changes. Clarify what is expected so that you may incorporate these revisions.

You should also be aware that the process of revising your completed dissertation can involve extremely intensive work and can be extremely time consuming. Students may feel that once they have everything down in writing, the rest a simple process of cleaning up the writing and organization. However, this is the stage in which everything must come together into a clear analytical package, and that can involve a tremendous amount of thought and consideration. It is at this point, when all of the dissertation is finally reduced to writing, that gaps in the argument may first become apparent. You may find, for example, that you need to revisit the literature review to add new studies or to reconsider the significance of studies you have discussed because your findings took an unexpected turn. In any event, you will have to re-check the literature to make sure there have been no significant developments since you completed your proposal. You may find that the results raise new issues that you had not previously considered requiring additional analysis in the discussion section. You may realize that there are limitations in your methodology that you had not recognized or policy implications to your findings that you had not expected, and these must be taken into account. You may even find that you need to run some additional analyses to address some of these developments.

You should not be discouraged should any of these arise. This is a normal part of the dissertation process. It is an element of the task of finally taking control of your work and turning it into something that you are proud to present at your defense and to the world. The process of moving from a first draft to a final draft is often the time when the most intensive thought and analysis takes place and when you first really appreciate what you have accomplished. However, it involves much more than simply refining the writing and you should expect that it can be the most intensive part of the process.

## FORMATTING OF THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

The **College of Graduate Studies Handbook of Information for Graduate Students** and the document on **Policies and Procedures** provide important information including many of the formatting requirements. This includes information on formatting such as style, type, font size, and line spacing.

The following link provides access to a number of documents that contain information from the College of Graduate Studies on subjects of interest to graduate students, including the dissertation process [www.usip.edu/graduate/current/index.shtml](http://www.usip.edu/graduate/current/index.shtml). You should familiarize yourself with the information in these guides. In most cases, the Health Policy Program expects you to use the style manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) when writing your dissertation.