

# Writing a Humanities and Interdisciplinary Dissertation 1: Intro & Literature Review

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STUDENT LEARNING SUPPORT  
Graduate Student Support



RYERSON  
UNIVERSITY

*Ryerson University sits on the  
Traditional Territory of the  
Mississauga's of New Credit  
First Nation. We are  
honoured to be a part of this  
community of our Indigenous  
colleagues and students.*

*- Chi Miigwetch*



# Goals

This workshop will help you by:

- Defining the major sections of a dissertation
- Highlighting the purpose and important points to consider for each section
- Outlining approaches to beginning and completing each section

It is structured around practical advice for:

- thinking about your dissertation
- foreseeing and overcoming barriers in dissertation writing
- developing and maintaining a writing practice

# Overview

Today:

Preparation

Introduction

Literature Review

General Writing Strategies

Next week:

Body: Method & Results

Conclusion

Discussion

Abstract

General Writing Strategies

# Preparation

# Why Are You Writing?

What is your motivation for pursuing this project?

Are you sure you want to?

Do you have something unique to contribute to your field?

Are you prepared to find something?

Be clear about your intentions, and when the going gets tough remember why you are doing this.

# Before You Begin

Read as much about your chosen topic as possible

Make an outline or list of points and topics to address

Discuss your topic and content of your dissertation with your supervisor and/or committee member(S)

- Get feedback about how to begin writing

# Get to Know Your Committee

## YOUR THESIS COMMITTEE

Also known as: an impossibly difficult group to get together in one room but who nevertheless hold your future in their hands depending on their ability to reach a civilized consensus.



### Your Professor

Simultaneously your biggest ally and your worst enemy. Will be the first to suggest you do more work.



### The Guru

Only here for the free cookies. Don't forget to bring cookies.



### The Adversary

Has bitter rivalry with your Professor and will argue the exact opposite view. Work this to your advantage.



### The Strawman/woman

Nice guy. No opinions.



### The Assistant Professor

Still doesn't believe just a few months ago they were on the other side just like you. Pretends to be an adult.

NONE OF THEM WILL ACTUALLY READ YOUR ENTIRE THESIS.



# Working With a Committee

## What You Can Expect from Them

- Set and stick to deadlines
- Stay in contact
- Professional Attitude
- Honesty and forthcoming attitude about progress and matters that might impede progress

## What They Can Expect from You

- Regular meetings to check up on progress
- Help working through ideas
- Support on any difficulties you might be having
- Remember: as busy as you are, your supervisor is busier, be kind and don't waste their time

# Working with a Committee: The Supervisor

Determine with your supervisor what their style and preference for supervision is:

should you submit your drafts to them first?

will they communicate to the other members of the committee?

will they determine the dissertation expectations, or is this negotiated among all three members?

# Relevant and Unique

Demonstrate understanding of the current issues in your field

Demonstrate a lack of research in a given area

Demonstrate a new way of thinking about an old problem

# What Qualifies as Unique?

re-consideration of a particular theory

application of a theory to a new problem

broadening the scope of pre-existing research

# Structure and Style

The structure of your dissertation may be different than other dissertations, and may not include all of the traditional elements of a dissertation.

Consider the function of each traditional section, and determine how you can adapt them to suit your own needs

# Working with Expectations

Always clear any structural or stylistic innovations with your supervisor

Consider if a more poetic, descriptive style would suit your object of analysis

If your primary theorist, researcher or philosopher has a particular mode of writing (ex. deconstruction) that follows a unique pattern, consider if it would suit your work to mimic that pattern. How might you adapt the expected sections to fit this pattern?

Consider reading (or at least skimming the table of contents) a dissertation or the first book published by someone in your field, and look at their overall organizing pattern.

# Asking the Existential Question

Does essence precede existence, or existence precedes essence?

Decide if you think best by thinking through a writing process,  
or if you work best by having worked out your ideas first, and then  
writing them out

This will help you to determine if you should write a complete draft,  
and then edit the entire work, or write and edit chapter by chapter.

Remember: everyone has their own way.

# Dissertation Journal

Consider keeping a dissertation journal to record not only your progress, but how you feel about your progress

Write in it daily!

On the days when you're not feeling great about the process, you'll be able to see how often you DO feel great about the process



# Why Dissertations Don't Get Finished

1. The task seems overwhelming
2. There are no clear deadlines
3. Negative thoughts
4. Isolation

The single biggest obstacle of the dissertation is psychological.

# The Writing Process

Completing a dissertation is a highly individualized process. Don't compare your process or your progress to others

Reflect on the writing habits that helped you succeed in the past. Which worked, and which didn't

The key to success in any project is to do work and to support the doing of the work:

- have you determined daily writing times?
- have you made your need for uninterrupted time clear?
- have you created an appropriate writing space?
- do you have an alternate writing space for a change of scenery?

# Supporting Your Process

1. Understand what is being asked of you
  - get clear about the expectations ahead of you
2. Take care of your self
  - eat, sleep, and exercise
3. Get the support that is available to you
  - Graduate Studies
  - Counseling
4. Advocate for yourself
  - to your supervisor and committee
  - to your family and spouse
  - to your friends and peers

# Introduction

# Purpose

Clearly state purpose

State your thesis

Introduce the field, and any key terms

Identify authorities and chief contributions

Explain the motivation behind the work (correlations, contributions, gaps)

Outline your approach

Describe the structure of the document

State your contribution to research

# Difficulties

How much background?

Informative enough?

A good first sentence?

Is my perspective, argument or purpose clear?

Have I introduced all the important concepts?

# Common Mistakes

Main purpose is not clear

Inadequate literature review

Too long, rambling, unstructured

Too short, too general

The approach is not clear

Specialist terms are not defined

# Does the Introduction:

Adequately review other people's work?

Show correlations, contributions, gaps?

Give a historical account if appropriate?

Put the study into a context of other work?

Clearly state the purpose?

Summarize the approach?

Describe the structure?



# Literature Review

# What is a Literature Review?

A survey of published materials relevant to a particular issue, theory or area of research

Provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of each work

Materials surveyed may include: scholarly journals, books, dissertations, conference proceedings, etc.

# Purpose

Explains how the work of others has led up to and contributes to your work

To identify previous scholarship, in order to prevent duplication and repetition

Displays your knowledge of the literature and field of scholarship – validates your authority as an author

Provides readers with background information and related studies necessary to understand your work

# Purpose (continued)

To identify new interpretations of previous work

To resolve conflicts between contradictory previous studies

Provides critical analysis of key texts

Leads readers to the problem that you undertake in your work and supports the approach you have chosen to use

# Elements of a Lit Review

Overview of the subject, issue or theory being considered and the objective of the review

Presentation of works in organized sequence

- in support, against, alternative accounts
- chronologically
- by researcher or camp
- by theory or methodology

Explanation of similarities and differences between works - identify areas of controversy

# Elements of a Lit Review (continued)

Conclusions about which works are most successful in their arguments, and how they contribute to the development and understanding of the topic

A synthesis of results, summarizing what is and is not known

Formulation of research questions

# The Process

## 1. Problem formation

What is the topic being examined?

What are the associated issues?

## 2. Literature search

Find related materials...how?

# The Process (continued)

## 3. Evaluation, Analysis and Outline

- Which materials are especially significant to your particular topic?
- What do these materials propose about your topic?

## 4. Write and Revise

- Discussion of the findings and conclusions of significant literature



# 1. Problem Formation

Make a list and define major terms

Make sure you understand them and can use them as keyword for library and Internet searches

Define the purpose of your lit review - your audience, the scope of the review, the type of material you are using (journals, qualitative research, etc.), and the time you have to complete it

# 1. Problem Formation Continued

Determine how you will organize your sources (by trends, theories, chronology, authors, methods, themes, research questions, etc.)

Determine what is most important to cover (for example theories, authors, or methods you must absolutely discuss)

Try to relate the points to one another and order them logically (you can number them by order of importance, or organize chronologically)

## 2. Literature Search

### What Should Be Included?

- Before including works, be sure to assess their excellence and relevance
- Consider the author's credentials (past work, education, authority)
- What evidence is provided?
- How objective is the work? Is it prejudiced? Is contrary data considered? Is certain information ignored?
- Which of the arguments are most/least convincing?
- Does the work make a significant contribution to an understanding of the subject?

## 2. Literature Search – Finding literature

Identify a few key papers from your current knowledge base

Consult librarians and professors

Search the library and online databases

Look at the references listed by the texts you already have and locate them

Forward citation:

- Through an online search, find papers that reference your key literature

## 2. Literature Search – Finding literature (continued)

Make your selection based on relevance, date, breadth, depth, and requirements

Be systematic

Go beyond books and articles

Be selective. Don't try to read everything

# 3. Evaluation, Analysis and Outline

Critical thinking:

Discern the validity and authority of an argument through reason and logic

Analysis:

Take apart and understand ideas

Synthesis:

Bring together parts of different arguments to produce a cohesive, coherent and ideally original perspective

# 3. Evaluation, Analysis and Outline (continued)

Break down information into its component parts and separate important aspects of information from the less important

Analyze and critically appraise component parts of argument

Discuss the pros and cons of the components

Demonstrate understanding of theory

# 4. Write and Revise

## Determine an appropriate style

- How structured?
- What are your premises and conclusions?
- What does each section add?
- Is first-person perspective appropriate?
- Like a journal article, book, or other?

## Use an outline

## Edit for bias



## 4. Write and Revise (continued)

A Literature Review Will Suffer if you:

- avoid commenting on the issues
- act as a neutral observer
- don't understand the topic well

# Literature Review – 12 Steps

# Step 1

Use the experts: librarians

Learn which databases are relevant

Learn efficient search techniques

## Step 2

Keep systematic records of citations

Keep copies of all key documents

Note full details of each citation

## Step 3

Try to find a book that gives an overview of the topic and mentions the major researchers in the field

## Step 4

Find and read a few review articles by authorities in the field

The most frequently cited authors and papers are the most important

Use this information as a framework for building your review

# Step 5

Choose the key papers

These are the most frequently cited papers and authors

The titles are most relevant to your field

Begin with the most recent ones

Use this information to expand your framework

# Step 6

Questions to be answered:

How does your topic fit the research area?

Why is it important?

What is known about it?

What is not known or in question?

Why do the gaps need to be filled?

Which gap(s) will you attempt to fill? Why? How?



# Step 7

Write some possible topic headings for the review

Keep them specific

Not: “Issues associated with...”

Better: “Methods for investigating...”, “Historical background”, “Standard techniques”, “Current technology”, and so on (Silyn-Roberts, p. 87)

Make separate files for each heading

# Step 8

Arrange your information according to your topic headings

Some information may fit under more than one heading. Put it in both files and decide later where it belongs

As you learn more from the research, you may change some of your headings

# Step 9

Look at the fringe papers

These are the ones by less prominent authors

Look at methods, results, and interpretations

# Step 10

Read the relevant sections of the fringe papers, take notes, and classify the information under the headings that you have established

# Step 11

Re-read the original review papers

Determine how your knowledge of the topic has changed

Review steps 7, 8, 9, and 10 to determine if you want to make any adjustments

# Step 12

Look at your notes and headings. Re-sort your information if necessary

Make sub-headings for each heading

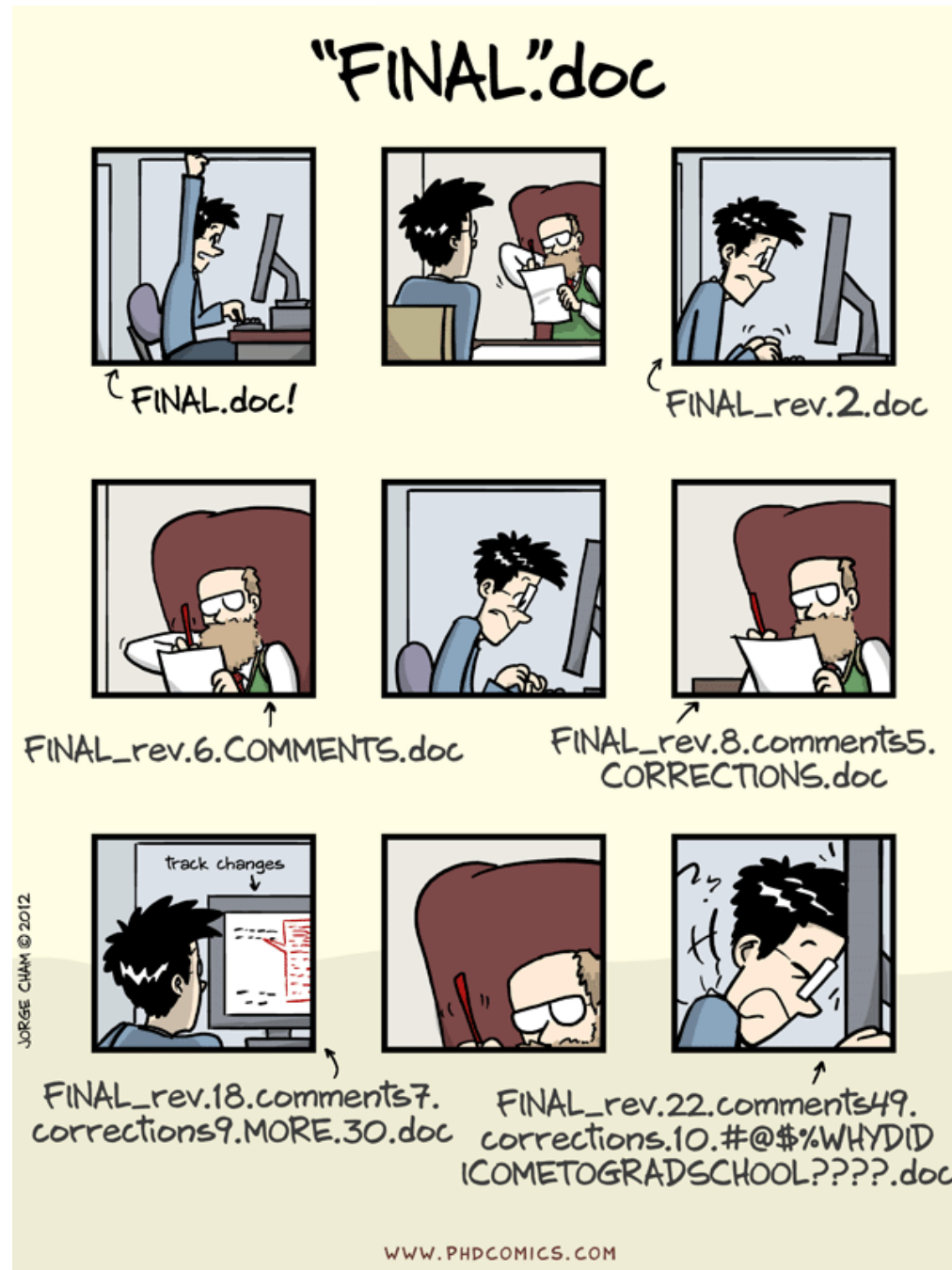
Make connections among the information for each topic, and write the review

Connect everything under headings and sub-headings

Keep revising until it is coherent

Write the reference list

# Revisions



# Common Errors

Writing the review before you have a thorough understanding of the issues

Giving a superficial account of research articles

Not coherent

Not pointing out gaps, contradictions, ambiguities

Referencing errors

Underestimating time needed for revisions



# Difficulties

Quantity of literature

Lack of literature

Getting started

How broad or narrow?

What should be discarded?

Argument, perspective or relevance unclear

Summarizing versus analyzing

Re-reading for improved understanding

# Overcoming Difficulties

Develop an outline to organize your ideas

Make a bullet-point list of questions your review will answer and then answer those questions

- What is the dominant approach to this research topic?
- What has been done?
- what is being done?
- What are the agreements, disagreements, gaps
- Are there conflicting 'camps', alternate theories?

Show that you understand the issue

- Analyze and contextualize each study, finding, work or theory

Make your view clear and relevant

- Link each point to an overall thesis or argument

# Checklist

Did you give the history of the topic?

Did you mention the current issues?

Did you show the agreements, correlations, ambiguities, and gaps?

Did you show the conflicts between the research 'camps'?

Did you make it clear that you understand the issues?

Did you cite reviews, key papers, fringe papers?

# Resources

- Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2008). *Writing a Successful Thesis or Dissertation: Tips and Strategies for Students in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Silyn-Roberts, H. (2002). *Writing for Science and Engineering: Papers, Presentations and Reports*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

# Graduate Student Support

- One-on-one tutorial sessions to help students with writing and referencing during any stage of the process.
- Two 50-minute appointments per week.
- Online workshops on a variety of graduate writing-related topics.
- Useful guides and resources on the website.
- Be sure to make an appointment on our website a week or two before your desired date as spots fill up quickly.

4<sup>th</sup> floor, Student Learning Centre

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