

Dr. Richard Nelson's Practical Guide to Starting, Writing, and Completing a Professional Master's Thesis or Doctoral Dissertation

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• *Research is the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. (Edward S. Balian, The Graduate Research Guidebook: A Practical Approach to Doctoral/Masters Research, 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994, p. 1)*

• *Research is not merely the act of stringing together facts from a variety of sources. In addition, you must analyze and interpret what you find. We value research not for the mass of information it brings to us, but because it helps us grow wiser. Authentic research, therefore, is a rational, systematic search for new knowledge and understanding of the world around us. (Paraphrased from "Masters of Military Art," 1988, p. 2-2)*

Congratulations!

If you are reading this then you have begun to complete the requirements for your master's or doctoral degree. As you pursue your course work, participate in seminars, and consult with faculty members, numerous ideas for study and research should be presented that may be turned into successful theses and dissertations. As you progress, you will begin moving away from the formal classroom setting into a world controlled by your own interests and abilities. You will be demonstrating that you personally have something to offer to the professional discipline you have decided to follow. This is the point at which most graduate students panic and begin to wonder what they have gotten themselves into.

DON'T.

You will have a faculty there to help. Your Committee members are interested in your success. They have been through this situation many times before. Even when they seem to be putting road blocks in your way, these faculty members really do want you to succeed.

Your first step in preparing your research is this manual. It is designed to help you through these problems:

1. Selecting a research topic, especially ones with direct professional application.
2. Planning for the research.
3. Completing an initial proposal for your Committee.
4. Preparing the formal prospectus.
5. Preparing the final version of your thesis or dissertation, ready for a successful oral examination.

Remember—If you are in a professional graduate program, the investigations you undertake in your classwork and for your thesis or dissertation can help you develop an interpersonal network and give you added-value knowledge and practical skills useful in a job search and later career.

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I'm a Professional. Why Me?

The Purpose of the Thesis or Dissertation

At this point, the world of research may seem like a foreign and hostile place. But the truth is most of you are already very familiar with it. Most of us engage in research of some kind virtually every day. Which product should I buy? What movie should I see? What position should I take on a political issue? Most students have also written many term papers and conducted studies in preparation for class assignments, campaigns, or articles. This work may not seem related to what you are about to do, but the basic process is the same. Your thesis or dissertation will build on your own work experience, education, attitudes, interests, and abilities. You will just be moving away from the intuitive process many of you now use toward the more formal, disciplined style used by the academic and professional research world. What you learn here is also valuable in working world professions where critical thinking skills are imperative.

Whatever your career interest, conducting formal research and writing a thesis or dissertation should not be regarded as an alien process. Yet, at the same time, you must understand that this is a major step in your education. The act of putting together a thesis or dissertation entails a mentally rigorous process that demands self-discipline. This may well be the largest single project you have ever undertaken. It is NOT something that can be completed in a couple of weeks as you rush toward your graduation deadline.

Considering the amount of time, frustration, and effort we are asking you to put into this project, you have a right to ask “WHY BOTHER?” The reasons are many and go beyond the fact that all the members of your Committee had to do it when they got their degrees. This challenge is not just another arcane initiation ritual, left over from 800 years of academic tradition.

The primary reasons for completing a thesis or dissertation are to help you experience significant intellectual growth and to increase your confidence in your ability to identify and solve complex problems. This growth will occur as you recognize important issues, develop methods to handle those issues, conduct research to answer specific questions, draw your own conclusions based on your findings, and then write about your discoveries to share with others.

A second major reason for the thesis or dissertation is to help you—under the guidance of your Committee—learn how to conduct and excel at formal, historically, socially, legally, and/or scientifically acceptable research. By the time you are finished, you will know the difference between real scholarly research and the anecdotal or “pop” variety infecting the world of popular culture. You will be able to take what you have learned and ethically apply it to any job-related research situation you may encounter.

You are now at a point where you are ready to start adding basic and applied knowledge to the discipline. Your thesis or dissertation may well be your first attempt to disseminate your views to the people working in the career area you have chosen for yourself. It is your move away from being a student toward becoming a contributing professional.

Finally, students are encouraged to take some elective course work outside the department in programs in other colleges on campus or institutions elsewhere. Education is a life-long learning process, and we find that useful information is often found in “other disciplines” that actually have much in common with ours. There is much to be gleaned from having a more integrative approach to analyzing problems.

Disclaimer: Every institution has its own unique rules and procedures – the way they do things. That is especially true for graduate education. So take the following as sage advice gleaned from years of experience, but remember you are responsible for complying with regulations specific to your own academic home.

Basic Check-Off List for Completing Your Thesis or Dissertation

1. You are responsible for reading and following all your institution’s Master’s or Doctoral requirements. These regulations are typically found in a *Graduate Bulletin* usually distributed to students online. See your institution’s Graduate School office where the counselors can also provide further information and forms.
 - _____ (Got copy of the *Graduate Bulletin*, date)
2. Select a general area for study and try to focus on a particular topic. Ideas can come from a number of sources: Your own prior experience, current events, your class assignments, footnotes from your readings, and discussion with others (professionals, students, faculty) are the most common ways to establish possible issues and questions for investigation. Faculty may also have a research agenda that you may be able to “plug into.” However, the responsibility for formulating the thesis or dissertation proposal rests with the student. Faculty members will normally serve in an advisory capacity only and not “assign” a topic to you. (See the “Selecting a Topic” section below.)
 - _____ (general area)
3. Write a proposal and put together your Graduate Committee. All students should begin to develop a program of study as soon as possible. Initial and routine advising is the responsibility of the program’s Graduate Studies advisor who will help you and faculty coordinate the bureaucratic paper work that needs to be filed. However, each student will develop a program of study under the guidance of a Committee comprised of a major professor and additional members of the graduate faculty representing primary and/or secondary fields of study. The Graduate Committee is structured to meet the needs and interests of each graduate student and to ensure that the student’s program of study will provide the highest level of preparation.

The *proposal* should be short and to the point (no more than three pages long). For most students the choice of the proposed subject matter of the thesis or dissertation is based on their own interests and inclinations. The candidate should approach potential Committee members, discuss the topic, and ask if those faculty members are willing to serve on the Committee. **Typically, you should begin asking faculty members to be part of your**

Committee as early as possible, and no later than your second semester or equivalent term. The Committee membership will also have to be approved by the program Graduate Advisor. The Committee will recommend selection of courses, guide your research, approve the thesis or dissertation, and conduct your final oral examinations.

As “the candidate,” you are responsible for initially selecting the Committee, asking one of the members to serve as your major professor Chairperson/Committee Head, setting up meetings with the Chair to discuss your proposed topic and method in depth, getting the proposal approved, and providing written copies of material to your Chair and Committee as appropriate for evaluation to proceed with your research. It is usually best to first contact a faculty member interested in your major area of emphasis and then seek recommendations from this person for other Committee members. This Committee usually **must have a minimum of three members, but the requirements vary depending on institution. All must hold official graduate faculty status and meet other qualifications determined by your institution. You can usually get a list of qualified faculty from your Graduate Advisor or Chair.** (If appropriate, you may ask a graduate faculty member from outside of your program to serve on your Committee if you wish; this is often required if you have an official graduate minor concentration from another department.)

Getting the “right” committee is important since they vote on whether or not you graduate. Students who wish to make changes in their committee generally may do so only with a written petition. Committee members may be removed only with their consent, subject to approval by the Graduate Advisor. In the event that the faculty member and the Graduate Advisor disagree on the committee member’s removal, the matter is typically referred to the Dean for resolution. So the goal is to get good members and avoid hassles. That is why adding extra people to your committee beyond the required number is not recommended. **Remember: The Chairperson/Committee Head is the individual you will have the most contact with and who will have first approval over your thesis or dissertation.**

- _____ (Appointment of Faculty Chair, date)
- _____ (Appointment of Committee Member #1, date)
- _____ (Appointment of Committee Member #2, date)
- _____ (Chair approval of *proposal*, date)
- _____ and _____ (Committee approval of *proposal*, date)
- _____ (Copy of approved *proposal* to Graduate Advisor, date)
- _____ (Got *Guidelines for the Preparation of Theses and Dissertations*, date)

4. Ask your Chair and Committee members to help you develop your research question and related hypotheses. The Committee has quite a bit of flexibility in terms of advising you on thesis or dissertation structure, format, and methodology. Since your thesis or dissertation

generally counts as 6 to 15 hours toward graduation, it requires original scholarly research and an extensive analysis of relevant information and pre-existing literature. Begin searching this literature (publications, news accounts, databases, government records, media releases, advertisements, broadcasts, organizational archives, legal cases, individual experts, etc.) on your chosen topic and use what you find out to refine your research question, to develop hypotheses centered around that question, and to help apply a method to answer the questions systematically. **You can start working on your thesis or dissertation ideas as soon as you enter graduate study. Many students informally begin work toward a thesis or dissertation in the papers they do for various classes.** Assignments, particularly in required core courses, can help you in this respect and possibly later be integrated into your thesis or dissertation. You can certainly utilize the internet, email and other online sources, but not to the exclusion of other relevant materials.

5. Students should not register for thesis or dissertation research credit until the proposal has been submitted and approved by the Committee. Following approval, you may receive permission to register for thesis or dissertation research which is graded by your Committee Chairperson, usually using the criteria of satisfactory progress (“S”)/unsatisfactory process (“U”). Meet minimum registration rules as outlined in your institution’s *Graduate Bulletin*. If you are using University resources—faculty advice and time, equipment, library facilities, and/or office space—you generally may enroll in 1-12 credit hours of thesis or dissertation research per semester or term based on your involvement. Nine hours a semester for all courses is often considered a full-time load (six hours in summer). *However, note that that at many universities you must register for thesis or dissertation during the semester you graduate. For master’s students, even if you have 30 thesis hours no more than six hours typically may count toward fulfilling master’s degree requirements.* Similar restrictions are in place for doctoral students.

6. Revise your proposal, taking into account the Committee’s suggestions, and enlarge it to a formal *prospectus*. Furnish a copy of your formal prospectus (typically the first three chapters of your thesis or dissertation) to your Committee Chair. You will probably have to go through several drafts and make many changes. **Only after the Chair is satisfied do you circulate the prospectus to other Committee members. When this is not done, students often get bogged down.** Get permission from your Chair to schedule a Committee meeting. Your prospectus should go to Committee members at least ten working days before the meeting to discuss the prospectus. After corrections, file a copy of the approved prospectus with the Graduate Advisor.
 - _____ (Chair approval, date) _____ (Committee approval, date)
 - _____ (Copy of approved *prospectus* to Graduate Advisor, date)

7. Collect additional data. Analyze and interpret the results as they relate to your research questions and hypotheses. In conjunction with your Chair, you will also have to determine if the research is complete or if more evidence still needs to be gathered.
 - _____ (Chair approval, date)

8. Develop conclusions and suggestions based on your findings. Write up your results. Show how your research answers the specific questions you have proposed, how the results apply to the real world, and what suggestions you have regarding areas where further research is needed. Distribute the chapters to your Chair for review and revision.

_____ (Chair approval, date) _____ (Degree audit with Graduate counselor, date)

9. As part of the requirements for the Master's and Doctoral degrees, you must successfully complete an oral examination (the "thesis or dissertation defense") administered by your Committee after the completion of required course work and submission of the written thesis or dissertation, but before it is sent to the Graduate School. After approval by your Chair, each member of the Committee must be given an opportunity to read a first draft of the thesis or dissertation. If any member of the Committee believes that the full Committee should meet with the student at this point, the major professor (the Chair/Head) will schedule such a meeting. No final examination will be scheduled by the Chair until a sufficient number of members of the Committee are satisfied with the thesis or dissertation to ensure that the student will not automatically fail (a student generally cannot pass with more than one negative vote). The final oral examination will be administered only after a tentatively acceptable thesis or dissertation is completed, and clean, readable copies have been available to all members of the Committee for at least two weeks. This examination basically concentrates on the written thesis or dissertation and related course work. However, it may also include questions concerning other aspects of your graduate study. You may pass without revisions to your thesis or dissertation, pass contingent on making specific manuscript corrections and changes prior to its submission to the Graduate School, or fail (in which case you, your Committee Chair, and the Graduate Advisor will need to meet and explore your options). **REMEMBER:** *You are responsible for coordinating the exam date, place, and time with your Committee Chairperson. The schedule required by the Graduate School to complete paperwork associated with approval of the thesis or dissertation should be taken into account as the timing of the oral exam may affect the semester in which you graduate. You also need to make an appointment with the Graduate School editor to ensure your thesis or dissertation is formatted correctly for both the print and electronic versions you will need to provide. Consult the Graduate School calendar each term for appropriate deadlines and forms, with copies to the Graduate Advisor.* For Master's students interested in pursuing the Ph.D., the thesis and final oral examination are also used in framing recommendations for employment and admission to doctoral programs. Similarly, these exams are critical for the doctoral candidate.

_____ (Filed "Application for Candidacy for a Graduate Degree" form, date)

_____ (Filed "Request for Graduate Examination" form, date)

_____ (Committee Chair approval/signature on "Graduate Examination") and "Thesis/Dissertation Report" forms delivered to Graduate School, date)

- _____ and _____ (Committee Member approvals, date)
- _____ (Visited Graduate School editor for format check, date)

10. A few words of further advice in avoiding problems. **Historically, the biggest single problem with thesis or dissertation and project work has been student lateness in getting the work into the hands of his or her Chairperson and Committee members.** It is the rare thesis or dissertation or project that does not need at least some revision—and often major revision—to become fully acceptable by normal academic and professional standards. Yet far too many graduate students wait until the very last minute to turn in a first draft of their work to the Chairperson and the rest of the Committee. This delay forces the Committee into one of two decisions, either of them bad: (1) rejecting the work outright, forcing a postponement in graduation, or (2) accepting far less effective work than the student would seem capable of doing. Graduations have had to be put back simply because otherwise competent students forced their committees into assessment of marginal or sub-marginal work. Don't place yourself and your Committee in this position. Meet your deadlines, and thus help your Chair (who will work long and hard with you) and yourself produce a thesis or dissertation of which you can be justifiably proud. If you miss Graduate School dates, at some institutions you may be eligible for "Degree Only" status that allows you to graduate the next semester for only a nominal fee to correct your diploma. Remember: No matter how many credit hours you take, you must prepare a thesis or dissertation acceptable to the supervisory Committee and the Graduate School.

11. Following a successful defense, each graduating student needs to complete the paperwork (including format check) and approvals required by the Graduate School and your program (including extra abstracts). Many universities participate in the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation (ETD) Initiative, so you will likely have to prepare your thesis or dissertation electronically. Further information is available from your institution with instructions for online posting. As a courtesy, when requested you should also deposit bound copies of the final thesis or dissertation with your Committee Chair and members. You may, of course, make additional copies for your personal use. Graduation fees are assessed after the student submits the "Application for a Degree" form to the Graduate School.

- _____ (Filed "Application for a Degree" form, Graduate School, date)
- _____ (All Graduate School paperwork, ETD thesis or dissertation, and fees completed, date)
- _____ (Bound thesis or dissertation copy to Chair and discussion of publication options, date)
- _____ (Bound thesis or dissertation copies given to committee members, date)
- _____ (Abstract and fees sent to register the thesis or dissertation with the appropriate *Master's* or *Doctoral Abstracts* services, date)

- _____ (Abstract copies to Graduate Advisor for student's file, date)

The Difference Between a Dissertation, Thesis and a Report

It is sometimes hard to define the difference between these three types of graduate research papers, as they are generally arranged in the same order and involve many of the same steps. The easiest solution is that the Committee members know which is which when they see it, so ask them. The difference between a report and thesis really has nothing to do with length, although dissertations generally are more detailed and extensive. While the report is usually shorter than a thesis, some reports can go on for more than a 100 pages, while an experimental thesis might only fill 30 pages. NOTE: The recommended length of the main body of a Master of Mass Communication thesis is between 50 and 150 pages. Doctoral degrees are often longer.

There are a few other rules that can be given to distinguish between the report, thesis, and dissertation:

1. Both the dissertation and thesis must involve some form of original research (including interviews, surveys, use of unpublished materials, etc.), while the report can summarize the work of others without any original research of its own. Typically, a master's degree requires proof the candidate can develop an idea, understand how to frame that into one or more interesting research questions, generate a hypothesis, sort through the pertinent literature, apply appropriate theory and methodology, generate interesting findings, and report the results in a way that demonstrates at least basic understanding of academic research protocols. The dissertation extends this experience by delving even more deeply into a topic, so that at the end the person earning the doctorate is really an expert.
2. A report can be built around a project, such as a video production, a campaign design, a community service project and so on, while the thesis always involves a structured style of academically acceptable research in which practice has to be linked to theory. However, please note that this does not preclude the incorporation of audio-visual materials into a thesis or dissertation nor having a very professional focus to your work.
3. A report generally involves three (3) credits of elective work (or the equivalent of one course). In contrast, the thesis typically earns six (6) credits (or two courses) and the dissertation receives 15 credits (or five courses) toward required work. This difference seems obvious, but the question is how much time is going into the final dissertation or thesis or project—about the same as 15-credits versus 6-credits or a 3-credit course load?
4. A report can be largely descriptive, while the thesis or dissertation must lead to original conclusions. This means these conclusions can be generalized to the world at large, or they can be compared to theoretical models or to other cases. For example, a study of what has been published on tourism promotional campaigns might make a good report and could serve as the literature review. However, to make the study into a thesis, the results from the one community case study would need to be compared to a theoretical model, while for a dissertation two or more actual tourism efforts likely would need to be

5. Check with your Committee Chair, who you should work with to organize an examining Committee early in your graduate program (see “Steps in Completing Your Thesis or Dissertation”). These faculty members will be able to determine whether or not your proposed project is capable of being a thesis or dissertation. Students are encouraged to have a tentative thesis/dissertation topic selected and the thesis/dissertation *proposal* begun by the second semester of their entry into graduate study and certainly before all other course work is completed. In every case, the thesis or dissertation *prospectus* (generally the first three chapters) should be completed sooner rather than later.

Selecting a Topic

To qualify for both master’s and doctoral level work, your topic must meet several requirements. It should make a contribution to the field of study. It must show originality, independent thinking, mastery of the subject matter, an ability to think logically, to utilize appropriate methods, and to complete acceptable research with a beginning, middle, and end. The topic also should be one you want to study. This involvement is essential, as the discipline and style required to complete the thesis will be very taxing. A thesis or dissertation both result from an individually-initiated program of the graduate student—a program which can be carried out largely alone. If the study is of personal interest, you will find the work rewarding, fun, and enlightening. If the area is one selected just to complete the degree, you will find it very hard to get through the necessary busy work and style requirements. From personal experience, faculty have discovered that students who work on areas in which they have no real interest tend to do sloppy research, make dumb mistakes, and often never finish the work. There are several guidelines you may want to consider in selecting a topic and formulating your thesis. All of the following methods have been used successfully by graduate students:

1. Consider something that will provide a new or improved analysis of current thought. For example, if advertising is your interest you might study ways to test the effectiveness of advertising campaigns or to analyze the audience. You might test competing theories of advertising positioning, see if a TV programming theory still works, or study different ways to organize a webpage. There are no areas in any field of study where everything is already known.
2. Combine information from several sources to arrive at a new conclusion or discovery.
3. Explore aspects of a subject that have not been widely considered.
4. Refine other people’s work or theories.
5. Question existing assumptions or hypotheses.
6. Enlarge upon your own observations or feelings in a systematic way.

7. Validate earlier research by redoing a study or by looking at conclusions from a new angle.
8. Conduct original research into a topic that has not been considered previously at all.

A good topic is not limited to any specific area or set of subjects, but it should meet several conditions.

1. It should provide an opportunity for original thinking in either substance or approach. This task is not as difficult as it may seem. All that is required is an approach to the subject from a new point of view. You may rethink assumptions or question the accuracy of what is now being thought. You may refine general ideas in more specific terms or apply accepted methods to new situations. You may utilize interviews to add new information. In short, there are many ways to achieve original thinking. However, all of these methods are dependent on immersion into the literature on the topic. When you begin to grasp what has been written, you will also begin to understand what is missing, what has not been tested, what may have changed over time, or may just be wrong. A fresh approach always starts with a comfortable grasp of what has already been done.
2. A good topic should be focused as narrowly as possible. The worst mistake most graduate students make is to try to test everything. Your study must be kept to a workable size. For example, it would be impossible to study the question “What makes a successful advertisement?” But, one can easily deal with topics such as “How are women portrayed in advertisements for household products?” or “What is the difference between the way men and women are used in clothing advertisements on television?” One way to narrow your topic and to help yourself understand what is really being asked is to write a 30- to 50-word title for your proposed study. This effort may seem like overkill, but it will force you really to think through what it is you actually want to do.
3. The topic should have significance. In short, you need to be able to justify the time and effort that will go into the question. There is a tendency to go for the easy or momentarily popular topic. This approach seldom produces anything of value and usually results in sloppy research. Remember, the purpose of the thesis or dissertation is to add to the body of knowledge and show that you are ready to earn a place as a scholar in this field.
4. The topic should be reduced to a question that will guide all future steps in the research process. It should lead naturally to sub-questions, hypotheses, and a method. The topic should both guide and limit the literature review. It should also indicate an open-mindedness on the part of the researcher to consider all alternatives. In short, you should not set out to prove a pre-conceived notion.
5. The topic should be feasible, given the time, resources, and limitations of the program. Virtually any question can be asked. However, given our resources, not all

6. Pay attention to the details, especially any Graduate School requirements, usually available in a printed version and online. Also see the “Academic Writing Style” and “Style Guides and Procedure” sections below.
7. Work through your Committee Chair to get everything in order prior to submitting your work to the Committee as a whole. By using this “chain of command” approach, you avoid many pitfalls. As you become expert in your topic, you gain confidence in explaining it to others. By knowing your topic well, you should be able to answer questions pertaining to it. The oral defense usually requires you to discuss how you became interested in the topic, the process you went through in organizing your thesis or dissertation, why you made specific choices, and what you learned in your graduate experience.

Your goal should be to get as early a start as possible—the core courses and electives can profitably be used to help launch and complete the thesis or dissertation. Most academic libraries have access to a host of specialty research resources locally and online, which can prove invaluable—so check with your reference librarians. They are aware of the helpful guides that will aid you in finding periodical literature and previously completed theses and dissertations. Several resources can prove valuable in getting an early start and conceptualizing your project. For example, *Social Science Citation Index* and *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* cover major publications and are widely used by researchers for “powerful access to the bibliographic and citation information they need to find research data, analyze trends, journals, and researchers, and share their findings.” *Dissertation Abstracts Online* “is a definitive subject, title, and author guide to virtually every American dissertation accepted at an accredited institution since 1861. Selected Masters theses have been included since 1962, with *Masters Abstracts* incorporated beginning in Spring 1988. In addition, since 1988, the database includes citations for dissertations from 50 British universities that have been collected by and filmed at *The British Document Supply Centre*. Beginning with DAIC Volume 49, Number 2 (Spring 1988), citations and abstracts from Section C, *Worldwide Dissertations* (formerly European Dissertations), have also been included in the file.” See also the online information about the *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Database* at <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/products/dissertations/individuals.shtml>.

You should also consult at least one of the following general guides on writing the research project: *The Craft of Research*, 3rd edition, by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); *The Modern Researcher*, 6th edition, by Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004); or similar reference. A number of new books specialize in walking individuals through the thesis and/or dissertation writing process. To check them out, an easy way is to go to www.amazon.com, select “books” and use either “master’s thesis” or “doctoral dissertation” as the search term.

Writing the Proposal and Prospectus

The proposal, prospectus, and the first three chapters or sections of your thesis or dissertation are structured identically. They differ only in the amount of thought and effort that go into them. *The proposal is very short—generally just two or three pages and consists of the following three sections:*

1. An introduction of your research question and hypothesis. Here you identify or formulate a clear statement of the problem or purpose of the proposed thesis or dissertation and what form it will take. This writing should be detailed enough so that your Committee knows what you plan to investigate.
2. A brief review of literature/resources showing what has been done in the field already and why your work will be important. This is illustrative, not exhaustive.
3. A suggested plan of procedure or research design method to pursue your study. This includes a statement concerning the methods and/or data set you intend to employ. You will need to incorporate proposed deadlines.

The proposal should be tightly written but contain sufficient detail to tell prospective Committee members if your topic is “do-able,” if there is a sufficient information base to study your topic, if you have a research method that is manageable (quantitative or qualitative), and if the topic and approach fit their interests and expertise. Specific items which may be addressed in these sections include the tentative title of the thesis or dissertation, your central idea or goal, the theoretical underpinnings of your research, possible hypotheses for investigation, resources upon which the thesis or dissertation is to be based, an outline of your plans to complete the research, a statement of the significance of the problem to be solved, and previous research studies and/or experience that indicate you have the required skills needed for the thesis or dissertation project.

Write the proposal in consultation with the person whom you expect to be your thesis or dissertation Chairperson or other qualified faculty member. *Supervisors should counsel graduate students early in their program on the judicious selection of a manageable and suitable thesis or dissertation topic.* You will then submit the proposal to prospective members of your thesis or dissertation research Committee. Based on your proposal, faculty members will determine if they wish to serve on your Committee. Once they agree to serve, your Committee will then suggest readings, make comments, and recommend changes. This is a green light to get to work. While your proposal will establish a preliminary research question and method, as your thesis or dissertation progresses, refinements in these areas will often become necessary. As you start your research you may also find things that don’t work as planned. You may even discover that the question must be redone or the method completely changed. Your Committee will likely also have many suggestions or clarifications for this initial document.

All of these findings will be edited and incorporated into the next document, the **prospectus**. The formal prospectus is much longer (20 to 50 pages) and is actually a draft version of the first three chapters of your final thesis or dissertation. It must be a detailed account, providing complete information in all three of the areas listed below.

Once the prospectus has been completed, the major professor will schedule a meeting of the Committee and the student to discuss the proposed research. The meeting for the prospectus defense is mandatory and covers the proposed thesis or dissertation as well as related literature and methods. After the prospectus has been approved (with a copy to go into your file in the Graduate Advisor's office), you may begin your actual research comfortable in the knowledge that your Committee is aware of your topic and has agreed to your method. After it is signed, **NO BASIC CHANGES ARE NORMALLY MADE BY EITHER YOU OR THE COMMITTEE. THIS DOCUMENT ACTS AS A CONTRACT BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR COMMITTEE THAT THE PROSPECTUS HAS BEEN ACCEPTED.** However, if you feel major revisions of the prospectus are needed, you need to submit these to the Committee for review and approval.

The three sections generally addressed in both the proposal and prospectus are:

1. A complete introduction of the topic. Here you justify the study, any hypothesis you plan to test, and your research question(s).
2. A detailed review of pertinent literature and information resources with explanations of how these sources influence your study and how your work is different from what has already been done. This typically involves an annotated bibliography in which you list relevant authors, titles, publisher, dates and places of publication along with comments on what the book or article is about and how it is relevant to your topic. Legal cases and unpublished data are similarly treated as appropriate. In essence, you justify the problem as one worthy of research time and show that the topic is one that has not been previously investigated in quite the same way by another scholar.
3. A methodology section describing how the actual research will be completed, with an annotated outline and calendar. An annotated outline should provide the reader with a detailed understanding of the scope and organization of your thesis or dissertation. Please note that the calendar for completing the sections of your thesis or dissertation is an approximation—another reason why you need to regularly consult with your advisor concerning your progress.

IMPORTANT NOTE AND REMINDER: Students and members of Advisory Committees are reminded that the purpose of a thesis or dissertation is to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to carry out a professional study and to produce useful results. The goal is to successfully complete a sustained research-based narrative, not to produce definitive or exhaustive research on a subject. Students and faculty should also know a thesis or dissertation may sometimes lend itself to a somewhat different format than the one described elsewhere in this guide because of the topic or methodology. Legal analyses, biographies, and depth non-fiction journalistic narratives are examples of the types of studies that commonly may use an alternative chapter ordering. **The nature, the relative size, and the placement of each one of the sections and components of the thesis or dissertation need not follow a cookie cutter formula but may be adjusted by the student, in consultation with his or her thesis/dissertation Chair, as appropriate for the problem under investigation. As long as you include the basic**

required information and your Committee approves the chapter structure, you may deviate from the commonly used format described below.

The Introduction

In the most widely utilized thesis and dissertation format, the introduction defines your topic and formulates your specific research questions. It will control all that follows and will guide your Committee at the final oral exam. When your Committee members receive your thesis or dissertation, their main question will be “Has the candidate clearly presented a comprehensive answer to the basic questions set forth in the introduction?” Therefore, this section must be your first consideration. Do not move on until you have a clear grasp of this area. The following list of items should be considered as you write the introduction:

1. Formulate one primary question that expresses the problem you wish to solve. This will usually lead to several subordinate questions that must be answered in order to get at the primary question and will also often lead to several hypotheses, or statements of what you believe you will find. The difference between a hypothesis and a question is basic to research, and both may appear in the same paper.

The hypothesis is a statement of what you think you will find, and your research either supports or rejects that statement. *Example:* Business executives are treated as callous objects in prime-time network television situation comedies, while workers are portrayed as sympathetic figures.

The question is just that, a question *Example:* Are business executives and workers portrayed differently in broadcast network prime-time situation comedies?

2. Justify the importance of the research. Near the start of the introduction you need to specify what your study will contribute to the field. You might consider how your study will influence the following four areas:
 - a. Personal: Why does the student wish to explore this topic? The student’s motivation should be reflected in the proposal and prospectus statement.
 - b. Social: Why is this study important to society? Who is likely to benefit from this project and in what ways? What will society gain from the answer to the question you have proposed?
 - c. Scholarly: How is it better than, or different from, previous projects and studies? What will the thesis or dissertation contribute to the academic world and particularly to the scholarly community in which you are working?

- d. Professional: How will answering the question you have proposed benefit or help us better understand the professional community? What practical applications will come from your work?
3. Provide any definitions that will assist the reader in understanding your meanings or the variables that are important to the study. For example, under the hypothesis stated in Number 1 above, you would need to define what is meant by “business executives,” “callous objects,” and by “treated.” The definitions are up to you, but they must be provided so that others can discuss their validity.
4. Limitations—Limit the scope of your study. Indicate your assumptions and why and how you narrowed the topic under consideration. This section will include the rationale for your specific area of study.
5. Indicate what you expect to discover and list possible alternatives and what they would mean. For example, in a study of television ratings over the last five years, you might expect to find a general decline in network prime time viewing. However, you might find only some networks had declined or only some nights or times. If that were so, what might the data indicate was happening in terms of audience preferences?
6. Finally, often in list form, provide the specific questions or hypotheses the study will address. This formal statement of the problem may include sub-statements as warranted.

The Literature Review

The literature review serves to show your Committee and others who read your thesis or dissertation that you have a broad command of your topic’s relevant body of knowledge. The review provides a historical and theoretical framework and forms a major portion of your final project. The literature review requires that you classify the books and articles according to the ideas you consider pertinent to the themes developed in your thesis or dissertation. Authors and titles appear almost exclusively in reference notes; hence, the subjects of the topic sentences of each paragraph reference the critical thematic aspects you will develop in your thesis or dissertation. *What drives the literature review is ideas.* Their organization is critical to the success of the literature review. By the time the reader reaches the conclusion, she or he should not only have a sense of the contribution of earlier authors to your understanding of the topic, but also how your contribution will build on their prior work. Remember, you are becoming an expert on your chosen topic, and that expertise can be acquired only if you fully understand what has already been written, thought, or assumed.

You will describe the method of selection for sources already searched and for those to be searched later. You summarize previous findings and research efforts that lead you to believe that you have isolated a meaningful research question. You will also need to indicate that no one else has answered the question that has been proposed, or, if they have, why you feel it is necessary to look at it again.

Because new research often challenges existing theory, it is important that you become—and appear conversant with—the predominant “schools of thought” regarding your topic. Use the review to justify your method and to validate your definitions and assumptions. You may disagree with findings, but you must always acknowledge them and indicate that you did consider their points of view.

In the writing, you will describe relevant journal articles, periodicals, books, monographs, dissertations and so on, indicating what each contributed to the development of your question or hypothesis. You will also use the literature review to refine both your question and method. No matter how carefully the question is constructed, as you become more familiar with your topic, revisions will occur.

Each study you find will generate other useful research leads. Also, your Committee members, other faculty members, and library personnel can help you find material for this section. Still, you will need to limit the review. Do not get sidetracked. Be guided by your question and by the theme: “Because of this work, which I’m paraphrasing, the next logical step in the study of this issue is my question” Be sure to also comply with appropriate copyright regulations. Available online is the handy guide called *Copyright Law & Graduate Research* at <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/products/dissertations/copyright/>.

Finally, in the review of literature, you must evaluate your information sources. All “facts” are not created equal. In this day of information overload, much of what is disseminated is simply not true or is badly done. Therefore, as a researcher, you must take a close look at the material and criticize it, if necessary. Here are some things you should consider while preparing an integrative summary of pertinent literature:

1. Does the information appear to be credible? Credibility may be hard to determine, but you need to know where the information came from, how it was gathered, who gathered it, whether other sources agree, and so on.
2. If a sample-based survey was used, what was the sample size and how were data gathered? A small sample can produce impressive looking results that have little validity or reliability. A case study may indicate exactly the information you want, but it is still only one case. On the other hand, a large sample is not necessarily a good sample. The questions are: Was the sample random?, and Does it actually represent the people it is supposed to represent? For example, a large sample taken on November 1, 1972, predicted Democratic Party candidate George McGovern was the clear favorite of the American people for the presidency. The problem was not the sample size. The problem was the only people sampled lived in Massachusetts and the District of Columbia and didn’t represent the feelings of the rest of the country.
3. Are there other scenarios that could explain the findings? Just because the source comes to a particular conclusion, that doesn’t mean you have to agree. Your literature review should always indicate that conclusion, but you can then go on to give alternative possibilities of your own.

4. Was the method appropriate? Often, very strong conclusions are based on very weak methods. Look at what was actually done and ask yourself how realistic or reasonable that method really was.

The Methodology Section

The methodology section is your operational plan—it will describe exactly and in detail what you planned to do. It should be designed in such a way that someone unfamiliar with your study could take this section and do exactly what you did. It is hoped that your research question will suggest a clear method. But you will still need to explain the steps you took, when they were taken, and how you actually did it. In many cases you will also have to provide definitions of variables used, explanations of controls, and so on. While the following list is not complete, these are points you will want to consider in the write-up:

1. The actual method chosen—survey, content analysis, experiment, and so on—why it was selected, how it applies directly to the project, and the actual procedural steps followed.
2. What subjects and materials were needed. If applicable, your sample size, how it was gathered, where it came from, why it was valid, what controls were used, and so on.
3. Definitions of your variables and how they were determined.
4. Examples of any questionnaires, surveys, or other documents used or required. (Note: If applicable to your study, the entire questionnaire or survey instrument should be included as an Appendix.)
5. How feasible is the operational plan? What are the estimates of time and cost? Indicate in the timetable—when you did the study—how long it took, what were the limits set on such things as the number of years covered in a content analysis or literature review, and why those limits were chosen, etc.
6. Any secondary sources used for data, and why they were selected.
7. How did you check the validity and reliability of variables or any instruments used?
8. What assumptions did you make and why?
9. What statistical tests were run and which computer program was used?
10. Sub-studies completed under the main study, exactly why they were done, and how they relate to the main question.
11. Exactly what data were actually gathered, in what form and how they were coded or used.

12. Were there any other special qualifications and considerations necessary to develop this project?

The Final Version

The final thesis/dissertation generally contains polished versions of the three areas discussed above, plus at least two additional sections or chapters: a Results section and a Discussion or Conclusion section.

The Results

This section of the thesis or dissertation reports the findings from your own study. This is not the place to draw conclusions, but you may point out implications of the findings or support for things found in the literature review—such as—

These findings seem to support the conclusions reported by Brown and his colleagues (Brown, Smith, and Jones, 2008, p. 5).

This is also the place for charts, tables, and graphs. Make the data as easy to read and as complete as possible. Don't assume things or expect your Committee to take your word for it. Even when visual aids are used, an explanation must still be included in the text itself (i.e., most graphs will require a cutline or legend to explain what the graph means).

It is also possible that at this time you will discover more data are needed or your data contain findings that were not anticipated. Don't worry; this need to adjust one's thinking happens quite often. If you already knew all the answers, there would be no need to do the study. In the case of unexpected results, just list them along with your other findings. In the case of not enough data, the problem is greater. At this point you may have to clarify the question or enlarge the method to collect the needed material. Your Committee can help with this problem, so let them guide your decision.

The Discussion or Conclusion

The final chapter is a descriptive summary that actually takes the reader back to the first chapter and then shows how the findings answer the questions and hypotheses you proposed. In addition, this chapter should indicate how the results relate to other people's work, as discussed in your review of literature. Finally, this chapter is the place for your own thoughts, conclusions, interpretations, and so on. Don't be afraid to suggest what you believe the findings mean. Also, suggest alternative explanations and why you feel your explanations are stronger. Remember, the reader will look for alternatives to your conclusions, so beat them to the punch and indicate you have already made these considerations and are open-minded to other possibilities. This chapter is also the place to suggest where research needs to go from here. No study takes into account all situations, and often research creates as many questions as it answers. Don't be afraid to point that fact out. While this list is far from complete, your conclusions should at least consider:

1. How do your results answer each of the questions and hypotheses given in Chapter 1?
2. Can you support each of your conclusions with specific results?
3. Have you drawn all possible conclusions from the data as reported, regardless of whether the conclusion was anticipated?
4. Have you claimed more than can actually be supported by the study? There is a tendency among researchers to imply too much. Don't.
5. Have you related your results to other peoples' work as reported in the review of literature?
6. Have you indicated how your results relate to, or can be useful to society, scholarship or the academic world, and/or the professional world?
7. Have you suggested what your findings mean in practical terms and given possible alternative explanations?
8. Have you suggested areas for further research? Also, when your results are not clear, suggest possible alternative explanations that may clarify the issues.

Academic Writing Style

The thesis or dissertation must be written in academic style, but should remain readable. This is often a very hard task even for Mass Communication majors, because the typical thesis/dissertation style goes against much of what you have learned. Remember, under common academic style, you must suppress your own opinions until the final section. Up to that point, all claims must be based on evidence or the opinions of others. This admonition does not mean there is no place for your own thinking; it just can't sound like your own thinking. For example, instead of saying "obviously ratings went down for several years," you could say, "according to

figures reported in *Variety*, ratings have been declining for several years.” Anecdotal evidence is also acceptable. It is OK to write, “Copies of the *Cosby Show*, such as *Growing Pains* and *Different World*, seem to be dominating prime time television during this period.” Also note, academic writing tends to qualify things, as opposed to talking in absolute terms. There are lots of “seems to be,” or “is indicated,” or “the evidence would support this,” and so on. The best way to learn this style is to read the journals in the field and write accordingly. See also the “Style Guides and Procedure” section below.

Monetary Support

Grants *may* be available to help with the expenses of research, convention participation, and publication. First check with your Graduate Advisor. Often individual departments and university Graduate Schools have set aside monies for travel and related awards they administer. Typically, you must be proactive and apply for such funds, which have specific deadlines and limitations. When you get to the writing stage, also check with the Graduate Advisor and your thesis or dissertation Chair about other possible funding sources from your program or professional groups.

Abstract Requirements

Because your abstract will be used by researchers and others to determine whether or not they wish to access your complete thesis or dissertation, it should provide a succinct, descriptive account of your work. The abstracts generally should not exceed 300 words. There are two basic sets of requirements you will typically need to comply with:

1. Graduate School requirements. Students submitting a thesis or dissertation to the Graduate School often must include an abstract in each copy of the thesis or dissertation, sometimes **plus one extra abstract** with a special heading for the Graduate School’s records. Be certain that all “Master’s Examination” and “Thesis or dissertation Report” forms are signed by all Committee members before the copies are submitted to the appropriate official. For more specific information and examples, see your own university’s *Guidelines for the Preparation of Theses and Dissertations*.
2. Additional requirements for graduate students in the School or department. Many programs also required students to prepare **two more additional versions of the abstract**. These abstracts should be submitted to the Graduate Advisor within a week after the thesis or dissertation has been defended and accepted. One abstract will be retained in your departmental file. The second goes to ProQuest UMI Dissertation Publishing, which produces [ProQuest Dissertations & Theses \(PQDT\) database](#). If you have further questions, consult the Graduate Advisor regarding the style to use, copies of the appropriate forms, and more details on the amount of current charges for these services.

While recognizing that not all theses and dissertations are uniformly excellent, many departments put this policy requiring submission of copies of thesis or dissertation abstracts by students to these and other abstracting services into effect for the following reasons:

- a. Theses are designed to advance knowledge. Without broader distribution of the results, however, the findings are not easily discovered by other researchers.
- b. Publication of thesis or dissertation abstracts expands participation by our students and faculty advisers in the emerging information society.
- c. Regularized publication of abstracts enhances awareness of research ongoing at your institution, making your work more widely available as a model for other students who follow.
- d. The cost to students is rather negligible compared to the benefits of having their work permanently registered and available for photocopying in bound format should they, their faculty advisers, or others need access to the thesis or dissertation at a later date.

In addition, you are encouraged to provide nicely bound extra copies of your thesis or dissertation with your Committee Chair and committee members.

Publishing, Copywriting, and Presenting Your Work

We strongly encourage all master's and doctoral candidates to copyright their individual thesis or dissertation and subsequently condense their work for publication and/or presentation. You can complete copyright requests and fees at the time you submit your abstract. Do talk to your Committee Chair about other publication options. Our students have successfully published the results of their research in academic and professional journals, presented papers at conventions using multimedia, and written articles for popular magazines and newspapers. Taking this final step will help disseminate your findings and build your reputation—a big help in promoting your career. By this time, most students are sick of the entire idea, so it takes an extra push to go for publication. The effort is well worth it. These write-ups are much smaller than your thesis or dissertation (generally 12 to 20 pages or 2 to 4 pages for an op-ed piece). To cut the original to the smaller size, you may report only the most important findings, condense the review of literature, or focus on only one part of the study. Don't feel you have to get everything into one article. In fact, theses and dissertations are often divided into several papers submitted for publication. Your Chair will normally be glad to help you with this process. If you want to further collaborate, your Chair may even be willing to co-author an article with you. The norms in most disciplines generally require that such co-authorship when it occurs must be voluntary on your part, feature you as first author, and not lead to publication submissions without your written consent.

Arrangement of Your Thesis or Dissertation

Specific format and pagination requirements of the Graduate School are generally outlined in various published *Guidelines for the Preparation of Theses and Dissertations*, which also contains a number of example pages to help you organize your research. The following listing should get you off to a good start:

1. Title Page - Includes the title of the thesis or dissertation, your name, the degree being completed, the full name of the School and University, date, etc.
2. Copyright - This page is optional, but official copyright cost is quite inexpensive.
3. Dedication - This page is optional. Here you can dedicate your work to someone.
4. Acknowledgments - This page is optional. This is a statement of your indebtedness to other people. The candidate's name has no place on this page.
5. Preface - This section is optional. It may include an introduction by someone recognized as a leader in the field who has read and endorsed your work.
6. Table of Contents - This is a clear outline of the thesis or dissertation, giving headings and page numbers where topics can be found.
7. List of Tables, Charts, and Graphs - This list gives a page reference for each table, chart, and graph in the study.
8. List of Illustrations - This gives a page reference for each figure or graph in the study.
9. Abstract - A 300-word summary of the major findings and key words is required by the Graduate School for inclusion in the thesis or dissertation. Many departments also have special requirements about submission of abstracts. Note: From the Dedication to this point the page numbers are in lower-case roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv etc.).
10. The Body of the Thesis or Dissertation - This is the five sections talked about earlier, which can be arranged and modified in various ways with the approval of your Committee.
11. Endnotes - These may be required instead of footnotes depending on which style guide is used, so be sure to check your particular guide.
12. Bibliography - This section includes all primary and secondary sources used in your research: books, articles, news accounts, online documents, laws and legal cases, broadcasts, films, written unpublished materials, interview sources, etc.
13. Appendix(es) - These are all other materials you feel should be available to readers but which do not fit in the main body of your thesis or dissertation. Included may be a glossary of terms, questionnaires, data lists, reprints of key news accounts or documents cited in your thesis or dissertation, long sections used by permission from other people's work, and side notes or references which are important but not directly related to your question, etc. Each Appendix is listed by an alphabetical letter and descriptive title—such as Appendix A, B, C, and so on.

14. Index - This section is optional. Even though an index has not traditionally been a part of the thesis or dissertation, new computer programs available make this procedure much easier to do. An index can be a great help to people trying to use your work.
15. Vita/About the Author - This is a brief, double-spaced biographical sketch of the author in paragraph form and in third person. Included are statements about his/her education, experience, qualifications, and so on.

Style Guides and Procedure

We believe scholarly writing can still be readable and you are generally free to use an appropriate writing style. Communication students often opt to incorporate Associated Press (AP) newswriting style forms in terms of abbreviations and capitalization decisions. AP, however, does not address a number of other issues ranging from subheads to endnotes, so you will need to also utilize a thesis or dissertation style handbook. Most programs will accept any recognized standard with which you, your Graduate Committee, and the Graduate School are comfortable. For example, you may use the style adopted by prominent journals that you have consulted in the process of completing your thesis or dissertation. However, you must be consistent. Check with your Chair as to which format is most recommended. Four commonly used thesis or dissertation style guides, available at campus bookstores and from online book retailers, include:

1. Chicago Editorial Staff. *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, latest edition.
2. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: Modern Language Association, latest edition.
3. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, latest edition. Also, while the APA guide is becoming the standard among many journals, there are a couple of suggested changes you may want to implement if this guide is used. Please check with your Committee on the changes before you start. Mainly it is suggested you:
 - a. Include the page number with the reference. Example: Instead of (Brown, 1997), put (Brown, 1997, p. 56).
 - b. Include interviews as part of your bibliography. Enter them in this fashion: Brown, B. (Aug. 12, 1998). Telephone interview conducted at Tulane University. (Interview was taped), 45 min.
 - c. Eliminate running headings on each page.
4. Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, latest edition.

Note: If points of a style manual differ from guidelines issued by your program and/or Graduate School, the latter guidelines take precedence. The student must be thoroughly familiar with your department's and University's requirements and abide by them. There are several specialized software packages available commercially that automatically adjust to a variety of styles (e.g., Turabian, Chicago A and B, APA, MLA, etc.). See also helpful information on writing a thesis or dissertation and making electronic source citations at the following web sites:

Beyond the MLA Handbook: Documenting Electronic Sources on the Internet:

<http://english.ttu.edu/Kairos/1.2/inbox/mla.html>

A Brief Citation Guide for Internet Sources in History and the Humanities (Turabian):

<http://www.h-net.org/about/citation/>

Citation and Style Guides:

<http://arapaho.nsuok.edu/~DREVESKR/cged.html-ssi>

Citation Guides for Electronic Documents:

<http://archive.ifa.org/I/training/citation/citing.htm>

Guide to Online Writing Labs:

http://www.enhancemywriting.com/writing_labs.html

Style Manuals and Citation Guides:

<http://www.sc.edu/library/styleresources.html>

Web Extension to American Psychological Association Style:

<http://www.beadsland.com/weapas/>

Writers Workshop: Writer Resources:

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/>

Writing Links & Links for Writers

<http://www.internet-resources.com/writers/wrlinks-wordstuff.htm>

Other Helpful Online Sources include:

Association for Support of Graduate Students (ASGS):

<http://www.asgs.org/>

National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS):

<http://www.nagps.org/>

Graduate Record Examination (GRE) Home Page:

<http://www.gre.org/>

Appendix A: Constructing a Research Project

THE RESEARCH QUESTION: Student research papers should: 1. test or develop a theory, 2. test or refine a media industry practice, 3. analyze legal, ethical, or historical questions, or 4. critically review a concept, an issue, or a model. Describe as precisely as possible the research question or questions that you would like the research project to answer or address. What hypotheses are you testing?

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: Discuss the methodologies that you plan to use in carrying out your research project. Explain why you have chosen those particular methodologies.

THE UNIVERSE OR POPULATION: Describe as precisely as possible the universe (or population) from which you plan to draw the sample for your research project.

THE SAMPLE: Describe as precisely as possible how you plan to draw your sample and explain what the size of your sample will be. Please indicate if the sample will be drawn on a random basis or on judgmental or purposive basis, or if there are any other specific sampling approaches you plan to follow.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT: Describe the type of survey instrument you are planning to use in carrying out your research project. Will it be a structured, primarily closed-ended, questionnaire instrument for use on the telephone, in-person, or through the mails? If in person or telephone, about how long will interviews run? If a mail questionnaire, about how many questions will the instrument contain? If your approach is content analysis, what type of survey instruments do you plan to develop? How would you code and categorize the items you select?

DATA COLLECTION: Indicate as precisely as possible how you propose to collect your data and how long you anticipate being in the field. Specify state how you plan to deal with non-respondents or those individuals who you would like to interview that prove next to impossible to reach.

RESEARCH TIMETABLE: Present as detailed a timetable as you can, giving dates for completion of sample design work, for questionnaire preparation, for data collection, for data tabulation, for data analysis, and for preparation of your written findings.

DATA TABULATION AND ANALYSIS: Describe as precisely as you can how you propose to tabulate the data and analyze the results. Discuss any special statistical analytical techniques you contemplate using.

PRESENTATION OR DEFENSE: When completed, you must be prepared to orally and visually explain your work (including use of multimedia presentations).

Appendix B: Advantages and Disadvantages of a Case Study

(prepared by Dr. Ali M. Kanso, University of Texas at San Antonio, ali.kanso@utsa.edu)

The case study technique offers the researcher an opportunity to deal with a wide spectrum of information about the research topic. Documents, historical artifacts, systematic interviews, direct observation, and traditional surveys can all be incorporated into a case study. The more data sources a researcher can bring to bear in a case, the more likely his/her study will be valid.

The case study is particularly advantageous to the researcher who attempts to find ideas and clues for further research. This statement does not suggest, however, that case studies are to be used only at the exploratory stage of research. The technique can also be used to gather descriptive and explanatory data. Ideally, case studies should be used in combination with theory to achieve maximum understanding. As a result, case studies are widely used in mass communication theses that focus on professional practices and issues.

Critics sometimes downplay the significance of case studies for their general lack of scientific rigor. They point out that many times the investigators have been sloppy and allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the findings and the conclusion. Another criticism is that case studies may prove time-consuming and occasionally produce massive quantities of data that are hard to summarize and too often poorly presented. A third criticism is that case studies are not easily open to generalization. If the main goal of the researcher is to make a statistically-based, normative statement about the frequency of occurrence of a phenomenon in a defined population, then some other methods may be more appropriate.

These critical observations, however, do not imply that the results of all case studies are idiosyncratic. In fact, if generalizing a theoretic proposition to a professional topic is the main objective, the case study method is well suited to the task.

Case Study Stages

No precise method of conducting a case study has been documented yet. However, many practitioners agree that a case study should consist of the following six distinct stages: design, pilot study, data collection, data analysis, report writing, and orally/visually presenting your findings.

A. Design. The first concern is what to ask. The case study is most appropriate for questions that begin with “how” or “why.” A clear and precise research question will focus the remainder of the efforts in a case study. The second concern is what to analyze. What exactly constitutes a “case”? In many instances, a case may be an individual, several individuals, an event or events. If information is gathered about each relevant individual, the findings are reported in the single or multiple case study format. In some situations, the precise boundaries of the case are harder to pinpoint. For example, a case might be a specific decision, a program, or some discrete event. Prior research literature should provide a rough guide to selecting the unit of analysis.

B. Pilot Study. Before the pilot study is carried out, the case study researcher constructs a study *protocol*. This document specifies the procedures to be used in the study and outlines the data-gathering instrument or instruments. A good case study protocol contains the steps necessary for gaining access to a particular person or organization. It should also list the questions central to the inquiry and the possible sources of information to be tapped in answering these questions. If interviews, for example, are to be used in the case study, the protocol should contain the questions to be asked.

Once the protocol has been developed, the researcher is ready to go into the field for the pilot study. The main objective of the pilot study is to refine both the research design and the field procedures. Variables that were not foreseen during the design phase can crop up during the pilot study, and problems with the protocol or with study logistics can also be uncovered.

C. Data Collection. Most case study researchers recommend the use of multiple sources of data. Such sources help the investigator improve the reliability and validity of his/her study. There are at least five sources of data that can be used in case studies. One source is documents. They represent a rich data source and may take the form of letters, memos, minutes, agendas, historical records, and so on. A second source of case study data is the interview. Most case study interviews are either *open-ended* or *focused*. An open-ended interview can cover a wide range of topics. In a focused interview, the interviewer generally uses a set of predetermined questions or at least specific topic areas to be investigated. Observation and participant observation, respectively, are the third and fourth techniques that may be used in case studies. The last source of evidence is the physical artifact—a tool, a piece of furniture, or even a computer printout. Artifacts are commonly used as a data source in anthropology and history but not in mass media case study research. They are, however, frequently used in legal research concerning media.

D. Data Analysis. Unlike more quantitative research techniques, there are no specific formulas or “cookbook” techniques to guide the researcher in analyzing the data. As a result, this stage is probably the most difficult in the case study method. The literature has suggested three broad analytic strategies: *pattern matching*, *explanation building*, and *time series*. In the pattern-matching strategy, an empirically based pattern is compared with a predicted pattern or several alternative predicted patterns. For instance, suppose a newspaper is about to institute a new management tool: a regular series of meetings between top management and reporters, excluding editors. Based on organizational theory, a researcher might predict certain outcomes, namely, more stress between editors and reporters, increased productivity, weakened supervisory links, and so on. If analysis of the case study data indicates that these results did in fact occur, some conclusions about the management change can be made. If the predicted pattern did not match the actual one, the initial study propositions would have to be questioned.

The analysis strategy of explanation building takes several forms in which the researcher tries to construct an explanation about the case by making statements about the cause(s) of the phenomenon under study. Typically, however, an investigator drafts an initial theoretical statement about some process or outcome, compares the findings of an initial case study against the statement, revises the statement, analyzes a second comparable case, and repeats

this process as many times as necessary. For example, to explain why some new communication technologies are failing, a researcher might suggest lack of managerial expertise as an initial proposition. But an investigator who examined the subscription television industry might find that lack of managerial expertise is only part of the problem—inadequate market research is also contributory. Armed with the revised version of the explanatory statement, the researcher would next examine the direct broadcast satellite industry to see whether this explanation needs to be further refined, and so on, until a full and satisfactory answer is achieved.

In the third analytic strategy—time series analysis—the investigator tries to compare a series of data points to some theoretic trend that was predicted before the research, or to some rival trend. If, for instance, several cities have experienced newspaper strikes, a case study investigator might generate predictions about the changes in information-seeking behaviors of residents in these communities and conduct a case study to see whether these predictions were supported.

E. Report Writing. The case study report can take several forms. It can follow the traditional research format: problem definition, methods, findings, and discussion. Or it can use non-traditional techniques. For instance, some case studies are best suited for a chronological arrangement, while others can be best reported in a comparative way.

F. Orally/Visually Presenting Your Findings. Several helpful online resources can aid you when you must deliver your case study results. Check out the *Effective Presentations* web site at <http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/effective.html> and the *Presenters University* home page at <http://www.presentersuniversity.com/courses/index.cfm> sponsored by Proxima.

Regardless of the chosen form, the researcher should always consider the intended audience of the report. A case study report submitted to chief executive officers has to adopt a style different from one that is written for scholarly journals. The most important section of the report is the summary. It should clearly explain whether assumptions have been confirmed or denied and whether nagging doubts about the findings prevail.

Most of these guidelines were taken from:

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Appendix C: How Not To Do Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments

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Some might argue that I owe my parents and friends a note of gratitude. Let me put forth the question: Did they write this thesis? I daresay no. I wrote it, so there.

Some might also argue that I owe my Committee a note of gratitude because they had to spend several hours reading the thesis. Let me put forth another question: Is it harder to read or write a thesis? I would argue that it is harder to write the thesis. Granted, I would be the first to acknowledge those on the Committee if they had written the thesis. But they did not. Remember, I wrote the thesis. Given that premise, I hereby modestly acknowledge—and thank—myself.

[NOTE: A thesis or dissertation is not a frivolous document. It is best to assume your Committee has absolutely no sense of humor and play it straight. After all, why blow it at this point?

However, you are welcome to add the following: I wish to dedicate this thesis or dissertation to (ADD NAME OF YOUR FAVORITE PROFESSOR), whose intrepid spirit, boundless help, and endless encouragement made this work possible!]