

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH DISSERTATION
MANUAL
How to Successfully Complete
A Good Dissertation

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Cardinal Rules

Rule #1: Choose a topic that excites your interest and commitment.

You will most probably live with this research and writing project for several years!

Rule #2: Follow the Graduate School guidelines at all times and from the beginning of your project.

The NIU Graduate School requires certain [forms](#) and procedures throughout the dissertation process. They have strict [deadlines](#) for different milestones. Consult their website for more information: <http://www.niu.edu/grad/>.

Also, you will need to work with the [Thesis and Dissertation Office](#) to format and deposit your final dissertation. Sign up for the Thesis and Dissertation Office's [blog](#) and attend some of their [workshops](#).

Rule #3: Know your dates and deadlines.

Keeping track of the required forms and deadlines is your responsibility, not your dissertation director's. Pay special attention to the deadline for requesting a defense in the semester you expect to finish; it comes much earlier in the semester than you would think.

Rule #4: Remember: you are writing a dissertation, not a book and certainly not the magnum opus of your whole career.

Make it good but get it done. Sometimes you need to dare to be adequate. Faced with a situation in which you are not sure what depth of research or extensiveness of documentation or explanation is inadequate, adequate, excellent, or excessively perfectionist, consult your dissertation director.

Rule #5: Stay in communication with your dissertation director.

Don't go away for 6 months and reappear with an 80-page chapter!

Writing and Revising

You know how to write; but, faced with probably the largest piece of writing you've ever undertaken, it is easy to forget the basics.

1. Keep your **thesis** front and center. All else follows.
2. Use active verbs.
3. Use direct phrases.
4. Mercilessly cut unnecessary phrases and content.
5. Each chapter should include an introduction and conclusion.
6. The introduction to each chapter should give the reader a roadmap to your argument.
7. The conclusion to each chapter should remind the readers of the intellectual journey they have just made with you and underline the significance of the chapter's thesis for the overall goal of your dissertation and for the field.
8. In the body of each chapter, cue your readers (plant road signs) at significant steps in your argument.

The Dissertation Proposal

A. Getting started:

Per the English Department's [Graduate Student Handbook](#), the defense of your proposal should take place within six months of the successful completion of your field exams. Thus, you should begin developing an idea and investigating it early in your program, and it is in your best interests to begin conversations with your prospective director and committee members well before your exam date.

Clarify your topic idea enough to make an effective pitch to the faculty member(s) you would like to have serve as your director/co-directors. She/he/they may ask for further development before committing. Once your director(s) have agreed to serve, discuss his/her/their requirements for the proposal and your ideas for who else you'd like to have on your committee. Your director(s) will probably have advice on whom to ask.

B. Purpose and length:

Your dissertation proposal explains the proposed subject matter and goals of your dissertation and the significance of this research to the field. Your director will give you guidelines on length requirements, which will vary from project to project based on the scope, the complexity of your theoretical framework, the specificity of your outline, your committee's familiarity with your material, etc. To start, aim for 8 to 10 pages, not counting the bibliography.

C. Organization:

1. Topic and Proposed Thesis
2. Methodology and Critical Debate
3. Potential Outline of the Dissertation
4. Timeline
5. Working Bibliography

At the end of this section, explain the original contribution to the field that your dissertation will make.

D. Process:

You will likely submit multiple drafts to your director before getting approval to pass it on to the rest of your committee, who may or may not suggest additional revisions before agreeing to schedule a defense. Use the revision process to help clarify your argument and goals for yourself as well as your committee. Although your project will almost inevitably change between

the proposal and the final draft, the drafting of the dissertation will go much more smoothly if your proposal establishes clear objectives for you to meet.

E. Defense:

You will meet with your committee to discuss your proposal. Generally you will be asked to prepare a brief presentation (the length will be determined by your director but is usually 10-15 minutes) about your project--your thesis, your goals, and the significance of your argument to the field. Your committee will ask questions and offer suggestions about your next steps.

The Dissertation

A. Organization

The organization of your dissertation should serve the subject matter and thesis. A common dissertation format is as follows:

First Chapter: Introduction

Explain topic, goals, significance, thesis, theoretical framework.

Following Chapters: Argument

3, 4, or 5 chapters organized by chronology, author, theme, and/or literary work

Final Chapter: Conclusions

Summarize, underscore significance, suggest further research possibilities.

B. The Drafting and Revision Process

Ask your director for instructions on how to approach drafting and revision, as the process varies in each case. For instance:

You may write chapters out of sequence.

You may send multiple drafts of one chapter before sending the first draft of the next or send out multiple chapters before receiving feedback.

You may send early chapters to the rest of your committee before your director has seen the later ones or you may send your director a complete draft before the rest of your committee sees anything.

You may send each chapter to the committee once your director is satisfied with it or wait to send later chapters until you've seen the committee's feedback on the earlier ones.

Get clarification.

However, you can expect your director to view multiple drafts of a chapter before you are approved to send it to your committee. The process will generally be as follows:

1. The student hands in the first draft of each chapter to the director.
2. The director returns the chapter with comments for revision.
3. Student revises the chapter and gives revised chapter to director.
4. Student gives revised chapter to the other two committee members when the director says the chapter is ready.
5. All three committee members return comments to student.
6. After consulting with the director about the committee's feedback, student revises the chapter again and gives revision to all three committee members.

Do not wait to complete these steps with one chapter before moving on to the next, especially because committee members may be slow to respond. You will have multiple chapters in different stages of the research, drafting, and revision process simultaneously.

Also, depending on their schedules and your timeline, your full committee may not give multiple rounds of feedback before agreeing to schedule your defense.

Throughout this process, the dissertation director serves as mentor, advisor, and mediator, if needed, with the rest of the dissertation committee. The director is your first resort for questions and problems (other than graduate school requirements and deadlines). If you start to feel stretched, pulled, or confused by differing advice and direction from various members of your dissertation committee, consult your dissertation director. If that does not resolve the problem, consult with your department's Director of Graduate Studies.

If the feedback from different committee members is difficult to reconcile, the following steps can be useful:

- a. Write a summary of each reader's comments
- b. Write a list of the changes you agree will make the chapter stronger
- c. Write a list of any questions you have
- d. Share copies of a, b, and c with your director

C. Tips for Research and Writing

- Keep a one-page outline of your dissertation in front of you as you work so that you can remind yourself of the big picture as you go along.
- Write a timeline with dates and share it with your dissertation director.
- Write a rough-ish draft of the introduction (generally adapted from your proposal) at the beginning but write the final version of the introduction after the rest of the dissertation is complete. (Consult with your director about how much to revise your introduction before moving on to the next chapters.)
- Generally, a dissertation chapter should not exceed 40-50 pages.
- Research one chapter at a time so that you do not get swamped with mounds of information, notes, and references.
- Use time and mental energy efficiently by writing one chapter while reading/researching for the next.
- It is fine, and often smart, to start writing a chapter before your research for that chapter is complete.
- Keep your bibliography updated as you go.
- Remember Rule #2! Unfortunately, the most complicated and arduous parts of the process of formatting for the graduate school's requirements can't be done until late in the revision process, but some things (block quotes, footnotes, headings, bibliography) can be done as you go. Additionally, make friends with Word before you have to format the defense draft. In particular, learn how to add section breaks.

- When in writing mode, pace and discipline yourself by assigning yourself a quota (2 pages a day or 10+ pages a week) or keeping to a regular schedule (write for a certain number of hours per day/week or during frequent and generous blocks of time set aside for it).

D. Preparing for the Defense

All three committee members must approve the dissertation as ready for the oral defense.

You must submit a request to the Graduate School for an oral defense **3 weeks** in advance of your defense date, along with a **hard copy** of your defense draft.

Your committee members will let you know how far in advance of your defense they need your defense draft. Some members of the department prefer hard copies, so be prepared to print.

As with the proposal defense, you will be asked to prepare a presentation (generally somewhere between 15 and 25 minutes, depending on your director's preferences) in which you discuss your argument, your findings, and your conclusions. Consider your technology needs when choosing a location for the defense. After your presentation, your committee will ask questions. Then they will invite the audience to ask questions. Then they will ask everyone to leave so they can deliberate. Once they're finished, they will tell you your results and inform you of any revisions they want you to complete before submitting your dissertation to the graduate school.

For the final submission process, visit the Thesis and Dissertation Office website. Follow their formatting requirements and templates exactly.