



Learning Design and Leadership

Dissertation Chapters, Formatting, and Structure FAQs

5-Chapter Dissertation Model



Refer to the [Exam-Dissertation Sequence Overview PDF](#) for additional guidance on the 5-Chapter model.

Question: Why is the structure and formatting of my dissertation so critical?

Your dissertation is an evolving manuscript and will go through different iterations as you progress and become clearer about your purpose, and what it means. When it is deposited with the university it becomes part of the body of literature that others can access who are interested in your field of expertise. It is a published, evidence based, manuscript discoverable by the world.

Question: When do I need to start worrying about the format of my dissertation?

Short answer: Immediately. While we ask that you prepare and present your iterative work for peer review within CGScholar, it is necessary to maintain a formatted dissertation manuscript with placeholders for any future sections. [Refer to the Thesis Office Resources page for important links.](#) Any work submitted to your advisor or committee for examination should be in the approved dissertation format. After your preliminary exam, you do not need to maintain the CGScholar version, but we ask that by the end of your final approved dissertation that you update CGScholar to reflect your deposited version, leveraging the capability to embed videos and other media.

Question: When should I procure a Copy Editor?

We strongly recommend all students procure a copy editor early in the exam-dissertation sequence. Depending on your writing skills, this may be a family member, friend, colleague, or it may need to be someone who does this professionally. We suggest they review your work incrementally as you submit each major milestone. This editing should be done prior to submitting your work for peer review and again before submitting your work for preliminary review or the detailed review by Professor Mary Kalantzis. By the time your advisor sees your work, it should be fully proofread. The advisor review should focus on content and not grammatical or structure issues. You want it to be informative, clear, and easy to read. Your external examiners will undoubtedly be attentive to such issues, and you need to make sure that the Word version of your evolving manuscript is presented according to the Graduate School's Style Guide and in a publishable format. Images/figures should be clearly legible and numbered and referenced in the body of your text. (The Graduate College recommends numbering based on sections so that if you insert or change figures, you are not renumbering your entire document.)

See <https://grad.illinois.edu/thesis/format>

Question: If/When is it appropriate to use first person in my dissertation?

Certain parts of your dissertation will be “your voice”, but you should still use third person, such as “in the present study...” or “The researcher will.... “. Passive voice is acceptable in your dissertation, which is a common way to avoid first person.



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Question: When do I streamline my Chapter 2 Literature Review?

During the examination phases (general and special fields), we ask that you maintain a structured Chapter 2 that differentiates the full General field literature review from the Special field literature review. This makes it clear to examiners where one ends and the other begins, so that they are examining the appropriate sections.

Either during your Chapter 3 works or in preparation for your preliminary exam, you should streamline your Chapter 2 literature review into a cohesive dissertation-focused Literature Review. You should have a single Introduction, a single Theory section, appropriately organized themed sections, a single Gaps in the literature section, and a transition to your Chapter 3. Regarding the gaps in the literature, you can decide how to present the gaps revealed in each case, given that the gaps were based on different sets of literature. You can keep them distinctive or put them together.

Question: What changes will I need to make to my Chapters 1 to 3 later in the process?

While we institute milestones to make this a more manageable experience, these are cumulative and iterative. Your dissertation is a living document that will go through multiple stages and rounds of revision. Always be attentive to opportunities to enhance your work, even if it passed a previous stage's review.

For your preliminary exam you are presenting a research proposal – what you plan to do. But after your preliminary exam, you will need to revise your work to be presented in past tense. You may also find that some things changed from what you planned. *What did you actually do?*

You may also find that you need to revise or expand your Chapter 2 Literature Review as you progress through the remainder of the dissertation process. This is especially true for topics where new research emerges in between the time you wrote Chapter 2 and when you are working on your analysis and final dissertation draft.

And of course, your Introduction, abstract, and other formatting items, such as your Table of Contents will need to be revised based on the most up-to-date details.

Question: Why is the Literature Review genre so important for my dissertation?

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW is a **review** of the literature in the **field** that aligns with your **tentative key research question** and/or your **hypothesis**. It is a **journey of discovery** not an essay style account of what you know. You must **not** make generalization backed by citations. Instead, it is a synthesized account of what the literature says, in the voice of the literature. That is, it should present in a coherent, appropriately cited, way what you **found/discovered** that the literature actually says -theories, claims, debates, data, etc. - that **enable you to demonstrate you have gained expertise in the field of your investigation** – it's not about a predetermined topic. This is true for both the first part, General Field or second part, Special Field Literature Review: the two qualifying exams.

The Special field review of the literature should emerge from the gaps revealed in your investigation of the general field. This will allow you to dig deeper into the literature in a more focused way and lead towards your own intervention, which should become clearer as a consequence of these two literature reviews. It will also lead to the refinement of your tentative research questions and/or hypotheses. Together these two literature reviews lay the scholarly foundation for Chapter 3 and subsequently your own research intervention/project. But Chapter 2 must focus on what the literature conveys.

Refer to our [Literature Review Guidance web page](#) for more details. See also [Academic Phrasebook examples](#).



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Question: What is the difference between Chapter 2 Theory and Chapter 3 Theory?

What does it mean to recast my Chapter 2 theory section?

While Chapter 2 is about what the literature **says** about your topic and the related theories, **Chapter 3 THEORY & METHODOLOGY** is about you **choosing** the theoretical foundation for your specific research study and how that theory aligns to your research goals. It will/may involve the recasting of some part of the theory section of Chapter 2. This means you will need to review it and determine how to select, recast, or augment the theories presented in Chapter 2 for Chapter 3.

Do not repeat yourself, but instead provide the reason and context of your selected theory/s that will inform your methodology and your own research intervention/project. The selected methodology for your own research intervention/project thus follows the theoretical statement here and needs to be cited, explained, along with an action plan.

Question: What belongs in Chapter 4 vs. Chapter 5?

Chapter 4 is about the execution of your study, that is the application of your selected theory and methodology; an account and analysis of the data you found, **but most importantly, the interpretation of the data and how it answers or addresses your research questions and hypotheses.**

Chapter 5 is about the implications, recommendations, limitations, and conclusions of your study. What does your study contribute to the field? What additional research still needs to be done? So far, your writing has been evidence driven and objective, in chapter 5 your own voice can return as you sum up the significance of your dissertation.

Refer to the final two pages of the [Exam-Sequence Overview PDF](#) for an overview of the 5-Chapter model.

Question: How do I present my data? How do I integrate analysis and discussion?

Avoid simply describing and repeating the process of data collection in Chapter 4, as you have already articulated that in Chapter 3. It is necessary to present the data that you found in a clear way, but you also need to incorporate an **interpretation of the data and how and to what degree it addresses your research questions and hypotheses.** You'll want to be able to **explain why the numbers (quantitative data) or responses (qualitative data) are what they are.** Do not assume that the reader has to work this out from spread sheets, graphs and the like. Additionally, you need to integrate your quantitative and qualitative “discussion/interpretation” of your results rather than simply addressing them separately. This will contribute to the triangulation of your data.

Question: What goes in the body of my work vs. what goes in the Appendix?

Some of your raw results from data collection and the processes involved in gathering it need to go in appendices – eg, description of case, weekly lesson plans, raw responses, etc. **The dissertation needs to focus on findings and meaningful scholarly contributions the field** – the reader can go to appendices to verify data that supports conclusions and recommendations.

The Appendix should also include your data collection instruments and IRB materials. It may also include supporting materials that provide additional context for your study, such as a lesson plan, policy, or other items referenced in the main body of your dissertation.