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What Are Theses and Dissertations, and Why Write a Book About Them?

This chapter introduces you to this book and the thesis and dissertation process, including

- what to expect in the book
- an overview of what theses and dissertations are and why you should do one
- helpful social, environmental, and resource supports

Read thoroughly if

- you are new to the thesis or dissertation process
- you want a quick overview of what you can expect to get from this book

Skim or skip if

- you are ready to dive right in!

Let's answer the second question in the chapter title first. It's been almost 30 years since we first conceived this book. When we started the first edition, students often began graduate school with minimal formal research experience. The thesis or dissertation may have been based on their first independent research projects, and these projects were often their primary, if not only, major research endeavors during graduate school. In addition, most students relied largely on the professor who chaired their thesis or dissertation for guidance on these projects.

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Dissertations and Theses From Start to Finish: Psychology and Related Fields, Third Edition, by D. J. Bell, S. L. Foster, and J. D. Cone
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Times have changed. Today, it is much more common for students to have considerable research experience by the time they get to the thesis or dissertation; for many it is no longer the first project or the pinnacle of their graduate years. For these students, the thesis or dissertation may feel like just another project in their evolving program of research, requiring skills they've already developed or at least observed in their lab mates. In addition, the number of resources available to support thesis and dissertation writing has exploded since the first edition of our book, including everything from online resources such as websites, blogs, and YouTube videos, to articles and books on the topic, to thesis or dissertation coaches and writing services! There are now journal articles and books, often discipline specific, that address certain aspects of graduate-level research projects (e.g., selection of a topic, organization for writing, time management, self-care). So why another edition of this book?

First, the vast array of resources can be overwhelming, as the focus, depth, and content of their support are different and sometimes even contradictory. Online informational resources are often too brief to offer much specific detail about any one aspect of the thesis or dissertation project, or they focus on only one aspect (e.g., organizing a proposal document). The stream-of-consciousness style of many blogs can take you down many informational rabbit holes before you find a nugget that is helpful to you. Writing support websites may offer some helpful hints, but many are really geared toward selling you a thesis or dissertation, which, for obvious reasons, we strongly discourage! Face it—the resources you find on the internet may not have been subjected to any quality assurance review; you may find useful information, but it is clearly a "buyer beware" marketplace. We believe that a single curated source of information that takes students through the thesis and dissertation process step by step still has a place on bookshelves and in libraries.

Second, there are key aspects of the thesis and dissertation process that warrant close attention from students new to the research process, as well as from students who are more seasoned researchers. If you are newer to independent research, as a beginning graduate student or even an advanced undergraduate, information on developing, implementing, and describing research will be quite useful. If you are already an active researcher, things such as the etiquette and formalities of university theses and dissertations, working with committees, or managing greater independence than you're accustomed to may still be new to you. Regardless of your experience level, considering topics such as how to assess your readiness, manage your environment, and balance your priorities can be critical in facilitating your research and graduate school success well beyond these two specific research projects.

We wrote the first two versions of this book to help graduate students in psychology and related fields more successfully negotiate the thesis and dissertation process from beginning to end. We included everything from deciding whether and how to embark on the journey to developing, implementing, and writing up the project; managing the myriad logistical issues involved in

making it to and through a successful defense meeting; and then disseminating your results through professional presentation and publication.

We also wrote the book to serve as an archival source of the wisdom we have amassed from a combined total of close to 100 years of supervising theses and dissertations. All of us have told graduate students many useful (and sometimes not-so-useful!) things over the years to help them through the process. Until we systematized these suggestions, we, like other faculty members, had to tell each fledgling thesis or dissertation student everything all over again. The first edition of this book compiled the best of our ideas on how to make the process a less mysterious and more exciting educational experience, and the second edition added a few things we left out and updated our suggestions in light of new trends in the field.

In the 13 years since the second edition was published, research areas and methods, expectations and requirements for theses and dissertations, and technology have all changed in notable ways. The pages that follow address these changes. Although we aim our suggestions primarily at graduate students in psychology and related fields and focus more on quantitative than qualitative research methods, much of the content of the book will be useful across disciplines, research methods, and levels of research experience. Importantly, we hope that many of our suggestions will be generalizable beyond thesis and dissertation projects to an ongoing program of research, other types of formal proposals (e.g., grant applications), collaborative projects that require committee approval, dissemination to multiple audiences, and even your general approach to multifaceted and long-range tasks.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The 14 chapters of this book provide the tools needed to assemble good theses and dissertations. Of course, simply reading this book is not sufficient to fully prepare you for the thesis or dissertation process. The book will be most valuable as a supplement to an already adequate graduate education. We do not explain research ethics, designs, methods, or statistics. Instead, we help you apply what you have already learned in graduate school to the practical conduct of research and point you toward resources to supplement that knowledge as needed.

In this chapter, we talk briefly about what theses and dissertations are, what they look like, and some of the reasons for doing one. Then, in Chapter 2, we ask you to assess your own preparation and commitment. Chapter 3 helps you estimate the time you will need to complete your project and anticipate and manage the various events that can come along to derail your efforts. Chapter 4 discusses finding a topic and developing a research question and hypotheses. Because this is most often done in collaboration with one or more faculty members, Chapter 4 also contains advice about selecting a chair and committee members and about thesis and dissertation etiquette in general.

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Chapter 5 provides an overview of the all-important thesis or dissertation proposal, and Chapter 6 follows with suggestions for developing your literature review. Chapter 7 discusses what to include in a good Method section, along with issues of research ethics and informed consent. Operationalizing and measuring your variables, collecting and analyzing your data, and presenting and discussing your results are covered in Chapters 8 through 12. Chapter 13 reviews strategies for handling your proposal meeting and oral defense. Finally, Chapter 14 discusses readying your research for presentation at professional meetings and submission for publication.

Each chapter begins with an advance organizer that gives you, in a few bullet points, an idea of what to expect in the chapter as well as advice to help you decide whether you should read the chapter thoroughly or can skim or skip certain pieces of the chapter. Most chapters end with a checklist that turns our suggestions from that chapter into concrete steps you can take to move your project forward. You can adapt these checklists to suit your project and use them to keep track of your progress.

At the end of most chapters, we also provide references to supplemental sources you might find useful if you want to explore the topics in more depth. These resources are ones we have found particularly useful for ourselves or our students. Although websites come and go, we provide references to a few websites that we believe offer particularly useful advice and may have some staying power. When our reason for recommending a specific resource may not be obvious, we provide a brief explanation of its topic and relevance.

The topics we cover follow the sequence you would normally encounter in the thesis or dissertation process. We think most readers will benefit from reading the chapters in order as they approach each new phase of their research. Some readers, especially if they've had a great deal of experience in a specific area, may want to focus more selectively on areas that are new to them. It will be useful to skim the entire book quickly before digging in so you have some idea of its contents and where to look for something should you want to focus on it or need it in a sequence different from the one we have chosen.

Now let's go back to the first question posed in the title of this chapter: What are theses and dissertations, anyway? First, we define them and talk a little bit about their history. Then we say something about what theses and dissertations in psychology actually look like.

DEFINITIONS, DISTINCTIONS, AND FUNCTIONS

Dictionary definitions of "thesis" and "dissertation" often do not distinguish between these terms. *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.-a) defines a *dissertation* as "an extended usually written treatment of a subject; *specifically*: one submitted for a doctorate." The same source defines *thesis* as "a dissertation embodying results of original research and especially substantiating a specific view; *especially*:

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one written by a candidate for an academic degree" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c). Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *dissertation* as "a long essay on a particular subject, especially one written for a university degree or diploma" (AskOxford.com, n.d.-a) and *thesis* as "a long essay or dissertation involving personal research, written as part of a university degree" and gives the example of "a doctoral thesis" (AskOxford.com, n.d.-b). Not only is there no clear distinction between the terms "thesis" and "dissertation," but both definitions of the former include the latter!

In U.S. universities, it has become common to distinguish between theses and dissertations by referring to the work done for a master's degree as a "thesis" and that done for a doctoral degree as a "dissertation." This is not a universally accepted distinction, by any means, and some faculty members refer to dissertations as "doctoral theses." Throughout this volume, we use the term "dissertation" to refer to an original piece of empirical research done as partial fulfillment of the requirements of doctoral (EdD, PhD, or PsyD) programs in psychology and related fields. We use "thesis" to refer to empirical research conducted en route to a master's degree.

Despite terminological ambiguities, most faculty members agree on the general functions of theses and dissertations. One major purpose of both projects is to demonstrate the student's skill at conducting independent research that makes a contribution to knowledge on an important topic. Another is to assess the student's mastery of a specialized area of scholarship. Some see the dissertation process as examining mastery of technical aspects of research, including knowledge and ability to apply principles of research design, statistics, and so on. Thus, the dissertation process is an examination of your competence to function autonomously as a researcher. The finished dissertation also results in a new and significant contribution to the body of knowledge.

Theses, too, are expected to contribute to the body of knowledge. Thesis requirements place less emphasis on originality, however, and candidates are often given more guidance and supervision. Some thesis candidates conduct a systematic replication of already completed research, for example. In addition, thesis candidates rarely operate as independently as doctoral candidates must.

Not to be overlooked is the training function theses and dissertations serve. In undertaking such a project, you learn and grow in your research skills and knowledge of the field. You expand your skills in thinking critically, synthesizing and extending the work of others, and communicating clearly and professionally. Ideally, the process should also increase your respect for the empirical aspects of the discipline and your pride in participating in the development of new knowledge about important phenomena.

WHAT THESES AND DISSERTATIONS LOOK LIKE

You have probably asked yourself numerous questions about the form your thesis or dissertation is supposed to take. Must you use particular methods? How long is it supposed to be? What format are you supposed to follow?

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Are there writing style requirements to follow? Let's look at some of these questions.

First, about methods. Although this book focuses primarily on empirical projects that involve quantitative research, not all theses and dissertations require this type of project. The traditional terminal degree in psychology, the PhD, virtually always requires an empirical project; frequently, these use quantitative methods, but increasingly, mainstream psychology research uses qualitative or mixed (i.e., quantitative and qualitative) methods. Some applied psychology programs offer an alternative terminal degree, the PsyD, or doctor in psychology. PsyD programs explicitly prepare students for careers as practitioners and thus may have somewhat different degree requirements than PhD programs. For example, many practitioner-oriented schools allow alternatives to the traditional empirical dissertation, such as a theoretical dissertation (or, more rarely, a case study) that addresses a clearly defined question and makes an original contribution to knowledge. However, many students in PsyD programs still complete an empirical dissertation. In a 1992 survey of directors of 40 "Vail-model" programs (i.e., professional clinical psychology programs, which presumably included a significant number of PsyD programs) in the United States, Sanchez-Hucles and Cash learned that despite the variety of acceptable dissertation formats, approximately half of the students in these programs elected to conduct empirical dissertations. Our recent informal consultations with colleagues in PsyD programs indicate that this is still true.

As for length, there is a great deal of variability within and between disciplines and within and between universities. Although we do not have objective data on theses, we do know something about the length of dissertations. We recently randomly sampled 100 dissertations completed in 2016–2017 selected from the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. Psychology dissertations had a mean length of 132 pages, including text, tables, appendices, and related items, with a range of 42 to 285 pages.[1] Interestingly, these numbers suggest that dissertations have become shorter in the past 15 years; when we sampled 2001–2002 dissertations, they averaged 44% longer, with minimum and maximum lengths close to double our current range (Cone & Foster, 2006). Likely this is due to the increased acceptability of publication-style dissertations. Our educated guess is that master's theses would average about two thirds this length, or about 88 pages.

As for format: Yes, there is a format you are supposed to follow. This format is dictated by your particular academic department and institution. We suggest that you get in touch with the people knowledgeable about such matters and learn about your local requirements. These people can usually be found in your department's graduate services office, your institution's graduate school or office of graduate studies, or your library. They typically have a website or written materials that spell out the acceptable format or formats. In addition, they can most likely provide you with other useful information,

[1]We are indebted to Madison Beedon for collecting these data.

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such as timelines, committee requirements, document deposit requirements, fees, and so on. Theses and dissertations in psychology commonly follow the style and format guidelines set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (also referred to as the *Publication Manual*; American Psychological Association, 2020). This book has been written in that format, and many journals in the behavioral sciences adhere to it. You will see frequent references to the *Publication Manual* throughout this book.

Although the *Publication Manual* provides an often-followed format, it is not universally accepted, even in schools and departments of psychology. Furthermore, even where it is accepted, local deviations often exist (e.g., sections or chapters to include, their order, reference format, placement of tables) that you will do well to discover. We advise you to make learning the local norms one of your first priorities. You will save time and aggravation by writing and referencing in the locally accepted format right from the start.

A good place to begin to find out what your thesis or dissertation will eventually look like is to examine some of those completed by previous students working with the same committee chairs you are considering. These provide good, concrete examples of what you can expect. Ask faculty members for some suggestions. Be aware that completed projects vary in quality, and faculty members should be able to direct you to the better quality examples. Because norms for the format and content of a thesis or dissertation may also differ depending on your specific area of research, you should ask for examples that are most relevant to the type of research you are contemplating. Chapter 4 deals specifically with the selection of committee chairs, so don't worry if you haven't yet selected one.

What, in general, will your final document contain? It will most likely resemble a journal article, or sometimes a series of articles but with more detail. The traditional thesis or dissertation begins with a table of contents and then launches into a review of the literature. Following this are the Method, Results, and finally Discussion sections. A reference section contains details on the works cited in the text, and appendices provide supplemental material, such as equipment blueprints, consent forms, data recording forms, and sometimes even raw data. Recently, many departments have begun to encourage alternative formats that are closer to submission-ready journal articles but that still allow students to demonstrate in-depth mastery of relevant knowledge. These alternatives may include a journal-length document with an appendix containing an extended literature review or a portfolio-style project consisting of a series of two to three studies completed during doctoral study, often with an integrated introduction and discussion. The portfolio-style alternative is more common at the dissertation stage, once students have amassed a body of work, than at the thesis stage. We say more about these alternative formats throughout the book.

So, there you have it. You know what theses and dissertations are and what they look like. The remainder of this book discusses the nuts and bolts of the process you will follow to complete this major undertaking. Now,

let's turn our attention to what is probably the most important question of this chapter.

WHY DO A THESIS OR DISSERTATION IN THE FIRST PLACE?

There are many reasons for doing a thesis or dissertation. In the final analysis, you are writing one because your graduate program requires you to do so to obtain a specific degree. There are other good reasons as well, of course. Some are pragmatic and directly related to your career plans: The project, as a way to showcase your conceptual, methodological, analytic, and communication skills, might be your stepping-stone to an academic research or teaching position or an applied job. Any publications that emerge from the project, as well as a rich data set that you may be able to work from for several years, can also jump-start your career and help you maintain momentum as you transition from trainee to professional.

Other reasons are more purely intellectual. Research offers many challenges and opportunities to think about and solve conceptual, methodological, and practical problems. Conducting research is a way to find out more about some psychological or other behavioral science phenomenon that piques your curiosity. Completing a thesis or dissertation can also provide the personal satisfaction of taking on and mastering a complex and challenging task and seeing how your intellectual skills have grown during the process.

Now that you are at this point in your program, take a moment to consider how you view this specific requirement. Is it merely a troublesome hoop to jump through on your way to a degree? Are you looking for the easiest, quickest way to get beyond it? Do you eagerly anticipate gaining useful skills during the project? Is it an opportunity for you to continue research you are already doing? Do you see it as having any relevance to the work you plan after graduation—for example, as a key part of your developing program of research or a chance to master and advance knowledge of an area in which you plan to practice?

As cognitive behavior therapists know, the way you think about the major research you are about to undertake will contribute to the enjoyment, ease, and speed with which you conduct the project and the amount you learn from it. If you are filled with curiosity about some aspect of psychology or about the process of doing research in psychology, good for you! You will probably have the stamina to stick with your project from start to finish. You will probably even have some fun along the way. You probably haven't gotten this far if you don't enjoy learning. For many of us, doing research is the ultimate learning experience. Even if the prospect of embarking on your thesis or dissertation is daunting and you're not sure it will qualify as "fun," it will be useful to concentrate on the positive aspects of the project and to view the hurdles you will encounter as challenges and growth opportunities rather than obstacles. With that attitude, although the project may never rise

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to the level of fun, it can be a very satisfying, rewarding, and esteem-building experience.

FIND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

Before ending this chapter, a word of warning is in order. Some of the advice we offer will not be useful to you. Not every strategy works well for every student, and not every faculty member or department orchestrates the thesis and dissertation process with the same instruments and score. There are almost as many ways of getting from the beginning to the end of the thesis and dissertation process as there are graduate students. The key is finding ways of negotiating the process that work for you. In addition, rules and traditions differ from place to place. Take what we say with some healthy skepticism, and gather information along the way to see whether your local situation is different from what we present in this book.

Remember, completing a thesis or dissertation is, in some respects, a rite of passage. As with most such rites, some of the process may seem arbitrary and nonfunctional. If you acknowledge this up front and decide to do what needs to be done, whether it makes complete sense or not, you will succeed much more easily and have a lot more fun along the way. Remember to keep your eyes on the prize, and engage in lots of positive self-talk as you do.

In other words, don't get too intimidated or annoyed by the thesis or dissertation process. Yes, it's lengthy. Yes, it involves seemingly arbitrary requirements. Yes, you may never have done anything quite like this before. Yes, it may be scary. And yes, you, like many others, will probably complete the process and earn your degree. Remember, most of the project will involve skills you already have. In addition, your chair and committee will be there to help. One of our students put it very well:

> As I come to the close of my graduate process and the completion of my dissertation, one thought keeps coming back to me—that any goal is possible given two factors: 1) the ability to break things down into tiny steps, and 2) the support of family, friends, and the community. (Dionne, 1992, p. iii)

We know you are motivated, or you wouldn't be reading this book. Are you ready to act on this motivation? Let's turn to Chapter 2 to examine your preparation in some detail and find out what you might do to be even better prepared for the task ahead.

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