



AMRIDGE UNIVERSITY

Dissertation Manual

January, 2019

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PURPOSE OF THE MANUAL

Published words become a permanent part of the public domain. Long after a student has graduated, his or her written work continues to represent his scholarship. Therefore, what one writes becomes an original contribution to the literature in one's field of study. A student must not plagiarize or otherwise misuse what others have written. Amridge University puts great value on research and well-written dissertations. Like any other major university, Amridge insists that all written materials emanating from the University follow a uniform style.

This manual provides the student/researcher and the Dissertation Committee a common basis from which to proceed in researching and writing the dissertation. One's dissertation should demonstrate his or her knowledge of the field, ability to conduct advanced research, organizational skills, and competence in both oral and written presentation. The dissertation should be used as a tool to ascertain and dispense truth independent of one's desired results.

The contents of this manual are selected primarily from policies and procedures in the academic catalog and other sources. Efforts will be made to keep this manual up-to-date with University policies and requirements. However, the user of this manual should be aware that the current Amridge University Academic Catalog is the most accurate source of University policy and, should policies in the academic catalog differ from this manual, the policies in the catalog will take priority.

In the process of writing a dissertation, the researcher may use many resources such as people with knowledge of the subject and aids such as computer software, but the student ultimately bears the responsibility to defend his or her work and own it as intellectual property. A good dissertation enables the student to obtain a terminal degree -- an accomplishment which relatively few people can claim.

INTRODUCTION

The information in this manual applies to all Amridge University doctoral degree programs. Students and faculty members should be familiar with the contents of this manual, as it contains key information regarding the expectations and components of the dissertation.

The doctoral dissertation at Amridge University is a formal, written document that is accepted for partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree program. The doctoral dissertation demonstrates the student's ability to:

1. Analyze and synthesize the pertinent literature on a subject;
2. Identify, select and verbalize a valid, researchable problem;
3. Design and implement a scientific investigation;
4. Analyze the results of the investigation and draw supported conclusions; and
5. Develop a written report of the study that meets standards of the profession and present practical information to professionals in the field.

It is important to note that there are differences in and variations between Doctor of Ministry (DMin), Doctor of Education (EdD), and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dissertations. The PhD dissertation focuses on making a new contribution to the body of knowledge in one's field. That is, PhD dissertation must make a scholarly contribution to both the research and theory (e.g., generating a new theory or testing an existing theory).

DMin and EdD dissertations are applied dissertations. That is, they are practice-based and focus on making practical contributions to documented problems and issues for which there is not already an acceptable solution. An applied dissertation does not necessarily require generalizable results beyond the study site; however, it must address a problem that is relevant and exists outside of the study site.

BEGINNING THE DISSERTATION

The student must pass his or her Qualifying Examination and achieve “Candidacy Status” prior to enrolling in the first Dissertation Module. Candidacy Status marks a major milestone in one’s doctoral journey and represents the transition from student to independent researcher. Before beginning the dissertation, the student should have a general understanding of the dissertation purpose, standards, and required procedures. The student must be eligible to begin the dissertation and must have a dissertation committee appointed. The student must develop the dissertation through a series of dissertation module courses and must receive approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to beginning data collection.

DISSERTATION MILESTONES OVERVIEW

The Milestone approach provides the student with a structure to plan and complete the dissertation while allowing room for individuality in the process. Upon completion of Milestone #1: Topic Paper, the Dissertation Modules are taken continually and sequentially until all dissertation milestones have been completed.

Milestone #1: Topic Paper. The student develops a paper and makes a presentation during the Qualifying Examination course. A main objective is to ensure students obtain feedback about the feasibility and worthiness of their topic.

Milestone #2: Dissertation Proposal. Contains Dissertation Committee and Academic Leadership Team approved Chapters 1 – 3 of the dissertation. Note: achieving this milestone will take the longest (approximately 6 – 8 months on average).

Milestone #3: Amridge University IRB Approval. With Chapter 3 complete and approved by the Dissertation Committee and Academic Leadership Team, this will flow smoothly for most candidates. Once IRB approval is obtained, data collection can commence immediately.

Milestone #4: Final Dissertation Manuscript. Once all of the data are collected, the major elements missing are Chapters 4 and 5. The Final Manuscript includes the findings from the analysis, recommendations for future research, and practical applications.

Milestone #5: Oral Defense. Student presentation that highlights the key elements of the study. Questions from committee members and others.

DISSERTATION MODULES

The dissertation is to be completed through a sequence of Dissertation Module courses. Each degree program has a minimum number of Dissertation Module courses, and the maximum number of Dissertation Module courses for all doctoral degree programs is 12. Dissertation Module courses are taken continually and sequentially until all Dissertation Milestones have been completed (i.e. Dissertation Module 1, Dissertation Module 2, etc.). The sequence of Milestones is mandatory, but the number of Dissertation Modules required to complete all of the Dissertation Milestones will vary. After beginning the dissertation the student must enroll in a Dissertation Module course each semester until completion of the dissertation.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEES

The dissertation is developed by the student with the advice, guidance and approval of the Dissertation Committee. The Dissertation Committee is composed of the student, a chairperson, one or more readers, and the dissertation secretary. The Dissertation Committee is assigned during the semester in which the student is enrolled in the Qualifying Examination. The student, in consultation with the Qualifying Examination instructor, may request that specific individuals be appointed to his or her Dissertation Committee.

Student - The student is responsible for his or her dissertation. This includes registering for the correct Dissertation Module courses, selecting the dissertation topic, conducting the literature review, designing the research plan, obtaining necessary approvals, executing the research plan, writing the dissertation, obtaining approval for each module, defending the dissertation, and fulfilling all dissertation completion processes.

Chairperson - The dissertation chairperson is the leader and coordinator of the dissertation committee. The dissertation chairperson provides advice and reactions to the student's ideas and materials. The dissertation chairperson communicates to the students the directions and decisions of the committee. The dissertation chairperson considers both the technical content and the written form of the student's presentations. The dissertation chairperson decides when to bring in the dissertation reader for suggestions and reactions during the planning and development stages.

Reader - The dissertation reader provides assessment and advice regarding subject matter content when requested by the dissertation chairperson. The reader sends all communication and feedback back through the Chairperson

Secretary - The dissertation secretary is responsible for assessing the quality of the written product based on standards of grammar, sentence structure, and the appropriate writing style manual. The secretary sends all communication and feedback back through the chairperson.

STYLE MANUALS

It is the student's responsibility to become familiar with the appropriate writing style manual and ensure that anyone assisting in the typing of the document follows the rules of the manual. The style manuals

also include directions for the reporting of numbers, construction of tables and figures, structure of headings, use of terms, preferred language, and the expression of ideas or writing style suggestions. Writing for research or publication demands a new level of dedication and compliance to rules, and, in order to be acceptable by publishers of professional literature, the student must demonstrate this ability. The committee must be able to focus on the substantive content of the dissertation without spending valuable time looking for infractions of these rules.

- Students enrolled in the *College of Business and Leadership* are required to use the writing guidelines provided in the latest edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA Manual).
- Students enrolled in the *School of Education and Human Services* are required to use the writing guidelines provided in the latest edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA Manual).
- Students enrolled in the *Turner School of Theology* are required to use the writing guidelines provided in the latest edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMS Manual) and/or *Society of Biblical Literature Handbook of Style* (SBLHS); however, APA is acceptable in some cases (e.g. Doctor of Ministry courses and dissertations).

Allowable alternatives/exceptions to the University approved style manuals:

- A student may choose whether to use one or two spaces after a period, as long as consistency is maintained.
- The possessive of Jesus may be done as Jesus' or Jesus's, according to the student's preference.
- Pronouns for religious figures, including God and Jesus as deity (e.g. he, him, and his), may be either upper case or lower case, as long as consistency is maintained. In quotations of works by other authors, the integrity of sources must be maintained by preserving either upper or lower case pronouns for deity as found in the original sources.

DISSERTATION GUIDELINES

Students conducting research involving human subjects are strongly encouraged to follow the traditional dissertation format, which consists of five chapters. This format is most common; however, variations exist. The candidates should consult with his or her Dissertation Committee to determine the most appropriate format with consideration given to the chosen approach.

Templates are provided in the Dissertation Module courses for students to consider along with advice from their committees. General, suggested guidelines for page numbers are included below. Chapters may vary slightly by name and/or page length as a result of the chosen research method and design. For example, if a student puts most of the research results and findings in an appendix, Chapter 4 might be quite short. If the data is quite extensive and if it is all reported in Chapter 4 rather than an appendix, Chapter 4 could exceed 30 pages. Note: students pursuing the PhD in Biblical Studies who are not conducting research involving human subjects should follow a modified version of the traditional dissertation format available in the dissertation module courses.

The quality of the work is more important than the actual length of the dissertation or the individual chapters. Students should listen to the advice of the chairperson and the other committee members as they judge the unique topic and the research needed to address the research problem and questions in the proper manner.

5 Chapter Dissertation Guidelines

Chapter 1 - Introduction (12 -20 pages)

The introductory chapter generally includes the following key sections: Need for the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Delimitations, and Definitions of Key Terms.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature (30 - 50 pages)

In the Review of Literature, the candidate should summarize and synthesize the peer-reviewed literature relevant to the topic area of the dissertation. Findings from existing studies should not be merely reported; they should be compared and contrasted when appropriate.

Chapter 3 - Research Method (15 - 20 pages)

Discuss the appropriateness of the research method as it relates to the problem statement, and present the research design chosen for the study. Provide enough details so that the study could be replicated.

Chapter 4 - Reporting of Data (15 - 30 pages)

Present and evaluate the findings in light of the research questions.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations (15 - 30 pages)

Draw conclusions based on the findings presented in Chapter 4. Discuss practical implications resulting from the conclusions.

TOPIC SELECTION

Selecting a topic for researching and writing a dissertation is one of the most important decisions one can make in a doctoral program. Do not rush and make a quick, hasty decision on a dissertation topic. Rather, make a cautious, careful, deliberate decision in the choosing of a topic, and the rest of your work in research, gathering data, analysis, writing, and defense will go much smoother and be more pleasant.

There are many ways you can go about selecting a topic (Neuman, 2006). Begin by exploring ideas from your personal professional experience and examining current cultural trends that affect your field. The current state of knowledge in your field of study will yield many topics that are valid for research. In reviewing your vocational specialty, consider the problems people often struggle with. Also consider the values to which you are committed – religiously, socially, ethically, and politically – and explore how a topic might be embedded in these aspects. You should also seek advice from professors and scholars for areas of study that need to be explored further (Lei, 2009) and explore recommendations for further research in recently published peer-reviewed journals. As you continue to narrow your topic, consider the following questions:

1. Is it **WORTHY?** Choose a topic that merits the time and effort of dissertation research. It could take two or three years to complete your project, so you need to choose a topic worthy of that commitment. By the way, it is a myth that you must pick a topic that you are passionate about or one to which you have a prior commitment (Ségol, 2014).
2. Is it **FEASIBLE?** Pick a topic that is manageable. Be realistic. Consider the resources that will be needed, the participants that will potentially be involved, and the time that will be required.
3. Is it **RELEVANT?** Select a topic that is timely; it should matter to and make a difference in your field now and in the future. Strive to make your dissertation of publishable quality, and think of it as a way to make a positive impact on others and advance your career. Those things are more likely to occur when your topic is relevant.

Once you have found a topic that you think is perfect for you, your academic goals, and your vocational goals, further groundwork is still needed. Search the dissertation index for other dissertations on this topic to see what others have written. Remember, your dissertation needs to be original work. If other dissertations exist on a similar topic, read their abstracts to see if they are cast in a different setting or if they tackle a somewhat different problem. You want to make sure that your dissertation proposal will be unique. You should also do a bibliographical survey of books and journal articles to ensure there is sufficient literature available for your literature review. Finally, confer with the instructor who has the most expertise within your topic area, since that instructor would be the most likely person to be the chairperson for your dissertation committee. Get advice from him or her on the suitability of your topic. Find an advisor who is knowledgeable about your dissertation topic and is able to help you analyze it for potential issues, problems or dangers. Try to choose an advisor with whom you think you will have a good working relationship (McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin, & Williams, 2009).

MILESTONE #1 – DISSERTATION TOPIC PAPER

The Topic Paper is developed over the course of the first 12 weeks of the semester under the supervision of the faculty member assigned to teach the Qualifying Exam course with input from the student's dissertation chairperson. Then, the student makes a live presentation online near the end of the semester.

The components required in the Topic Paper will evolve into the major elements required for Milestone #2 – The Dissertation Proposal. The Topic Paper must contain the following sections, and headings should be properly formatted and use these exact terms (Exception: this does not necessarily apply to students enrolled in the PhD in Biblical Studies degree program).

- Introduction
- Problem Statement
- Purpose Statement
- Research Questions
- Definition of Key Terms
- Literature Review (will later evolve into Chapter 2)
- Research Method and Design (will later evolve into Chapter 3)
- Conclusion

MILESTONE #2 – THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

The Dissertation Proposal provides the foundation for the research plan and serves as the candidate's roadmap to completion of the dissertation. Achieving this milestone takes the longest (approximately 6 to 8 months on average). The Dissertation Proposal contains Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of the dissertation. It organizes the project, and the effort and clarity put forth at this stage will likely prevent problems down the road and help the candidate avoid pitfalls that commonly occur in subsequent stages of the dissertation process. Note: the PhD in Biblical Studies Dissertation Proposal will be slightly modified from this format, but no less rigorous.

The Dissertation Proposal must be approved by both the student's dissertation committee and the Academic Leadership Team (ALT), and it is the responsibility of the Dissertation Chairperson to send the committee approved Dissertation Proposal to for ALT review and approval. **Note:** the student must have an ALT approved Dissertation Proposal in order to receive a passing grade for Module 5 and continue to Module 6 (if necessary).

While some of the components may vary slightly in the order and length of presentation, each proposal must contain, but is not limited to, the following:

Chapter 1: Introduction

- This chapter should begin by establishing the context of the study and orient the reader to the field.
- Problem Statement
- Purpose Statement
- Research Questions
- Hypotheses (for quantitative studies only)
- Significance of Study
- Definition of Key Terms

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

- Population
- Sample and Sampling Method
- Measurement Instruments
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Limitations
- Delimitations
- Ethical considerations

MILESTONE #3 – IRB APPROVAL

The primary purpose of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) review process is to protect research participants from undue risk and ensure their safety. Further, the IRB exists to ensure all investigations are conducted ethically and comply with applicable regulations and standards. To this end, the IRB is entitled to require clarification and/or revisions in instances where there are questions concerning the ethical or professional nature of a proposed study.

Faculty members, students or others, other than the Amridge University Center for Institutional Research, conducting research on human subjects in association with the University, including research for dissertations, master's theses or other studies, must have IRB approval prior to data collection. Procedures for requesting IRB approval can be found in the *IRB Policy and Procedures Manual*. The manual and IRB Application are available on Library page of the Amridge University website. Candidates must document having received training in protecting human subjects and must submit documentation of the completion of such training along with the IRB Application. Once the completed, the candidate must submit his or her IRB Application to his Dissertation Chairperson for approval. The IRB Application cannot be submitted to the Amridge University IRB until it has been approved by the candidate's

Dissertation Committee. The candidate and his Dissertation Chairperson will receive an electronic letter from the IRB Chairperson acknowledging approval of the IRB Application.

The Amridge University IRB is typically able to review an application and provide a response within 14 calendar days. However, the process may take considerably longer considering the nature and complexity of a proposed study.

Data collection cannot begin prior to IRB Approval.

If the research investigator (candidate in this case) and his or her Chairperson determine that the research plan does not involve human subjects, the research investigator may complete the *IRB FORM 2- Request for IRB Approval of a Research Plan that does not include Human Subjects* (see page 16 of the *IRB Policy and Procedures Manual*) and submit to the IRB as instructed on the form.

MILESTONE #4 – FINAL DISSERTATION MANUSCRIPT

Once all data are collected, the major elements missing are Chapters 4 and 5. The Final Manuscript includes the findings from the analysis, recommendations for future research, and practical applications. In order to limit unnecessary redundancy, Chapter 4 should be clearly reserved for presenting results, and Chapter 5 should contain an evaluation of those results.

The presentation of data in Chapter 4 should be succinct, relevant, and flow logically and smoothly. For qualitative studies, the research questions should be used to organize and guide the presentation of the findings. For quantitative studies, hypotheses should be used to organize findings.

The overarching goal of Chapter 5 is to draw logical conclusions that are supported with the research findings. Very important: the student should avoid drawing conclusions that are beyond the scope of the study results. How the study fits into the knowledge base within the field should be discussed along with the impact of your results and what further information needs to be known.

MILESTONE #5 – THE ORAL DEFENSE

The candidate must successfully defend his or her dissertation before an examining committee either online or on campus in Montgomery, AL. During the defense, the candidate should be prepared to answer questions concerning the study's method, implications, and relevance to the field.

SUBMITTING DISSERTATIONS TO THE LIBRARY

The Dissertation Committee Chairperson is responsible for submitting the student's Final Dissertation Manuscript to the Library electronically (email to library@amridgeuniversity.edu). Note: the Library does not accept submissions directly from the student.

The electronic file containing the Final Dissertation Manuscript must include (a) the Committee Approval page and (b) the Circulation Agreement page. Both are to be left **UNSIGNED** in the electronic copy.

Upon receipt of the electronic file, the Library will print three copies on archival quality paper.

Once printed, the 3 copies of the Committee Approval page are mailed to each member of the dissertation committee for signatures, and the 3 copies of the Circulation Agreement page are mailed to the student for his or her signature. Address labels, return postage, and detailed mailing instructions are provided.

Upon receipt of the signed Committee Approval page and the Circulation Agreement page, the Library ships all 3 copies of the Final Dissertation Manuscript to a library bindery.

It takes approximately 4 – 6 weeks for the bindery to return the bound dissertation volumes back to the University Library. One bound volume of the Final Dissertation Manuscript is mailed to the student, and the other copies are retained by the Library.

All questions concerning these procedures should be directed to:

Mr. Terence Sheridan
Head Librarian
(334) 387-7541
terencesheridan@amridgeuniversity.edu

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