

Guidelines for Writing a Dissertation**

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I. Introduction:

A dissertation, as defined in a dictionary, is “a treatise advancing a new point of view resulting from research usually a requirement for an advanced academic degree.” Thus defined, a dissertation has to consist of “a new point of view” and such a view must be substantiated by data or facts. These data and facts can be obtained from research which may employ either qualitative or quantitative methods covering such techniques as experimental study, questionnaire, interview, using available data from various sources and observation. Research technique, as discussed, has been extensively explored in various texts and it will not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that knowledge of research technique is a sine qua non of a dissertation.

The focus of the present undertaking is to explicate the way a dissertation is to be written. It has to be pointed out that a dissertation, as it is defined above, must have a new point of view. The new point of view is none other than a “thesis” or a core argument. A thesis, as defined by a dictionary, is “an unproved statement put forward as a premise in an argument.” Based upon the above, it can be seen that a thesis is an argument that remains unproven; it must be researched repeatedly until it cannot be disproved in order to be qualified as a “theory.” Thus the first step toward more research uses the thesis as a “premise”. A premise is the first step toward eventual conclusion following sufficient confirmatory research, in brief, “proved means cannot be disproved.” A thesis is thus the core of a dissertation which facilitates significant the growth of knowledge along the Hegelian dialectic process of “thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis.” Thesis is a premise which is open to be challenged by an opposite thesis or anti-thesis. Finer points of both theses may combine to become another thesis as in the synthesis process. A synthesis is a new thesis which is again open to be disproved by another thesis or anti-thesis and the process will proceed in a cyclical fashion. Knowledge has been advanced by using this process. Along a similar vein, Karl

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Marx took Hegel's argument to turn it into dialectic materialism but this is not relevant to the current discussion.

A dissertation by definition must contain a new point of view or a thesis. It is not just a collection of data based on an established conceptual framework; by itself data cannot lead to the advancement of a new point of view. Rather, a dissertation is a piece of treatise which is well thought out and well-conceived based upon serious pondering of the background knowledge of the subject matter. In forming a dissertation, there must be an investigation of the existing body of knowledge on the subject matter or the discipline including, most notably, the weaknesses of the subject matter. The weaknesses will serve as the focal point which the doctorate student can come up with a proposal to fill the informational gap with an argument and offer it as a hypothesis for research. This hypothesis can become a new view point or a thesis in the dissertation. This can come about as a hypothesis or "below thesis", which has to be substantiated with data collected from a methodologically correct research project. The objective is to prove initially the hypothesis until the word hypo is dropped and becomes a thesis.

So, a dissertation must contain a thesis. The doctoral student should remember that while writing his or her dissertation, the question encountered endlessly will be: "What is your thesis?" Regrettably, many dissertations written as part of the requirements of a doctorate degree offer no thesis. The common phenomenon in many educational institutes in Thailand is that the first three chapters, consisting of the statement of the problem, review of literature and previous studies, and the conceptual framework are the same for almost every student. The only difference is the data collected is from different samples from different locales. As it turns out, most dissertations are not dissertations, as defined, but are just regular research projects with new data but lack a new point of view or "thesis" which is the foundation of theoretical advancement. As a result, the dissertations contain just raw data.

The data is presented in tables with impressive figures supported by statistical methods and correlation, but there is no analysis whatsoever, save the presentation of figures. There is no thesis and hence there is no novel contribution to the body of knowledge of the subject matter, as is expected of a doctorate student. The contribution is just new raw data. The first three chapters, most notably the conceptual framework, are usually copied from the dissertation supervisor who graduated by writing a dissertation in the same way the students did, effectively following the same process as discussed. This is a form of plagiarism. In many cases, the knowledge of the instructors is confined only to the three chapters; that much the instructors can impart to their students. It has thus turned out to become a process of reproducing new doctorate degree holders by the limited knowledge and the plagiarized method of writing a sham dissertation which lacks the originality and academic characteristics of a respectable dissertation with a proved thesis.

The objective of this composition is to point the problems of doctorate degree programs and the low quality of dissertations which are supposedly the treatise to qualify a student for the prestigious academic title of Dr. or doctor.

It is to be noted here that with “no new conceptual framework” there can be “no new thesis”, just raw data.

II. A dissertation for a doctorate degree

Education follows a pattern of gradual advancement from kindergarten to primary school and then secondary school, usually taking 12-14 years. After secondary school, approximately four years of university study are required for a bachelor’s degree. Following the bachelor’s degree, those inclined can pursue a master’s degree; this course of study takes one or more years. After a master’s degree, one may further study one of many disciplines for a doctorate degree (Ph.D.) and, in turn, receive the title Dr.

To obtain a doctorate degree, one may have to take some required courses; some systems might not have the above requirement. After the required courses, the student has to pass a general examination known as a qualifying exam, a comprehensive exam, or something similar. This is to make sure that the individual is ready for a dissertation. The qualifying exam is designed to test whether the individual has the required knowledge and can create, research, and defend a dissertation. This means that the researcher must have knowledge of research techniques and the necessary tools, such as statistics, to present a cogent analysis to prove the thesis. The process is designed to make sure that:

1. The individual has the body of knowledge of the subject matter or the discipline.
2. The individual can contribute to the knowledge of the subject matter or the discipline. They are able to create new knowledge by presenting a new point of view or thesis in the treatise known as the dissertation.
3. To make his or her thesis based upon a hypothesis (in the case of quantitative study) or asking a relevant question (in the case of qualitative study). The individual has to substantiate the argument advanced in a hypothesis with data collected with an appropriate research methodology or technique.

In so doing, the individual demonstrates to the committee who supervises his or her dissertation the following:

First, the individual has acquired the body of knowledge of the subject matter and is ready to come up with new knowledge or with a new view point of in their field of study. This new view point serves as a premise known as a thesis. Before the individual can do that, they must undertake intensive study and have a thorough understanding of the discipline in

order to be knowledgeable enough to fill in the gap of knowledge by coming up with a tentative argument, known as a hypothesis, or by asking a relevant question regarding the subject matter. For this, the individual has to present the objective in the “Statement of the Problem,” in which a display of knowledge is presented. Also, a tentative premise or hypothesis is also proposed for substantiation by data collection by research techniques appropriate for the subject matter.

Second, the individual then has to present his studies of the literature on the subject in a foreign language, such as English, and the native language. This is to show that the individual has done enough studies by reading books, journals and other documents and is well equipped with knowledge of the subject matter. Apart from the review on literature, the individual must also show that they have conducted a thorough survey of research works by scholars on the subject matter in which the individual is going to present a counter argument or a new thesis.

The individual must selectively discuss the specific works above that will be used for the study in the dissertation. All these works will also have to be used for the analysis and discussions of the collected data, the hypothesis, and eventually the thesis. Arguments supportive of the findings will be highlighted to lend weight to the assertion; those that contradict the findings have to be acknowledged and explained to justify their dismissal. This is performed in order to strengthen the proposed hypothesis by presenting convincing arguments and supporting arguments in the relevant literature and research works of others.

Third, the proposed argument or the objective of the dissertation has to be summarized in the conceptual framework or theoretical framework which, in essence, means “what and how to go about the study.” In other words, it is like “what is to be done.” It has to be a well-thought process not just something popping up. In the conceptual framework, theories and other theses and findings may be quoted if they are used in support of the conceptual framework. Diagrams, such as those involving the independent variable and dependent variables, may be presented.

Fourth, following the conceptual framework, the research process has to be delineated to show how data will be collected and with what method, such as in-depth interview or by observation and what not. Sample size and the relevant locale will be specified. Statistic technique such as regression analysis, chi-square, etc., will be specified.

Fifth, there will be a presentation of the data collected with tables and statistical techniques to prove the reliability and validity of the findings. The most important thing to take note of here is that presentation of tables and description of figures are nothing but sheer presentation of raw data; this is not sufficient. This is the common flaw of many dissertations which are full of raw data and tables but no analysis or critical comments. The right method

is that the data has to be presented and analyzed to render support to the hypothesis or hypotheses. But of most importance, the analysis has to be related to the selected pieces of the reviewed literature and research works discussed in the second topic above. Many dissertations will contain just a pool of data and tables with no analysis, avoiding mention of the reviewed literature and previous studies entirely. Regrettably, this has been the case of many dissertations in many educational institutes in this country.

Sixth, there will be a chapter to assert the thesis which is the focus of the dissertation. However, some comments and suggestions regarding the study may be given. This will depend on specific dissertations. Important supplementary findings and statistics may also be presented. Obstacles and problems faced during data collection may be discussed. Suggestions or caveats for future researchers may be made. The following two items are presented as examples.

A. The weaknesses of the dissertation and research with suggestions for further studies such as samples to cover more grounds, factors which were missing in the study, etc.

B. Policy recommendations such as for improvement or rectification of the problems encountered.

Seventh, there will be a summary and conclusion of the dissertation. The summary is a wrapping up of what has been done and what has been found. The conclusion can proceed further for academic advancement and or for policy formulation as an expansion of the sixth part, which has already been discussed.

Eighth, the bibliography has to follow the rules established by the specific institute or educational system of a particular country. One thing to make sure of is to refrain from putting in books which the researcher is known for not having the capacity to use such as a book in French; it is commonly known that the researcher cannot even read English, let alone other foreign language. What is worse than the crime of stealing is plagiarism and “perjury”. It will destroy the credibility of the person who presented the dissertation for the prestigious title of Dr.

It is to be pointed out here that a person who is not qualified to hold a doctorate degree but has through some way manipulated to get the prestigious degree and the title will have to realize the negative aspects generated from the perpetration. It will bring about five negative aspects. One, the individual will be ridiculed when he or she talks nonsense, despite possessing the title of doctor. Two, the professor or professors who supervised the dissertation will be questioned as to their morality and professional ethics. Three, the name and honor of the educational institute from where the unqualified doctor graduated will be discredited. Four, the person may cause damage to students, due to their poor qualifications, if he or she has a teaching job. Last, the title doctor will lose its sanctity in society and, to a certain

extent, in academia at large. This perpetration of an unqualified doctorate degree holder can be taken as a cardinal sin in the educational system, and for that matter in the society.

It would be appropriate to be reminded of what Aristotle said:

“Dignity does not consist in having honors but in deserving them.”

Aristotle

III. Problems of Thai Education

The above discussion about dissertations is closely linked to the problems of Thai education. In order to have a good dissertation, as discussed above, the body of knowledge has to be up to date. If educational institutes and instructors cannot catch up with the developments of their discipline, because of the lack of intention to keep abreast of the advancement of knowledge, then the body of knowledge imparted to students will automatically be lagging behind. The problem of the English language can also pose a problem for both instructors and students. They simply cannot read texts or books in English. The translated versions may be out of date and could contain many mistakes. Moreover, these books in the vernacular are usually written in a descriptive style.

With inadequate knowledge or a body of knowledge, which is the basis upon which a cogent thesis by research can be made, the ability of students working toward a doctorate degree to create new knowledge will be jeopardized. So this is the first educational problem faced by Thai educational institutes. The second part of how new knowledge can be created, such as in the case of a dissertation, requires the ability of research to develop critical thinking, analytical thinking and synthetic thinking. Learning by rote practice and the karaoke teaching and learning methods can never lead to the trilogy of critical, analytic and synthetic thinking. Based upon the inadequate body of knowledge and the inability to use critical thinking, analytic and synthetic thinking, the only option left is to present a description of the data collected based upon a limited body of knowledge. Accordingly, many students try to emphasize the research methodology or research techniques as strong points of their dissertation. What good will the two things do for knowledge creation when the body of knowledge is limited and outdated while the data collected is based on poor background knowledge and confined to only a description, with no analysis and synthesis? The whole process is thus a sham.

Education in the form of training is similar a technician who creates an object based on an established pattern. Indeed, the first three chapters of a dissertation are like a model upon which one produces something; it has become a set mold. Education without learning or knowledge without learning leaves much to be desired. With no solid education, development of quality manpower will not be possible. Under this situation, human resources are the key factor for economic growth and social development with the ultimate goal of strong international presence for Thailand. There is an urgent need for educational and, to a certain extent, cultural reform for Thailand to be able to excel in the era of globalization.

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