Editorial

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

Rewriting a Social Science Dissertation Into a Journal Article and Getting it Published

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Abstract

Publishing a journal article based on a social science dissertation establishes the credibility of the author and provides a mechanism for disseminating the results to a much larger audience than is available to the dissertation. However, rewriting into an article suitable for publication is often an intimidating and overwhelming prospect. The present article discusses the aspects of the dissertation that should be maintained in an article, the logistics of writing, as well as information on the review process, the process of peer review and publication, and the role of the journal editor.

Keywords: *publishing, dissertation, social science*

Introduction

Frequent questions I get, as the editor for the *Journal of Social, Behavioral, and Health Sciences* are how to rewrite a dissertation into a journal article and how to get it published. Understanding how journals work behind the scenes is also useful for the new author. First, definition of terms is needed. The doctoral dissertation (may be called a "doctoral thesis," "doctoral project," or "capstone" in some institutions) demonstrates students' abilities to conduct an original piece of empirical research to complete the requirements of doctoral programs (e.g., Ed.D., Ph.D.; Gardner & Barnes, 2014; Paré, 2017). Yet, completing the dissertation is only the first step as a professional; the study needs to be rewritten and published in a professional journal for it to be added to the professional literature. For many individuals, taking the 100–200-page dissertation and reducing it to a 20–30-page article feels so overwhelming that it is never completed. In addition, new authors often perceive the processes involved in becoming published as mysterious and difficult (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Kamler, 2008; Lassig et al., 2013; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2017). This article will be a guide through completing the task of rewriting and the process of publication.

Literature Review

There are several differences between a dissertation and a published journal article. An article based on the project will be much shorter than the original dissertation. While a dissertation is often between 100–200 pages, a manuscript for a journal article is rarely over 30 double-spaced pages. A dissertation must exhaustively review the literature; however, the literature in an article is condensed to only put the study into context; the goal should be to lead the reader to clearly see the need for the study and the gap being addressed. Much of the information in a dissertation is repeated throughout the paper and it can be characterized more as a book, whereas a journal article should be succinct and to the point. Editors and reviewers readily recognize when an article has been hastily converted from a dissertation; careful attention when reformatting the dissertation is likely to increase the manuscript's potential for serious consideration and eventual publication (American Psychological Association [APA], 2019). The basis of a journal article in the social sciences is typically the *APA Manual* (APA, 2020), so use the format it describes. Do check the journal's website for any exceptions it might prefer over the *APA Manual*.

Why Publish?

There are a number of reasons to publish the results from the dissertation study. The full dissertation is available online; however, dissertations are often viewed cautiously by researchers. Members of the dissertation committee are not true peer reviewers in the sense that they also have a stake in the paper (they are more of co-authors). Publishing in a professional journal insures that the study has been peer reviewed, it establishes the author's credibility as an expert in the field (Tribe & Tunariu, 2016), and allows the published article to reach a much wider audience. Getting an article published demonstrates "a range of additional, transferable skills of the author including good time management, confidence in their ideas and knowledge base, and the ability to write coherently and succinctly to a set structure and audience" (Tribe & Tunariu, 2016, p. 2; Williams, 2005). The acceptance rate of professional social science journals tends to be between 10–45% (Björk, 2018); therefore, getting published is itself an achievement. In addition, professional publications strengthen the curriculum vitae and thefore will be an asset when applying for research-related positions.

Choosing a Journal

There are many opinions on how to choose a journal for publication. The commonly cited journals in the dissertation are probably good candidates of venues for the article. Some people suggest going for a top journal, such as with a professional organization; while there is a high probablility of rejection, typically they provide valuable reviews. Other researchers recommend avoiding these journals, as they tend to have a very high rejection rate and a lower-tier journal provides a better opportunity of actual publication. Discussing these issues with experienced researchers, such as the dissertation committee, may be a good idea.

There are two main types of journals, paper versions and open-access journals, both of which publish the articles online when they are accepted. Some journals, which also publish a paper version, may charge authors for immediate online access of their paper. Read the information provided carefully on the journal websites on their Instructions to Authors page. They should indicate whether there are charges for publication and requirements in terms of format, content, and length. Follow their directions carefully. Be very cautious of journals who seek you out directly; they are often predatory, providing no peer review and charging a high fee for publication.

Be aware that you may only submit an article to one journal at a time. If you have the material for multiple articles, be careful that the same data are not used in different articles. A good rule is that if you want to submit an article that was reviewed by Journal A to Journal X, withdraw it from Journal A first.

Beginning to Write

The first step I recommend is to start the writing process over and resist the temptation to just copy sections from the dissertation. With this in mind, do an outline of the project in an article format. Typically, this will be the following:

Cover page (title)
Abstract (check journal requirements—typically 200–250 words). Keywords
Body of paper
(1–2 pages) Introduce the need for the study (why should we care about the topic?)
    (2–5 pages.) Literature review discussing variables
    Method
        Participants
        Materials
        Procedure
    Results
    Discussion
    References

Title

Your title should invite readers to continue reading beyond the first page (Busse & August, 2020; Lang, 2017). I recommend choosing a title different from your dissertation's so that the two papers are not confused in the future. The title should be informative and interesting. APA (2020) recommends that titles be under 12 words; consider describing the independent and dependent variables, the population and setting, the study design, and even the main result in your title. Be sure that the title will be useful for potential readers searching for your topic. Avoid using abbreviations or jargon in your title. Because the focus of the paper can change as you write and revise, it is recommended that you wait until you have finished writing your paper before composing the title (Busse & August, 2020.)

Abstract

The abstract should be written last, as it is a summary of the entire paper. However, just because it is the final step, resist the urge to quickly throw it together. The abstract will be the primary source for readers, with many researchers only reading this section of the paper. A good abstract attracts database searches with keywords, so you need to include relevant search terms and keywords (Silvia, 2015). End your abstract with a statement about the implications of your study (Silvia, 2015). Journals vary a great deal on the length of the abstract they require, the content, and how it is structured. Read the instructions provided by the journal and follow them.

Literature

Reducing the 50–75 pages of Chapter 2, the Literature Review to a few pages of literature review in an article is a very daunting prospect. I suggest beginning by thinking through the key concepts/variables. What does the reader absolutely have to know to understand the study? Then write these down as the beginning of an outline for the article. Typically, it will look something like this:

    Intro
    Theory
    Variable 1
    Variable 2
    Gap in the literature

Your introduction should be approximately three to five paragraphs in length. Begin with a general context, narrowing to the specific focus of the paper. Include five main elements: why your research is important, what is already known about the topic, the "gap" or what is not yet known about the topic, why it is important to learn the new information that your research adds, and the specific research aim(s) that your paper addresses. Your research aim should address the gap you identified. Be sure to add enough background information to enable readers to understand your study (Busse & August, 2020).

With the outline as a map, take each section individually and think about the most important literature that is needed. An exhaustive review is not required, but an understanding of the literature is necessary. It may be helpful to treat each section as a summary of the literature on the topic in the dissertation. Remember, there should not be more than five pages or so of literature, so keep to the essentials and be concise. Make sure every factual statement has one or more citations (Busse & August, 2020).

Do a first draft and let it set for a day or two, and then go back and see if any nonessential sentences can be eliminated. Have someone else read it for coherence: does it make sense to them and does it make an argument for the study? Be sure to end the literature review section with a couple of sentences emphasizing the gap that is being addressed and the purpose of the study. Be sure that your research aim contains essential details like the setting, population/sample, study design, timing, dependent variable, and independent variables. Using such details, the reader should be able to imagine the analysis you have conducted (Busse & August, 2020). Listing the research questions helps the reader know where the study is going.

Methods

The methods section of the dissertation needs to be reduced to just a couple of pages for an article. It is helpful to go to the *APA Manual* (APA, 2020) and read the section on methodology and look at their examples. Reading a recent article from your target journal with similar methodology may also help. Check the instructions from the journal as to whether they have specific requirements in this section. Again, I suggest starting with an outline, which will look something like this:

> Method
>> Participants (or Sample)
>> Materials (or Instruments)
>> Procedure

The method section must provide enough detail that someone else could replicate the study based on the description. Therefore, each section needs to be written in concise detail with justification for the reason that method was used. Note that there are fewer sections than in the dissertation; so, some things will need to be eliminated or limited to a sentence or two, such as a brief mention of the approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB; give approval number); however, to maintain anonymity do not name the specific college or university. It should be added after acceptance by the journal. In a paragraph or two describe any survey instruments you used, with a brief history of its use related to your population. Give previous researchers' Cronbach's alphas (or other reliability test), as well as those for your study. Qualitative researchers may wish to have an appendix with their interview questions. Typically, only surveys or other instruments the researcher specifically designed are given in the appendix.

Results (or Findings)

The results or findings section of the article is taking the dissertation's Chapter 4: Results and reducing the findings to the essentials. Begin the results section by describing the number of participants in the final sample and details such as the number who were approached to participate, the proportion who were eligible and who enrolled, and the number of participants who dropped out (Busse & August, 2020).

It may be helpful to discuss the results through the research questions (e.g., list the research question and then answer it through the data). The results should be unbiased and provide enough detail that others can interpret them. Do not hide results that did not come out as expected. Indicate whether the data violate the assumptions of any statistics that were used. Do not include unnecessary figures and tables. If data are discussed in detail in the text, do not also include a figure or table.

Qualitative Studies

Report the findings in a nonbiased way; explain how the analyses were done, giving appropriate citations for specific analytic methods used. Provide participant quotes to illustrate the themes; treat quotes as examples and do not include all data. It is a good idea to assign pseudonyms (or subject numbers) to participants and briefly provide any relevant information after each quote (e.g., Rose, age 68). Discuss any discrepant cases, and how these were addressed.

Quantitative Studies

Keep the reporting of results non-biased and assume the reader has a professional knowledge of statistics (i.e., do not explain basic concepts, provide formulas, or give citations for common procedures). Be sure to explain how any missing data were handled in the analyses and the percentage of data that were missing.

Discussion

The final text section of the paper is the Discussion and is similar to the dissertation's Chapter 5: Interpretation. In the discussion, evaluate and interpret the results and draw conclusions about them. Emphasize the theoretical or practical consequences of the findings. Be very careful that findings are not misinterpreted or misrepresented (e.g., "the results are clear that older adults...." Were ALL older adults examined? No? Then do not overgeneralize).

Begin the discussion with a clear statement of support or nonsupport for the original hypotheses or gap that was addressed (it can also be structured in terms of the research questions). Relate the findings to the previous literature, how do the results fit in with others' work? The interpretations should consider sources of bias and threats to internal validity. Also, consider limitations or weaknesses of the study. Bring in the theoretical implications of the study; do the results fit with previous theories: why or why not? If not, could the theory be modified to account for the findings? Resolve any unexpected findings, speculate as to why they may have occurred (Silvia, 2015). Discuss any research or practice-related implications. Finally, end with problems that remain unsolved and future areas of research.

References

References and citations should include only the most pertinent references (i.e., theoretically important or recent), rather than providing an exhaustive list of the literature. Only the references cited should be included in the reference list. Citation of reviews and meta-analyses can guide interested readers to the broader literature while providing an economical way of referencing prior studies (APA, 2019).

Rewriting and Polishing

Once a draft of the article is complete, it is time to begin the rewriting and polishing phase. Everyone must do it, including very experienced writers; accept that rewriting is part of the process. Where to start? I suggest reading through the draft in full, make notes (I use track changes) and mark areas that are not complete, that may not be clear to someone reading it for the first time, or that need more support with citations. Rework the identified problem areas and then start at the beginning and read each sentence aloud: is there a way to make

it clearer, more concise? Picture someone who knows nothing about the topic reading it, would they understand each sentence? Have any terms that might be considered jargon been explained? Have acronyms been spelled out the first time used? Review all pronouns (they, he, she, and it): is it clear to whom or what the pronouns are referring? Check plurals versus possessives: plurals (e.g., "girls") do not have an apostrophe, while possessives do have an apostrophe (e.g., "the girl's bike;" "the girls' bikes"). The journal's copyeditor, Laura McGowan, adds that writers should avoid passive voice, as using active voice makes for stronger, clearer writing. (The bike was fixed by Nita vs. Nita fixed the bike; The results were tested using…. vs. We tested the resulting using….) Also, articles appear more credible if the author carefully checks the reference list format in APA. If you cite an unpublished dissertation is that correctly indicated? If you cite a web page, have you formatted that appropriately? Have you provided DOIs with verified links in your reference list?

Know a former English major or someone who is a great writer? If so, ask them to read through the paper and offer suggestions (be sure to thank them for their assistance in the author notes when the paper is published). Check the results section's APA format. Statistics should be written in very specific ways, and the *APA Manual* (2020) lays out how they should be done correctly. If tables or figures are included, read the sections on these in the *APA Manual* (2020), not only on how to present them but also when to use them.

Print out the references, then go through the paper crossing off each time the reference is cited. They should come out even. If the citation has 3 or more authors (e.g., Smith, Jones, & Johnson, 2015), APA 7 requires that it should be written as "et al." (e.g., Smith et al., 2015).

Updating the Literature

When rewriting the dissertation into an article for publication, be sure that the literature is updated. With the internet, research moves quickly these days, and the paper needs to be published with the most current thinking. Authors often forget to check on literature related to theory, which can get them into trouble.

Additional Writing Resources
Some additional resources for rewriting the dissertation into an article:

American Psychological Association (2019). *APA Style: Adapting a Dissertation or Thesis into a Journal Article*. https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/research-publication/dissertation-thesis?_ga=2.48107879.1378513491.1645636405-1568894374.1644787895

Bowen, G. A. (2010). From qualitative dissertation to quality articles: Seven lessons learned. *Qualitative Report*, *15*(4), 864–879.

Staller, K. M. (2019). From dissertation to published article: Advice from an editor. *Qualitative Social Work*, *18*(6), 897–904.

Tribe, R., & Tunariu, A. (2016). Turning your dissertation into a publishable journal article. *Counselling Psychology Review, 31*(1), 50–58.

Submitting to a Journal

When all of the revisions and polishing have been completed, it is time to submit to the journal. Be sure to check once more that all journal instructions for authors have been followed. Typically, an anonymous version of the paper is submitted through the journal website with a cover page with only the title listed. A cover letter

should also be written and submitted which includes a summary of the paper and all authors' names, emails, and affiliations.

Behind the Scenes at the Journal

Once the article has been submitted to the journal website typically an editor checks it for compliance with the journal instructions and for anonymity; it may then be run through plagiarism software. If sections of the paper were directly copied from the dissertation, the plagiarism software will pick it up, and this could result in the paper being rejected or the author being asked to rewrite. Once these initial items are completed, an editor or associate editor is assigned who will select several peer reviewers to anonymously review the paper. The reviewers will be experts in the field of study and will critique the contents, methods, and interpretation of the results. Typically, this is a "double-blind" process, meaning that neither the author nor the reviewer is told who the other is; only the editor knows their identities. This process is done to reduce any biases. The peer review procedure could take anywhere from a few weeks to several months.

Eventually the editor will send the author the comments from the peer reviewers and make a preliminary decision on the status of the paper. It may be rejected, meaning the author may not resubmit it to that journal. The author may be told that it may be revised and resubmitted or it may be accepted (which is rare on a first review). If revisions are suggested, the editor will probably give a deadline, which should be followed.

The reviewers' comments should be addressed carefully and professionally. I suggest creating a list of all the reviewer comments and indicate how each one was handled. The author can disagree with a comment but needs to provide a rationale for it. This list should be submitted with the revision.

Dealing with Rejection

Your paper may be rejected for a variety of reasons, such as it may not fit the journal's scope or area of interest, the writing may not be at a level expected by the journal, or the reviewers may identify flaws in the research design. While this can be hard on the ego, it is better to treat this as a learning experience: to learn to write as a professional takes time and patience and often requires multiple iterations.

I suggest reading through the reviewers' comments and then set it aside for a few days. Go back and carefully read the comments and put together a plan. If it was sent to an inappropriate journal, do some research, and find one that fits better. If writing issues were the problem, consider working with your former committee members or one of your former professors on the writing (it would be appropriate to offer that they be a second author for their work). If it is the research design that was at fault, it is worth discussing it with some experienced researchers; there may be a way to salvage the study. Rewrite and resubmit it to a different journal, following the procedures outlined above.

Communicating With Editors

Authors are welcome to send emails to editors about whether a particular topic is appropriate to the journal. The author can also ask for assistance in interpreting reviewer comments; the editor may work as an intermediary between the author and reviewer to get clarification. It is not appropriate to argue with an editor about their decision. An author may always take the article to a different journal; if so, be sure to formally withdraw the current article from consideration.

Conclusion

Rewriting the dissertation into an article in a professional journal is a necessary step in professional development. Keeping the study on a shelf does not add to the literature and means the results are not available for further development. Rewriting does take time and should be done carefully through following the instructions provided by the journal. I find, as an author, it often helps to remember that the worst that can happen is the journal may say no. If this happens, the peer reviews can be used to revise and resubmit to a different journal.

Additional Publishing Resources

American Psychological Association (2020). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th Edition. APA.

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