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Mary Garofalo

Kean University, mgarofal@kean.edu

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Recommended Citation

Garofalo, Mary, "The Dissertation Proposal Process to Dissertation Defense: A Guide for Students" (2022). *General Research*. 11.

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The Dissertation Proposal Process to Dissertation Defense: A Guide for Students
Mary A. Garofalo, Ph.D.- Research Lead, NTLC
Kean University

Once you have finished your coursework, which has prepared you for designing and implementing your study, you need to prepare for your dissertation proposal and subsequent defense of said proposal. This may feel like a daunting task, as more doctoral programs prepare you with coursework, and then you are required to complete a study (from design, to implementation, to writing it up). This is your first autonomous task as you transition from doctoral student to doctoral candidate.

First things, first

You have most likely taken courses or had professors whom you have connected with. The content of the coursework, the focus of the class, and the methods or specialty that the professors have can help you figure out what you want to study, how you want to study it, and who you would like to be on your dissertation committee (Abramson, 2015; Herrington et.al, 2007). For your dissertation committee, you should have a mentor who will be your chair, and two external readers. All committee members must have terminal degrees and must be affiliated with your content/ discipline and/ or methodology. Standard practice is to choose your mentor as you are moving into the last semester of coursework. Each program has its own norms of how you go about asking a faculty member to be your mentor, and subsequently, how to ask the other two members of your dissertation committee.

Your mentor will be the proverbial “coach” of your dissertation process and will advise you on everything from process, to writing, and to giving you the go-ahead to move from one stage of the process to the next. Your relationship with your mentor is exactly that, mentor and apprentice. You won’t like everything that your mentor says or tasks you with, but you have to trust them- because they hold the keys to your successful defense. They have guided students across the dissertation finish line and are an integral part of your learning experience.

After you choose your mentor, you will begin the process of putting together your proposal. You will present your ideas to your mentor, and they will give you feedback on the quality and accessibility of your topic, plausibility of your research goals, and the steps required of you to complete your study. The next step is to complete Chapters 1, 2, and 3 (Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology) of your dissertation for your mentor's approval. After each chapter, you will send it to your mentor to review, edit, and critique. N.B. Each chapter will go through several iterations of edits. Do not be discouraged. Your mentor’s job is to make sure you are in shape to present your ideas and research design and ultimately pass your dissertation defense.

Tips: You should be able to draw on your previous coursework to complete Chapters 1-3 for your proposal defense. Understand that in the process, you will complete the following in order:

1. Complete the [CITI training modules](#) and print out the certification.
2. Write your Chapters 1-3 for proposal defense.
3. Get [IRB pre-approval](#) and other steps for approval from the research site.
4. Gain approval from your mentor to send Chapters 1-3 to two other committee members that have been mutually agreed upon.
5. Receive feedback from all members of your Chapters 1-3.
6. Make edits from all three members of your committee.
7. Present your proposal to the committee with IRB pre-approval completed and site approval obtained.
8. Pass your proposal defense and get the necessary forms signed.
9. Apply to [IRB for the official approval](#) of your research.

IRB

The IRB process can be a bit confusing. That is why your mentor will require you to submit a pre-IRB application to make sure that you are inline with all the steps and processes for compliance. Kean University's IRB website has all of the forms and training modules you need to complete your application for approval. N.B. There are different deadlines to have your applications in to IRB during the year. If you miss a deadline, you will have to wait until the next deadline in order to submit your application and receive a ruling from the IRB. This could delay your research, so you want to be completely aware of each deadline and the process by which you submit your proposed research. See deadlines for [IRB applications for the 2022-2023 academic year](#) as an example.

There is a chance that you may have to resubmit your IRB application more than once to gain approval for your study. The IRB will direct you to change, clarify, modify, or exclude any information that they deem important for the approval. Do not be discouraged. Follow the edits, suggestions, and directions and resubmit for the next deadline. Once you have gotten IRB approval, you may start conducting your study. This is the exciting part!

Collecting Data, Analyzing Data, and Writing it Up

During the data collecting phase, you are going to need to come up with ways to stay organized and keep the data secure. No matter what you are studying, you are completely in charge of how the data will be dealt with. Obviously, your methodology has been approved by your committee and IRB, so you must not deviate from the process by which you outlined your collection, analysis, and storage of the data.

The analysis of the data is where all of the magic happens. You have designed this study, now you see your design come to life. Often there will be results that take you by surprise, as you gain insights you could not conceptualize into the field you are studying. Leave room for deviation from your preconceived ideas of how the results will appear. This is the significance of research- discovering something novel in a discipline that is important to you.

Writing it up may sound easier than it actually is. Writing up Chapters 4-5 (results and conclusions) will require you to present your findings, framed by the theoretical/ conceptual lens, and to discuss the significance within the broader context of your discipline, essentially answering the question, “what is the significance of this study?” (Abramson, 2015). Once again, you need your mentor’s edits, commentary, and critique. After you and your mentor have agreed that Chapters 4-5 are in good shape, then you need to send the entire dissertation (Chapters 1-5) to your committee for last rounds of edits (Locke et al., 2013; Talab, 2008). N.B. Your Chapters 1-3 will need to be revamped to be sure they are in line with your results and conclusion. Take all the notes and suggestions from your committee as they are literally telling you what they need your dissertation to state and prove so that you will pass your dissertation defense. It may feel, at times, like you are Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, especially during the many rounds of edits required for each chapter. Remember, you are almost there. PERSIST!!!

Setting the date

Once you have completed ALL of the rounds of edits for the entire dissertation and have gotten approval from your mentor and committee members, you can schedule your dissertation date. You do this with your mentor, and they clear it with your committee. Good News! Your mentor will not allow you to set your dissertation defense date without having confidence that you are in good shape to pass the defense. Once the date has been set, your job is to prepare a presentation that proves the quality, methods, findings, implications, and significance of your study (Abramson, 2015). Your mentor will approve your presentation before your defense. Once your presentation has been approved and the date has been set, your job is to practice, practice, practice.

The Day of the defense

All of your hard work and perseverance over the last several years has led you to this day. You are ready! Dress professionally. Get to the space early so you can set up and make sure there are no technological issues. Bring water and remember to breathe. Speak slowly, clearly, and with enthusiasm. Once you finish your presentation, you will be asked to leave the room, as your committee deliberates. They will call you back into the room to let you know the verdict. Believe in your brilliance! Possible outcome for your dissertation defense:

1. Pass.
2. Pass with major revisions.
3. Pass with minor revisions.
4. Fail.

Almost no one passes their dissertation defense with NO REVISIONS. Also, your mentor will not schedule your defense unless they believe that you will PASS. Therefore, mentally prepare yourself for passing with major or minor revisions. Upon hearing the results, provided you passed- YOU ARE OFFICIALLY a DR.!!!!!!! Congratulations! Only about 2% of the U.S. population holds a doctorate (Herrington et al., 2007; Locke et al., 2013)! You should be enormously proud!

After the defense

You have a few weeks to make the revisions that are required after your defense, whether major or minor. Your mentor will guide you through the revisions. Additionally, it would be important to have your dissertation copy-edited, as it will be published in the university dissertation repository and can be accessed by anyone doing research in your content area (yes, you will be cited in some other student's reference page- how exciting). Ask other peers who have recently completed their defense where they found someone to copy-edit their dissertation for publication. There may be a fee to have someone copy-edit your dissertation defense. If you can afford it, it would be worth someone with the skills and fresh eyes to comb through your dissertation to make sure it is ready to be published.

You will have the opportunity to order your own, leather-bound copy of your dissertation, for a fee. Additionally, you will be able to track the metrics of your research and see how often it has been downloaded and cited in published materials. You are officially an expert in your discipline. Welcome to the summit!

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