

Dissertation Formatting Guidelines

The questions below apply to doctoral dissertations (Ph.D.), records of study (Ed.D.) and master's theses. To facilitate reading, the term "dissertation" will be used consistently throughout the text to mean any of the various documents (records of study, dissertations or theses).

FAQ #1: How does one choose the most appropriate format for a dissertation?

The decision about which format is most appropriate should be made jointly by you and the chair of your committee. Special consideration should be given to:

- The fit of your topic to the format
- The academic field's view of the format
- The practical considerations regarding the (job) positions you wish to apply for when you finish your training (academia or private sector).

FAQ #2: I have heard of an alternative to the traditional dissertation format. What is this alternative?

The College of Education and Human Development accepts two choices of formats for the Ph.D. dissertation and for the Ed.D. record of study:

- Traditional Format
- Journal Article Format

FAQ #3: What does the Traditional Format look like?

The Traditional Format consists of five chapters organized, most commonly, in the following sequence:

- Chapter 1 - Introduction
- Chapter 2 - Literature Review
- Chapter 3 - Methods
- Chapter 4 - Results
- Chapter 5 - Conclusions/Discussion
- References
- Appendices

In this format, the student describes and discusses a focal research question/topic and the steps undertaken to answer that specific question. When the focal question comprises sub-questions, all questions (focal and sub-) are addressed in tandem in the dissertation reporting. For instance, the methods chapter describes all methods

employed to collect and analyze data to answer the focal question as well as the sub-questions even if different data sets are employed.

The number of chapters may vary according to disciplinary fields and/or methodological approaches. At times, historical studies or critical analyses may comprise seven or eight chapters. The five-chapter format, however, has been the most common within schools/colleges of education.

FAQ #4: What does the Journal Article Format look like?

The Journal Article Format allows the presentation of dissertation research in the format of...

- Journal manuscripts published during a candidate's doctoral training
- Journal manuscripts submitted for publication during a candidate's doctoral training
- Journal manuscripts to be submitted for publication immediately following dissertation defense proceedings

The doctoral candidate decides, in agreement with his/her dissertation committee and chair, on the number of articles suitable for a particular dissertation report. When collating already-published manuscripts for a dissertation report, it is common to have a minimum of three articles form the body of the dissertation text. The decision regarding the number of manuscripts is inseparably tied to the number and types of research questions being posed.

The Journal Article Format dissertation contains the following sections:

- Chapter 1 - Introduction
- Chapter 2 - Manuscript # 1
- Chapter 3 - Manuscript # 2
- Chapter 4 - Manuscript # 3
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- Chapter X - Conclusion
- References
- Appendices

FAQ #5: What does the final product look like in each of the formats?

[Click here](#) to see a side-by-side comparison of the two formats.

FAQ #6: What is the purpose of the Introduction chapter in the Journal Article Format?

- It describes the broad research question/topic being investigated

- It presents the over-arching goal of the study (of the individual research reports, considered in tandem) as well as the specific objectives of each individual study report (each 'piece')
- It functions as the chord that weaves the various manuscripts together and describes, for the reader, their 'collective meaning' and 'combined contribution' to the field
- It allows the reader to connect the various manuscripts in the dissertation in a logical and meaningful manner
- Without the introduction, a Journal Article Formatted dissertation would read as a 'pile of articles,' apparently related but not intimately linked

FAQ #7: What is the purpose of the Conclusion chapter in the Journal Article Format?

- The conclusion chapter 'ties' everything together
- The conclusion chapter focuses, as does the introduction chapter, on helping the reader see how the various manuscripts, taken together, make a contribution to a particular field
- The conclusion chapter may present/discuss research imperatives, or knowledge gaps, not visible when each manuscript is considered individually

FAQ #8: Does the CEHD have a required or preferred format?

No. The CEHD believes having alternatives provides much-needed flexibility for doctoral candidates, yet the goal remains that of excellence in education and human development research. The format for disseminating such research should reflect the best choice, the best "match" for the type of study being conducted.

FAQ #9: My dissertation chair and my committee have no experience working with the Journal Article Format. What should I do?

Not all faculty members have experienced using this format. Nonetheless, faculty who wish to learn about the format may do so, through the CEHD, and by working collaboratively with other faculty who have directed Journal Article Format dissertations. Models are available and experienced faculty can mentor those desiring to master this approach.

If your chair/committee members do not feel comfortable advising a dissertation in this format, you have two options:

1. to adapt your research question and project to the Traditional Format, knowing that your chair and committee members will be able to contribute more successfully to this format, given their experience and expertise
2. to change chairs or committee members and seek out faculty who do have experience with the Journal Article Format

FAQ #10: What are the strengths and limitations of each format?

Traditional Format Strengths

Some scholars argue the Traditional Format mirrors the scientific process itself: identifying and stating a problem and hypotheses, situating the problem within the current scientific dialogue, developing a plan to collect and analyze data, and conducting the analysis and critical interpretation of the findings.

Many studies have a single focal question that does not lend itself, easily, to reporting in separate manuscripts. In this case, the traditional format is well-suited for reporting on a single study.

Traditional Format Weaknesses

The amount of rewriting and reshaping required to publish a traditionally formatted dissertation as journal article(s) or a book is the major drawback. The rewriting demands, coupled with recently graduated students' new professional roles, oftentimes preclude publication of the dissertation.

"Thus, most theses [and dissertations] are not submitted for publication. Ironically, the time-honored, scholarly style of the conventional thesis/dissertation actually acts as an impediment to one of the integral parts of the research process, which is the dissemination of the results" (Thomas, Nelson, & Magill, 1986, p. 118).

Recently, the availability of dissertations on the Internet has minimized the problem of disseminating dissertation findings through publication (as dissertations become more widely available). Nevertheless, distribution of the dissertation through electronic means does not usually carry the same weight as refereed publications do. Authors, therefore, are often eager to enhance their chances of 'getting published.'

Journal Article Format Strengths

- Allows the candidate to write in a format with which he/she is familiar. As the currency in most research-intensive/extensive universities is refereed journal publications, the sooner doctoral students learn to master this format for communicating their inquiry, the easier it will be to become productive academics.
- Increases the odds that the dissertation (or portions of the dissertation) will be published soon after defense/completion (and, oftentimes, prior to defense).

Journal Article Format Weaknesses

- The Journal Article Format is inappropriate for some types of research questions and topics that do not involve multiple experiments, various data sets, or different types of analyses.
- The Journal Article Format follows specific journals' formatting and word/page limitations. Oftentimes, authors are not allowed to provide as much detail as they would be able to in a Traditional Format. However, such weakness can be compensated by attaching appendices to the dissertation text, with reviews of the literature, methods or procedures, and analytical techniques, written in elaborate detail for committee members and other interested scholars.
- The Journal Article Format requires careful consideration of authorship and copyright issues (see these topics addressed in other FAQs).

FAQ #11: What type of study is best-suited for the Journal Article Format?

- A study involving more than one focal/substantial research question. The questions are related, but each can 'stand alone' and have its own research report.
- A study involving mixed methods (e.g., qualitative and quantitative) for which the author does not want to aggregate findings (i.e., wishes to report findings separately for each approach/method).
- A study involving more than one experiment.

In summary, studies requiring more than one journal article to be fully described because they contain multiple dimensions, data sets, sub-questions, or analyses are best in the journal article format. Determining whether a study is suited for the Journal Article Format requires careful consultation with the dissertation chair and committee members.

FAQ #12: When should I decide which format I will use for my dissertation/record of study?

- As early as possible because the reporting format and the research design oftentimes go hand-in-hand.
- The decisions regarding format should not drive the research, however. It is not recommended that a doctoral student choose the format first, then attempt to 'fit' his/her research question into that format. The format choice should follow the development and framing of the research question(s).

FAQ #13: Can I change my mind concerning the format I chose?

Yes. Keep in mind, however, that changing from one format to another requires reorganizing one's thinking about the reporting of the study. It can be challenging to move from one format to another but not impossible.

FAQ #14: Does the Journal Article Format generate redundancy?

It may. For instance, portions of the literature review may need to be cited in the various articles because it delineates the entire historical background of the study's focal topic.

Redundancy can be carefully avoided by citing one's own work. For instance, in a literature review, the author might mention, "For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see So-and-So (candidate's name and year of publication)." At the very least, you can cite your own dissertation (if no publications are yet available for referencing).

Avoid self-plagiarism. Authors self-plagiarize when they "reuse their own previously written work or data in a 'new' written product without letting the reader know that this material has appeared elsewhere."

FAQ #15: May I publish a 'piece' of my dissertation before the defense?

- Yes. More than one article may have been published prior to the defense.
- The main or primary author of that 'piece' must be you, the doctoral candidate.
- If the article has co-authors, the doctoral candidate must be the primary author, and the role(s) of the co-authors should be clearly outlined for the dissertation committee.
- You must request copyright permission from the publishing journal to include the article in your dissertation.
- If you do not request permission, you will be breaking U.S. copyright laws.
- When asking for permission to include the article in your dissertation, you should notify the journal editor that Texas A&M University 'publishes' (or posts) completed dissertations on the World Wide Web (Internet).
- Make sure you have all copyright permissions before you finalize the proposal and formatting of your dissertation. You may run into copyright peculiarities with your journal and decide it's not worth the trouble to include that specific 'piece' in your dissertation. Consider all of these issues early on in the process.
- The Thesis Office at Texas A&M University recommends you have all the permissions necessary, in case you are utilizing an already-published manuscript, before you submit the final manuscript of your dissertation for approval and graduation.

FAQ #16: If I want to submit a manuscript from my dissertation for publication prior to defense, what happens to authorship?

You, the doctoral candidate, must be the principal author on all dissertation articles (previously published or to be submitted for publication).

Previously published manuscripts may have co-authors, but the role of the co-authors must have been described to (and approved by) all members of the dissertation committee.

FAQ #17: What if journal reviewers want me to make changes to a manuscript I have submitted, but I still haven't defended my dissertation?

Reviewers' comments, suggested changes and your plan for addressing those suggestions should be shared with your dissertation committee members and approved by all of them before you enact the changes.

Changes can be made to the manuscript, as long as the dissertation committee members are in agreement (and are aware) of the changes being made and their rationale.

FAQ #18: What about authorship issues if I plan to submit AFTER defense?

You, the doctoral candidate, should always be the primary author of your own dissertation. Keep this in mind when publishing with your dissertation chair or with members of your dissertation committee.

While having co-authors (who are not members of your committee) is permitted, their role must be clearly specified to the dissertation committee.

Some journals are now asking for a clear explanation, in writing, of each author's contribution to the manuscript (see, for instance, recent issues of the *American Journal of Public Health*). Make sure you can clearly state each author's main contribution without difficulty.

FAQ #19: What is the role of the dissertation chair/advisor regarding co-authorship of manuscripts from dissertations?

When the dissertation chair is co-author with the doctoral candidate on one or more manuscripts:

- If the piece has been previously published, the role of the co-chair must be explained to (and approved by) all members of the dissertation committee.
- If the piece will be submitted upon defense, the co-author must maintain the role of dissertation chair (and not the role of co-author) until the dissertation defense. The work must document the candidate's ability to conduct independent research and should not reflect the chair's contribution as a co-writer or co-author. After defense, the chair may assume a more active, co-author role (as second or third author).
- When issues of co-authorship are unclear, discussions with the candidate's committee members and/or with the department head are recommended.

FAQ #20: Do I need to be careful regarding copyright issues with the Journal Article Format?

Yes. If after you follow the steps outlined below in question # 21 you still have questions or need clarification regarding copyright issues, you should contact Student Conflict Resolution Services at 979-862-7272. They will help you 'navigate' through the copyright issues.

FAQ #21: Regarding copyright issues, what must I do, when I am ready to submit my manuscripts for publication?

Before anything else, check with Texas A&M's Thesis Office. They have an updated list of journals in various fields (literally, thousands of journals) with each journal's decision regarding copyright negotiations. Some journals have given 'blanket approval', so there is no need to mention to the editor of the journal that the manuscript was part of your dissertation. Some journals have imposed serious restrictions and will not allow releasing the dissertation on the Internet if they publish one of your dissertation 'pieces.' This existing list will help you decide where your particular journal stands.

Not all journals are covered on this list or have replied to Texas A&M's request for a disposition, so your particular journal may not be listed. In this case, you have two options:

1. Submit the article and wait for its acceptance. When accepted, you'll need to sign a copyright release form. At that time, contact your journal and explain that your text is part of your dissertation and has already been released on the Internet by Texas A&M.
2. When submitting the manuscript, describe on the submission/cover letter to the editor the status of the manuscript as a piece of your dissertation, which has been posted on the Internet. Better yet, contact the journal, directly and in person, and ask how you should proceed.

The issue - some journals are not familiar with this dissertation format and are not ready to have their manuscripts 'published' both in their journals and on the World Wide Web. Most journals (especially those in the science fields) are very familiar with this format, having dealt with this type of formatting for over two decades.

The strategy - when in doubt, *ask*. Ask the Thesis Office at Texas A&M and ask the journal to which you've submitted. Do not ignore these copyright issues. It is unethical and can be illegal to do so. Student Conflict Resolution Services can also help navigate through the copyright issues (they have an attorney on staff who understands copyright law and can help you understand agreements you are making with the journal).

FAQ #22: Is the Journal Article Format easier than the Traditional Format?

Not at all. Some claim it may be more difficult to conceptualize and to write in this format than in the traditional manner (given the page restrictions journals impose). Candidates writing in the Traditional Format need worry only about satisfying their program's requirements and the dissertation committee members. Candidates writing in a Journal Article Format must consider, alongside their program and committee members, the audience for whom they are writing, the journal reviewers who will scrutinize their work, and the journal editor making final dispositions about the manuscript.

FAQ #23: Is there anything written about the Journal Article Format in Texas A&M's Graduate Catalog?

Yes. On page 32 of the 2007-2008 Graduate Catalogue you will find the following statement:

"Pre-Defense Publication of Thesis or Dissertation Material

A graduate student may publish material that subsequently will be used as part of the thesis, dissertation or record of study provided that he/she notify the Office of Graduate Studies in writing at the time the student submits the paper for publication. The notification should include the article title, the names of authors as they appear on the paper, the name of the journal, and the date of submission.

In addition, a student should be aware of the agreement that is signed when a journal (hard copy or electronic) accepts an article for publication. At that time, the student assigns rights to the journal as publisher. The student must obtain written permission from the copyright holder to include the material in the thesis, dissertation and record of study."