

Academy of Management
Business Policy and Strategy Division
Managing Your Dissertation Workshop
“Managing the Management Dissertation – Proposal, Process and Defending”

Thomas Brush, Purdue University

I. Suppose One could do a Resource Based Topic Selection (Barney, 91)

A. Valuable – Is it interesting?

- 1) Is there a need for this research or is it a “me too” contribution?
- 2) Can you envision an audience that will be anxious to know your results? Do you know why?
 - a) Clash of different research paradigms – unlikely you will settle it.
 - b) Topical or practitioner interest – can these questions be addressed systematically and with theoretical underpinnings?
 - c) Clarification or extension of previous research or testing previous researcher’s assertions.
- 3) What is the right level of risk/reward and expected time of completion for your personal taste and circumstances?

B. Rare

- 1) Is it a new area, or
- 2) If an old area, are you bringing a new perspective, theory or methodology to bear?

C. Imperfectly Imitable

- 1) Is there an unusual match between your capabilities or experience and the topic area?
- 2) Has this theory or methodology not yet been applied to your topic?
- 3) Do you exploit a unique database, combination of databases, or sample?

D. Substitutable

- 1) There may be other approaches to the same general question or topic – are they better/worse? Why?
- 2) Is your approach the best for at least a subset of questions?

II. The Dynamic Capability – The Process of Convergence

A. Recognize your strengths as identified for example in RBV approach above.

B. Use the process to leverage strengths in new ways when confronting barriers in data, topic definition, scope, adviser suggestions, dead ends. Seek flexibility that shows off your strengths in new ways that you didn’t necessarily envision when you started in the topic domain.

C. Often new paths only reveal themselves after considerable work in what turns out to look like a dead end. Be willing to reverse your steps and go down a new path, recognizing that you may see this new path in different ways as a result of your first efforts.

III. Proposal

- A. First round of topic selection not narrow enough! This is an iterative process.
- B. Consider breaking down the general idea into addressable chunks – each with its own topic analysis (Davis and Parker, 1979).¹
- C. Drop some chunks, continue to pursue others as chapters, save some for further research.
- D. What alternative methodologies could you use?
- E. Try scenario analysis when considering potential outcomes.
 - 1) In addition to your intended outcome you could find a relationship of the opposite sign, an insignificant outcome or simply insufficient cases or responses to proceed. What then?
 - 2) What can be done to structure data collection or theoretical development such that competing hypotheses make more than one scenario a successful outcome.

IV. The Day to Day Process

“One of the principles for doing work such as a dissertation is to provide structure for the work. Since structured work generally takes precedence over unstructured work, the management task is to put enough structure into the dissertation activity that it assumes priority over other less important activities.” (Davis and Parker, 1979, p. 104)

(This quote applies to both the use of time and use of ideas. Structured ideas drive out loosely defined ones. Your dissertation evolves by the way you file and structure your ideas.)

- A. Keep a lab book.
- B. Keep a log of decisions that you made and why. Also, log any suggestions and the comments of your committee.

¹ Davis, Gordon and Clyde Parker, *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation*, 1979, Barron’s Educational Series.

- C. Notes from committee meetings and one-on-one meetings can be useful to inform members who were not present.
 - 1) Your minutes (of previous suggestions explored) help direct individual advisers or the group towards a decision.
 - 2) Arranging the next meeting gives you a credible deadline for the next draft (and for comments on the draft) when a meeting time is agreed upon.
 - 3) Manage your committee members by using their time efficiently:
 - a) Identify section on which you would like comments but provide outline for the context.
 - b) Summarize changes you have made since last draft and why.

- D. Depending on personal taste – do whatever it takes to create structure for yourself.
 - 1) Plan out activities for the week.
 - 2) Work regular hours at a specified location.
 - 3) Budget time for writing, library search, discussion with fellow students, and completion of specific tasks. All are essential but each activity can easily digress.

- E. Writing
 - 1) Outline dissertation into chapters and sub-chapters.
 - a) Break writing into incremental parts, each sub-heading for example, that can be re-organized later.
 - b) Sub-headings can be integrated later – this avoids spending too much time on transitions that are later thrown away.
 - 2) Summarize sections and chapters and make sure they are consistent with your outline.

V. Defending, Defending, Defending

- A. By listening to committee members carefully you can usually respond to their concerns and get your committee members more excited about the project.
 - 1) Committee meetings and formal defenses can be more constructive if you have solicited and addressed these concerns in advance with each member.
 - 2) Don't confuse an attempt to get you to recognize limitations and assumptions, i.e. constructive criticism, with rejection.

- B. But also stick up for your position when you think it is important! It is your dissertation and a good committee wants you to call the shots. You have to live with them. Often an adviser will continue to make critical comments on a topic and suggest new directions until they see conviction from you.

- C. The system is designed for criticism, not compliments – if they agree to meet again you've done well!