



WRITING A CHAPTER IN A LARGER DOCUMENT

So, you finished all the course work and research, and now you are ready to write your dissertation or thesis. Congratulations on reaching this step! Personally, when I started writing my dissertation, I was overwhelmed with the amount of information I needed to communicate and how to organize myself to write this large document efficiently. This guide is just one step-by-step approach to organizing your dissertation or thesis and how to manage writing single chapters that flow as a part of the whole.

Because there is no single approach to writing a dissertation or thesis, trial-and-error is necessary to help you figure it out. It is important to stay organized from the beginning of this writing process, but iteration is also essential. Staying motivated and confident while writing your dissertation/thesis requires flexibility to accept calmly that your original plan for this document may not be exactly how it evolves; this is true for both the whole dissertation/thesis and each individual chapter therein. Still, starting with a clear, organized plan can make it a lot easier when you find the document needs to evolve as you write. I developed the following guide based on my own trial-and-error experience:



While it is only one approach, I hope it will be helpful to other students as they take on the challenges of these larger documents.

Step 1 – Decide Purpose & Audience: Before beginning, it is critical to know the purpose and audience for your whole dissertation/thesis to help you write efficiently. Knowing your purpose and audience will help



ensure you only write what you need to write. Sometimes it can feel like we could talk about every aspect of our topic. However, at this stage of academic writing, synthesizing robust information concisely for a specific purpose and audience shows our sophistication as academic communicators, as well as our expertise.

Step 2 – Decide Each Chapter Topic: Most dissertations/theses follow a five-chapter format (introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion), but some have more or include individual chapters intended for publication. This step is an important time to decide how many chapters you need and what the topic of each will be. Each chapter should complete one part of your overall research purpose, while cohesively fitting in the larger document.

Step 3 – Outline Each Chapter: To make each individual chapter less overwhelming, it is critical to create an outline. At this step, it is helpful to determine each section and subsection of the chapter, and what you want to accomplish in those sections.

Step 4 – Gather Old Writing: If you are writing your dissertation/thesis, you have likely already written a lot about the topics therein. Go through each section/subsection of the chapter you are working on and pull information from your old papers/research that can be used in that section. You can just copy and paste paragraphs from other papers into your outline for this chapter; remember, however, that your dissertation/thesis should be new and unique writing. Any information taken from old papers should be rewritten and integrated into the final chapter to flow with the whole document cohesively and uniquely.

Step 5 – Do New Research Necessary: Look at the information you have already for the chapter (from Step 4) and see where there are missing pieces in the narrative (e.g., you already have plenty of



information on climate change, but you do not really discuss biodiversity, which your audience is concerned with). Use those missing pieces to conduct specific literature searches to help fill in the blanks. Only research one section/subsection at a time so you do not get overwhelmed. You can take notes on that section/subsection in your outline to help stay organized.

Step 6 – Write Chapter Sections: Using all the information you gathered, draft each section of the chapter individually. It is easy to stray and move onto other parts of the paper, but working one section/subsection at a time can keep you from getting overwhelmed.

Step 7 – Revise Chapter: Read the whole chapter to identify missing information, opportunities for reorganization, and redundancies. When reading the chapter, keep in mind how it fits in the whole dissertation/thesis and how it meets the goal of that specific chapter. Then, revise the chapter to be as clear and concise as possible, using clear transitions and academic language. This is also a great time to seek outside feedback from the Antioch University Virtual Writing Center (free peer feedback) or The Writers Exchange (discounted editing service).

Step 8 – Repeat for Each Chapter: Repeat this process for each chapter of your dissertation/thesis. Then you can look at the document as a whole using this same process as well to ensure it is cohesive, comprehensible, concise, and informative.

Once you reach Step 8, do not forget to congratulate yourself! Writing a dissertation/thesis is a marathon, not a sprint, and each bit of progress is worth celebrating.

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