PART I

Taking Charge of Yourself and Your Work

OVERVIEW

Part I presents a broad introduction to the complex task of conducting and writing a dissertation. Figure I.1 depicts the cyclical qualitative dissertation process in its entirety. As you will no doubt experience it, the process is not linear, but rather iterative and recursive, sometimes unpredictable, and more often than not very "messy."

Although the process appears complex, if viewed incrementally, it is one you can master. Thus, we encourage you to recognize that you can do this work if you have the

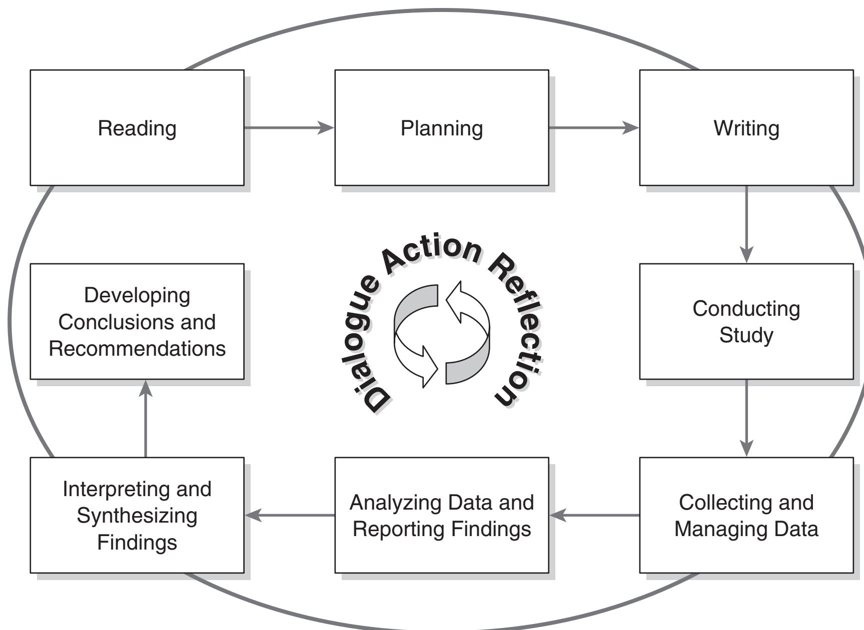

Figure I.1 The Dissertation Process

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right attitude, understand the content and process involved in conducting a research project, and are willing to develop and/or sharpen the skills required to carry out the research. Although this work is intellectually rigorous, requiring a lot of thinking, preparation, and planning, it is not so much a matter of having superior intellect as it is a matter of having tenacity, perseverance, and patience. It is, in fact, a process of continuous learning because, for most people, conducting research and writing a dissertation is a first-time endeavor, an undertaking for which there is little experience. By the end of the process, you will have learned as much about yourself and how to do research as you will have learned about the subject of your inquiry. This section presents the initial steps involved in thinking about and preparing for the dissertation process. However, we don't want to get you bogged down here. Part II is where the real work and learning occur. If you feel what you are reading is not relevant, skip it and go on to Part II.

OBJECTIVES

Part I Objectives

The objectives that follow address the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to successfully complete a dissertation:

- Provide *information* that will broaden student understanding of what comprises a sound research study.
- Demonstrate the *skills* needed to conduct and write up the study.
- Recognize, appreciate, and adopt the *attitudes* that will contribute to the success of the research project.

GETTING REENERGIZED

Undoubtedly, if you are reading this book, you are a continuous learner; it is the reason you decided to pursue a doctoral degree in the first place. It takes a certain amount of courage to take on this work because in many ways it is fraught with uncertainty. For those of you who are just starting out and for those who need to restart and continue, it can seem an overwhelming process. If the truth be told, for everyone who has ever embarked on this journey, most likely they have experienced a certain amount of anxiety, if not downright fear. Will I know how to do this work? Will I be up to the task? What if I fail? Ah, what if I succeed? Will it meet my expectations? These are some of the cobwebs that cloud our vision and stand in our way. It is okay to feel anxiety and fear. As a matter of fact, these feelings are natural as long as they do not debilitate us.

One way not to become overwhelmed is to look at the entire process of completing a dissertation as an incremental one. It is like the novice skier, who recognizes that a good way not to be overwhelmed by the sheer size of the mountain is to traverse it—going from side to side, conquering it, bit by bit. It is a matter of taking one step at a time and finding out what is needed at each step along the way. That is what this book is all about—giving you the information you need and helping you to develop the skills required along the way to complete this work.

So let us take up our journey and begin by getting ourselves organized mentally and physically. Begin by taking a reflective stance—think about those things, personal and professional, that have caused you to procrastinate, get stuck, or even abandon the work. Come to terms with those obstacles. Develop a plan to deal with the real challenges you face and determine to move beyond your own self-imposed obstacles by

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taking action. Commit to acting despite your apprehensions and commit to developing an "I can do this" attitude; become your best friend and not your own worst enemy. This is of paramount importance. Once you have the right mindset, you can begin to get organized.

ORGANIZING AND MANAGING YOUR PROJECT

Your dissertation is a project that will extend over a period of time. Therefore, successful completion requires careful organization and planning. To begin the process of getting organized, you need to create a "workspace" for your dissertation—a physical as well as a mental/intellectual space. One of the first steps in beginning to create a system for organizing and managing your work on this project is to start keeping records—of information as well as of your thinking.

As you begin your research and as you live with your study, you will begin to gather and accumulate a diverse array of material that has potential relevance. As you become immersed in your work, you will continue to be inundated with large amounts of information, including formal documents, correspondence, photocopies of articles, pieces of reflective writing, class notes, reading notes, discussion notes, handouts, memos, as well as other miscellaneous scraps of paper. All of this information is the precursor to the final data. It is the raw material of the inquiry that will be of use later. You certainly do not want to lose any of your material, nor do you want to drown in it. Organizing and managing dissertation-related "stuff" right from the beginning is essential to getting on track and staying focused. In this regard, you will need to make sure that it is sorted systematically and stored safely and securely, and that it will be easily retrievable when you need to access it.

In addition to storing various forms of information, you also should make sure that you keep the various drafts of your dissertation. During the process of writing your dissertation, drafts will need to be edited and refined. As you make revisions and update earlier versions, you will find yourself continually writing and rewriting. These drafts are important and should not be discarded. It is possible that you may want to revisit some text of an earlier version to check on something you have written. In addition, as your research and writing progress, by comparing drafts you can keep a check on your progress, as well as note any developments in your understanding of certain issues and phenomena. Therefore, before making revisions, original drafts should be kept intact, and each revised version should be labeled, dated, and stored in a designated file or folder for easy retrieval.

There are various systems for handling information at a practical level and, based on your learning style preference, different methods will seem more appealing. Those of us who are more visual and tactile like to print hard copies of everything and have the physical "evidence" in our hands. Some people "file" material in stacks—some of which are neatly piled and precisely ordered and others are strewn across every surface of their workspace. Some people do better with neatly labeled file drawers. Still others are less inclined to file manually and more inclined toward a computer-based system. They prefer to set up electronic folders in which to store information by way of emerging topics or chapters, rather than actual files or folders.

In our experience, it seems that an effective way to organize and sort information would involve a blend of approaches—manual and computerized. One of the ways to start collecting and managing the material that you are accumulating—and something we have found extremely useful—is to set up

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a three-ring dissertation binder with tabs for each chapter. This binder becomes a place to save information and notes on each chapter of your forthcoming dissertation. As you progress, print out completed chapters and insert them in your binder. The binder not only helps control notes and information, but it also gives you a sense of your progress. When the binder is complete, you are just about at the end of the process and can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Whatever methods work best for you and whatever strategy of information management you choose, your computer will become your best friend throughout the dissertation process. Using your computer, you can catalogue, record, and manage multiple forms of information. Becoming familiar with your computer and technological resources before you start your research will save you much time and frustration. Developing computer literacy and mastering the software does add another layer of learning to an already intensive experience, but one that is well worth the effort. If you feel overwhelmed in this regard, you might want to seek technical assistance.

In addition, no matter what kind of computer system or software package you are working with, a necessary and, in fact, absolutely essential consideration is that you are—right from the beginning—vigilant in saving information. This goal can be accomplished by regularly and frequently backing up your files by way of copying them to your hard drive, as well as to a disc or flash drive. You can never back up too much. Many people recommend printing out hard copies of completed sections in addition to saving electronic copies. As useful as they are, computers are not infallible. They can and do crash. Losing chunks or even all of your work can be a devastating setback in the dissertation process.

Up to this point, much of the discussion has focused on the practical details of the organization and management of dissertation-related material. Aside from keeping track of information, you need to keep track of your thinking. Just as it is important to have the relevant material on file, so it is important to keep a record of your changing thoughts about the research process. One way to ensure that you preserve your reasoning and are able to spell out the development of your ideas is to keep a research journal. Recording your thinking means that you will accumulate material that can be revisited and drawn on and that can form a substantial part of the methodology and analysis chapters of your dissertation. Keeping careful records also implies an open-minded and critical approach and can contribute to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as an "audit trail," which provides useful material for making validity claims for your study.

Journaling allows you to be meticulous about keeping an orderly record of your research activities. Journaling also engenders a reflective stance, which offers the opportunity to create a record of your experiences—your insights, speculations, hunches, questions, methodological and analytical concerns, tentative interpretations, and so on. In the qualitative inquiry process, you as the researcher/writer are the main instrument of data collection and data analysis. It is your task to provide personal insight into the experience under study. Integral to the notion of *self as instrument* is a capacity for reflection. The act of reflection, as Dewey (1916) suggests, affords the potential for reconstructing the meaning of experience that actually yields learning. In effect, a journal provides a solid link to and keeps track of the many levels of experience that are involved in the dissertation process. In the qualitative dissertation, what you bring to the inquiry is as important as what you discover as you live with your project. The quality and credibility of the dissertation indeed rests on your capacity for insightful conceptual reflection.

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Creating your new workspace means that you also should begin identifying writing resources. In addition to purchasing the relevant textbooks, online library databases will become invaluable as well. Your computer, in connection with your university library system, is a literature searching and bibliographic management tool. An ongoing literature review begins right from the beginning stages of topic identification; continues with reviews of research methodologies, specific methods of data collection, and issues of trustworthiness; and carries through to the final stages of analysis and synthesis. In addition, you have to produce a bibliography or reference list that is formatted correctly and in perfect synchronization with the materials referenced in the body of your dissertation. This ongoing literature review can indeed be one of the most time consuming of all the dissertation challenges. It is certainly worth taking the time to become familiar with using your library's computerized search capability, as well as with the variety of software programs that allow you to efficiently perform the tasks of referencing your materials. We just briefly mention this now so that you can start adding these thoughts to your new mental workspace. Further details pertaining to some of the more commonly used online library databases for the social sciences are presented as Appendix A.

Although much of the work involved in the dissertation process—in both the researching and writing phases—is done independently, you need not feel you must "go this alone"; you should not isolate yourself. As a resourceful doctoral candidate, you need to create a support system that contributes to your success. There are many people who have the potential to promote your progress. In our experience, we have found the graduate student network to be a particularly valuable resource. It is to your advantage to reach out to graduates and other professionals and colleagues whom you believe might be helpful to you.

Once you have gotten your mental and physical house in order, and with strong personal commitment and the will to succeed in completing your dissertation, you are ready to take the first step or resume wherever you left off in the process.

IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING A RESEARCHABLE TOPIC

The starting point for any research project, and indeed the first major challenge in conducting research, involves coming to some decision about a sound, doable topic. The topic is the subject of inquiry around a particular research problem that your study will address. For some, choosing a topic can be an exciting process; finally, you have the opportunity to pursue an area in which you have long been interested. For others, generating and selecting a topic can be a frustrating and somewhat overwhelming experience; you are torn between several topics—all of which are seemingly interesting and fascinating—with each piece of reading that you do adding further ideas and fueling your desire to explore everything. A real dilemma! Still there are others who are exasperated by the process and are unable to find a workable topic. For them this step is a painful experience. Commonly, students consider a few potential topics before finally settling on one.

In selecting a topic, most students focus on trying to be original and exhibiting the desire to contribute to the existing knowledge base. Most universities and doctoral faculties agree that a dissertation should be an original piece of research and should make a significant contribution to the field. At the outset, it is important to remember, however, that making an original contribution does not imply that there need be an enormous "breakthrough." In social science research, the discovery of new facts is rarely an important or

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even challenging criterion. Rather, research is a process of searching or re-searching for new insights; it is about advancing knowledge or understanding of a practice or phenomenon. In fact, it is perfectly acceptable to model your research on a previous study and develop some aspect of it or even replicate it. Replicating a previous study or aspects of a previous study is appropriate because knowledge accumulates through studies that build on each other over time.

In seeking a topic, you should remember that the objective of doing a dissertation is to obtain the credentials by demonstrating that you understand and can therefore conduct good research. The dissertation should not be centered on any grandiose ideas that you want to pursue—that can come later at another point in your life. For the purpose of successfully completing your dissertation, the focus should be on a sound topic—one that is crystal clear and concise.

For the most part, identification of what to study evolves slowly as you become immersed in a variety of concepts, philosophies, and theories. The way to begin developing a researchable topic is to look around you at the activities in which you are involved and to draw on your own personal and professional experiences. Most students find that they can best access areas in which they already have substantial expertise or familiarity with practice in the field or existing research. Once you have identified an area of interest, begin to examine and become familiar with the available literature related to your topic. Especially useful are reviews of literature found in journals specifically committed to publishing extensive review articles, as well as policy-oriented publications that discuss current and emerging issues. In addition, all discipline areas have their own encyclopedias, yearbooks, and handbooks, most of which can be accessed on the Internet. You also might take time to look over earlier dissertations and seek previous studies that in some respects mirror your own interests and topic.

In addition to seeking out relevant literature, engage in conversation with colleagues and peers to hear different perspectives about pertinent issues, and so begin to sharpen your topical focus. Generating and selecting a viable topic is a complex process that involves various competing factors. As you may notice throughout this book, our predisposition toward research and writing is that both are highly interactive processes. Seeking the feedback and critique of academic advisors, faculty committee members, and colleagues is, in our experience, an integral part of the dissertation process.

Once you have identified a general area of interest, you need to begin narrowing your topic. The process of developing a researchable topic is a process of idea generation; the movement from a general interest "out there" toward a more clearly refined idea around a researchable problem. It is important that the problem becomes specific and narrow enough to let you master a reasonable amount of information. If your problem is too broad—that is, if you try to take on too many aspects of one problem—you will encounter a data glut, which makes the reporting of findings and analysis of your data extremely difficult and tedious.

Refining the problem to be addressed calls for reflecting on whether that problem *can* and *should* be researched in the first place. First, whether the problem can or cannot be researched involves giving some thought to the practical feasibility or *doability* involved. Important judgments will have to be made regarding the possibility of access to potential sites and potential research populations, availability of sources of information, the researcher's knowledge and skills, and the availability of time and resources at your disposal to collect and analyze data over a sustained period of time. Second is the question of *should.* This question is complex and

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brings various factors into play. Considering the *should-doability* of a study calls into consideration the practical as well as the theoretical implications of pursuing a research problem. You therefore need to take the following into account:

1. The potential audience. Who would appreciate the worth of my study? Who would care enough to read it? Who would be interested?
2. The intellectual value and worth of the study. What, if any, is the wider significance of this research? Who would benefit by this study? Would a study in this area contribute to the ongoing conversation in a particular social science discipline or applied field? Would the study generate theoretical and/or conceptual understanding? What, if anything, would be the significance for policy? Will the study contribute to the development of professional practice?
3. Personal and professional goals. Will this study further my personal and professional interests? Will it enhance my career and/or career change? Will the research problem sustain my interest over the ensuing months and years?
4. Ethical considerations. Does the research involve practices or strategies that might embarrass or harm participants? Are there any political risks to others or me in reporting fairly and accurately the findings and outcomes of the potential study?

Undertaking a dissertation is a rigorous and long-term engagement, in terms of both conducting the fieldwork and working with the data. Although the dissertation need not necessarily be one's "life's work," caring about the topic at hand and having a compelling interest to learn what is not yet known are critical to sustaining motivation and commitment and, hence, momentum. The sooner you can begin to narrow your research interests and identify and develop a topical focus, the better. Having a fairly good idea of the area in which you will be situated, you will most productively be able to utilize your time to refine your research problem and so further the dissertation objectives.

Students often labor over coming up with a dissertation title at the early stages of dissertation work. It is a good idea to create what is, in effect, a "working title," as you think about your topic and hone your problem, and to refine this title as your study proceeds. A title generally captures the major thrust of your research. A working title becomes a guiding focus as you move through your study. Keeping notes about how and why your title changes over time is a useful exercise because it tracks developments in your thinking as your study progresses. A more extensive discussion regarding selecting a final dissertation title is included in Part III of this book.

CHOOSING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

Choice of research approach is directly tied to research problem and purpose. As the researcher, you actively create the link among problem, purpose, and approach through a process of reflecting on problem and purpose, focusing on researchable questions, and considering how to best address these questions. Thinking along these lines affords a research study methodological congruence (Morse & Richards, 2002). A research problem should not be modified to fit a particular research approach. You cannot assume a particular qualitative approach regardless of your research problem. In other words, research approach follows research problem; the appropriate research approach is the one that best fits with your research problem.

Qualitative research is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting

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or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. This approach implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description. Quantitative research, in contrast, is applied to describe current conditions, investigate relationships, and study cause–effect phenomena. Both research approaches involve complex processes in which particular data-collection and data analysis methods assume meaning and significance in relation to the assumptions underlying the larger intellectual traditions within which these methods are applied.

In recent years, the fierce debate between quantitative and qualitative methodologists—often referred to in the literature as "the paradigm wars"—has softened (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2003; Ercikan & Roth, 2006; Reichardt & Rallis, 1994). A consensus gradually emerged among researchers that, rather than universally advocate any single methodological approach for all research, the challenge is to appropriately match the research approach to purposes, questions, and issues. Thus, as a researcher, you are obliged to understand those theoretical principles that shape the logic of your inquiry. Understanding the logic behind research approach allows your study to be appropriately positioned within an inquiry tradition and also lays the foundation for supporting your study's findings. Preliminary steps in formulating a research approach include (a) assessing the knowledge claims that the researcher brings to the study based on her or his theoretical perspectives, and (b) identifying the strategy or tradition of inquiry that informs the procedures of the research.

Knowledge Claims

A knowledge claim implies certain assumptions about what the researcher will learn during the inquiry and how she or he will learn. These claims might be called *research paradigms*. Philosophically, researchers make claims about what knowledge is (ontology), how we know what we know (epistemology), what values go into knowing what we know (axiology), and the processes for studying knowledge (methodology). There are essentially four schools of thought or paradigms.

Postpositivism

Postpositivism is referred to frequently as "the scientific method," "quantitative research," or "empirical science." It refers to the thinking that developed from logical positivism, a school of thought that maintains that all knowledge can be derived from direct observation and logical inferences based on that observation (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Postpositivism reflects a deterministic philosophy, and the problems studied by postpositivists typically examine causes that influence or affect outcomes. Thinking within this paradigm is reductionistic. The belief is that there are laws or theories that govern the world, and that these can be tested and verified. Thus, research typically begins with a theory and a set of hypotheses, and the intent is to test ideas. Research is concerned with causal relationships, and the aim is to advance the relationship between variables. The knowledge that develops through a postpositivist lens is based on careful observation and measurement. Results of a study either support or refute the theory. Being objective is an integral component of inquiry, and standards of reliability and validity are important.

Social Constructivism, Interpretivism, or Naturalistic Inquiry

Social constructivism challenges the scientific-realist assumption of postpositivism that reality can be reduced to its component parts. The basic tenet of constructivism is that reality is socially, culturally, and historically

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constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2000). Therefore, research attempts to understand social phenomena from a context-specific perspective. Social constructivists view inquiry as value-bound rather than value-free, meaning that the process of inquiry is influenced by the researcher and the context under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The central assumption of this paradigm is that reality is socially constructed, that individuals develop subjective meanings of their own personal experience, and that this gives way to multiple meanings. Therefore, it is the researcher's role to understand the multiple realities from the perspectives of participants. The only way to achieve this understanding is for the researcher to become involved in the reality of the participants and to interact with them in meaningful ways. Thus, constructivist researchers often address the "process" of interaction among individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work to understand particular cultural and historical settings. The constructivist researcher's role is essentially that of "passionate participant," as the facilitator of multivoice reconstruction (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Constructivist researchers recognize and acknowledge that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they thus "position" themselves in the research to acknowledge their own cultural, social, and historical experiences. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), researchers pose research questions and generate or inductively develop meaning from the data collected in the field.

Critical Theory/Advocacy

The critical theory paradigm, which also is referred to as an advocacy or liberatory framework, includes feminist perspectives, racialized discourses, queer theory, and disability inquiry. It has a clear focus on social justice (Creswell, 2003). This framework arose during the late 1980s from the critique that postpositivist assumptions imposed unfair structural laws and theories that did not fit marginalized or disenfranchised individuals or groups. In addition, the critique of constructivism is that it did not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda to address the injustice and inequality inflicted on those who have become the passive object of inquiry.

Critical theorists view research as intertwined with politics, and therefore advocate that research contain an integral action agenda that will bring about reform that will change the lives of the research participants, the institutions and communities in which individuals live and work, as well as the researcher's life (Brookfield, 2005). Critical perspectives involve research strategies (e.g., action research, participatory action research, and narrative analysis) that are openly ideological and have empowering and democratizing goals. It is assumed that the researcher will engage participants as active collaborators in the inquiry so as not to further marginalize them as a result of the inquiry. To achieve this, participants are typically involved in designing questions, collecting data, and analyzing and interpreting information. Advocacy means providing a platform for research participants so that their voice can be heard and their consciousness can be raised. The goal of research is to create political debate and discussion to empower people to take action, to bring about change in existing social structures and processes, and to reconceptualize the entire research process.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism arises from the work of Pierce, James, Mead, and Dewey. Pragmatism is not

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committed to any one research philosophy or paradigm. For the many forms of pragmatism, knowledge claims arise out of situations, actions, and consequences, rather than from antecedent conditions (as in postpositivism). There is a concern with practical application and workable solutions to research problems (Patton, 1990). Instead of methods being important, the problem is primary. Researchers posit that research is contextually based and typically employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand the problem. Pragmatic researchers propose that, within the same study, methods can be combined in creative ways to more fully or completely understand a research problem. It is contended that researchers should be free to choose the methods and procedures that best meet their needs and purposes, and that the research questions should determine the methods used (Krathwohl, 1998). Pragmatists thus adopt multiple data-collection and data analysis methods.

Strategies or Traditions of Inquiry

In addition to assumptions about knowledge and operating at a more applied level are strategies or traditions of inquiry that provide specific direction for procedures in a research design. These strategies or traditions, in turn, contribute to decisions regarding research methods.

Strategies of inquiry associated with quantitative research invoke postpositivist perspectives. Such strategies include descriptive research (involves collecting data to test hypotheses or answer questions about the current status of the subject of inquiry), correlational studies (involves collecting data to determine whether and to what degree a relationship exists between two or more quantifiable variables), causal-comparative research (attempts to determine the cause or reason for existing differences in the behavior or status of groups of individuals), and experimental research (this includes true experiments as well as the less rigorous experiments or quasiexperiments). In both strategies, at least one independent variable is manipulated, other relevant variables are controlled, and the effect on one or more dependent variables is observed. Although there are variations among these strategies regarding their goals and their data-collection procedures, what is common among them is that all quantitative strategies collect and analyze numerical data to explain, predict, and/or control phenomena of interest.

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena and is based essentially on a constructivist and/or critical perspective (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Within the qualitative approach, there are a variety of traditions or genres (the word *strategy* is more suited to quantitative research), each distinguished by specific form, terms, focus, and assumptions regarding what constitutes inquiry within the qualitative paradigm. Creswell (1998) identifies five main traditions: case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative research. To that list, we add a sixth tradition—namely, hermeneutics. There are others, but they are more content-specific. There are many types of textual analysis, including conversation analysis and discourse analysis. There also are many forms of action research and feminist pedagogies. Traditions are not always wholly separate and may overlap. Moreover, to complicate matters, each tradition is not necessarily an agreed-upon whole, and distinctions and divisions have come to characterize some traditions.

Although all of qualitative research holds a number of characteristics and assumptions in common, there are variations in how a qualitative study might be designed and what the intent of the study might be. Just as the choice of research approach is directly tied to and fits with the research problem, purpose, and research questions, so is the choice of

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qualitative research tradition. In other words, choice of research tradition follows research problem and purpose. Following is a brief description of some of the primary qualitative traditions. As you read on, you will notice that the primary difference among these traditions lies in the particulars of the social context examined.

- *Case Study:* As a form of research methodology, case study is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon, social unit, or system bounded by time or place (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Case study involves a detailed description of a setting and its participants, accompanied by an analysis of the data for themes, patterns, and issues (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1995). There might be one or more cases involved in the study.

- *Ethnography:* The researcher studies a cultural or social group in its natural setting, closely examining customs and ways of life, with the aim of describing and interpreting cultural patterns of behavior, values, and practices (Van Maanen, 1988, 1995). Rooted in cultural anthropology, the researcher's role is that of a participant observer, with the researcher becoming immersed in the day-to-day lives of the participants. To produce a holistic "cultural portrait," the researcher gains access to the group through "gatekeepers" and "key informants."

- *Phenomenology:* The purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the *lived experience* of people to identify the core essence of human experience as described by research participants. Rooted in the philosophical perspectives of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and subsequent philosophical discussions by Heidegger (1889–1976) and Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In this process, the researcher "brackets" her or his own experiences to understand the participants' experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

- *Grounded Theory:* The researcher attempts to generate or discover a theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of the research participants. To examine changing experiences over time and to describe the dimensions of experience, research involves multiple stages of data collection and the refinement of abstract categories of information (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Two primary characteristics of grounded theory are the constant comparative method of data analysis (i.e., the ongoing comparison of data with emerging categories) and theoretical sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and differences of information. The objective is to generate theory from the data or modify or extend existing theory. The researcher integrates categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of the studied process.

- *Narrative Inquiry/Biography:* In this form of research, the researcher studies the lives of one or more individuals through the telling of stories. The information gleaned from the story or stories is then retold or "restoried" by the researcher into a "narrative chronology" (Creswell, 2003). Ultimately, the narrative combines views from the participants' lives with those of the researcher's life, culminating in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

- *Hermeneutics:* Developed by Dilthy (1833–1911), the German philosopher, this highly specialized form of research has been described as the interpretation of texts or

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transcribed meanings (Polkinghorne, 1983). Pioneered by biblical scholars who made use of textual analysis, this research method has been applied to secular texts to derive a richer understanding of the context that gives it meaning. This method involves an openly dialogical process of returning again and again to the object of inquiry (the text), each time with an increased understanding. Gadamer (1960) explains the *Hermeneutic Circle*, whereby a text is understood by reference to the context in which it was generated; the text, in turn, produces an understanding of the originator and context. Parts of the text are understood by reference to the whole, and the whole is understood in terms of its parts.

Having decided on a qualitative research approach, you will proceed to design your study within the framework of one of the traditions or genres of qualitative inquiry. Thus, the components of the design process (e.g., the theoretical framework, research purpose, and methods of data collection and data analysis) reflect the principles and features that characterize that tradition. However, one need not be so rigid as to not mix traditions, employing, for example, a grounded theory analysis procedure within a case study design or conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 1990). We recommend that you have some knowledge of the available traditions before making a choice, and that you understand each one as rigorous in its own right before combining them.

Qualitative research can be construed metaphorically as "an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material" (Creswell, 1998). Because of the complexity of qualitative research, this fabric is not explained easily or simply. There are, however, some common core elements that characterize qualitative research.

In summary, qualitative research involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of narrative and visual (nonnumerical) data to gain insight into a particular phenomenon of interest. Because understanding is the primary goal of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The researcher strives to describe the meaning of the findings from the perspective of the research participants; to achieve this goal, data are gathered directly from the participants. Taking place within natural or nonmanipulated settings, qualitative research allows for complex social phenomena to be viewed holistically.

An important assumption that underlies qualitative research is that the world is neither stable nor uniform, and, therefore, there are many truths. Qualitative data are analyzed inductively, requiring flexibility in the research design—one of the hallmarks of qualitative research. Data analysis often occurs concurrently with data collection. As the data are analyzed, the researcher seeks patterns and common themes. Qualitative research is iterative. That is, there is a continuous movement between data and ideas. Qualitative research reports include detailed descriptions of the study and clearly express the participants' voices. Qualitative research seeks to establish credibility and dependability and is concerned with the issue of transferability; that is, how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in other similar contexts.

Table I.1 provides a summary overview of qualitative research, illustrating its primary characteristics and indicating how these compare and contrast with the characteristics of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches.

With a researchable problem in mind and with a clear idea of what qualitative research involves, you are in a position to think about carrying your ideas further and consolidating these ideas in terms of developing a dissertation proposal. You also need to begin thinking about selecting advisors.

Table I.1 Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach[1]

	Quantitative Research	*Qualitative Research*	*Mixed Methods*
Research paradigm	Postpositivist	Constructivist, Critical Theory/Advocacy	Pragmatic
Strategy/tradition/ genre of inquiry	Descriptive, correlational, causal/comparative, and experimental research	Case study, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, Hermeneutics, Narrative Inquiry, Phenomenology	*Sequential design can be exploratory or explanatory *Concurrent design triangulates methods
Research purpose	*Seek consensus (the norm) *Examine topic in order to quantify results *Investigate relationships and cause—effect phenomena	*Seek variation in findings *Delves into the "essence" of the topic	*Combination of quantitative and qualitative methods are needed to fully understand a problem
Researcher role	*Adopts an *etic* (outsider) point of view *Seeks to test or verify theory *Identifies variables, makes predictions, and seeks specific evidence that will support or disconfirm hypothesis *Believes that research can be value-free *Attempts to remain unbiased, objective, and impartial	*Adopts an *emic* (insider) point of view *Seeks to discover and understand meaning of experience *Adopts a flexible stance and is open to change *Is reflective about own voice and perspective *Acknowledges personal values, and brings own experience to bear on the study *Is active and involved	*Appreciates how quantitative and qualitative data might complement each other *Develops a rationale for integrating aspects of qualitative and quantitative research *Decides whether to prioritize one or other type of approach or to consider them equally important
Research design	*Hypothetic-deductive: Research is about "idea testing" *Design is determined up front and follows systematic procedures *Large samples are selected randomly *Study is conducted under controlled conditions	*Inductive: Research is about "idea generation" *Design is proposed up front, but is open and emergent, rather than rigid and fixed to permit exploration *Small samples are selected purposefully	*Design combines quantitative structure and qualitative flexibility *Borrows distinct elements from both quantitative and qualitative approaches *Purposeful or random sample selection *Researcher-designed framework allows for innovation or creativity

(Continued)

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Table I.1 (Continued)

	Quantitative Research	*Qualitative Research*	*Mixed Methods*
	*Usually involves some form of pre- and posttest *Little opportunity for creativity outside prestructured research design	*Research takes place within natural contexts *Real-world situations are studied as they naturally unfold *Researcher-designed framework allows for flexibility and creativity	
Methods of data collection	*Uses existing instrumentation *Experimentation follows rigid guidelines *Survey includes closed-ended questions, scales, and ranking order checklists *Instruments yield performance data, observational data, attitude data, and census data	*Researcher as instrument *Methods are emergent and flexible *Instruments include observation, survey, interviews, documents, focus group, and critical incidents *Questions are generally open ended *Multiple methods are combined to achieve triangulation	*Research questions determine the methods *Instruments yield multiple forms of information that can be triangulated
Methods of data analysis	*Deductive design reduces data to precise numerical indices *Statistical analysis occurs after all data have been collected *Researcher offers causal explanations *Analytic process is linear and unidirectional	*Inductive design leads to holistic, richly descriptive findings *Analysis is based on identifying themes and patterns *Phenomena are understood as holistic and complex systems and are viewed within particular social and/or historical contexts	*Research employs both quantitative and qualitative practices *Statistical as well as textual analysis are used

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	Quantitative Research	*Qualitative Research*	*Mixed Methods*
		*Researcher tries to authentically depict the voices of participants while remaining reflexive and politically aware *Context sensitivity and understanding allows for interpretation *Analysis is iterative, cyclical, and ongoing	
Issues of trustworthiness	*Seeks to uphold scientific standards of validity and reliability *Seeks to generalize results from research sample to the larger population	*Seeks to establish credibility and dependability by way of triangulation and other strategies *Seeks to explain transferability of findings to other similar contexts	*Decisions are made according to methods used
Presentation of findings	*Charts, graphs, and diagrams are used to display results *Discussion explains and augments visual displays	*Thick, rich description is the primary mode of data presentation *Visual displays are used to augment the narrative discussion	*Both quantitative and qualitative modes of presentation are used to illustrate the research design and to portray and describe findings

[1]Note: Although qualitative research is presented here as one broad approach, it must be remembered that each tradition or genre has its own peculiarities and nuances. Moreover, although qualitative research as an overall approach is based on certain central assumptions, it also is characterized by an ongoing discourse regarding the appropriate and acceptable use of terminology. Current thinking over the years has caused some qualitative researchers to develop their own terminology to better reflect the nature and distinction of qualitative research, whereas others still borrow terminology from quantitative research.

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FINDING THE RIGHT ADVISORS

One of the most important tasks of a doctoral candidate is finding a suitable advisement team. Each university has a different system in this regard, and you need to make sure of your institution and/or program's policies and procedures. At some universities, the doctoral committee structure is based on an apprenticeship model and is used as a vehicle to guide the student from coursework through the dissertation defense. The dissertation committee in effect becomes the group of faculty responsible for your progress right from the beginning of the process, with all members contributing to the development of an acceptable dissertation. The committee is a hierarchical organization, with each member of the committee having a different responsibility vis-à-vis your research. At some universities, you work with an advisor (sponsor) and second reader from the proposal stage onward; when you have almost completed your dissertation, a dissertation committee needs to be formed.

Ideally, the doctoral committee is composed of faculty with different areas of expertise and whose resources you will be able to tap in the process of working on your dissertation. Again, this is a matter of institutional difference. In some instances (but not always), you can select your committee from among those in your department and related departments, those whose courses you have taken and/or those whose work bears some relation to the focus of your dissertation. Some faculty may be members of other programs or other schools within your university. In other instances, choice of committee may be more tightly constrained. In some cases (but not always), experts beyond your university are chosen. It is strongly advised that you be clear about your own institutional requirements so you can follow the necessary protocol and take into account acceptable policy and procedures. Bear in mind, too, that in most instances a faculty member has the choice to accept or decline to serve on a doctoral committee, so be prepared to make alternative choices should the need arise.

In most cases, a dissertation committee comprises four members. Working in collaboration with your sponsor and second reader, you typically need to select two additional committee members who will be your third and fourth readers. Most frequently (but not always), the third reader is someone known to the student as someone with whom she or the has previously worked. The third reader is, in most instances, the dissertation chairperson. Her or his role is to direct and moderate the discussion. The fourth committee member is usually assigned through the Office of Doctoral Studies because this person usually comes from outside the department. In some cases, a dissertation committee consists of three faculty members who guide the development and completion of the dissertation. A final oral panel is convened consisting of the dissertation committee plus two outside readers selected by the graduate office.

Because you have known from the beginning of the program that faculty members will eventually have to be selected, rather than wait for the time close to the dissertation defense, you should start thinking early on about who might best serve on your committee. The more information you have about potential committee members, the easier it is for you to make decisions regarding which individuals may agree to work with you and help you achieve your goals. You certainly want your committee to enhance the quality of your academic work and to be supportive of your progress. Therefore, you need to identify the best match between your learning style and the faculty who are available to work with you. In addition, because progress, to a large extent, is the function of a collaborative team effort, you also need to give careful consideration as to how faculty members get along with each other.

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Remember that your advisor will hopefully be your mentor, principle guide, and primary resource throughout the dissertation process. Therefore, you need to spend time looking for the kind of authentic educator you feel confident can help you. Take the time to do some research, ask others about their experiences, and find out as much as you can about the faculty at your institution and their areas of interest. Considerations in looking for the right advisor include:

- *Expertise*—Your advisor/sponsor need not be a content expert with regard to your particular topic, but should be a process expert. In this case, you may select a second reader who is a content expert, and in this way you would have a strong combination of resources.
- *Chemistry*—You need to feel comfortable with a prospective advisor and confident that you will be able to develop a good working rapport with him or her. There also need to be good lines of communication between your sponsor and your second reader so that you are never caught in the middle trying to resolve different perspectives.
- *Access and availability*—You may find the kind of expertise you are looking for in a prospective sponsor and feel comfortable with that faculty person, but he or she may be so busy that it makes getting advisement time and feedback difficult and even frustrating.
- *Other characteristics*—Ideally, you need to find a person who will really listen to your concerns and help you deal with them. All too often, work is interrupted by life issues; you need to find someone who is willing to give you understanding and encouragement from the sidelines and who knows when to push you to start moving again. Above all, this person must have a genuine interest in helping you succeed.

Once you select an advisor, be proactive in establishing and maintaining a good working relationship. Keep your advisor apprised of your status along the way by regularly sending progress reports. This communication serves to maintain contact throughout and is a strategy for gaining the necessary support and feedback as you proceed to tackle your dissertation.

Finding just the right advisor is a tall order, and you might be wondering what happens if you do not make the right selection or if you are appointed an advisor who is not the right fit for you. Many students are afraid to change advisors because they view it from a political perspective. Yet in all institutions, it is okay and even appropriate to make changes by going through the correct channels, seeking out the most appropriate person within your department, and asking for their help and advice. Most important, if you make changes, give your existing advisor the respect and courtesy of informing him or her of your desire to change.

DEVELOPING YOUR PROPOSAL

A completed proposal is the point at which you present and justify your research ideas to gain approval from a faculty committee to proceed with your study. Once your proposal has been approved, you are ready to embark on the research. Holding the proposal meeting represents a vital step in the dissertation process. At this meeting, you and your committee will discuss your proposed study relative to its scope, significance, design, and instrumentation. You also agree on expectations and procedures for the study's duration.

The proposal is a well-thought-out written action plan that identifies (a) a narrowly defined and clearly written problem statement; (b) a purpose statement that describes how the problem will be addressed; (c) research questions that are tied to the purpose and, when answered will shed light on the problem; (d) a review of the literature and relevant research to determine what is

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already known about the topic; and (e) data-collection and data analysis methods. Rather than merely descriptive specifications of what you will do, a qualitative proposal should present a clear argument that explains and justifies the logic of your study. In effect, a dissertation proposal is a "working document on the way to the production of a dissertation" (Kilbourn, 2006, p. 530).

A proposal is not an end in itself. Although a proposal is mandatory, it also is the means to obtain feedback from advisors before implementing your study, and this feedback is usually useful in improving the proposed study. Typically, you will write multiple drafts of your proposal. Based on the feedback you receive, you will continue work toward an increasingly more integrated presentation of the different components guiding the proposed study.

A completed proposal approved for execution and signed by all members of the sponsoring committee constitutes a bond of agreement between you and your advisors. The approved proposal describes a study that, if conducted competently and completely, should provide the basis for an extensive research report (the dissertation) that will meet all the standards of acceptability. However, that design flexibility is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research. Although the proposal is a contractual document, it is also a working document. Therefore, as the research progresses, some changes or modifications will, in all likelihood, have to be made along the way.

Some universities make specific demands regarding the format of proposals, whereas others provide more general guidelines for form and content. You will no doubt have to attend carefully to the variations that reflect the expectations and requirements of your particular institution. Several writers (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Schram, 2003) describe the proposal as representing the first three chapters of a dissertation. This notion might apply to some institutions, but not all. Therefore, it is highly advisable that you make inquiries as to your own institution's requirements regarding the content and structure of the proposal.

Following is a brief explanation of each of the sections that constitute a three-part proposal. Chapters 1 through 3 of this book provide more elaboration on each of these sections. Proposals are written in the future tense because they are proposing research that has not yet taken place. Once you have carried out your study and proceed to write up your dissertation, be sure to change your writing to the past tense.

Introduction to the Study

The introduction includes the context or background for your study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, your research questions, the research approach, researcher assumptions and expertise, significance of and rationale for the study, and explanation of key terminology. The introductory section serves three major purposes. First, it orients your readers by providing them with the context leading to the problem that you are addressing and the overall purpose of your inquiry. Second, it identifies your research questions and the research approach you are adopting. Third, it begins to frame the study by explaining what has led you to focus on your topic, conveying a personal orientation as well as a more general sense of the rationale and significance of the study. In summary, the introduction sets the stage for explaining and justifying the research. It should draw readers into your inquiry while orienting them to its nature and purpose.

Literature Review

The literature review identifies what is already known about your topic/problem

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and what consensus or lack there is around your topic/problem under study. Literature is reviewed to identify other relevant research so that you can situate your work in the literature, as well as draw from the literature to inform your study. The literature review helps develop the argument for your study by showing how your study is part of a larger conversation and/or part of a broader theoretical scheme. Following the review, it is recommended that you present a conceptual framework, which is designed to guide your study. The categories of the conceptual framework are tied directly to the research questions. These are the same categories under which your data are sorted. The conceptual framework is not some abstract model. It is, in fact, a working tool. These categories continue to evolve and become further refined as data emerge. The conceptual framework is, in our experience, one of the most misunderstood pieces in the dissertation puzzle. Hence, more about developing the conceptual framework is explained in chapter 2.

Methodology

The methodology section includes an overview of the research design, information needed and sources of data, proposed research sample, plans and methods for data collection and data analysis, and a rationale for the methods to be used. The strategies you intend to employ for both collecting and analyzing data are determined by the particular qualitative tradition that you have adopted for the study; thus, in your discussion, you need to demonstrate these connections. In addition, there should be some mention of how you intend to deal with issues of trustworthiness (validity/credibility and reliability/dependability), anticipated ethical issues and your plans for dealing with these issues, as well as limitations and some plans for addressing these limitations.

The methodology section of the proposal helps further develop the argument for your study by showing how you are going to go about conducting your study. Although research proposals do not always necessitate the collection of data, it is often recommended that you include in your proposal reports of pilot studies, which present the findings of actual preliminary work. In our view, conducting pilot studies and presenting the findings thereof certainly serve to strengthen a proposal. By doing the "spadework" and by saying, "I tried it, and here is how it worked," you demonstrate the availability of participants, the practicality of procedures, as well as your skills and capabilities as a researcher. Moreover, pilot studies have additional benefits. As Locke et al. (2000) point out, "the modest pilot study is the best possible basis for making wise decisions in designing research" (p. 74).

In addition to the three parts of the proposal outlined previously, we recommend the inclusion of a tentative chapter outline for the dissertation, as well as a detailed projected timetable for your research. Both of these illustrate that you are able to plan and think ahead. This timeline will convince the reader that you have given serious thought to the tasks involved and your estimation of the time needed to complete each task. The timeline will help the reader (and you) judge the feasibility of the proposed study and may suggest implications for logistics and practicality that might not be immediately apparent in the body of the proposal. Additionally, you need to attach as appendices all necessary information, such as a copy of Institutional Review Board ([IRB] or similar body) approval for your proposed study, tailored consent forms with a clear outline of the steps you will take to protect research participants, projected instruments and forms used in pilot studies, projected coding schemes and projected matrices, and any other appropriate forms and letters. Of course, a bibliography and

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proper use of references and citations are absolutely necessary.

A proposal requires a logical structure. The conceptual and methodological parts of the proposal need to make sense in relation to one another, and the writing must be clear and concise. You need to think carefully about the interrelationship between the various parts of your proposal and how the various parts are aligned with each other. This sense of interrelatedness will not only provide your readers with a cohesive picture of the proposed project, but will help you, as the researcher/writer, to conceptualize the entire process involved.

It is important to point out that this understanding of structural interrelationship, while implying clear definition and cohesiveness, does not necessitate a rigid framework. It is vital that your proposal preserves the design flexibility that is characteristic of qualitative research. In this regard, you should expect that, before it evolves toward its final form, your proposal will most likely undergo many drafts as you refine your thinking. The thinking, writing, and rewriting involved in developing a sound proposal will help you to develop a logic and a plan that will guide and direct your research. As such, the time and energy spent in writing a proposal that is carefully explained, theoretically sound, and methodologically thoughtful will reap rewards throughout the dissertation endeavor.

ESTABLISHING A TIMELINE

One of the major challenges of completing the dissertation is developing and honing the habit of thinking critically. Another challenge is the practical application of ideas, including the need to systematically plan the study, collect and analyze the data, and write up the dissertation. The ability to focus, problem solve, and make informed decisions at every step of the way will bring your study to completion. Time is part of the equation.

Clearly, the more time you devote to carefully thinking about, planning, and completing your study, the more effective your discipline will be. Because the time commitment required of an individual doing qualitative research is substantial, you need to pace yourself from the beginning. Be sure to keep your goals realistic or you will set yourself up for failure. As such, be honest about the time that particular tasks might take to complete and what other life demands are competing with the dissertation demands. Aside from time constraints, you also need to plan carefully for what can be achieved given your available resources (e.g., personnel and financial support). Finally, you must consider developing realistic deadlines with regard to institutional constraints. For example, many university departments are typically understaffed during the summer months and over winter vacation. Expecting feedback from advisors, gaining approval from review boards, or even attempting to set meeting times with research participants at these particular times of the year would be somewhat unrealistic.

In line with the ski metaphor mentioned earlier, it is important that you set yourself a time frame within which to complete each section of the dissertation. Just as the experienced skier traverses the terrain, bench marking is fundamental to success in the dissertation process, too. In developing realistic deadlines, we recommend that students "chunk" the tasks in conjunction with a multiyear calendar. Create a system whereby you work on parts that contribute to the whole—chapter by chapter or even one part of a chapter at a time. The dissertation journey is essentially about achieving milestones one step at a time.

A useful guiding principle is to always have a sense of your next step. Identifying the various stages in the process, pacing yourself, and documenting your achievement of goals

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and subgoals along the way are important and will contribute to keeping you task-oriented and focused. Having some sense of how your progress is moving you closer and closer to completion will help to keep you motivated. In this regard, we recommend marking your progress on a checklist that you create for yourself. A sample checklist appears on the inside back cover.

It is especially critical that you not lose momentum once formal coursework has ended. At this moment of being out there on their own, many students experience overwhelming feelings and are unsure of how to proceed. The longer they remain fixed and unmoving, the more their inclination to start on the dissertation wanes; the longer this continues, the more difficult it becomes to get going again.

You also should bear in mind that, in most institutions, once a student is certified and becomes a doctoral "candidate," he or she usually has a designated number of years in which to complete the dissertation or else he or she will have to be recertified (which involves retaking the "certification" or "candidacy" exam—a most unappealing thought). In any event, although extensions may be granted for extenuating circumstances, to get an extension, a student usually has to demonstrate that she or he has been making significant progress. This is all the more reason to take the time to develop a timeline, stay on task, and set realistic, appropriate, and reasonable goals. After all, this doctoral program is a once-in-a-lifetime venture and you surely want to succeed.

In following up with our students as to their progress, we often hear, "I'm still reading." Reading widely indeed allows you to become knowledgeable and proficient in a specific domain. Although reading is essential, it can sometimes be an avoidance mechanism when it is time to write. It is now time to start *writing* your dissertation. The sooner you begin writing, the easier it is to continue writing and the more rapidly your dissertation is likely to progress. Adopt a do-it-now attitude and get started.

GUIDELINES FOR GOOD WRITING

A dissertation is the combination of performing research and writing about your research to describe and explain it. As a researcher/writer, knowing how to best express your ideas in written form to convey them to the reader becomes an essential skill. The impact of any research is likely to be enhanced if you are able to write well about your work. The dissertation requires a high level of scholarly writing. Although not everyone enjoys scholarly writing nor is everyone good at it, you have to get into the mode of writing for a particular audience—the academic community. Academic or scholarly writing is, in essence, writing that is clear, concise, precise, and bold. Above all, good writing is a function of good thinking.

Clarity, Coherence, and Cohesiveness

Whatever chapter of your dissertation you are busy with, it is important that you spend time planning not only *what* you will write, but also *how* you will write. Creating an outline or "mind map" that traces the path of your argument is one way to begin thinking about this. Creating outlines is an effective way to organize your thinking and sequentially guide your writing. In writing your dissertation, your intention is not only to demonstrate your knowledge of the topic. You also want to capture the interest of and guide the reader throughout so that she or he understands and can follow your train of thought. To ensure that your paper is user-friendly, aim for clarity and logic:

- In your introductory section, write a paragraph that describes your outline. This

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paragraph lets readers know where you will take them. A strong introduction as well as a strong conclusion (described further on) will help readers to see the significance of your work.

- Make use of headings and subheadings to provide structure to your writing. These are useful in communicating the key ideas to the reader. Crowding makes reading difficult and unpleasant.
- Resist jargon. Jargon excludes and mystifies the reader. Do not assume that all readers understand specialized language. If you must use a specialized term, be sure to explain it.
- Build coherence through connecting sentences. Every sentence should be a logical sequel to the one that preceded it.
- Use transitions or segues to trace the path of your argument and to guide the reader. Transitions are "bridge sentences" between paragraphs and help make your discussion easy to follow.
- Organize your thoughts in a coherent, well-constructed paragraph. Create paragraphs that contain one main idea only. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence, followed by supporting sentences that illustrate, elaborate, explain, and clarify your main idea.
- Each paragraph should logically and sequentially lead to the next. Remember to pay particular attention to the last sentence of each paragraph because this is the springboard to the subsequent paragraph.
- Paragraphs should not be overly long because this overwhelms the reader. If a paragraph is one page or more, break it into two or more paragraphs.
- Make sure that each section and/or chapter ends by summarizing and integrating the main points/themes. The summary allows the reader to come away with a clear understanding of what you have written and what will follow.

After writing each paragraph, it is helpful to read it aloud. In this way, you can check for syntax, as well as for coherence and flow. In academic writing, it is essential that you are clear and precise. In reviewing your work, ask yourself: Is what I am reading really what I intended to write? Does it say what I mean it to say? If a written passage sounds awkward, you might need to add new words, phrases, or sentences to establish clearer connections. You also should watch out for sharp breaks where the reader is left "hanging"; in these cases, you should consider restructuring the sentence or phrase.

In reading aloud, watch for any assumptions and unsupported statements. In these cases, the reader might ask, "Who says so?" You must provide evidence to support what you say. In dissertation writing, you have to get in the habit of writing defensively. In other words, you need to stop after each paragraph and ask yourself: "Have I provoked any questions in the reader's mind?" This step is important because the process in the defense of a qualitative dissertation is one of questioning and challenging any assumptions you may have made. As soon as you provoke questions in the reader's mind, she or he begins to lose confidence in your argument and may even go looking for more questions. That is the last thing you want to happen.

Reading aloud also allows you to check for grammatical errors:

- Make sure that you use complete sentences, not fragmented ones.
- Do not use unwieldy, run-on sentences. Long, complicated sentences force the reader to decide which of the points you are making should be emphasized. Each sentence should contain one thought only. Aim for short, clear, and crisp sentences.
- Check for incorrect use of punctuation, which can affect meaning.
- Be consistent in your tenses.
- Place descriptive words and phrases as close as possible to the words they describe or they may inadvertently describe the wrong word.
- Be careful not to end a sentence with a preposition (*to*, *from*, *with*, etc.).

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- Whenever possible, use the active rather than the passive voice. The active voice reduces wordiness and is more direct, giving vitality and force to your writing.
- Look for unnecessary adjectives and delete vague qualifications such as *very*.
- Remember that academic writing is formal writing. As such, slang expressions, colloquialisms, and idioms are not appropriate.

Format and Style Requirements

A research report must consistently follow a selected system for format and style. Format refers to the general pattern of organization and arrangement of the report. Style refers to appropriate writing conventions and includes rules of grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation to be followed in preparing the report. Most colleges and universities require the use of a specific style—either their own or that in a published style manual. You need to make inquiries regarding your particular department's recommended style preference.

A note regarding use of first-person "I" in your writing: In qualitative research, the researcher is the main research tool or instrument. The unique style and narration of the researcher is an integral part of the study, and, as such, the first-person "I" is sometimes used. According to some (but not all) views, this usage can be justified in a qualitative research report, as opposed to "the researcher" or "the author," which tends to sound distant and uninvolved. Because there may be different preferences regarding the use of the first person, we strongly advise that you check with your advisor before proceeding to write.

The most frequently used style manuals in the social sciences are APA (American Psychological Association), MLA (Modern Language Association), CMS (Chicago Manual of Style), and Turabian. Although different style manuals emphasize different rules of writing, several rules are common to most. Regardless of which manual you use, you are expected to adhere to its rules meticulously. Early on in the dissertation process, you should become familiar with your required manual and use it consistently throughout. Mastering the manual's technical nuances early on (such as the use of headings, footnotes, tables, and figures) will save you considerable time and effort in the long run. Be especially careful to follow the manual's guidelines regarding citation of references. Citations must be accurate; from the beginning, you should remain vigilant in updating your reference list each time you add a citation. Do not imagine that you will remember to do so later. Searching for "lost" references is time-consuming and very frustrating.

Tables and figures are often included in a dissertation to augment the narrative, thereby enabling the reader to more clearly understand the issues being discussed. These graphic organizers are somewhat distinguished from one another:

- Tables are typeset, rather than photographed, from artwork supplied by the author. Tables consist of text only and are frequently used to present quantitative data. Tables offer precise details, including percentages and whole numbers, and should always include group size (i.e., $N = \ldots$).
- Figures are typically used to convey structural or pictorial concepts. Figures can be line graphs, bar graphs, pie graphs, maps, drawings, and photographs. Choose a figure if you want to reinforce the point you are making by way of a strong image.

Tables and figures are used to present material in summary form and should add clarity to the overall presentation of the report. These follow their related textual discussion and are referred to by number. Readers of dissertations are drawn to graphic displays of information. If you choose to use displays of any sort, make

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sure that they are appropriately included and do not unnecessarily disrupt the flow of the text. The potential usefulness and importance of visual displays suggest a need to dedicate time and care in creating them. Tables and figures should be uncluttered and self-explanatory; it is better to use two tables (or figures) than a single overcrowded one. If you choose to include tables and figures, be sure to contact your style manual for correct format and usage.

In addition to general format requirements, there are books that deal specifically with the rules and principles of writing. These offer useful suggestions regarding sentence construction and word choice. Although writers tend to have their favorites, we have found Strunk and White's (2000) *The Elements of Style* and Hacker's (2003) *A Writer's Reference* to be extremely helpful guides.

Integrity Matters

The strength of your writing rests on your ability to refer to and incorporate the work of others. It is imperative, however, that you attribute recognition to all and any sources of information that you use. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are matters that have serious consequences. Types of plagiarism include:

1. Using another writer's words without proper citation
2. Using another writer's ideas without proper citation
3. Using the exact words of a source without quotation marks or indentation
4. Borrowing all or part of another student's paper or having somebody else write your paper or parts of your paper
5. Falsifying data

For proper use of quotations, refer to your style manual. There is no fixed rule regarding when and how much to quote and paraphrase. If you quote and cite too often, you may seem to offer too little of your own thinking. If you quote too little, readers may think that your claims lack support, or they may not be able to see how your work relates to that of others. However, there are some general rules of thumb, as outlined by Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2003): Use direct quotations when you are using the work of others as primary data or when the specific words of your source are of particular significance. Paraphrase sources when you can say the same thing more clearly or when you are more interested in conveying the general idea, rather than how it is expressed by a particular source. Do not quote because you think it is easier or you think you lack the authority to speak for your sources. Make your own argument with your own claims, reasons, and evidence.

Proofreading and Editing

Always proofread your work. The goal of proofreading is to enable you to find and correct your own errors in thought and organization. After writing each section, examine your sentences for clarity and grammar. In an effort to present an organized, logical, and coherent argument, be prepared to spend time editing and reediting as you "polish" your narrative, correct sentence structure, and trim excess wordiness and redundancy. You will find yourself writing and rewriting throughout the process of doing your dissertation. Writing multiple drafts of a manuscript is part of the writing process and is standard practice for most writers.

If you feel that you need assistance with writing, be sure to contact your instructor for additional resources and guidance. It should be obvious that the expectations for correctness and accuracy in academic writing are high. If you feel that you are unable to meet these demands at your current level of writing

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proficiency, you may need to seek outside assistance. It is quite acceptable to hire an editor or proofreader to help meet academic writing expectations. In addition, most universities offer writing classes and/or workshops.

A dissertation is indeed a "creation" or "construction" that takes effort and time. Constructing a dissertation is both an art and a science and takes thoughtful and careful planning. A good dissertation is built on solid outlines and is constructed logically and sequentially, paragraph by paragraph. This process includes paying close attention to style, format, and precise language. Most important, your writing should flow logically and smoothly. You do not want to lose the reader.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Taking Charge of Yourself and Your Work

- Overcome your anxieties and frustrations by acting and seeing your work in increments—piece by piece, step by step. Action leads to progress, and progress leads to increasing levels of confidence.
- Develop your own system to organize and manage the ongoing accumulation of data. This will help you feel in control and less overwhelmed.
- Maintain a journal to capture your thoughts, ideas, and strategies; a journal can also become an important audit trail.
- Familiarize yourself with data sources that you will need throughout the process (e.g., library resources, computer databases, and relevant textbooks).
- Determine what you want to research and what you want to learn. To identify a researchable topic, begin by looking at a broad area—one you know something about or in which you have a general interest. Although you do not necessarily have to be passionate about your topic, you should like the subject matter because your interest will sustain you and keep you going.
- Fashion a narrowly defined problem statement from your topic to control the scope of your research.
- Develop a working title that can serve as a guide and focus. The working title should remain flexible so that it can be refined and re-refined as your study progresses. Keeping notes about how and why your title changes over time is a useful exercise.
- Select a research approach based on the nature of your research problem and your study's purpose and research questions. There are six primary approaches in designing a qualitative study: case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry/biography, and hermeneutics. In choosing sponsors and advisors, important considerations include expertise, chemistry, access and availability, and ability to listen. If you make an inappropriate selection, you can and should seek an advisor who fits your needs.
- Check on institutional and/or program-related requirements with regard to the process of choosing advisors and forming your dissertation committee.
- Make multiple drafts of a proposal as you refine your ideas and become more precise about what will happen in your study. The proposal consists of the first three chapters of what will become your dissertation—introduction, literature review, and methodology.
- In effect, your proposal is your proposed plan to carry out a particular piece of research. It is brought forth to a hearing by a committee for endorsement and approval to proceed. The proposal also requires a review by your university's institutional review board. As such, completing your proposal and holding the proposal meeting is a major step on the road to completing your dissertation.
- Check on institutional and/or program-related requirements with regard to dissertation proposal requirements.
- Plan your time carefully. The time commitment involved in doing your dissertation is substantial given the volume of work.

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- Considering that your audience is primarily the academic community, use formal, scholarly writing. Such writing requires command of basic writing skills, such as good sentence and paragraph construction, logical organization, and appropriate transitions.
- Use outlines to plan and present your writing.
- Read your work aloud to check syntax, flow, and any unwarranted assumptions and unsupported statements that you may have made.
- Get in the habit of writing defensively. This approach not only ensures clarity, but also helps to ensure that what you are writing does not provoke questions in the mind of the readers. Questions can unnecessarily bring into suspect the totality of your argument.
- Ensure that format and style adhere to your specific institution and program's requirements.
- Avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, which are serious matters with serious consequences.
- Proofread and edit your work. The quality of your work is a reflection of your respect for the reader.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book summarizes the distinctive features and guiding assumptions of the five major qualitative research traditions—biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study—along philosophical, theoretical, and practical lines. Chapters 1 through 5 compare the various phases of research design inherent in each of the five traditions, from conceptualization to analysis and interpretation. The emphasis throughout is on the variation among the five traditions, offering the reader insights into and understanding of the inherent philosophical underpinnings, theories, assumptions, and practices of each tradition. Especially useful is Creswell's comprehensive list of additional readings regarding each of the five traditions, as well as the glossary of definitions of terminology presented by tradition.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Built on the foundation of the landmark first edition, published in 1994, this handbook represents a comprehensive overview of the state of the art for the theory and practice of qualitative inquiry. Included are useful examples of qualitative research studies and their application, with the contributors examining the relevant histories, controversies, and current practices associated with the various qualitative traditions and their associated strategies and methods.

Hacker, D. (2003). *A writer's reference* (5th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Rather than providing a set of grammar lessons, this book should be consulted as needed to master the academic style of scholarly writing. The author provides details pertaining to word choice, grammar, sentence style, and punctuation. The author also discusses the most commonly used academic writing styles (APA, MLA, and CMS/Chicago), as well as various online resources (search engines and databases) that can be accessed through library portals.

Holloway, I. (1997). *Basic concepts for qualitative research.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

A complex and interconnected family of concepts, constructs, and assumptions surround the term *qualitative research*. Although it was published a decade ago, it is

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still a highly accessible reference book that provides descriptions and explanations of the "language" and processes used in qualitative research. The first section includes an overview of the historical evolution of qualitative research, its characteristics and aims, and the key methodological issues involved. The second section identifies and describes a comprehensive range of the most commonly used terms, concepts, and methods within qualitative research. This section is ordered alphabetically for ease of access to the information.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book offers a detailed overview of the process of designing a qualitative study, providing details of the various steps involved in conducting and reporting research. In addition, the authors expand on the methodological challenges involved. This work is an excellent introduction to qualitative research and provides clear and comprehensive guidance for preparing a research proposal.

Pellegrino, V. C. (2003). *A writer's guide to powerful paragraphs*. Wailuku, HI: Maui'ar Thoughts Company.

Writing is best when it is concise, meaningful, and easily understood, and this book is written with these objectives in mind. The book is designed for writers who seek to improve their writing by providing everything one needs to know about structuring and writing effective paragraphs—the essential element of good writing. As the author points out, a paragraph should be considered "a unit of thought, expressing a single idea, communicated through related sentences." The author provides clear and concise explanations of different types of paragraphs and offers practical examples and suggestions. This book can assist writers in learning how to plan their writing by breaking down their ideas into understandable segments and then organizing and combining these segments to produce a logical, flowing, coherent whole.

Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book is a clearly written and straightforward introduction to qualitative research. The authors creatively integrate the scientific and artistic dimensions of qualitative research, explaining how the research process unfolds from planning and design, through fieldwork and data gathering, to the presentation of findings, analysis, and interpretation. The underlying theme cutting across all the chapters is that research is a process of learning and the utility of research requires clarity of purpose. This book is excellent for novice researchers and introduces the puzzles and tensions that one faces in embarking on a qualitative study, offering some assistance in grasping the core concepts, issues, and complexities involved.

Strunk, W., & White, E. B. (2000). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). New York: Longman.

This timeless book is a wonderful companion as you proceed to write your dissertation. It clarifies the rules and principles of grammar and composition, emphasizing the power of words and the clear expression of thoughts and feelings. Published for the first time in 1919 and then again in 1972, this book is a gem and is small enough and important enough to carry around in your pocket!

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