Guiding Students through the Thesis/Dissertation Process

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Good advising is multi-dimensional and includes:

- Expertise in the topic area
- Providing specific feedback in a timely fashion
- Giving advice relative to navigating the pre-defense and defense process
- Occasional nudging
- A good collaborative working relationship between the advisor and advisee
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What should be considered before accepting the role as advisor on a student’s thesis or dissertation?

- How well do you know the topic area?
- Are you knowledgeable about the pre-defense and defense process?
- Are there compatibility issues relative to other members chosen to serve on the committee?
- How many students are you already advising?
- What is the advisor’s role in the thesis dissertation process?
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**Point-to-Note:** An advisor should feel comfortable about taking the lead in the following areas:

- Ensuring that committee members have up-to-date copies of the proposal
- Meeting with committee members to discuss the development of the proposal
- Meeting with the student to convey the different perspectives and critiques of the other members of the committee
As an advisor, I usually recommend two steps in coming up with a research topic.

1. Identify the general area in which you want to do research.

2. Conduct a preliminary literature review in order to come up with questions with research potential.
Point-to-Note: It is generally unwise to define something as important as a dissertation topic without first obtaining a broad familiarity.
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An advisor should help the student arrive at a researchable topic by considering the following questions:

- Is the topic worthy of research?
- Has the topic been studied before?
- Can the topic be studied?
- Will the topic give the student enough practice in the methodology and theory of his/her field?
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Point-to-Note: If students are to get practice in testing theory, they should choose a topic that provides them with the opportunity to work within a theoretical framework.
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When I am approached as a prospective thesis/dissertation advisor, I usually give an outline of questions.

- What is the subject area?
- Why is the topic worth studying?
- What specific aspect of the subject matter does she/he wish to investigate?
- Who has previously explored the topic and what were the findings?
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Once the student selects a topic, I would suggest that he/she explore it in depth.

Using the Search Engine

**Tip 1**: Type into the search engine your topic statement.

Ex. How does race and age impact the ability of women to move up as managers in the corporate workforce?

**Tip 2**: Type in only the keywords all together.

Ex. Race, age, women, corporate workforce
Point-to-Note: Finding the right keywords and/or phrases is the basis for a successful computer search.

- Fewer than 10 articles relevant to your topic may indicate that your topic is too specialized.
- Over 200 articles generated by the “first run” may indicate that your topic is too broad.
Figure 1: Steps for Narrowing the Topic

Women

- Women at Home
- Women in Workplace
  - Performance of Women in the Corporate Workforce
    - Treatment of female managers by other women
  - Treatment of Women in the Workplace
    - Availability of managerial jobs for women
    - Treatment of female managers by males
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Title Development

Each student should be aware that she/he is accountable for every word that is written in the research and the title is not exempt from scrutiny.

Point-to-Note: A student would not title research “Problems in Education.” This would imply that a student has studied every problem in education.
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The Writing Process

The actual writing of the proposal could be facilitated in two ways: (1) holistic or (2) sectional.

**holistic approach**: the advisor would have the student complete a rough draft of the entire proposal and then would critique the entire document.

**sectional approach**: the advisor would have the student complete each portion of the proposal in sections and then would provide critique and guidance on each section, one at a time.
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As an advisor, I take the position that in writing a proposal:

(a) there should be a plan.
(b) it should be carefully structured.
(c) there are minimum essentials which every proposal should contain.
Proposal Components

- Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study
  Statement of Problem, Research Question, Hypothesis
- Chapter 2: Review of the Literature
- Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework
- Chapter 4: Research Methodology
CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study explains:
(1) What is the problem area of study?
(2) Why is this study being planned?
(3) What are the expected benefits of exploring the problem?

Point-to-Note: Common Errors in Introduction to the Study
- Tedious and lengthy details
- Failure to get the point due to engaging in grand generalizations
- Use of unnecessary technical language
- Use of extensive references and quotations
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Statement of the Problem
A definition of what the researcher proposes to do.

Point-to-Note: Although there are divergences of opinions about the statement of the problem, it is advisable to introduce the theory of your study within the context of the statement of the problem.
Figure 2: Diagram of the Functions of the Statement of the Problem
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Research Questions

- Should be carefully constructed
- Should be directed towards outcomes that are foreshadowed by the literature and/or theory
- Should exhibit clarity and inclusiveness

Point-to-Note: It is advisable for students and advisors to interact throughout the development of the research questions and the proposal.
Hypotheses

Hypotheses start with the basic research question and develop a specific prediction about the nature of relationships between variables.

**Point-to-Note:** By specifying a prediction about the outcome, the hypothesis creates a bridge between the theoretical considerations that underlie the research question and the ensuing research process that is designed to produce the answer.
CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

- Helps you to become familiar with the theoretical background of the problem
- Helps you to assess the merits of the previous studies
- Helps you to avoid unintended duplications
- Helps you to justify the section on the problem
Figure 3: Relevant Literature to Understand the Research Hypotheses within the Topic

- Literature that does not relate to the investigation
- The next most relevant literature
- The most relevant literature
Figure 4 - ILLUSTRATIVE LINKAGES AMONG PROPOSAL COMPONENTS

Legend:
- Solid lines – Primary linkages
- Dashed lines – Secondary linkages
CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Framework

- Is very important for understanding the proposal.
- Is the precursor to the statement of the problem, research questions and/or hypotheses.

**Point-to-Note:** Theory allows the following questions to be answered:

- What guided the selection of these particular variables?
- Why did you select these particular research questions?
- What are the underlying mechanisms that may account for the predicted relationships you are hypothesizing?
Chapter 4

Methodology

This chapter on methodology will vary, depending on whether the subject for research is in the arts or in the sciences.

- *In the Arts*: Subjects for research in the arts usually require the analytic approach and the use of secondary sources.

- *In the Sciences*: The methodology will identify the specific procedures to be used and the conditions for testing.
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Meeting Reasonable Deadlines
Dissertation completion takes an average of 2 years depending upon the discipline.

Point-to-Note: The advisor and student should collaborate on constructing a time frame schedule.