

DISSERTATION PLANNING GUIDE

A structured roadmap for moving from topic development through final defense and completion.

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AN SBH DOCTORAL PLANNING WORKBOOK

Student: _____ Program / University: _____

Chair / Advisor: _____ Target Completion: _____

1. DISSERTATION ROADMAP & REQUIREMENTS

Start with your institution's process—not a generic dissertation timeline.

- ☐ Download the current dissertation handbook, templates, rubrics, and milestone requirements.
- ☐ List every formal milestone from topic/prospectus through final submission.
- ☐ Identify required committee roles and approval sequence.
- ☐ Record institutional review, ethics/IRB, formatting, defense, and repository requirements.
- ☐ Create target dates and realistic buffer time for reviews and revisions.
- ☐ Identify forms that accompany each milestone.
- ☐ Create one master dissertation folder and version-control system.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

2. PROBLEM, PURPOSE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Alignment is the foundation of a defensible study.

- ☐ Write the research problem in clear, researchable language.
- ☐ Define what is not known or what needs further investigation.
- ☐ Draft a purpose statement that directly responds to the problem.
- ☐ Develop research questions that can be answered by the proposed evidence.
- ☐ Confirm the population, setting, phenomenon/variables, and boundaries are consistent.
- ☐ Check terminology across the problem, purpose, and questions.
- ☐ Create an alignment table and update it as the study evolves.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

3. LITERATURE REVIEW PLAN

Build a literature system before the number of sources becomes difficult to manage.

- ☐ Define major concepts, search terms, synonyms, and database strategies.
- ☐ Follow program rules for currency, peer review, seminal works, and source types.
- ☐ Create a literature matrix with citation, purpose, method, sample, findings, limitations, and relevance.
- ☐ Organize literature by themes and scholarly conversations rather than individual authors.
- ☐ Track conflicting findings and methodological patterns.
- ☐ Identify where the literature supports the research problem.
- ☐ Schedule recurring literature updates through completion.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

4. FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

Your framework, questions, design, data collection, and analysis should tell one coherent methodological story.

- ☐ Clarify the theoretical or conceptual framework and its role in the study.
- ☐ Select a methodology and design appropriate to the research questions.
- ☐ Define the population and sampling approach.
- ☐ Establish inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- ☐ Determine data sources and collection procedures.
- ☐ Plan instruments, interview protocols, surveys, records, or other evidence as applicable.
- ☐ Define the analysis process before data collection when required.
- ☐ Address quality, validity/reliability, trustworthiness, bias, and researcher role as appropriate to the methodology.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

5. PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT & COMMITTEE REVIEW

Treat committee feedback as a managed workflow rather than scattered revisions.

- ☐ Create a chapter-by-chapter writing schedule.
- ☐ Use the official template from the beginning.
- ☐ Maintain a feedback tracker with comment, requested action, response, and completion status.
- ☐ Resolve conflicting or unclear feedback through appropriate committee communication.
- ☐ Check citations and references during drafting rather than at the end.
- ☐ Run an alignment review after major revisions.
- ☐ Keep dated versions and clearly identify the version submitted for review.
- ☐ Build review time into the schedule rather than assuming immediate turnaround.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

6. ETHICS / IRB & DATA COLLECTION READINESS

Do not begin recruitment or data collection until the required approvals are in place.

- ☐ Confirm whether IRB or another ethics review is required.
- ☐ Prepare recruitment materials, consent documents, permissions, and instruments.
- ☐ Verify data-storage, confidentiality, and retention procedures.
- ☐ Create participant or data-source tracking systems without exposing protected information.
- ☐ Pilot or field-test materials if required by the program/design.
- ☐ Prepare scheduling, recording, transcription, survey, or data-access logistics.
- ☐ Document the approved protocol and follow it consistently.
- ☐ Create a plan for protocol changes and required amendments.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

7. DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS MANAGEMENT

Good organization during data collection makes later analysis more defensible and less stressful.

- ☐ Track collection progress against the approved sample or data plan.
- ☐ Maintain secure backups and clear file naming.
- ☐ Document deviations, field notes, memos, and methodological decisions.
- ☐ Begin allowed organization/preparation promptly instead of letting data accumulate.
- ☐ Follow the approved analysis procedure consistently.
- ☐ Maintain an audit trail or analysis log where appropriate.
- ☐ Connect emerging findings back to each research question.
- ☐ Keep raw data, working files, and final analytic outputs clearly separated.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

8. FINDINGS, DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The final chapters should answer the study—not introduce a different one.

- ☐ Organize findings according to program expectations and research questions.
- ☐ Use evidence appropriate to the methodology to support findings.
- ☐ Distinguish findings from interpretation.
- ☐ Connect discussion back to literature and framework.
- ☐ Address unexpected or contradictory findings.
- ☐ State limitations accurately without undermining the entire study.
- ☐ Develop implications that are supported by the evidence.
- ☐ Make recommendations for practice and future research that follow from the study.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

9. DEFENSE PREPARATION

Prepare to explain the logic of the study, not memorize the manuscript.

- ☐ Re-read the exact manuscript version being defended.
- ☐ Build slides around problem, purpose, questions, method, findings, conclusions, implications, and required institutional elements.
- ☐ Create a question bank covering methodological decisions, limitations, findings, and implications.
- ☐ Practice aloud with a timer.
- ☐ Practice answering difficult questions without rushing.
- ☐ Test technology, backups, links, audio, camera, and screen sharing as applicable.
- ☐ Keep a clean manuscript and concise notes available.
- ☐ Plan how you will document required post-defense revisions.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

10. FINAL REVISIONS, SUBMISSION & COMPLETION

The defense may be the most visible milestone, but completion often includes several steps afterward.

- ☐ Record every required defense revision and who must approve it.
- ☐ Complete final formatting and institutional review requirements.
- ☐ Verify tables, figures, headings, references, appendices, and pagination.
- ☐ Complete required similarity, compliance, or publication checks.
- ☐ Obtain final committee/dean/program approvals as required.
- ☐ Submit to the institutional repository or publication platform when required.
- ☐ Complete graduation or degree-conferral paperwork and deadlines.
- ☐ Archive a clean final manuscript and supporting research records according to policy.

NOTES / NEXT ACTIONS

11. MASTER MILESTONE DASHBOARD

Topic / Prospectus: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Proposal: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Committee Approval: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

IRB / Ethics: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Data Collection: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Analysis: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Final Chapters: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Defense: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Final Revisions: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

Repository / Completion: Target _____ Actual _____ Status ☐ Not Started ☐ Active ☐ Complete

THIS WEEK'S THREE MOST IMPORTANT DISSERTATION ACTIONS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Academic-use notice: This guide provides general planning support. Your university's current dissertation handbook, committee direction, research ethics requirements, and academic-integrity policies control your study.