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Getting Started on the
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“The hardest part is getting the first foot out the door.” –Old runner’s proverb**Introduction¹**

Achieving *All But Dissertation* (ABD) status is a milestone of graduate school. This status is attained when a graduate student has completed coursework, passed exams, and maybe even named a committee. The only thing missing at this point is a completed dissertation—an extended, independent research project. ABD status is also a bit of a danger zone—it is the point at which most attrition occurs. How hard could it be to execute a brilliant study that makes an original contribution, and then write it up in concise and engaging prose in no more than 300 pages? Put that way, it seems like an intimidating process, and maybe it should not be a surprise that many students find it a challenge. But it need not be an insurmountable challenge.

Many students get stuck at this point because it is difficult to get started! In any subfield, there are so many unanswered questions, but at the same time so much interesting work has already been done; there are a seemingly infinite number of research approaches, but you only can choose one; and ultimately even if you have a supportive and directive advisor and committee, the work must be your own. It is perhaps no wonder that students have trouble even getting started. But it does not have to be intimidating, if you have the right tools and a good process with which to get started.

This chapter aims to help you get over that hump by giving you a template with which you can start your project. Although the discipline of political science is diverse, there are some basic principles that exist across all subfields, and thus a student in the dissertation process should consider them when getting started. While the format of your dissertation prospectus is ultimately determined by your advisor, committee, department, and/or university (see chapters 13 and 15 for additional information), the template suggested here could be used as a “first first draft” to share with your advisor in your early meetings.

First Principles of the Dissertation Process

There are three things to keep in mind as you begin the dissertation process. First, a dissertation is not just a list or description of research findings. It is a *narrative* of the way you framed an important research question—of how you set it up and how you are making a contribution. It is also a report of the techniques and results of your original research, with a description of the research design, methods, and findings. The narrative is a good place to start with a big project such as a dissertation, as you need to justify spending potentially years of your life dedicated to what is likely a narrow research question. In other words, you need to demonstrate that your project “matters” and you need to do this early on

in the process.

Second, it is a good idea to start with a relatively concise draft of what you hope to do; perhaps thinking of it as a proposal of a proposal may help. Expecting a fully formed prospectus or proposal to emerge the first time you try is a recipe for disaster. As many political scientists know, an incremental approach is a good strategy to achieve success. Thus, an early version of your thoughts, such as the one proposed here, should use succinctness as a guiding principle.

Third, the narrative is the most challenging aspect of the dissertation project, but it is crucial to stick with it: The only way to get to a completed written dissertation is to start writing and keep at it! It is so easy to set things down for a while to deal with other distractions—and then you find that three weeks have passed by and you have not thought about the project. The strategy and template proposed here breaks the various aspects of the dissertation project into manageable chunks (a “workflow”) so that you can plug away at one section at a time. You can also expand each section as you proceed, eventually building them into the prospectus format required by your program, and then into the dissertation chapters. (For additional tips and suggestions about the larger dissertation process, see chapter 15.)

The Narrative Template

Constructing the narrative requires the following components (the appendix contains a specific organizational outline). To stick with the principle of succinctness, each section contains specific length limits. In these beginning stages, try to keep within these limits; being able to express your project (relatively) briefly is crucial to building the narrative and makes things more manageable. There will be time to expand things as the project expands. At least in the beginning, use the suggested headings.

1. Here's My Question

Two to Four Paragraphs

This is the introduction. The first paragraph introduces the issue, providing the motivation for the study: why are you doing this project, and why should others think it interesting? The second paragraph states your central research question as clearly and simply as possible. After that statement, you can pose some important sub-questions. If you believe you need more than two paragraphs, you may use more, but be as concise as possible.

2. Here's Why Answering the Question Matters

Two to Four Paragraphs

In this section, discuss the reasons that the topic is of importance in practical and academic terms. For the practical side, use one to two paragraphs to describe what impact this research will have on the world. How could it possibly lead to policy change, a better society, or something along those lines? For the academic side, take one to two paragraphs to describe which academic tradition, subfield, and/or literature to which your research will contribute. What will you learn that is not already known? How will your work help to move the subfield forward?

3. Here's What We Know

Try to Limit to Eight Paragraphs

At a relatively high level, review the scholarly literature and, if needed, other publications and media related to your topic and question. What are the knowns and unknowns in the area? What research has been done in the past? The purpose of this section is not to exhaustively summarize every work ever written on the topic, but rather to build the contours of your question and point to a gap that needs to be filled. Remember that you are building a narrative here, meaning that in the next section you will frame your question as a puzzle that has yet to be answered. In your dissertation, potentially even in your pro-

spectus, you will expand this into a (relatively) exhaustive literature review, but for now keep your focus on the big picture, perhaps by focusing on the most influential works.²

4. Here's What We Need to Know

Two to Four Paragraphs

Building upon the previous section, identify the gaps in the literature, the puzzle that needs to be answered. Explain why the question you identified in the section, “here’s why answering the question matters,” is especially in need of answering and amenable to finding an answer. Be sure to connect the puzzle to the question. What is unknown that needs to be known? Do not be afraid to repeat or restate your question. Repetition is not always bad, particularly if it is in service of clarifying and connecting.

5. My Plan for Answering the Question

Five Paragraphs

In this section, describe the research approach you will take to close the gap you described in the previous section. Specifically address the following points with hypothetical or real examples from your research area, as sometimes an example can provide more clarity than the abstract reasoning. Examples can also help you think through complex challenges in your topic. The subsections are described below.

5a. Unit of Analysis

One Paragraph

Describe what kinds of events or action you will need to examine or observe to answer the question from the previous section. Are you examining an aggregate phenomenon or an individual one? Do you plan to focus on countries or people, or perhaps some other unit? If there are multiple levels of analysis, not that, but make sure you are clear in doing so. You should also provide the time period of the events or actions you plan to study. If you plan to examine them at a single point in time—if you plan a cross-sectional analysis—be sure to note this.

5b. Evidence Available

One Paragraph

Describe the kinds of evidence available to help you answer your question. In this context, “evidence” means much more than data, although it can be that, too. Other types of evidence include historical writing, mathematical theorems, and case studies. The need for evidence depends on the question you ask, your subfield, and the approach you plan to take. Think of this section as the realm of possibilities for your research project.

5c. Evidence to Collect

One Paragraph

Regardless of your question, subfield, or approach, you will need to collect some form of evidence, but you will not be able to collect all that exists. In other words, you will need to make choices. Use this section to select from the available evidence and justify your choices. You should consider your resource constraints, but it is important to remember that not all resource constraints are insurmountable, and you may not need to limit yourself just yet.

5d. Defend the Choice of Evidence

One Paragraph

Building upon the previous two sub-sections, explain why the evidence you chose is adequate to address the question. Provide some reasons why the specific evidence you intend to collect can be extrapolated to a more general understanding of the phenomenon you hope to explain. Do not dwell on potential shortcomings, rather make an affirmative case as to why your approach would be adequate.

5e. Analytic Technique

One Paragraph

Describe the analytical techniques that you will use to evaluate your evidence and answer your question. The technique you use necessarily depends upon the question you are addressing, the subfield or tradition in which you are working, and your inclination and resources. It is fair to say, though, that this section should rely upon your methods training, where the term “methods” is broadly defined to include approaches taken across all subfields. In other words, do not limit yourself.

Other Components

Other items to include in this initial draft include an outline of a Table of Contents, which will give you and your potential committee a good idea of what the organization of your dissertation. You should also draft up a Research Timeline that provides the dates by which you hope to complete the work. This is likely an aspirational document, subject to significant change, but as with everything else, it is a good idea to put things in writing to clarify things.

Once you compile the document described above, take it to a potential advisor or committee.³ It is important to note that the document described above is not a legally binding contract, to be approved by your committee and enforced by law. That is in some sense what a prospectus is supposed to be. Rather, the document described here, and outlined in the appendix, is a starting point for a constructive discussion about your project. Only with a written document such as this can you begin the journey ahead.

Below, please see the template for getting started on the narrative component of your project. Use this as a guide if you like.

Concluding Remarks

As far as ABD is concerned, it can be hard to get started on your dissertation, but once you begin, you'll be happy you did. Getting started and keeping the momentum going is easier when you have a plan and process in place that provides guidance. Hopefully, the plan and process outlined in this chapter will help you get that proverbial foot out the door.

Resources

1. Reference Management / Research / Writing Tools:

- Endnote: <https://endnote.com/>
- Mendeley: <https://www.mendeley.com/>
- Zotero: <https://www.zotero.org/>
- Scrivener: <https://www.literatureandlatte.com/>

2. Dissertation Proposal:

- Knopf, Jeffrey W. (2006). Doing a Literature Review. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(1), 127-132.
- May, Peter J. (2002). Constructing the Prospectus. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 34(4), 843-844.
- Most, Benjamin A. (1990). Getting Started on Political Research. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 23(4), 592-596.
- Rothman, Steven B. (2008). Comparatively Evaluating Potential Dissertation and Thesis Projects. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 41(2), 367-369.
- Useem, Bert. (1997). Choosing a Dissertation Topic. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 30(2), 213-216.

Appendix: Sample Template

Here is the suggested format for getting started on your dissertation:

1. Title page (including your name, affiliation, and date of the draft)
2. Here's my question (two to four paragraphs)
3. Here's why answering the question matters (two to four paragraphs)
4. Here's what we know (eight paragraphs)
5. Here's what we need to know (two to four paragraphs)
6. Here's my plan for answering the question (five paragraphs)
 - a. Unit of analysis
 - b. Evidence available
 - c. Evidence to collect
 - d. Defend the choice of evidence
 - e. Analytic technique
7. Outline a table of contents
8. Outline a research timeline through the dissertation defense
9. Bibliography or references cited page

Endnotes

- 1 The idea for this comes from Dave Robertson, Curator's Professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, who sadly passed away in October 2020. Dave was a productive and influential scholar, and a great mentor to many successful PhD students. He would give his students a two-page “tip sheet” to get started, and this is adapted from that. This chapter is dedicated to him.
- 2 If you haven't already, now is the time to start using a reference management tool like Zotero, Mendeley, or EndNote. Keep track of all you have read by entering the citation in your library as soon as you read it.
- 3 Whether you talk to potential advisors before setting out on this particular journey is your choice, and something you should discuss with your academic advisor and peers. See chapters 13 and 15 for additional information about selecting an advisor and consulting with your advisor during the dissertation phase of study.

