Dissertation and Thesis Writing for Social Science Research: A Practical Guide

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ABSTRACT

Dissertation and thesis writing is one among the scholarly pursuits that involves a number of writing skills and considerations that are used to report a research work and organize it in chapters based on the authorized research guidelines. This paper has shown how dissertation/thesis chapters, citations, references, and preliminaries i.e. declaration, certification, dedication, acknowledgement, copyright, abstract, table of contents, list of tables, list of figures, and acronyms and abbreviations should be appropriately written. It has also shown how supervision and certain ethical and professional issues should be considered for professional guidance, mastery of the topic and competence building among supervisees. Therefore, based on such descriptions, it is concluded that the writers of dissertations or theses should ensure that contents and contexts of the work are in logic, correctly cited, referenced and formatted based on institutional and APA research guidelines. They should also make sure they get in touch with their supervisors for professional guidance that cultivates writing and communication skills, mastery of the topic and professional competence. They should furthermore make sure they adhere to certain ethical and professional issues before, during and after writing the dissertations/theses.

1.0 MEANING OF DISSERTATION/THESIS

Dissertations and theses are actually referred to as academic writings necessitated for the award of postgraduate degrees i.e. Masters or Doctorate (PhD). They are produced out of field researches that are done topic-wise by matriculated students for the partial or full fulfillment of the requirements for the degree programme. Thus, put into documentation as reports of what is investigated, obtained, analyzed, tested, interpreted, discussed and proven through conclusions (Swales & Feak, 1994).

2.0 CHAPTERS AND CONTENTS OF DISSERTATIONS/THESES

Ever since dissertations/theses act as reports of field researches, they are put into five or six chapters that carries segments of information. The arrangement of the chapters is determined by acceptable formats as prescribed under university research guidelines or [APA] formats, thus enhancing commonality and unison during write-ups (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). The arrangement of the chapters of dissertations/theses begin with the introductory chapter known as *"Introduction"*. Herein, the writer needs to indicate necessary information as obtained from recent documented studies regarding the problem understudy and identify the puzzle. Then, proceed to briefly and magnificently state the existing problem and indicate research position out of what is known or little investigated. Thereafter, he/she needs to develop the purpose or objectives of the study and put/write them using action verbs i.e. *"to investigate", "to examine", "to explore", "to determine", "to develop" "to assess", "to find out or to discover"*, etc. Moreover, he/she needs to put/write research questions that indicate inquiries of what is intended to be studied. The kind of questions should be structured as open-ended, trying to seek *"the what", "the how", "the why", "the which" or "the when"*.

In the same introductory chapter, the writer/researcher needs to proceed to justify the significance of the study. The justification needs to indicate how the findings may contribute or be used by the agencies, organizations, readers, scholars, policy makers and government authorities to effect change and improvements. Thereafter, he/she needs to indicate the scope and limitation of the study. The scope should indicate the geographical coverage of the study (ward, district, region, country), time coverage (days, months, year) and content coverage (theories, models, empirical studies as documented in articles/books) and justify the reasons. For example, the study will be accomplished within a planned time of three months due to research permits and time set by the university for the project. Regarding limitation of the study, the writer/researcher needs to indicate the contexts and contents that will be/are put in the dissertation/theses in correspondence to the study objectives.

The next chapter is known as *"Literature Review"*. Herein, the writer/researcher needs to revise the published/authorized documents based on the existing theories and reported cases that indicate prevalence of the studied phenomenon. Thus, put into theoretical review and empirical review (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Under theoretical review, the writer/researcher needs to choose a theory, tell why the theory is chosen for the study and how does it inform the study. Under empirical review, the writer/researcher also needs to pinpoint and describe necessary concepts and ideas as documented in already-made researches and field reports The review should be done based on the objectives of the study, so as to distinctly inform the study and compare the existing knowledge (Rhoades, 2011). Thereafter, the writer/researcher needs to intelligently summarize the whole research ideas within a figure/diagram known as *"Conceptual Framework"*, so as to show causal-effect relationship of the research variables. Finally, the writer/researcher needs to indicate the knowledge gap as described out of the existing literatures based on context, theories, or methodologies regarding the studied phenomenon (Pan, 2016).

The third chapter in dissertations/theses is known as *"Research Methodology"* because it contains designs, data collection and analysis tools, targeted population and ethical issues that were considered during the field study. Herein, the writer/researcher needs to tell where is, how and why he/she chose and approached the area of the study. He/she needs to tell who constituted the population involved as respondents of the study and justify their participation. He/she needs to tell the techniques used to draw a sample size of respondents and justify the applicability. He/she needs to mention the instruments/tools like questionnaire, interview guides and assessment tools that were used for data collection and tell how they were structured to effect data collection. He/she needs to tell how data collection instruments were authentically predetermined to collect data (validity) and how the collected data tested reliable. He/she needs to tell how and why ethical issues like informed consent, respondents' freedom of participation, confidentiality, safety and legalization of the study were adhered before, during and after the study was done—these include seeking research permits from authorities, informing the respondents of what is to take place, asking their willingness to participate in the study and giving them freedom to withdraw regardless of any reasons, etc.

The forth chapter is known as *"Results and Discussion"* or *"Presentation of Findings"* depending on the guidelines of the institution or preference of the supervisory committee, which aims to either avoid repetitions of presented ideas or comprehensively present and interpret the findings. For those who opt to use five-chapter dissertation formats having *"Results and Discussion"* do present the findings based on the objective(s) then supplement by discussing how they similarly relate with already-made studies in the same chapter—presentation and discussion of each result is done in the corresponding paragraph(s). For those who opt to use six-chapter format do put the *"presentation of findings"* in chapter four and *"discussion of findings"* in chapter five. The presentation of findings is usually done in subsections having subtitles of findings that answer each objective of the study. It is also done based on the kinds of data obtained and analyzed. Thus, quantitative data are presented in tables showing their statistical inference i.e. frequencies, percentages, mean scores, standard deviations and correlation coefficients; while qualitative data are presented in quotes of the respondents' voices based on themes or content.

The fifth chapter is known as *"Discussion of Findings"*. Herein, the writer/researcher needs to critically compare the obtained findings with those already documented regarding the topic understudy. He/she should identify whether already documented findings relate or differ with current findings and justify the comparison. He/she should pinpoint how and why circumstances, customs, beliefs or any other significant factor(s) have contributed to the existence of the studied phenomena as similarly indicated by other documented studies. Thus, signifying the authenticity of current findings from those already documented and applicability based on the context of studied population.

The closing and sixth chapter is known as *"Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations"*. Herein, the writer/researcher needs to firstly shorten major parts of the dissertation/thesis i.e. research problem, objectives, literature reviews, methods and obtained results. The summary should straightforward enable the reader to capture general information of the whole work. Similarly, he/she needs to make conclusion by showing what or how the study has discovered based on overgeneralized context of the studied phenomenon and give recommendations that suites intervention, improvement or sustainability of the studied phenomenon.

3.0 PRELIMINARIES OF DISSERTATIONS/THESES

During the process of writing dissertation/thesis, the writer/researcher needs to page-wise put/arrange preliminaries i.e. declaration, certification, dedication, acknowledgement, copyright, abstract, table of contents, list of tables, list of figures, and acronyms and

abbreviations before writing chapter one. They are called preliminaries because they are put in introductory pages before the main work that appears from chapter one to chapter five/six, thus numbered using roman numerals.

In declaration, the writer/researcher needs to confidently affirm that he/she owns the work and has met required standards for research, thus signing to authenticate the statement. In certification, the writer/researcher needs to tell that the work has been under supervision of specific named supervisor(s) who have thoroughly revised and therefore recommend it to be accepted by the institution through signing. In dedication, the writer/researcher indicate to whom does he/she give the dissertation due to certain reason or purpose i.e. a person either alive or dead, group of people or institution. In acknowledgement, the writer/researcher needs to briefly express thanks and appreciate whoever assisted him/her to finalize the study i.e. financial/monetary support, ethical recommendations, proofreading the work, prayers and encouragement, etc. In copyright, the writer/researcher needs to mention who have authority over the document on matters of producing, photocopying, printing or publishing in any version under profit or non-profit terms. In abstract, the writer/researcher needs to precisely condense the work in one page by indicating the objectives of the study, methods and instruments used for data collection, data analysis and presentation, major points/themes of the obtained results/findings, and conclusion and recommendations of the study.

In the same preliminaries, the writer/researcher needs to put table of contents that show headings and subheadings of all contents in dissertation/thesis page-wise. He/she needs to put the list of tables used to present certain statistical data that appear in the contents i.e. demographic information of respondents, etc. He/she needs to put the list of figures showing the figures drawn in the contents page-wise i.e. the figure of conceptual/theoretical framework, etc. Finally, he/she needs to put the list of acronyms and abbreviations of long-terms as used to mean/refer certain concepts and phrases i.e. NAM for Non Aliened Movement, APA for American Psychological Association, etc.

4.0 CITATIONS AND REFERENCES OF DISSERTATIONS/THESES UNDER SOCIAL SCIENCE

Dissertation/thesis writing without citations lowers the credibility of the research because most of the presented ideas might be irrelevant, outdated, or less informed compared to how they need to be. Instead, dissertation/thesis writing should involve citations because they do support the arguments of the writer/researcher as documented by other scholars and do inform the readers about cited materials for further readings as per their interests (Swart, 2019). Alongside, citations that are usually put in the dissertations/theses are from published journal articles, project reports, professional books, academic research reports, reviewed papers, conference proceedings, or web resources (Kayongo & Helm, 2012; Gunasekera, 2013).

In social science, citations are written following authorized referencing styles/formats under Harvard, Vancouver or American Psychological Association [APA] Referencing Guides based on released editions. As described in the referencing guides, the writer/researcher needs to know which items are put in a single citation based on the kind of cited document and how to differentiate each based on common used style i.e. Chicago, Harvard, APA, or Vancouver. Citations are grouped depending on their types and put in different ways depending on how the context is expressed. Typologically, there are direct citations, block citations and paraphrase citations that may be put using footnotes, endnotes, or name and year method. The direct citations refer to certain author's ideas that are quoted and used in the work to substantiate the expressed context. The block citations refer to certain author's ideas that are copied and separately put in a quote of sentences, so as to not alter the original wording and meaning as documented. The paraphrase citations refer to certain author's ideas that are rephrased by the writer/researcher on his/her own language or words, so as to argue about the expressed context without alteration of the meaning (Hyland, 1999; Borg, 2000).

Direct Citation can be put as follows:
According to Mugane et al. (2023), the lifestyle of taking alcohol affects social and family interactions once not intervened or Mugane et al. (2023) indicate that the lifestyle of taking alcohol do affect social and family interactions.

Block Citation can be put as follows:
Regarding the lifestyle of using alcohol, Mugane et al. (2023) says:

> "Alcohol use has nowadays enclosed adolescents due to peer influence, less purchasing restrictions, cheapness and affordability of accessing alcoholic substances. The use of alcohol is proven to affect social and family interactions."

Paraphrase Citation can be put as follows:
Alcohol use is a psychological disorder that mostly affect adolescents and enhances social and family problems. The use is also said to lower intimacy and hinder interactions (Mugane et al., 2023).

Figure 1: Illustration of the types of citations based on APA research guidelines

During dissertation/thesis writing, citations are put differently to appear in different positions through the use of narrative, parenthesis and in-text citation methods. Under narrative citation method, the author's surname and year of publication are used or put to account the ideas in correspondence to the studied variables. For parenthetical citation method, the author's surname and year of publication are used or put at the end of the quote or statement that is rephrased to contextualize the studied variables. For in-text citation method, the author's surname and year of publication are put in between of the contexts in order to differentiate and uniquely indicate the ideas based on their sources (Thompson, 2000).

All citations appearing in the dissertation/thesis are considered as references that the writer/researcher used to contextualize the study. They are supposed to be put in their fullness so as to assist the readers to capture basic information of the cited documents. Thus, formally listed in the last page(s) after chapter five or six of the dissertations/theses. The list of references is often arranged in alphabetical order based on the surnames that appears in the beginning of each reference having surname of the author(s), year of publications, title of the document, name of the publisher, place and area of the publisher (for books), volume and issue number (for articles), page numbers, digital online identifiers (DOI) for articles (Beile, Boote & Killingsworth, 2003; Hofstee, 2006).

Reference of a Book needs to include:
Author's Surname, Initials of other author's names. (year). Title of the book. Area, City: Publisher.

Reference of Article needs to include:
Author's Surname, Initials of other author's names. (year). Title of the article. *Journal's name, volume number*(issue number), page numbers. DOI

Reference of a document accessed online needs to include:
Author's Surname, Initials of other author's names. (year). Title of the document. [accessed on day, month, year] from webpage link (https//:).

Reference of dissertation/thesis needs to include:
Author's Surname, Initials of other author's names. (year). Title of the dissertation/thesis work. (degree level). University.

Figure 2: Illustration of the kinds of references based on APA research guidelines

5.0 SUPERVISION DURING DISSERTATION/THESIS WRITING

Supervision during dissertation/thesis writing may be referred to as a persistent-ending action that is associated with instructions, guidance, mentorship, critical inquiries and professional advices given to the supervisee so as to polish the work and meet required academic standards (Lee, 2019). It demands two parties (supervisor and supervisee) to establish common bases that would initiate supervisory relationship and sustain it through integration of appointments, events and professional inputs (Tahir et al., 2012). The established supervisory relationship is also expected to last long depending on either level of the programme or time limit set for the dissertation/thesis writing—it usually takes three to six years for PhD programmes and six months to 2 years for Masters programmes.

Supervision is meant to assist students to get professional assistance in research practices i.e. proposal preparation, development of authentic research tools for data collection, obtaining respondents through the use respective sampling technique(s), adherence to ethical issues for research, data analysis and interpretation, and writing research report in form of dissertation/thesis (Britton et al., 1975; Lee, 2007). Throughout supervision, both supervisor(s) and supervisee are obligated to regularly meet either in person or through online platforms like Zoom/Google meeting, so as to assess the progress and discuss the needful. The meetings should be done after the supervisees have submitted their dissertations to supervisor(s) for critical revisions, examinations and assessments of the contents and formats. They should also be done after the supervisor(s) have identified professional errors and misconceptions, thus wanting to physically meet the supervisee in order to help him/her to sharpen his/her writing skills and polish the work (Dong, 1996; McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

During supervision, the supervisee is expected to fetch competences out of supervisors' comments, advices, and critiques. He/she should be positive and eager to unlearn the old know-how's and learn new insights for professional advancement and successful completion of the dissertation/thesis write-up. He/she is supposed to cultivate and show acceptable morals and be cooperative, advice taker, effective communicator and hardworking in doing the needful as instructed or advised by the supervisor(s). On the other hand, supervisor(s) should respond by adhering to supervisory ethics and professionally help the supervisee to cultivate writing and communication skills, mastery of the topic and professional competence—this might be through tasking the supervisee, giving

him/her chances of presenting the contents before letting him/her to go in front of research or viva-voce panel, and showing him/her how to do the needful (Alfonso & Firth, 1990).

6.0 ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS DURING DISSERTATION/THESIS WRITING

There are ethical and professional issues that are obligated to be considered by the writer/researcher before, during and after writing dissertation/thesis. The following are the ethical and professional considerations as subsequently presented in subtitles.

6.1 Ethical and Professional Considerations before Writing Dissertation/Thesis

Before writing dissertation/thesis one should make sure that data collection, analysis and interpretation is satisfactorily done based on the research objectives. The writer/researcher should make sure that he/she has collected data for each research objective through the use of appropriate methods and instruments, so as to provide details that answers the objective(s). Thereafter, the writer/researcher should run data analysis by sorting, coding and providing statistical inferences (frequencies, mean scores, standard deviations and coefficients) or identifying major themes and contexts. Under sorting data, the writer/researcher is obligated to select the needed data and categorize and arrange them in subsections i.e. demographic information of respondents and those covering objective(s). After analysis, he/she should end by giving interpretation of each data unit through showing their significance or implication. Hence, throughout, the writer/researcher should make sure he/she avoids forgery and manipulation of data and results, so as to authentically preserve their reliability and relevancy (Roberts, 2010; Balmer & Murcott, 2020).

6.2 Ethical and Professional Considerations when Writing Dissertation/Thesis

When writing dissertation/thesis one should make sure that he/she puts clarification and discussion of contents in simple present tense and reporting speech. He/she should also ensure that quotes and rephrased concepts/ideas are well cited and written in researcher's own language/wording so as to avoid duplication and plagiarism. On the other hand, the writer/researcher should make sure that the results/findings are presented without alteration of their statistical inferences (quantitative data) or namelessness approach through pseudo-naming the respondents' voices (qualitative data). The writer/researcher should furthermore make sure he/she organizes the work as described by institutional guidelines and put correct spacing, margins and punctuations throughout. Finally, the writer/researcher should make sure that he/she puts the appendices that include copies of data collection instruments i.e. questionnaires or interview guides, together with research permits and introductory letters given by the authorities (Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012).

6.3 Ethical and Professional Considerations after Writing Dissertation/Thesis

After completing to write all chapters, preliminaries, reference and appendices, the writer/researcher should send the work for editorial services i.e. grammar checking and content proofreading, so as to make it readable and eligible to be published. After completing editorial issues, he/she should print copies of the final version of work and secure signatures from the supervisor(s) to legalize the dissertation/thesis, then similarly sign on declaration page to justify the ownership of the work. Thereafter, he/she is required to bind the copies of dissertation/thesis in form books as instructed by respective institution and submit binded books to the faculty and other specified departments i.e. libraries or directorates for academic records.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the contents of this work, it is clearly described that writers of dissertations or theses should ensure that contents and contexts of the work are in logic, correctly cited, referenced and formatted based on institutional and APA research guidelines. They should also make sure they get in touch with their supervisors for professional guidance that cultivates writing and communication skills, mastery of the topic and professional competence. They should furthermore make sure they adhere to certain ethical and professional issues before, during and after writing the dissertations/theses. Therefore, dissertation/thesis writing should not be taken for granted because it is one among the scholarly pursuits that is backed up by a number of skills and considerations for dissemination of knowledge.

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