

Review of  
*Rudestam, Kjell E., Newton, Rae R. (1992). Surviving Your Dissertation: A  
Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process. Sage Publications.*

Rudestam and Newton's book opens with a brief anecdote of a Zen Buddhist who led a group of monks into a dark forest. After realizing they seemed to be lost, one monk asked the leader what their destination was. The leader replied "To the deepest, darkest part of the forest, so that we can all find our way out together."<sup>1</sup> The authors compare this journey to the path that students must follow with their committees on their way to achieving their doctoral degree. They note that a particular sticking point for many is the leap from application to theory that underlies the doctoral process.

In this first chapter, the authors also introduce the Research Wheel, which reinforces the notion "that research is not linear but a recursive cycle of steps that are repeated over time."<sup>2</sup> The Research Wheel begins with empirical observation, which leads to proposition, conceptual framework, research questions/hypothesis, then branches back to empirical observation, or data collection, to data analysis, and back to conceptual framework. It illustrates the iterative refinement process that underlies the dissertation process.

The second chapter introduces approaches to selecting a dissertation topic. It is interesting to see the authors steer students clear of selecting topics that relate to an emotional incident in their lives or to topics that they have specific outcomes that they wish to prove. The need for objectivity is clear in the dissertation process, yet, the fact that the authors found it necessary to steer students clear of these two pitfalls indicates how common they are. Chapter three discusses quantitative versus qualitative methods. The authors suggest that a combination of the two often work the best, giving the example of a researcher who invited subjects to her home to fill out a survey, followed by an in-depth discussion.<sup>3</sup> The concept of a "theoretical dissertation" is also introduced, in which a theory is developed from the existing literature rather than from new data collection.

Chapter four addresses the literature review, including such tips as being comprehensive in reviewing material, but selective in reporting it. It is interesting that the authors suggest that students avoid statements like "Jones found..." when citing an author, since that "defer[s] to the authority of others."<sup>4</sup> Rather, the student should treat the literature as simply a collection of other opinions on the topic that is to be considered together and in the context of the student's work as supporting statements, rather than authoritative

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<sup>1</sup> P. 3

<sup>2</sup> P. 5

<sup>3</sup> P. 40

<sup>4</sup> P. 48

affidavits. The distinction between “long shots” and “short shots” is also drawn, in which long shots are background material that must be treated at only the most cursory level, addressed to show that the student has read the relevant material, but not covered in significant detail. Short shots, on the other hand, refer to the crux of the supporting literature and must be far more thoroughly covered.<sup>5</sup>

The methods chapter, addressed in chapter five, is one of the more important chapters in the dissertation in that it lays the critical foundation in which the data and findings are interpreted. The methods chapter must cover such topics as sample selection and overall sample design and a discussion of the characteristics of measurement instruments used for survey-based data collection. It is usually best to use an existing instrument for data collection which has been thoroughly tested and its assumptions well understood, but sometimes modifications are necessary, or even the design of an entirely new instrument. Modifying existing instruments can be dangerous in that the removal or modification of even a single question can render certain expected norms invalid and skew the results of the instrument. When utilizing unusual techniques (the authors give an example of a student using medical records as his data source)<sup>6</sup> it is important to acknowledge the departure from traditional data sources and cite relevant literature that supports that the use of this technique will render valid results.

Chapter five also discusses the importance of detailing procedures and data analysis techniques used, and justifying any unusual approaches. The chapter concludes by suggesting that students include a “Limitations and Delimitations”<sup>7</sup> section in their dissertation. Delimitations are restrictions on the study purposely imposed by the author (such as restricting a population to only males since a larger sample size of males was available as opposed to females), while limitations refer to restrictions out of the author’s control, such as only being able to sample a small portion of a particular population.

The results section of empirical studies are the focus of chapter six, which instructs students to present only factual data in the results section, and leave the majority of the interpretation to the discussion section to maintain a clean separation between the two portions of the dissertation. The authors devote an entire section to discussing formatting and presentation, such as when to use a table instead of a graph, what kind of placeholder to use in empty table cells, and how to include annotations to data. The rest of the chapter is devoted to examples of different types of techniques such as ANOVA and regression analysis, how to interpret the results from those techniques, and how to present them in the dissertation.

The next section of the book deals briefly with the discussion section of the dissertation, examining ways to “move beyond the data and integrate creatively the results of your study with existing theory and research.”<sup>8</sup> The authors note that there are not strong

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<sup>5</sup> P. 51

<sup>6</sup> P. 70

<sup>7</sup> P. 74

<sup>8</sup> P. 121

guidelines for the format of this section and they spend only a few pages with various suggestions.

Chapters eight and nine address issues of working with committees and writing styles. While committees should ideally be a united voice of support guiding the student along his or her path to completion, in reality committees are only human, and the student is left to many decisions on his/her own. Emotional issues can also become significant obstacles, as students will often find blows to their self-esteem lying around every corner and must be able to navigate uncharted waters, knowing when it is time to give up on a particular approach and try something new, or forge ahead. Finally, the ordeal of the oral defense is briefly covered.

A dissertation is ultimately a very large body of written work describing the research undertaken, and so it is very important that a student have a firm mastery of the scholarly writing process in order to cope with the extremely large scope of the dissertation. The chapter starts off with a discussion of how formal schooling teaches students to distance themselves from their writing, to speak in a formal tone rather than first-person narrative, but that in a dissertation, the student must strike a strong balance in writing styles and should write however is natural, editing to required form later on. Iterative revision and other standard practices are covered in this chapter, touching on the key areas that many students find problematic. The chapter concludes with 12 helpful hints for the writing process, revolving around the notion of writing the initial first draft in common-language form using a first-person voice to make the writing process more natural, and then iteratively refining the text to the formal voice required of the finished product.

This 1992 book predates the Internet era, but the personal computer and electronic literature searches still find their place in Chapter ten, covering everything from using CD-ROM databases for literature reviews to desktop computer database programs for reference management. The authors also discuss the use of statistical software such as SPSS and SAS in the personal computer environment and make recommendations on the type of computer hardware a student might need to support their dissertation process.

The book closes with a chapter on style, such as adopting MLA formatting guidelines, and one on ethical consent and related issues in the data collection phase, though the primary focus is on ethical issues surrounding psychology experiments, which is the area of study of the authors.

Overall the book is very easy to read and provides a thoughtful discussion and useful guide to the dissertation process.