

# Comparatively Evaluating Potential Dissertation and Thesis Projects

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Graduate students suffer from many pressures when writing a dissertation. Deadlines loom, jobs are highly competitive, publishing is always a bonus, and these are often combined with outside research, teaching fellowships, or other occupations. In order to finish a quality dissertation without too much wasted time or effort it is useful for students to begin early and to think hard about their projects in a variety of ways. Students may have a broad conceptual interest or field interest without a focused and tractable project. In addition to the normal practice of discussing potential projects with advisors and mentors, there are several ways to evaluate potential projects that may be overlooked. This essay helps bring a good dissertation project to the front of several potential ideas a student might have by describing several characteristics for comparison across topics. In addition, this essay provides a rubric by which students can develop and discuss a project with faculty and colleagues. Without a doubt, one of the most important aspects of preparing a dissertation project is to discuss that project with faculty mentors and potential committee members (Banesh 2001). Between these discussions, or before the first discussion of potential projects, students can spend considerable time thinking about various ideas for their thesis or dissertation. Students approaching their project systematically may have many projects they are considering and wish to narrow down those projects to a manageable few before discussing them with advisors. As a first time dissertation writer, however, most graduate students are unaware of criteria that can be used to

evaluate and compare their ideas objectively so they can compare several project ideas and narrow down the field. The criteria described here combine and extend other criteria previously developed, such as developing questions that are important in the real world and those that contribute to scholarly literature (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). The criteria described below were developed specifically for dissertation projects, but are also very useful for students writing theses for other purposes such as undergraduate senior projects. The guide provided here should enable students to compare several potential ideas objectively to begin to find a viable project. Although the initial development of a thesis project based on a student's theoretical or empirical interests is mostly idiosyncratic and personal (See King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Van Evera 1997), once a student's interests emerge there are some common ways to objectively evaluate several dissertation projects. This essay helps students develop several ways to think about their dissertation projects and create a rubric so that several projects can be evaluated on comparable terms.

The essay does not discuss writing techniques or the stages necessary to completing a dissertation project. There is extensive literature on writing dissertations and getting through the writing stages (e.g., Rudestam and Newton 2001). This essay discusses the often unattended to area of project development through an explanation of several criteria that can aid students in the development of their projects. By no means is this essay intended to replace student interaction with faculty regarding their dissertation project. Instead, the essay complements these discussions by preparing graduate students with ways to begin to evaluate several projects in a systematic way. The essay provides guidelines to help focus a project and should be taken as a whole, not as steps in the research process. After describing all the elements within this essay, the

project itself and the demands required of the researcher to complete the project will become clearer. The criteria described below can be followed in conjunction with the guide-sheet in Figure 1.<sup>1</sup>

Before several projects can be evaluated, students must have a reasonable command of the literature and theoretical and empirical questions that are not answered adequately in their field. Students who have such extensive knowledge most likely have several ideas that are viable thesis projects, but they may also vary according to the criteria examined below. One way to begin to solidify the project is to generate a *project title* and a short *summary* (Brown 2005). By doing this, the student will formulate some idea of what the dissertation will look like, a good place to start when developing and evaluating the dissertation idea. Often it is necessary to quickly describe the project to colleagues at conferences or in hallways, and the title serves as a small, pithy description. Of course, the title can and probably will change throughout the project's research and writing.

Writing a short, one-paragraph *summary* of the project provides a slightly longer project description. Adding a little more information than the title helps students remember the project's emphasis and a few ideas regarding its direction or focus. Having a short statement about the dissertation is useful because many people the student talks to will not have a deep interest in the project. The summary serves to engage those that do show interest in the one-sentence title description. This summary does not need to resemble an abstract because not all of the details of the project may be worked out. In addition to this summary, it is a good idea for the student to describe their *personal interest* in the project. The project will consume half or more of the time the student spends in graduate school and it is necessary to have a strong interest in the project. The more interesting the project is to the researcher,

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**Figure 1**  
**Guide for Evaluating Dissertation Topics**

<b>Dissertation Title</b>		What's the first title for your project that will give it initial direction?
<b>Summary</b>		How would you describe the project to a colleague during a two-minute elevator ride or other chance encounter?
<b>Variables</b>	<b>IV</b>	What is the primary cause of the behavior or event you would like to explain?
	<b>Other IV's</b>	What are other plausible causes of the behavior?
	<b>DV</b>	What is it that the project will try to explain?
<b>Your Interest</b>		Why do you want to do this project?
<b>Tractability</b>	<b>Reach</b>	How big or how small is the project?
	<b>Data Availability</b>	Do you have to generate new data?
	<b>Problem Clarity</b>	Is the problem you are addressing clear?
<b>Methods</b>		What methods do you need to learn?
<b>So What?</b>		Why is this project important for the field?
<b>Problems</b>		What problems might you face?
<b>Future Projects?</b>		What future projects could come from working on this one?
<b>Job Prospects</b>		How will this project prepare you for the job market?
<b>Resonance with Organ. Culture</b>		How well does this project sit within the organization of your current university?
<b>Committee Member Support?</b>		How do your potential committee members feel about the project?

the more likely that interest can be communicated to audiences at job talks and other presentations. Later on in the research process, during an especially difficult or frustrating period, it may be useful to return to this description of interest and the basic summaries to focus attention on why the project is important.

It is also worth considering the likely *variables* in the dissertation, if any. There are three important sets of variables that should concern students at the early stage: the independent variable of interest, the dependent variable of interest, and other independent variables (controls). By beginning to specify each set in a simple, conceptual way, the project begins to take shape around what will be explained and what will explain it. Concept building need not be complex at this stage, and these basics can be further developed later. The basic conceptualization of variables is also important for knowing whether data are available for the dissertation.

The *tractability* of the research, consisting of reach, data availability, and problem clarity (Useem 1997), will greatly affect the ability of the student to finish the project in a reasonable time. Reach concerns the degree to which the paper seeks new ground. Is it a big idea that no one has worked on yet? Is the argument going against all mainstream ideas in a field? Does the project reach closely by evaluating a simple causal

claim or case study? A project that has relatively short reach may be more tractable than research that attempts to open up a completely new area of study that has received little if any attention in the past; however, the former may have less of an impact than longer reaching projects. Data availability is very important for the tractability of a project. Extensive archival or field research will add considerable time to the project. Problem clarity refers to how well the problem has been defined and explored already. If the dissertation is breaking new ground into an area not researched, the problems and questions encountered may be quite complex. On the other hand, projects with a larger literature may be easier to handle because others have already defined terms and created a standard ground from which new projects emerge.

The *methods* description is also important for tractability. Although only one or a few sentences is necessary, it is important to know whether the student will need to learn new research methods and what those methods might entail. Training on methods may be costly or time consuming, especially if it requires a trip to a special institute. Although much of the methodological training students receive occurs earlier in graduate programs, some more specialized training may be required during the early part of working on the project. Learning OLS regression techniques in a methods

course early in graduate school may not be sufficient if the type of data and questions require the use of logit or probit techniques.

*So What?* This section is of vital importance to any project idea. The student should reflect on what this dissertation project will mean to a larger audience. Is it a single case study that will be of interest to a smaller group of scholars? Is it a theoretical piece that might have wide-spread application across subdivisions in a particular field? Some reflection on how the project will fit within the larger context of the graduate student's discipline is vital for evaluative purposes and for job prospects in the future. A project that can speak to a large audience is much more likely to attract attention from scholars in other fields and across disciplines, which can increase one's job prospects. This section assists students in understanding how a particular project might be marketed to the larger audience outside their own particular sub-discipline.

The last few sections should be written regarding *problems* and possible *future projects* from the dissertation. It is a good idea to start thinking about some problems the graduate student might encounter when writing and researching the project as well as some side projects that might emerge. It is very likely that problems will arise that were not considered before beginning, but considering some possible problems may help to minimize them. A good dissertation project will spawn various other side projects that may be of interest after completing the dissertation research itself. During the later stages of research as well, some conference papers or publishable articles may emerge from the dissertation work. Employers will usually look positively on publishing from chapters reformatted for journals while writing a dissertation (Wuffle 1989). Any publication is better than none, and thinking about possible extensions and publications that may emerge from the dissertation can be done early on while developing and comparing potential projects.

The two final sections involve *resonance* within the student's university and among faculty advisors or committee members (Useem 1997). Since the graduate student has spent considerable time working with faculty in a department, none of the topics should fall completely outside the academic culture and

preferences of faculty. However, it is possible that some topics have greater resonance with faculty because they relate more closely with some of their personal expertise than other projects. These projects may get more attention from faculty who have a greater interest in the work. The same holds true for the thesis committee. Approaching each of the potential committee members with the above criteria laid out may be a helpful starting point for discussions on whether the project falls within their interest and expertise. In some cases, students must find committee members outside their department or field due to their department or university's requirements. These criteria may be especially helpful for the prospective committee member to get a sense of the project before committing as a committee member.

After writing down all this information for all the graduate student's ideas, the student will be in a good place to begin evaluating dissertation options. After examining all of the criteria described above for several potential project ideas, the student can examine the different characteristics of each project to determine which ones will present well, are interesting to the student, will be tractable, and have good job prospects relative to the others. Of course there will always be trade-offs. Some more tractable projects, which could be completed more quickly, may have less impact and fewer future projects or job prospects. Other projects with a higher payoff may never get finished if they are too complex and far-reaching. Once the student has a clearer idea of what each project demands and

how each project may contribute to their discipline and the wider academic community, the student will be in a better position to discuss the project with advisors and colleagues. These criteria are only starting points for a discussion with others, and will not decisively help a student decide which project will be most suitable. Discussing the projects with others is always a great way to discover new issues and benefits from any project. Graduate students should talk with as many people as possible and use these criteria as a guide when discussing the project and writing the prospectus. The end result will likely be a much better dissertation completed within a reasonable amount of time.

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## Notes

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1. An electronic version of the guide-sheet that can be filled in as the student progresses with their idea is available from [www.uoregon.edu/~srothma1/images/DissertationEvalWorksheet.xls](http://www.uoregon.edu/~srothma1/images/DissertationEvalWorksheet.xls) or by contacting the author.

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## Further Reading on Writing Dissertations