

Dissertation Proposal Outline

Below is a basic outline of the dissertation proposal. These guidelines represent minimum requirements only. There may be variations in format and content based on discussion with your research advisor. You should thus meet with your research advisor to discuss their expectations and requirements above and beyond what is included in this document.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to state the problem to be studied and to discuss the significance of the research to Counseling Psychology. Below are proposed headings. Proposed page limit: 7-10 pages.

Overview of the Chapter

- Two to three paragraphs that describe the general problem, question, or theory driving the research.
- In this section, the student justifies the need for the study, briefly conveys how it is situated within the values (e.g., commitment to addressing individual or societal issues faced in our society; Gelso, Williams, & Fretz, 2014) and the literature of Counseling Psychology, and provides a framework to help the reader understand the rest of the chapter and the dissertation.

Body of the Introduction

- This section constitutes the bulk of the chapter. It should begin with a transition from the Overview.
- Throughout the chapter, describe relevant theories and constructs, provide a *brief* overview of the literature to be covered in the next chapter, and discuss in more detail the central question(s) underlying the dissertation.
- Organize it with headings and subheadings, which are used as *signposts* to guide the reader through the chapter
 - For example, if the focus is on two theories, create a subheading for each.

The Present Research

- One to four paragraphs, depending on the level of detail.
- Describe the study and explain how it will answer the central question(s) motivating the research.
- Briefly mention the research questions and hypotheses.

Conclusion

- Single paragraph that summarizes the chapter and provides a bridge to the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review and critique of the key literature (theoretical and empirical) that is relevant to your study. It is also where you should convey how the dissertation is situated within the values and the literature of Counseling Psychology, in greater detail than in Ch. 1.

For the dissertation proposal, the Opening Paragraph and the Statement of the Problem (see below) should be written in essay format. The Body of the Literature Review may be written in essay format or, alternatively, it may be in the format of an *annotated bibliography*. For the dissertation defense, however, it is expected that the entire chapter will be written in essay format.

Proposed page limit for completed essay-format chapter: 20-40 pages.

Opening Paragraph

- Provide a description of the Review section, in terms of scope and the topics to be covered.
- Do not simply write something like: “In the following chapter, a review of the literature will be conducted. In particular, the significance of the dissertation will be situated within the values and literature of Counseling Psychology. Moreover, the major study variables will be explored. Finally, a statement of the problem will be provided.”
- Instead, be specific. For example: “In the following chapter, a review of the literature pertaining to the counseling experience of immigrant youth in the Southwest will be explored. First, there will be a discussion of how this topics fits within the values and literature of Counseling Psychology, particularly the pillars of social justice and multiculturalism that characterize the field. Next, a review of the major study variables—including immigration and acculturation, ethnic identity, and the borderland region—is presented...”
- The purpose is to orient and guide the reader to the chapter ahead.

Body of Literature Review

- This section constitutes the bulk of the chapter. It is recommended to begin with a discussion of the significance of the research and how the dissertation fits within the values and the literature of Counseling Psychology. This discussion should take, at a minimum, one full page. However, it is also possible to weave the discussion throughout the chapter, depending on how it is organized.
- Throughout the chapter, review the relevant literature by way of descriptive summaries and critiques of research findings and theoretical papers.
- Organize with headings and subheadings as appropriate.
- Be sure to provide an overview of the literature pertaining to the central constructs/variables of your study.
- Summarize the most relevant aspects of the literature and your critical observations as they pertain to the proposed study.
- Even in the annotated format, it should be made clear how each aspect of the literature relates back to the main purpose of the study.
- This chapter provides a transition between the literature review and your research questions.

Statement of the Problem

- Based on the literature reviewed, state the hypotheses and/or research questions that will be pursued in the dissertation.
- Provide justification for each. Typically, justification for each hypothesis or research question can take anywhere between one to three paragraphs.
- This section provides a bridge between the literature review and the Method section.

Chapter 3 – Method

Design Statement: In a short paragraph, describe the design of the study, including dependent and independent variables, if applicable. If multiple frameworks/designs (e.g., different qualitative approaches) for your study exist, provide a rationale for your choice.

Participants: Describe the sample, including approximate sample size and significant characteristics. Discuss sample size considerations appropriate for your design. For example, if you are conducting a study that uses hierarchical linear regression, include a power analysis (e.g., what is the estimated effect in the population and how many participants do you need to identify this effect?). If, on the other hand, you are conducting a qualitative study, discuss whether there are sample size considerations for your particular methodology (e.g., saturation in grounded theory) and epistemology (e.g., post-positivism, constructivism, etc.). Your research advisor can help you navigate these distinctions.

Measures: For quantitative studies, describe the conceptual and operational measures used in the study and your rationale for each instrument, including a discussion of advantages and disadvantages. Reliability and validity should be discussed, as well as the appropriateness and acceptability of all measures. Refer to relevant studies in the literature. If the proposal includes the development of a new measure or new items to tap various constructs, procedures for that development should be described in detail. Please note that for every measure, you will be expected to conduct analysis of internal consistency/reliability.

For qualitative studies, at a minimum, describe the data which will serve as the basis for analyses (e.g., participant interviews, journal entries, etc.). Depending on your particular methodology and epistemology, you may also need to discuss issues of trustworthiness and credibility of the data.

All measures/interview protocols should be attached in Appendices to the proposal. Be sure to seek permission to use measures that are not in the public domain, as the NMSU IRB will require that you provide proof that you are allowed to use the measures in your study.

Procedures: Describe how the study will be done, namely, the exact sequence of events. Enough detail should be provided so that another investigator could replicate the study and, perhaps more importantly, so that your dissertation committee can evaluate the feasibility of the dissertation. Describe method for selecting sample, any criteria for participation, the method of selection (randomization, volunteer, etc.), and if appropriate, minimum acceptable response rate. Include a discussion of how you will recruit participants and other important procedures (e.g., how you will conduct treatments, how you will do manipulation checks, etc.).

Data Analysis: The hypotheses and/or research questions should be copied from prior sections and the specific analysis for each should be detailed. Indicate the methods to be utilized and show how the proposed analysis is consistent with the objectives, hypotheses, type of data, design, sampling, etc.

- **Note:** The Data Analysis section later becomes its own chapter (Results).