

Planning Your Dissertation

Probably the most frequent questions students have about planning the dissertation is (a) what the scope should be and (b) what kind of research methodologies are acceptable. Because of the range of topics that clinical students focus on for their dissertation work, it is difficult to provide precise answers to these questions. Nevertheless, it is possible to provide some general guidance on these and related matters.

Students are responsible for understanding and adhering to the dissertation-related policies and procedures set out by both the School of Psychology and the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. These can be found at

<https://socialsciences.uottawa.ca/psychology/programs/policies-regulations/doctoral-thesis> and <https://www.uottawa.ca/graduate-studies/students/theses>

Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies defines the dissertation in the following way: “A doctoral thesis must make a significant contribution to knowledge in a field of study, embody the results of original investigation and analysis, and be of such quality as to merit publication.” This means that, when developing and defending the thesis proposal, a student is expected to be able to articulate the nature of the original contribution. With this in mind, it is important to recognize that the fact that something has not been studied before does not mean that studying it necessarily constitutes an original contribution to knowledge. Furthermore, unless some aspect of the topic being studied clearly relates to a feature of Canadian society, and the link between the topic and the feature of Canadian society is explicitly made, a Canadian replication of prior research, for its own sake, is not an original contribution to knowledge. Few students, at the beginning of their research, have a good sense of what an original contribution might be in their research area. The thesis supervisor is much better placed to know the viable options for doctoral research in the area. Therefore, it is most common for options for the thesis research to emerge from ongoing discussions between the student and the thesis supervisor.

Both the School of Psychology and Graduate and Doctoral Studies permit two types of doctoral theses: the monograph format and the thesis as a series of two or more articles. Essentially the monograph format presents the results of a single, large scale study; in contrast, the article format usually presents the results of two or more related studies that are similar in detail to manuscripts submitted for publication (in fact, published manuscripts can be included as part of this thesis option). More details on these options can be found at:

<https://www.uottawa.ca/graduate-studies/students/theses/writing> and details on the content of the thesis proposal can be found at <https://socialsciences.uottawa.ca/psychology/programs/policies-regulations/doctoral-thesis>

There is no simple answer to the question of what the appropriate scope for the thesis must be. The important factor is that it makes an original contribution to knowledge. Generally speaking though, most monograph dissertations written by clinical students are probably between 150 and 200 pages in length (inclusive of all material). With respect to the article format thesis, most written by clinical students include two to four studies, and must have general introduction and general discussion sections. Some clinical students have written an article format thesis based on a single large study. In such cases, the content of the single study is divided into multiple article length

manuscripts—similar to what would be done to submit for publication two or more manuscripts based on a single large study. The scope of the thesis, in either format, depends on the state of knowledge on the topic addressed in the thesis. Finally, as indicated in the various policies and procedures, the thesis committee has considerable input on the thesis. Establishing the size and scope of the thesis is truly a collaborative process in which the student, the thesis supervisor, and the thesis committee determine what is likely to constitute an original contribution to knowledge. Perhaps the best route to help you get a sense of the scope of a dissertation is to either ask your supervisor for copies of recent theses they have supervised or examine recent theses written by clinical students (available from <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/?locale=en>).

Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies can be appropriate for the doctoral thesis, depending, of course, on the state of knowledge in the field. It is also possible to use both types of methodologies, combined in one study or used independently in a series of studies. With respect to quantitative methods, depending on the state of knowledge in the field, correlational, quasi-experimental, and experimental designs may all be appropriate for a doctoral thesis. Likewise, scoping reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses can be suitable for doctoral theses. Students using these review methodologies would typically choose the article format although, if the scope of the meta-analysis warrants it, it may be possible to use the monograph format for these methodologies. Although doctoral research typically involves data collected by the student, the use of archival data may be appropriate for some doctoral theses.

Typically, major decisions about the particular methodologies chosen for the thesis are made by the student and thesis supervisor prior to establishing the thesis committee. Therefore, identification and selection of potential committee members should be made with these methodological decisions in mind—it is important to select members with knowledge of the research content and/or planned methodology/analyses. Subsequent consultations with committee members are very important to finalize the methodologies, assessment methods, data sources, and planned statistical analyses most appropriate for the planned thesis.

Regardless of the format chosen for the thesis, the planning, conduct, and presentation of the doctoral thesis is a multi-year task that requires substantial organization and effort. Students should expect to devote time to the various aspects of the thesis on a regular basis, at least several hours a week, every week. Many students try to have a specific day each week in which they focus on their research—although this may be possible at times in the program, it may be more productive and more realistic to plan to have several shorter periods throughout the week to work on the thesis. One critical aspect for successfully progressing with the thesis work is the development of a realistic timeline for attaining key milestones, such as approval of the thesis proposal, receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board to conduct the research, and the writing and submission of the thesis. Please work with your thesis supervisor to develop an appropriate timeline. In order to be useful, the timeline must take into account other program commitments, such as courses and practica, and predictable life events (e.g., vacation time). You might also want to develop specific timelines for your course requirements and practicum requirements in order to get a sense of your likely total workload each year. Please consult the following documents as they provide a timeline of progression through the program, based on whether you began the doctoral program before or after 2020 : https://socialsciences.uottawa.ca/psychology/sites/socialsciences.uottawa.ca.psychology/files/timeline_before_2020_eng.pdf and https://socialsciences.uottawa.ca/psychology/sites/socialsciences.uottawa.ca.psychology/files/timeline_after_2020_eng.pdf. This link from Graduate and Postdoctoral studies may also be helpful: <https://www.uottawa.ca/graduate-studies/students/thesis/writing/components-work-plan>.

As part of the thesis completion, it is expected that students will engage in dissemination activities. In other words, students will present their doctoral work at conferences and will submit their work to be published in peer-reviewed journals. It is expected that some of these dissemination activities will be completed prior to students defending their doctoral thesis.

There is a reason for this strong expectation that thesis research findings are disseminated in the various ways specified above. Dissemination is part of the agreement that a researcher enters into with a human participant. Participants give of themselves to contribute to research with the expectation that their contribution will advance knowledge. As such, it is an ethical obligation of researchers, including doctoral students, to disseminate their research findings to an appropriate audience.

It is easy to underestimate both the time necessary for completing various aspects of the thesis and the time necessary for the supervisor and committee members to review material and provide feedback. In particular, it is common for students to submit thesis proposal and final thesis documents to committee members in the summer, hoping for a meeting early in the fall for defending the proposal or the thesis itself. Please remember that this time period is one in which many faculty members take vacation, attend conventions, prepare grant proposals, and write manuscripts for submission to journals. Expecting a rapid turnaround time on your thesis materials may not be very realistic. Similarly, submitting materials to committee members at the beginning or the end of a term is also likely to result in delays, as these are typically periods of increased work demands for faculty members.

Elisa Romano, PhD., Sophie Lebel, Ph.D., Clinical Program Co-Directors

Updated: February 2019

Updated: August 2020

Updated: October 2021