# Dissertation Check List

## By Marilyn K. Simon and Jim Goes

Includes excerpts from Simon & Goes (2013), *Dissertation and Scholarly Research: Recipes for Success.* Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success LLC

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As longtime dissertation chairs, mentors, and committee members, we constantly see a number of common errors and problems in dissertation drafts.  Each one of these errors has the potential to halt your progress in dissertation development, either in the development stage, the quality review stage, or even at the university review level. This checklist was developed to help you avoid these problems, and in our selfish interests as well – to reduce the number of chapter or dissertation drafts that we receive that exhibit these chronic problems.

Once you move out of the development phase on your dissertation proposal, and submit your draft for review by your dissertation chair, mentor, or committee, use this checklist to verify that each of these quality elements are present or checked **BEFORE** you submit your draft for review.  Your committee will thank you, and proposal or final dissertation will move through the process MUCH more quickly!

**Before** you submit your dissertation to committee…. Check each of these items

| Item | Comment | Check |
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| **Abstract Content** | An abstract is a concise summary of a research study and a useful tool for others to have a clear grasp of the research that was conducted. Because on-line search databases typically contain only abstracts, it is extremely important to write a complete but concise description of your work to entice potential readers into obtaining a copy of the full paper.<br><br>An abstract consists of one paragraph and is **not** indented. The abstract includes summaries of the problem, purpose, methodology, conclusions, and results. The abstract should be concise and precise, and contain no redundancies or conflicting information. References and citations are not used in an abstract. An abstract should never be more than 350 words or one page, and some universities have much shorter word limits. An abstract (like the dissertation) is written in the past tense. | |
| **Abstract Form & Style** | Here are some form and style tips for the abstract:<br>A. limit the abstract to one *unindented* paragraph that does not exceed one page;<br>B. maintain the scholarly language;<br>C. keep the abstract concise, accurate, and readable;<br>D. use correct English;<br>E. ensure each sentence adds value to the reader's understanding of the research; and<br>F. use the full name of any acronym and include the acronym in parentheses.<br>Do not include references or citations in the abstract. Per APA 6.0 style, except at the start of a sentence, use numerals in the abstract, not written out numbers. The abstract, like the dissertation, is written in the **past** tense. | |
| **Alpha Versus p-value** | Note the difference between an alpha value and a p-value. Alpha (α) sets the standard for how extreme the data must be before the decision to reject the null hypothesis is made. The p-value indicates how extreme the data are. We compare the p-value with the alpha to determine whether the observed data are statistically significantly different from the null hypothesis. See http://statistics.about.com/od/Inferential-Statistics/a/What-Is-The-Difference-Between-Alpha-And-P-Values.htm | |

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| **Anthropomorphic Phrases and Language** | Avoid anthropomorphic phrases.  We see this problem constantly.  Anthropomorphism is the process of attributing human traits to inanimate objects.  This is ineffective because it often causes descriptions to be vague.  Instead of "Research shows that …", cite an author that reached a certain conclusion. Example: Simon (2013) found that students have difficulty with scholarly writing.  See here for more details: http://writingcenter.waldenu.edu/Documents/Scholarly-Writing/Anthropomorphisms.pdf | |
| **Assumptions** | You need to provide the reader with some assurance and justification that each assumption you made is reasonable and was *probably* true. To assume, for example, that participants answered honestly, you can explain how the identity of the participants were not revealed, confidentiality was preserved, and that the participants were volunteers who could withdraw from the study at any time with no ramifications. To assure the reader that the data collection instrument was able to get to the heart of the research problem and enable the researcher to answer the research questions, explain steps you took to make the instrument or measurement credible, such as a pilot study. | |
| **Case Studies** | Case study research is not limited to a single source of data, as in the use of a survey to carry out a quantitative descriptive study. In fact, good case studies benefit from multiple sources of evidence. You may use the following six sources of data in any combination, as well as related sources  such as focus groups (a variant of interviews), depending on what is available and for studying your case(s).<br><br>1. Direct observations (e.g., human actions or a physical environment),<br>2. Interviews (e.g., open-ended conversations with key participants),<br>3.  Archival records (e.g., student records),<br>4. Documents (e.g., newspaper articles, letters and e-mails, reports,<br>5.  Participant-observation (e.g., being identified as a researcher but also filling a real-life role in the scene being studied)<br>6. Physical artifacts (e.g., computer downloads of employees' or students' work). | |

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| **Chapter 5** | Chapter 5 *should not* be a rehash of results discussed in Chapter 4, but *should* include an in depth discussion section regarding what the results mean and help move the reader from the simple facts of the data analysis to the more general, theoretical, and contextual statements of the conclusions reached. The theoretical foundation of the study needs to be reconciled with the results of the study. How you dealt with disconfirming evidence needs to be clear and explicitly explained. | |
| **Confidentiality Versus Anonymity** | Know the difference between confidentiality and anonymity. Maintaining **confidentiality** of information collected from research participants means that only the investigator(s) or individuals on the research team can identify the responses of individual participants; and every effort is made to prevent anyone outside of the study from connecting individual participants with their responses.  To achieve this, provide pseudonyms or an elaborate coding system. **Anonymity** means either that no identifying information of individual participants (e.g., name, address, Email address, etc.) is collected or there is no way for anyone to link individual responses with participants' identities. | |
| **Current and Credible Sources** | The vast majority of your sources should be from peer reviewed publications published within a 5 year time frame from the date of dissertation completion. Studies that are considered "germinal" to the topic and problem can be used when stated as such. Always use the most current sources and data available, especially when framing a problem. | |
| **Definitions** | You must ensure that definitions provided in chapter 1 only are for unique or unusual connotations or concepts in the study. No definitions should be provided for terms that do not carry any unique connotation. Remember that consumers for the information in the dissertation are usually other researchers who are familiar with scholarly terms like validity and reliability. You do not need to define a policy such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). To support the use of a term, a scholarly reference is needed. The defined words should be listed alphabetically. | |
| **Demographic** | If you have interviewed a group of people for your study, consider | |

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| **Data** | inserting one demographic table in the beginning of Chapter 4 to help the reader understand key attributes of the participants of the study relative to the problem addressed. This could include demographics such as age, gender, years of experience, etc. The coding used for the participants should be in the first column. Subsequent columns should include factors relevant to your study and the problem investigated. | |
| **Dictionary and Encyclopedia Use** | Encyclopedias or dictionaries of any kind, including the very popular Wikipedia, dictionary.com, and Merriam Webster, are **not** regarded as primary sources and should not be cited or used in developing term papers or theses at the graduate or undergraduate level. They can, however, be useful to help gather some background information and to point the way to more reliable, peer reviewed sources. | |
| **Excessive Quotes** | Limit quotes to instances where the author uses a particularly striking turn of phrase, and where the precise meaning would be lost in a paraphrase. Use of excessive quotes makes it unclear what your own writing voice and original thoughts are. An unofficial rule is not more than 3 direct quotes in 10 pages.  Long, indented quotes should rarely if ever be used, and *only* if it is essential to hear the author's own words. | |
| **Explanation of Interview Question Formulation** | Make sure you explain in detail how the interview questions were formulated.  Perhaps you consulted the literature or constructed some type of map or chart that assured you that the context and specific meanings of the words used in the interview were not ambiguous, were culturally appropriate, and enabled you to answer the research questions and solve the problem framed. Perhaps you consulted with experts and had them complete a survey like VREP (Validation Rubric for Expert Panel) by Simon and White (2012). [http://dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Expert-ValidationXYZz.doc](http://dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Expert-ValidationXYZz.doc) | |
| **General Research Textbooks** | General methods textbooks, like those written by Creswell, help readers to 'understand' general social research methods and issues. However, you also need to consult methodological texts and peer-reviewed journal articles designed to elucidate the nuances of a specific methodology such as phenomenology, grounded theory, appreciative inquire, case study, etc. | |

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| **Headings** | In APA 6<sup>th</sup> formatting, the Introduction section does not get a heading, and headings are not indicated by letters or numbers. Levels of headings will depend upon the length and organization of your paper. Regardless, always begin with a level one heading and proceed to level two, etc. | |
| **Hypotheses** | The null and alternative hypotheses should be of the same format and completely complimentary.  If the null is: There is no relationship between X and Y, then the alternative would be: There is a relationship between X and Y. If the alternative is there is a direct relationship between R and S, the null would be there is no direct relationship between R and S. Hypotheses are written in the present tense. | |
| **Hypothesis testing** | You must assure the reader that the assumptions for each statistical test were met.  For example, assumptions needed to use chi-square analysis include:  data are drawn from a random sample; there are no overlapping cells; each cell has a minimum of 5 expected values; and sample data were drawn from a population with a known and uniform distribution. To use a Simple Linear Correlation (Pearson r) test, the assumption that the two variables are measured on at least interval scales needs to be met.  Check your test assumptions. | |
| **Likert-type Scales** | In 1932, Rensis Likert created a scale that displayed several ordinal-level categories that were ranked along a continuum to measure participants viewpoints (Agree a little, Agree somewhat, and disagree, etc). We refer to these instruments as surveys that use a *Likert-type scale*, not Likert scales or Likert instruments. | |
| **No Names** | Standard protocol in doctoral dissertation research is to keep the name of an organization involved in a study anonymous. It is fine to use a descriptive pseudonym. Similarly, names of participants should be anonymous or completely disguised. | |
| **NVivo** | NVivo software helps users manage, organize and analyze non-numerical or unstructured data. The software allows users to classify, sort and arrange information; examine relationships in the data; and extract themes and patterns. When working with NVivo, you record attributes of the case by classifying the node or setting the node's classification in the node's properties and then setting attribute values related to your study.  You should share these nodes, tables, and graphs with the reader. | |

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| **Overusing Specific Sources** | If you rely too much on one source, your readers may as well go directly to that source instead of reading your paper. APA policy permits authors to use, with some exceptions, a maximum of three figures or tables from a journal article or book chapter (with permission). Single text extracts of fewer than 400 words, or a series of text extracts that total fewer than 800 words, can be used (if properly cited) without requesting formal permission from APA" (p. 173). | |
| **Paragraphs** | Each paragraph must be at least 3 sentences in length, have a main idea, example, analysis, and a lead in to the next paragraph. Each paragraph should contain an academic argument.<br><br>Consider using the MEAL plan:<br>• Main points of the paragraph in your own words.<br>• Evidence to help support your assertion.<br>• Analysis of the evidence.<br>• Link the ideas in this paragraph to the ideas into your next paragraph. | |
| **Passive Voice** | Try to reduce or completely avoid passive voice.  For example instead of: "Open-ended questions *were used* to encourage the participants to share their experiences in vivid detail (Simon & Goes, 2013)", consider "The use of open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences in vivid detail as recommended by Simon and Goes (2013)". Active voice helps make your writing more forceful and interesting, and connects the subject of the sentence with the action initiated, enabling readers to see whom or what is responsible for the action in a sentence. | |
| **Primary Sources** | Primary sources are preferred in scholarly writing (APA 6.17). Use secondary sources sparingly (e.g., when the original work is out of print, unavailable through usual sources, or not available in English). If citing a secondary source, cite the source in the reference list; in text, name the original work and cite the secondary source (Laing, as cited in King (2011). Secondary sources, regardless of how *scholarly* they are presented, are considered hearsay. | |
| **Privacy Issues** | To protect your privacy and the privacy of any other researchers, mentors, or participants, delete personal contact or identifying information from any appendix materials. | |

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| **Problem Statement** | A viable problem statement (PS) explains something that is wrong and in need of correction. The PS is often anchored with numbers or current statistics to illustrate its significance. A lack or gap in research on a topic in and of itself is not a problem.<br><br>http://dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Problem-Statement-Checklist.pdf | |
| **Reliability in a Qualitative Study** | Reliability is not usually germane to qualitative studies. The reliability of a research instrument concerns the extent to which the instrument yields the same results on repeated trials and is based on the assumption of replicability. This is not an aim of most qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers focus upon the concept of dependability and trustworthiness, which account for the context within which research occurs. A variety of methods can ensure that data are gathered and documented in a consistent manner throughout the research process and thus enhance dependability and trustworthiness. | |
| **References** | Print out the reference list and then check each reference in the document with the reference list to make certain *all* citations are accurate. That is, all references in the text appear in the reference section and each entry in the reference section appears in the text. | |
| **Referencing Articles** | Since July 2007, APA has emphasized using the DOI (Digital Object Identifier) when referencing articles. Unlike URLs, which may change over time, the DOI is unique to an individual work.<br><br>Not all publishers participate in the DOI initiative; as a result, an article may or may not have a DOI assigned. In the 6th edition of the Manual, APA presents a simple approach for referencing online articles. You should review these sections for articles assigned a DOI and articles not assigned a DOI. If a URL must be used, the URL should not be underlined and only the URL of the home page of the journal should be used.<br><br>Bottom line: In citing online journal articles: If the article has a DOI, use it in your APA reference. If there is no DOI, include the journal homepage URL in your reference. Do NOT use the article URL, which is very long, may time out or may change.<br><br>The web link www.crossref.org/SimpleTextQuery/ allows you to paste an entire reference list into a box and then the system | |

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| | provides the DOIs for all the references it can at one time! You will need to register with your e-mail address to use this service. To look up one DOI then you can go to: http://www.crossref.org/guestquery | |
| **Research Questions vs. Interview Questions** | Research questions are usually 1-4 overarching questions guiding a study, and are not directly asked of participants. Interview questions are built around the research questions, help answer the research questions, and are directed to the person being interviewed. They should not be constructed as yes/no questions. | |
| **Scope, Limitations, Delimitations** | The scope of the study consists of the conceptual domain of the study, including population, geography, etc. – what is in the study and what is not.  It is closely related to the problem framed. Limitations are constraints that are beyond your control but could affect the study outcome, and methodology and design limits that are out of your control. Delimitations are constraints determined by choices you make regarding study scope and methodology/design, and are within your control. | |
| **Seriation (Lists)** | For listed items within a paragraph, (a) use letters, not numbers, in full parentheses; (b) separate each item with a comma unless a comma is used within one of the items, then separate items in the series with a semicolon.<br><br>When listing items vertically, or breaking them out of the paragraph, use 1., 2., 3., and so forth, if ordinal position is important.  If ordinal position is not important, use bullets.  Use MS Word's automatic numbered (or bulleted) list format; set the number indent the same as for a paragraph (usually 0.5 in.); if sentences run over one line, they are also indented **(Seriation, APA 3.04).** | |
| **Starting a Sentence with *it* or *this*** | *It* (or This) causes your readers to pause momentarily while they figure out to what *it (of this)* is referring. In most sentences starting with *it (or this)*, the real subject is buried somewhere later in the sentence. The real subject does not mean the noun or pronoun performing the verb in the predicate, which is called the grammatical subject. The real subject means the person, idea, place, or thing that is the focus of the sentence, which is called the rhetorical subject. | |

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| **Subject versus Participants** | In many past studies, humans were universally referred to as *subjects* (with its implications of subservience). Today, any person that signs a permission slip (or has someone sign on his or her behalf) will likely be referred to as a *participant*. Many believe that the term subject was used to separate that human connection when experimenting with human beings and that one is more likely to disassociate him or herself from someone thought of as a subject rather than a participant. This is similar to the situation in prison when someone is identified by a number rather than a name. However, conversion from using the term subject to participant has been met with some resistance. Most IRBs have not made this change. | |
| **Substantiation and Evidence** | Every statement (that is not common knowledge) must be supported with sufficient evidence. Assertions made without adequate substantiation appear to be rhetoric or opinion. Your extensive research of the topic has likely convinced you that your statements are supportable, but you must convince *readers* that they are indeed supported, by providing validation. Common knowledge is knowledge that most educated people know or can find out easily in an encyclopedia or dictionary. It might be helpful to ask yourself *How do I know this is true?* When it is unclear if information is common knowledge, the general rule is to cite it. | |
| **Table of Contents** | Chapter 1 should start on page 1. The page numbers of the front matter need to be lower case Roman numerals. However, the approval/signature page, title page and abstract page do not have visible page numbers but they are counted in the pagination. The page numbers in the main body are Arabic numerals. All page numbers should appear correctly in the table of contents. Refer to your university's style guide to be sure you are following appropriate standards. | |
| **Tables** | Make certain that the amount of data justifies a Table. Consider combining small tables into a larger table, or just citing information such as survey responses directly in the narrative. Each table must have substantive value. | |
| **Tense Changes** | When completing your final dissertation, make sure to change future tense to past tense in the proposal chapters (1-3), and remove language referring to the proposal. Do a search for *will* or *propose* to locate proposal remnants and areas to update so that the completed study is referenced only in the past tense. | |

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| **The Researcher or The Author aka YOU** | Seek to eliminate the phrases *the researcher* or *the author* in reference to yourself throughout the dissertation (to shift focus more appropriately from the researcher to the research).  It is understood that you personally conducted the study. Occasional use of the first person (I or me) is acceptable to avoid anthropomorphism [see APA, sec 2.04, p. 37], and use passive voice *when, and only when* it is unclear who performed a specific action. | |

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| **Theoretical versus Conceptual Framework** | A conceptual framework is linked closely to a critical review of the literature surrounding the problem and the variables in a study. A theoretical framework is more general and places the study in perspective among other studies (within the field and outside the field) and contrasts with competing theories. A conceptual framework more clearly connects to a particular methodology or a research design. Both align with the authors' (your) worldview of the problem investigated. | |
| **Transcribed Data** | A general rule in transcription services is that the text of a 30-40 minute interview takes about 1-2 hours to type and results in about 15-20 pages of text. If you have significantly less transcribed data, some explanation is needed for this deficit. | |
| **Type of Grounded Theory Study** | There are multiple schools of grounded theory. While the methodology originated in sociology through the works of Glaser and Strauss in 1967, it has been applied to numerous disciplines since. Researchers outside of sociology have modified the approach, and in 2013 there are different methods all carrying the name grounded theory. Classic grounded theory researchers use both inductive and deductive approaches. These researchers deal with hypothesizing and detail analysis at one and the same time. Strauss and Corbin suggested a more pragmatic approach and the use of existing concepts and labels when appropriate. Charmaz advocated for a more constructivist approach where the researcher is open to multiple perspectives of various actors in a setting. Make sure you inform the reader regarding which school of thought that serves as the basis for your grounded theory study. | |

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| **Type of Phenomenological Study** | There are multiple types of phenomenological designs (empirical, interpretive, Husserlian, among others). It is important to explain what type of phenomenological design was chosen over other types of phenomenological designs relative to the problem and purpose of the study, and to justify that this method was used appropriately. | |
| **Use or Utilize?** | The definition of *utilize*, implies taking something and using it for an unintended purpose (*convert to use*). The definition of *use* is straight forward and means employing an object or process to achieve a purpose that the object or process was designed to achieve.  When creating an alternate use for something, utilize can be used e.g. "I used the shovel to dig a hole" and "I utilized a pen to dig a hole". In your study, you will use instruments to collect data and use a theoretical framework to help inform your study. When you are finished with your study, you might utilize your dissertation to build muscles by lifting it over your head☺. | |
| **Vague References to Time** | Avoid vague references to time like *today*, *recent*, *presently*, the *past few decades*, or *currently*.  Replace with specific dates or periods. Many times eliminating these words as qualifiers is acceptable and makes the manuscript read paper. | |
| **When Quoting** | Limit quotes to instances where the author uses a particularly striking turn of phrase, and where his or her precise meaning would be lost in a paraphrase. Long, indented quotes should rarely be used. In using quotations or source material, you must adequately incorporate the quotations and ideas from your sources. Simply inserting the material into your paragraph is not enough. You must incorporate appropriate citation information, and then introduce, integrate, and explain your use of the quotations or source material. Do not start or end a paragraph with a quotation. | |
| **Which or That ?** | If a clause describes the whole set of the term it modifies, the clause in question should be introduced with *which and separated by one or two commas from the rest of the sentence.* (This is a nonrestrictive clause.) If the clause describes only a subset of the term it modifies, then the clause in question should be introduced by that and should not be separated by commas. (This is a restrictive clause.) | |

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| | Another helpful way to think about this is to view non-restrictive clauses as parenthetical. So when a sentence still makes sense if the clause inside parentheses is removed, or if words, "by the way," were added, this would be a nonrestrictive clause and it should be introduced by *which* and separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma or pair of commas. | |
| **You don't prove anything** | Words which imply absolutes, such as the research *proves* should be avoided. Instead, scholarly terminology such as "the research data or findings *suggest, demonstrate,* or *imply* is more appropriate.  Be careful to avoid any inferences of causation or proof, unless you are doing a theoretical mathematical dissertation. | |