

# A Tale of Two Dissertations: The Best and the Worst of Times

By Marilyn K. Simon

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Recently I had the opportunity to review two dissertations at the extremes of the quality scale. Dissertation A was a qualitative evaluative case study. Dissertation F *claimed* to be a quantitative causal-comparative study.

**Dissertation A** involved determination of the efficacy of a program for high school students. This dissertation had no discernable grammatical or APA errors. The only 'error' was an edit not yet removed from tracked changes, hinting that this draft was likely professional edited. The general and specific problem were stated precisely and concisely, and supported by current peer-reviewed citations. There was appropriate justification for both the paradigm and the selected design. Interview data were obtained from 10 stakeholders in the program. NVivo was used correctly to help manage and analyze these data. The doctoral candidate recorded the attributes of each case. Once the case nodes were created, queries were used to ask comparative questions based on the attributes, which required setting the node's classification and then setting attribute values. In addition, archival data were obtained from the organization that created the program. These data were also managed and analyzed with NVivo. The dissertation included a discussion on the possible transferability of the findings to similar programs. Disconfirming data were fully discussed. The writing was balanced, objective, accurate, and scholarly in the sense that conclusions were tentative and suggestive, and no claims of fact or causality were present. It was a joy to read this dissertation, and I felt that I learned a great deal after finishing my review. Other than removing the editing artifact, I had no suggestions on how the study could have been improved. This is quite rare, and I can only recall a handful of dissertations that were of this quality.

**Dissertation F** involved looking at archival data from two different groups to determine if one group would develop certain attributes based on a program that this group attended. Several assertions, made without adequate substantiation, appeared to be rhetorical rather than based in the study results. References were outdated, and many of the sources cited by the author were not peer-reviewed. There was a great deal of hyperbole and overreaching in the discussion, as well as numerous grammatical and APA errors. There was little justification for the methodology and the design chosen. The problem did not align with either the purpose or the methodology. Statistical tests were used without explaining if assumptions to use the test were met (as a statistician I know they were not met). The author even claimed that a sample size less than 10 was appropriate for conducting multiple correlational analyses (obviously, this is not correct). There was no discussion in Chapter 5 regarding what the data analyses meant, and no effort to help move the reader from the 'facts' of the data analysis to contextual

statements of the conclusions reached. This was also a very difficult dissertation to read. I was quite surprised that members of the committee had ‘approved’ the study.

**What learning can doctoral students take away from these two extremely different dissertations, and use in development of their own dissertation?**

First, choosing the correct methodology and design is essential, as is being consistent in the manner by which that method and design is explicated. Second, alignment of method and design with the problem and purpose of the study is critical; otherwise, the study will fall apart. The author of Dissertation A paid close attention to the details, including the fit between the various elements of the study. This is evidence of planning the dissertation carefully, rather than attempting to link elements that are not in alignment with each other or with the intent of the study. Third, the author of Dissertation A kept the reader in mind. The various elements of a credible study were presented in a logical flow and manner that *led* the reader through the study, telling the story of the research and concluding with results and interpretations that made sense, were grounded in theory and the data, and contributed original value. By contrast, Dissertation F kept the reader guessing, about both the alignment and conduct of the study, and about the credibility of the conclusions.

In writing your dissertation, keep your “audience” in mind—these are the readers of your research, including your committee members, other students, and even outside researchers. You want your readers to share the enjoyment felt in reading a credible and interesting study that tells a useful story, like dissertation A, and not the frustration that results from a confusing, inconclusive, and poorly articulated study like that of dissertation F.