Completing a Professional Practice Dissertation

A Guide for Doctoral Students and Faculty

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and audience first. Then ask yourself what dissertation structure and format fits those decisions. The result may be a dissertation with relatively unique chapter structures and content. That is fine if there is a good fit with the purpose, process, and audience for your dissertation!

**TAD—The Three Article Format Dissertation**

An alternative to all the five-chapter formats that is a good fit for many professional practice dissertations is the TAD or “three article” dissertation. We discussed this format in earlier chapters and we recommend it here because (1) the format allows you to write parts of your dissertation as articles that can be submitted directly to journals for publication, (2) it encourages you to complete papers while you are doing your coursework and field experiences, and those papers can become part of your dissertation, and (3) the type of writing you do for a TAD dissertation may be closer to the type of writing you will do as a practicing professional after completing your doctorate.

In an editorial published in the journal, *Qualitative Health Research*, Morse (2005) noted both the trend toward article dissertations and their advantages:

> Increasingly, the dissertation requirement for a doctoral degree is changing from a monograph-style research report to a set of interrelated publications. University regulations for this requirement differ. Some require three, and others four or even five articles. Some insist that these articles be accepted for publication as a requirement for graduation; others that they be presented in publication format, ready to be submitted after the student’s defense. This requirement has been led by the hard sciences, in which the reporting of several experiments as short articles is logical and efficient. But how does this requirement change the qualitative dissertation?

First, for students, this option has considerable advantages. Pragmatically, students skip the painful process of synthesizing, condensing, and segmenting a 200-plus-page [dissertation] document into 15-page articles. They graduate with a vita boasting publications or articles in press rather than scrambling to get articles “out” during their first year as faculty members. Therefore, in their new appointments, they can focus on getting a research proposal funded, teaching, and becoming a faculty member.

Professor Morse was thinking of the article dissertation from the point of view of students who will become professors and researchers, and she has some concerns about TADs. While she points out some of the advantages of article dissertations in the quote, her ultimate conclusion is that article
dissertations are a bad idea for people planning careers as academics. She prefers the traditional “monograph” model of a five-chapter dissertation.

What about doctoral students planning careers as professional practitioners? Despite Morse’s (2005) view, we think the advantages are substantial for them. In addition to the three advantages we mentioned earlier, most publications about professional practice are journal articles rather than monographs or books. Thus, it makes sense to do a dissertation that consists primarily of articles that can be submitted to journals without having to go through the difficult and time consuming rewrite that converts a 200+ page dissertation into two or three articles.

A typical format for a TAD has five parts:

1. **Introduction**: About five pages that introduce the three articles and explain how they relate to each other.

2. **Article 1**.

3. **Article 2**.

4. **Article 3**.

5. **Conclusion**: Five to 10 pages that tie the articles together, discuss the implications of the research presented in the articles, and suggest a line of exploration and study the dissertation author might pursue after graduation that is related to the work presented in the three articles. Five to 10 pages should usually be sufficient.

Remember the fictional action research dissertation used earlier as an example of how the chapters in a five chapter professional practice dissertation might be organized and structured? Suppose that dissertation was a TAD instead. Here is one way it could be a Three Article Dissertation:

1. **Introduction**: Describes the professional practice problem and provides an overview/introduction to each article in the dissertation. This can be done in about five pages.

2. **Article 1. XXX: Linking A Persistent Problem to Potential Solutions**. This paper could be an analysis of the professional practice problem selected by the doctoral student for in depth study. The paper could be written originally for a doctoral course. The paper might provide readers with an overview of the problem, lay out the common approaches to dealing with the problem, and link solutions as well as explanations to their theoretical foundations. The end of the paper might offer some practical guidance to practitioners based on the available research and professional practice literature.
3. **Article 2: An Action Research Study of XXX in a Mental Health Center.** The second paper could be an article that describes the action research project that focused on developing and trying out solutions to the professional practice problem in a particular professional practice context such as a mental health center.

4. **Article 3: A Manual of Practice: Addressing the Problem of XXX.** Suppose the third paper is a manual for practitioners that was created during the action research project to help practitioners implement a potential solution to XXX. If that solution seemed to work well, the manual might become the third "article" in the dissertation. It could also be published on one of the sites that distribute practitioner oriented resources on the web. Other options for the third paper include one on the policy implications of the solution developed through the action research project, or an analysis of the action research process itself and how it might be improved to address the problems of professional practice.

5. **Conclusion:** In this final section of the dissertation the three papers would be discussed in terms of their contribution to the literature on the XXX professional practice problem as well as how to approach problems of professional practice using one of the action research methods. In this section the doctoral student might, for example, discuss the particular strengths of the action research model used in the dissertation and suggest strengths as well as weaknesses in the approach plus the types of professional practice problems that seem best suited to action research.

**Formatting the Article Dissertation**

The first and last sections of an article dissertation are generally formatted according to the same rules as a five-chapter dissertation. Some institutions also require each article to be treated as a dissertation chapter and formatted accordingly. Others allow you to format your three articles according to the requirements of the journals they have been, or will be, submitted to. Louisiana State University takes an intermediate position and allows you to use a different format for the articles, but you must select one of the journals you will submit an article to and use those formatting requirements for all three articles even if one or two of them will go to different journals.

Ideally, you should be able to format the articles one time and use the resulting document in both your dissertation and for submission to journals. That is not always possible, however, and you must check local requirements to determine how to format your TAD.