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Finding a Dissertation Topic

by

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In the words of Sherlock Holmes, “The game’s afoot.”

The time has come, at last, to identify that all important dissertation topic. This topic will be the basis for the final research project that you must undertake and successfully complete to receive your doctoral degree.

The purpose of this report is to present and guide you through a process that will enable you to make the leap from (a) a personal or professional problem that you have a strong desire to study to (b) a corresponding research problem that, when properly investigated, will demonstrate to your university that you can design, conduct, and report the findings of a research project.

While finding a doable (i.e., in the time and with the resources available) and researchable (i.e., in the sense that it will make a contribution, however small, to the literature in its field) dissertation topic may seem like a simple enough task, it is, in fact, one of the most challenging tasks that most doctoral students face.

The goal of this report is to demystify this critical process.

The Research Process

The table below, from *Student to Scholar: The Guide for Doctoral Students*, summarizes the six steps in the research process (Levasseur, 2006, p. 69):

Step	Purpose
Problem Statement	Define your broad problem area.
Literature Search	Ground your dissertation research.
Purpose Statement	Specify the niche you intend to study.
Research Questions/Hypotheses	Determine your goals.
Research Method	Specify your general approach.
Research Design	Create your specific research plan.

The first three steps of the research process are the focus of this report.

Step 1: Broad Problem Area

We begin where you most likely are, by assuming that you have a passion for learning as much as you can about a “big idea,” and for using that knowledge to obtain your doctorate and, eventually, change the world in some tangible, positive way.

For me, that big idea was to assess the impact of transforming leadership on follower performance and satisfaction. I could not understand why something that, in my experience, was so important and so effective was not more pervasive in society. By quantifying its impact on productivity and morale, I hoped to make a stronger case for the use of transforming leadership in all organizations.

For some of my students, the big idea has been a topic like:

- Measuring how emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence affect leadership effectiveness in international settings
- Identifying strategies for enhancing the likelihood of successful mergers and acquisitions
- Determining the role of the Information Systems department in the success or failure of business process reengineering projects
- Assessing the effectiveness of school feeding programs in a major Canadian city and determining the reasons why they work or don't
- Quantifying the relationship between investments in quality and resulting product costs

While it may be a source of great energy and determination, having a big idea is the first, not the last step, in your search for a dissertation topic. In fact, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the difference between having a doable, researchable dissertation topic and having a broadly defined professional problem (i.e., a big idea) that you want to study is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

Step 2: Literature Search

To understand why this is so, we need to examine the four basic ways that a big idea can translate into the domain of scholarly research. For the sake of discussion, let us refer to these four possibilities or cases as follows:

- A. Old News
- B. Out to Sea
- C. A Hard Sell
- D. An Easier Sell

We will assume for now that you know how to do an effective literature search using online databases, so that we can focus on the inherent differences among the four cases. Later, we will carefully examine the steps in the important process of performing a good literature search.

Simply put, your goal in this second step of the research process is to search the literature (primarily peer-reviewed journals and dissertations) for prior research on your topic (i.e., your big idea). This search process, when it is successful, grounds your research in the literature.

A literature search will result in one of four generic outcomes. We will examine each one in turn.

Case A: Old News

Based on your literature search, you discover that many studies exist on your topic. In fact, one or more of them provide definitive answers on the subject.

For example, when I did the literature search in 2002 on the relationship between cooperative styles of leadership and more traditional, confrontational styles of leadership, I discovered a journal article (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) which reported that researchers had already conducted over 500 empirical primary studies on my topic. That was the end of my first big idea (i.e., to do a primary study on the topic).

If you discover that your big idea is not new, and you persist in asking for permission to do yet another research project on it, you run the risk of having the faculty at your university ask the dreaded “Who cares?” question. If you cannot provide a solid rationale for how your dissertation study would enhance existing knowledge on the subject in response to this question (which might be difficult if not impossible to do under these circumstances), then the faculty will most likely not allow you to study that topic for your dissertation.

Case B: Out to Sea

Based on your literature search, you discover that there are no studies on your topic in the literature. Furthermore, there are not even any related studies on the topic.

Finding a Dissertation Topic

If this happens, using the analogy that terra firma represents the domain of existing research literature, you are so far away from dry land that you once again run the real risk that the faculty will ask you, “Who cares?” As you are not likely to have a good answer to this question, you will probably not receive permission to proceed with your study of this topic.

Case C: A Hard Sell

Based on your literature search, you discover that there are several studies on topics that relate to your topic. However, none of them deals directly with your big idea. Hence, there is a definite gap in the literature that your study could fill.

This case, although researchable in the sense that it will make a contribution to the literature of the field, is difficult to sell because you must very carefully survey the existing literature before you can make a convincing argument that (a) there is a gap, and (b) your study will most likely fill it. The faculty will expect you to have done a very thorough search for articles, dissertations, and unpublished literature on the subject before giving you permission to proceed with your dissertation research.

Case D: An Easier Sell

Based on your literature search, you discover that there are one or more studies on your topic in the literature. However, none of them deals with the subject in quite the way that you intend to approach it. Perhaps one or more of these studies even calls, in its recommendations for further research, for a study of the type you hope to conduct.

This is the ideal situation that budding researchers hope to discover when they do a literature search. It is truly a Eureka! moment when you discover that such a study exists.

After months of trial and error spent trying to ground studies of many potential dissertation topics, when I finally found the article (DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000) that would serve as the basis for my dissertation work (by grounding it in the literature), I was ecstatic. I had found the giants whose shoulders I would attempt to stand on.

Convincing faculty that your topic (i.e., big idea) is worth researching is much easier when you can point to a current peer-reviewed article or dissertation that you intend to build upon in doing your dissertation research.

For example, if an existing quantitative study on your topic discovered several interesting but unexplained findings based on an analysis of survey data, perhaps you could suggest a qualitative study based on face-to-face interviews that would examine these issues in more depth. Alternatively, if an existing qualitative study on your topic proposed an interesting and seemingly plausible theory, perhaps you could suggest a quantitative study that would test experimentally one or more hypotheses logically derived from that theory. Yet another approach might be to replicate the original study, but on a different population. As you can imagine, there are usually numerous possibilities for extending existing research studies.

In the case of my dissertation, I was able to extend the work of DeGroot, Kiker, and Cross (2000), among other ways, by incorporating five years worth of additional primary research studies on the topic, and by applying the latest meta-analysis techniques.

Step 3: Purpose Statement

Once you have grounded your dissertation topic in the literature, you must describe exactly what you intend to study in your dissertation study. You cannot write a purpose statement for your research unless you have identified the place in the literature that your work will occupy.

For example, stating that the purpose of your research is to solve world hunger or eliminate the scourge of AIDS, while laudable, would not qualify as a purpose (of your research project) statement. Your purpose statement must speak to the gap in the literature you intend to fill (Case C) or the boundary of the existing literature that you intend to extend (Case D).

For the sake of illustration, here is a portion of the justification for my dissertation (Levasseur, 2004, pp. 3-4), which dealt with a meta-analysis (i.e., aggregate analysis) of existing primary studies on my topic (i.e., the effect of transforming leadership on follower performance and satisfaction):

Nevertheless, this body of literature has not been subjected to a meta-analysis since 1997 (DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000). Since then, new primary studies that attempted to measure the follower outcomes of transforming leadership, based both on experimental and correlational research designs, have been published.... Subjecting the results of these and earlier studies to the test of a new meta-analysis may provide the quantitative justification for a transforming leadership style over a traditional leadership style in much the same way that meta-analysis has provided support for the efficacy of new drugs or the benefits of new social programs...

To summarize, a purpose statement focuses on how your study will extend the boundaries of existing knowledge based on the work that other researchers have already done in your field. Hence, you must first identify a broad professional problem area that interests you, then ground your work by searching the literature of your field for existing studies on or related to that topic, before you can write a purpose statement for your unique dissertation research project that specifically defines the niche in the literature that you intend to study.

Searching Online Databases

There are many ways to search an online database for published articles. I learned the following method from the head librarian at our university, and have used it to help students quickly and effectively ground their dissertation research ideas in the literature. In concert with the technique I will describe for identifying the keywords that represent your study, it provides a powerful lens through which to view the existing work in any potential area of research. Used properly, it can lead you to one of those most desirable Eureka! moments when you are searching for a dissertation topic.

The Method

In my opinion, the best method for searching an online database for the literature on a particular professional problem is to:

1. Identify the keywords that best represent what you intend to study.
2. For a single online database, use the database's thesaurus feature to determine the synonyms used to catalog the information in that database for each of your keywords. [CAVEAT: You must search each online database separately, since each database has a different method of cataloging information and, hence, its own unique thesaurus feature.]
3. Using the synonyms for each of your keywords, search the database for articles that simultaneously match all of your keywords.
4. Repeat the process as necessary to identify a researchable dissertation topic.

An example should help to clarify the method.

Re: Step 1

As part of the first step in applying this method, I strongly suggest that you try to encapsulate the focus of your big idea in a tentative dissertation title. This exercise demands a level of attention to detail that is both necessary and helpful. For the

Finding a Dissertation Topic

sake of illustration, let's use the title of my dissertation (which contains the gist of what I studied in my dissertation research) as the starting point:

“The Impact of a Transforming Leadership Style on Follower Performance and Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis.”

The keywords in this title are (a) transforming leadership, (b) outcomes (e.g., follower performance or satisfaction), and (c) meta-analysis.

In short, my study was about how one particular style of leadership affects workers' behavior, and the research method I used was a quantitative one called meta-analysis.

You will probably not want to restrict your initial literature search by the type of research method, as you will want to identify all of the studies on your potential dissertation topic. This broader search (i.e., one not limited to a particular research method) might provide valuable ideas on how to approach your topic that you would never have thought of and should consider.

With this very important proviso, let us proceed with an examination of the second step in the method using my keywords as a concrete example.

Re: Step 2

Using Business Source Premier, a management database, I used the thesaurus feature to identify the corresponding keyword used in the database's thesaurus for each of the three keywords in my search. The following table shows the results:

Original Keyword	Thesaurus Keyword
Transforming leadership	LEADERSHIP
Outcomes	No Match (Use Outcomes)
Meta-analysis	META-analysis

[NOTE: Each database may have a different keyword in its thesaurus for a given keyword of yours. So, be sure to go through this same conversion with each database.]

Re: Step 3

The third step in the method requires that you search simultaneously for articles which match ALL of the thesaurus keywords corresponding to your original keywords.

Common sense suggests that a search for any one of the keywords, while it will yield a much larger number of articles, will not be as helpful to you in grounding your big idea as a search which requires that the selected articles match all of your keywords.

For example, a search using the keyword LEADERSHIP yielded approximately 22,000 articles. The first of these was entitled, “Veiling the Obvious: African feminist theory and the hijab in the African novel,” which is hardly what I was looking for as a grounding study.

On the contrary, a search using all three keywords (i.e., LEADERSHIP and Outcomes and META-analysis) resulted in 17 articles, all of which were much more on target, and one of which was the article I used to ground my dissertation work (DeGroot, Kiker, and Cross, 2000).

Now, I must add that I did not know how to use this method when I was a student, so I searched and searched until I found DeGroot, Kiker, and Cross (2000). Nevertheless, this example does illustrate how powerful this method can be when it works.

That said, it is important to note that this method is not perfect, and, hence, does not always work. For example, when I substituted the keyword Performance for Outcomes, I got 36 hits, but they did not include DeGroot, Kiker, and Cross (2000). Similarly, when I substituted Satisfaction for Outcomes, I got 17 hits, but they also did not include DeGroot, Kiker, and Cross (2000).

Re: Step 4

Hence, as the fourth step in the method suggests, like most other aspects of doctoral-level work (which is more art than science), you may need to use the method in a trial-and-error or iterative manner (using related keywords) to find the set of articles that define the body of prior research in your area of interest.

Despite any inherent shortcomings, this method is a very efficient way to search, and I, like our head librarian, recommend that you use it to help you find your dissertation topic.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the purpose of this report was to provide you with concrete information that would enable you to find a dissertation research topic that relates directly to your professional interest (i.e., your big idea).

Finding a Dissertation Topic

To that end, we examined the first three steps in research process in some detail, along with a method for performing effective library searches.

As a result, we hope we have achieved our goal of demystifying the critical process of finding a doable, researchable dissertation topic.

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