Doing Your Dissertation:
The Challenge

- Make an independent contribution to your field and communicate it, demonstrating that you have the knowledge, research skills, and motivation to do so
- Plan, conduct, and complete the biggest project of your life
- Please a committee of readers
Sources of Guidance

- Your dissertation director/mentor
- Other faculty in the department
- Other MS./doctoral students
- Completed dissertations in your field
- Your school’s office of graduate studies and school-specific guidelines for dissertations
- Books on the subject
Think Dissertation All the Way

From your first course on:

- Identify gaps in the literature, and therefore possible dissertation topics, as you take courses
- Read more and write papers in areas of special interest
- Gain needed experience and ideas from involvement in faculty research
- Complete the requirements for advancement to Candidacy (course work, comprehensive exam)
1. Pose the Research Question

- The hardest part for many
- Not the same as choosing a topic—that’s easier
- Need to be familiar with previous work on the topic; research questions come from thoughtful reading of the literature, previous research
- Generate questions about the topic that are (a) interesting, (b) important, and (c) answerable
Interesting???

- Interesting to you (you’ll be at it a long time!)
- Interesting in your field
- Maybe even interesting to your grandmother
Important???

- Tests a leading theory?
- Will help resolve a debated issue in the field?
- Brings together concepts that have not been brought together before, looks at things from a new perspective?
- Helps explain discrepant findings?
- Improves measurement of a key construct?
- Asks a question that needed to be asked?
Important???

- It’s not enough to argue that no one has studied it before.
- It’s usually not enough to replicate prior work using one more demographic group, one new little methodological wrinkle.
- Yet it doesn’t need to be the Great American Research Idea, either!
A question can be very interesting and important but not answerable, or not answerable within the scope of a dissertation project.

Can the research question be framed in terms of specific, measurable constructs, can the hypotheses be tested?

Are the library resources or data you need available or gettable? Can the project be done in a year or so? Can you cover the costs?
2. Develop proposal with mentor’s input

- One school/department may require only a brief prospectus, another may require the first three chapters of the dissertation:
  - *Introduction* (with clear statement of the research question and its significance)
  - *Literature Review* (should lead right into the research question and hypotheses)
  - *Methods* (tells how you will answer research question)
3. Form Dissertation Research Committee (or Research Advisory Committee, etc.)

- In addition to dissertation director (mentor, advocate), or director and co-director, usually need two other members at this stage.
- Use outline of proposal to acquaint potential committee members with your project.
- Seek committee members with relevant expertise, including methodological.
4. Defend Proposal/Obtain Approval to Do Dissertation

- Varies by school, but proposal must be approved by dissertation research committee.
- Committee meeting usually involves systematic questioning on theory and methods, pass/fail outcome, and suggestions for improving the proposal that grow out of the discussion.
5. Obtain Required Research Approvals

- Student is responsible for research compliance if project involves human subjects, animals, hazardous materials, etc.
- See [www.um.ac.ir](http://www.um.ac.ir/) for forms and procedures
- Leave plenty of time to get approval
- Do not begin data collection until approval is in hand or you will not be able to use the data
6. Obtain Funding if Needed

- Estimate costs and discuss with dissertation director
- Faculty grant funding and other funding sources may exist
- At www.....?, see Dissertation Funding at a Glance, a guide to competitive fellowships and grants to support dissertation research
7. Conduct Research

- Develop a timeline for collecting data and analyzing it, or for reading relevant texts and writing chapters of literary analysis.
- Break large tasks into smaller ones and go at them one by one.
- Keep dissertation director posted if the unexpected happens or if your thinking takes a new direction.
- Write as you go…
8. Write (Rest of) Dissertation

- A Word\Tex template with a dissertation format is available at: www.um.ac.ir/.....?
- Determine what style manual is followed in your department
- Follow your department’s guidelines on margins, type size, paper weight, order of parts, etc.
- Write and rewrite in response to feedback from primary mentor and committee members
9. Select Final Examination Committee

- Dissertation Research Committee of at least three, plus:
- Two additional examiners
- Varies by department, but usually at least one of the added examiners must come from outside student’s department
10. Schedule Dissertation Defense (alias Final Oral Examination)

- When draft of entire dissertation is ready, circulate it to the entire examination committee plenty ahead of desired defense date, asking whether it is ready to defend.
- If committee signs off, schedule date/time for defense with plenty of time for all to read version that will be defended.
- Complete Application for Graduation Form by deadline.
11. Defend Dissertation

- Final Examination session open to the public
- Normally begins with chance to highlight purposes, findings, and significance of work
- Mainly questions and answers
- Committee decision:
  - Pass with no revisions (rare)
  - Conditional pass (Pass subject to making specified changes to satisfy dissertation director or all/part of committee—can range from minor to more significant)
  - Fail (must redefend)
Helpful Reminders

- The committee approved your project. Assuming you did what you said you would, the committee is very unlikely to decide that it was a dumb project to do!
- They may question how you executed or interpreted things, though, so be prepared to explain yourself.
- Remember that all dissertations are flawed!
12. Finish Your Dissertation!

- It’s typical to have to make changes after the dissertation defense.
- Double check important things like the title, abstract, and your name!
- Turn in the signed approval form indicating that the final examination committee accepts the dissertation and turn in the required number of copies of the final dissertation.
- …..
13. Publish Dissertation

- Making your dissertation accessible via the Web does not prevent you from publishing parts of it as articles or reworking it as a book.
- Yes, you’re tired, but get it published soon!
- And don’t stick it in a drawer just because you’re rejected the first time—Keep at it!
The End—And the Beginning