



University of Massachusetts Medical School
Graduate School of Nursing
PhD Program

Dissertation Guidelines
(Revised: November, 2017)

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The dissertation is an original research project that demonstrates the student's mastery of research knowledge and skills. Key aspects of the dissertation process include choosing and working with the dissertation committee, writing and successfully defending the dissertation proposal, carrying out the planned study, successfully defending the dissertation at a public oral defense and submitting the results of the dissertation to a peer-reviewed journal.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

- Drafts passed in for review to your committee members should be in “near perfect form” (this includes reference agreement, all tables and figures, and careful editing).
Remember, even drafts need to be developed with care and attention to detail, this shows respect for those who review your work.
- Plan on a 2-week turn-around time on all drafts submitted for faculty review.
- The dissertation proposal must conform to either the guidelines outlined in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Edition) or another standard reference format mutually agreed upon by the student and Dissertation Chairperson.
- The final manuscript must conform to the Author's Guidelines of the journal that you select for submission.
- You must be continuously registered throughout the dissertation process (including the summer semester). You may take 3 to 9 dissertation credits per semester. The amount of credits will depend on how much work you plan to accomplish each semester. Discuss the number of credits to be taken each semester with your Dissertation Chairperson.
- All data collected for your dissertation must be stored on an encrypted password protected computer. A UMMS research drive may be purchased for this purpose (backed up nightly). Please note that this research drive will not be available to you after you graduate. No data may be stored on a non-encrypted computer.
- The dissertation process requires frequent communication between you and your committee members. Please check your Umassmed email address at least twice weekly during this process. Please use proper etiquette when responding to reviewers' concerns or issues. Reviewers should always be afforded 2 weeks to review your work.

DISSERTATION CREDIT GUIDELINE

Total Dissertation Credits Required = 18 dissertation credits

At a minimum, students should plan to accomplish the following during dissertation advisement:

1 st 6 credits	Complete the introduction, background and significance and theoretical framework sections of the dissertation proposal
2 nd 6 credits	Complete the methods section and the remainder of the dissertation proposal; defend dissertation proposal
3 rd 6 credits	Secure IRB approval and begin data collection

- *This document is only a guideline.* However, if the plan differs from above the student and advisor should agree upon the conditions ahead of time. This agreement should be in writing (e-mail is acceptable).
- Faculty and students may choose to accelerate this process and complete all dissertation requirements in 2 semesters (or 9 credits per semester).
- An incomplete grade will be given if the student has not accomplished the minimum expectation outlined in the table above. (Please refer to the student handbook for information about incomplete grades and progression). Loan re-payment may be triggered by an incomplete or non-progression.
- As a guideline: The GSN allocates one credit per 15 classroom hours. An additional three hours of independent work per classroom hour is expected. The standard is 3 hours of prep time is required for each 1 credit of course time. Therefore, the expectation is that for 6 credits of dissertation work you will be devoting a minimum of 24 hours every week to your dissertation (3 credits = minimum of 12 hours every week; 9 credits = minimum of 36 hours every week).

DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

The following outline describes the organizational structure for your written dissertation proposal. This is meant to be a guideline. You and your Dissertation Chairperson may make adjustments to this outline based on the specific requirements of your study. The dissertation proposal should be no longer than **25 pages in length** (double-spaced) not including the Title Page, References or Appendices. The page limits below are suggestions only. You and your advisor will make this determination depending on your study.

- I. Title Page
- II. Introduction to the Problem and Specific Aims: (2-3 pages)
 - a. This should include a succinct, yet powerful introduction to the problem and your specific aims. State concisely the goals of the proposed research and summarize the expected outcomes, including the impact that the results of the proposed research will exert on the field. List succinctly the specific aims of the proposed research.
- III. Background and Significance (6 - 8 pages)
 - a. This should be an incisive review of the major issues needed to understand and study the research problem. It should be organized and represent a synthesis of what is important in the field.
- IV. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework (2-5 pages) – include a diagram if applicable.
- V. Methods (8 - 10 pages): Describe the overall strategy, methodology and analyses to be used to accomplish the specific aims of the study. This will include the design, sample (power analysis if applicable), setting, procedures (recruitment, retention, data collection, and data management), measures and how data will be collected and analyzed. Point out any potential challenges or difficulties you anticipate and what you will do to deal with these concerns. Identify the human subjects' issues.
- VI. Conclusion (brief 1- 2 paragraphs)
- VII. References
- VIII. Appendices (scales, questionnaires, surveys, interview guides)

Note: Philosophical considerations may also need to be addressed within the body of the proposal. The placement of this component will be determined by your Dissertation Chairperson.

PROPOSAL HEARING

The dissertation proposal hearing will be scheduled by the Chairperson when all committee members are in agreement that the proposal is ready for review. A hard copy (an electronic copy may be provided if preferred by the committee member) of the dissertation proposal is distributed to the committee at least 2 weeks before the hearing. The proposal hearing is “closed” and includes the Dissertation Student, the Dissertation Chairperson and the Committee members. The student will do a brief (no longer than 20 minutes) oral presentation – focusing mostly on methods and issues for discussion. This is the point where the student and committee reach an agreement about what will be required of the student to complete the dissertation requirement of his/her program. All members and the student will sign off on the dissertation proposal once agreement has been reached.

GUIDELINES

for PhD Students serving as Principal Investigator (PI) on UMMS IRB Submission

PhD students may serve as the PI on their UMMS IRB submission.¹ In order to do so each student must adhere to the following guidelines:

- The student must remain up-to-date with CITI training (completed within 3 years) and Good Clinical Practice (GCP) training (within 3 years) if conducting an intervention study.
- The student must read and adhere to all policies outlined in the UMMS IRB Investigator Manual.
- The student must have all submission, re-submission, continuing review, and modification documents approved by their Dissertation Advisor/Chairperson before submission to the IRB.
- The student must clearly state at the beginning of the Investigator Study Plan (ISP) that he/she is a GSN PhD Student conducting dissertation research. He/She must list the Dissertation Chairperson on the ISP and as study personnel with access to all correspondence in the research staff section of the eIRB.
- The student must confer with the Dissertation Chairperson throughout the research project about IRB-related issues (adverse events, non-compliance with protocol, changes in procedures or protocol) and before submitting a modification to the IRB.
- The student must keep detailed records of all research-related activities so these records are available for audit (see storing and maintaining files).
- The student must close out his/her IRB submission before receiving his/her diploma. Special permission may be granted by the student's Dissertation Chairperson to leave the submission open in the rare instance that the study must remain open to ensure the scientific integrity of the study and/or adequate protection of human subjects. If the study remains open after graduation it is the responsibility of the graduate to maintain records according to IRB and IT policy and to communicate regularly with their Dissertation Advisor/Chairperson until closing the study.

¹ The decision about who will serve as the PI for the IRB submission will be made by the Dissertation Chairperson in collaboration with the student.

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION

- No potential study participants may be approached or data collected until you receive approval from the IRB.
- You are responsible for preparing the appropriate IRB applications. However, your Dissertation Chairperson must review all applications prior to submission.
- Make sure your CITI training is up-to-date (renewable every 3 years).
- You must also complete Good Clinical Practice (GCP) training if you are doing an intervention study.
- If you are collecting all data at an institution not affiliated with UMMS you will seek IRB approval at that institution but then you will need to execute an interagency agreement (IAA) with UMMS. This is required because you are conducting your research as a student at UMMS.
- IRB approval usually involves a “back and forth” process between you, your Dissertation Chairperson and the IRB. Plan that it will take several months to receive IRB approval.
- You must carefully review all policies related to IRB reporting and renewal.
- You are responsible for reading the UMMS Investigator Manual and complying with all IRB-related policies.
- All research files must be stored according to the UMMS GSN Storing and Maintaining Files for your Dissertation Research Document. **Please note:** you will not have access to the research drive or school email after you graduate so please discuss your plans for destruction and/or maintenance of data with your Dissertation Chairperson.
- You are responsible for carrying out the study as an independent investigator and must adhere to all guidelines related to the responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

STORING AND MAINTAINING DISSERTATION FILES

You should have folders with the following:

- Your proposal
- The original submission to the IRB (all documents: including correspondence, revisions, letter of approval, stamped approved consent form; stamped approved recruitment flyers etc.) Must keep a copy of all original documents
- Modifications – if you have made modifications – keep a file for these – make sure to keep a running list of the dates you submit and get approval for the modifications
- Continuing Review submission documents -with stamped copies as above

For study participant files:

- Keep all original consent documents in one folder – they should not contain the subject ID number and may need to be kept separate from your other study documents depending on how you said you would identify or not identify your data
- Keep all HIPAA documents in one folder (these must be kept for at least 6 years)
- Individual subject folders – with all data related to that particular subject (no identifiers except for subject ID)
- If you are keeping a file to link the subject ID with the subject name or other PHI – need to keep that in a separate locked location – or on a protected research drive

Make sure:

- You only use the current approved consent form and recruitment documents – they are “*stamped*” at the bottom with the expiration date – these documents are located to the **RIGHT** of the original forms when you pull up your study screen in eIRB
- That subjects sign the consent form and date the consent form (you should not date the form – see investigator manual)
- Never “back-date” any research documents – if there was an omission – need to add a “note to file” about this issue and discuss with your research advisor
- You (or person obtaining consent) must sign and date the consent form – use black/blue ink
- If you or the subject makes a mistake – put one line through the mistake – need to initial and date the mistake and then make the correction (never use white out or completely blot out the mistake)
- HIPAA form is signed and dated by the research participant
- All research files are stored in a locked file in a locked office (restricted access) – as per your Investigator Study Plan (ISP)
- All electronic files are password protected on encrypted device
- Do not use portable devices for data storage
- After the study is complete – need to store all research records for the time indicated in your ISP (locked up and secure). You must destroy your files in a HIPAA approved manner at the time point you indicated in your ISP. Most keep their research files for a minimum of 3 years. All HIPAA documents must be retained for a minimum of 6 years by law. Discuss with your Dissertation Chairperson the option of keeping your original consent forms and HIPAA documents at UMMS GSN where they will be destroyed on the noted date.
- You are required to close-out your study with the IRB before graduation (unless other arrangements have been made with your advisor)

DISSERTATION REQUIREMENTS

Completion of the Dissertation involves 3 main components:

1. Oral Defense of the Dissertation
2. Submission of an electronic version of the Dissertation to UMMS via escholarship
3. Submission of an approved manuscript describing the dissertation findings to a peer-review journal

No PhD degree will be conferred until all three of these components are completed. All students have up to 6 weeks after the oral defense to complete all dissertation requirements. Failure to do so may result in a change in the degree conferral date.

ORAL DEFENSE of the DISSERTATION

A public oral defense of the dissertation is required. The oral defense is scheduled once the dissertation student has a good draft of his/her dissertation manuscript and the committee agrees that the student is ready to defend his/her findings in a public forum. The student should be “close” to having all components of the dissertation complete (due within 6 weeks after the oral defense).

Plans for the oral defense must be announced publically at least 2 weeks before the event. This is an academic exercise that involves the student presenting his/her dissertation findings and responding to questions about the findings from the committee members and the audience. The following guidelines apply to the scheduling and conduct of the final oral defense of the dissertation:

- A hard copy (an electronic copy may be provided if preferred by the committee member) of the dissertation is distributed to the committee at least 2 weeks before the oral defense
- The final oral defense is announced to the UMMS community via email, postings and on the UMMS intranet at least 2 weeks before the defense
- The Dissertation Chairperson leads the final oral defense and all committee members must be in attendance (in person or via technology)
- The student gives a 15-20 minute formal presentation of the dissertation
- The student responds to questions posed by the committee and those in attendance
- Immediately following the discussion, the committee meets to determine the outcome of the final oral defense
- The student is informed of the outcome of the meeting

WRITTEN DISSERTATION

The final written dissertation will be prepared as a manuscript for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. The following steps must occur:

- You must select a peer-reviewed journal where you will submit your completed dissertation to (this should be done in consultation with your dissertation committee).
- Locate the author guidelines – provide these guidelines to your committee members.
- Work with your dissertation committee to agree on authorship order (the student must be first author and corresponding author on all dissertation manuscripts). Refer to authorship guidelines in the student handbook.
- Convert the first 3 chapters of your proposal into the introduction, specific aims; background sections required by the journal (follow the author guidelines for that journal for headers and page limitations).
- Write the results and discussion sections for your dissertation according to the author guidelines of the journal.
- Have the written manuscript approved by your committee - plan that this will require multiple drafts and multiple revisions.
- Once you pass the oral defense of your dissertation and have completed any needed revisions you must submit your manuscript to the journal for publication (proof of submission is required and must be provided to your dissertation chairperson prior to receiving your diploma).

The Final Written Dissertation should include the following:

Title Page (signed by all Committee Members)

Table of Contents

Abstract (500 words including a summary of your findings)

Dissertation Proposal (approved version)

Executive Summary: This summary should provide a brief description of the research approach (what was done) and any changes from the proposal with an explanation of why the changes were made.

Slide Presentation: A print copy of a formal slide presentation (professional plain background - black & white preferred) describing all aspects of your study. No copyrighted materials may be included in the slide presentation.

Dissemination Plan: Include a separate page with the following statement:

The primary description of this dissertation work was submitted as a manuscript on ____date____
to _____journal name_____ for review and consideration for publication.

**** Place Appendices at the end of the written dissertation.**

NOTE: Verification that your paper was submitted for review to a journal (*this must be provided to your Chairperson before graduation*).

DISSERTATION SUBMISSION TO *ESCHOLARSHIP*

After you successfully defend your dissertation:

You must obtain a signed copy of the dissertation title page from your dissertation Chairperson. This page becomes the title page for the final electronic version of your dissertation.

It is the student's responsibility to submit his/her dissertation to *UMMS escholarship*
<http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/>

Submit the final dissertation to *escholarship* following the guidelines on the [Graduate School of Nursing Dissertations Home Page](#).

NOTE: When your manuscript is accepted for publication - please notify your Dissertation Chairperson and/or the PhD Program Director with the reference to the manuscript. The UMMS library will then link your dissertation with your published manuscript.