



Liminal Theological Seminary

Dissertation Handbook

Welcome to the final culmination of your studies! Arriving at the point of your dissertation means you have gained a comprehensive understanding of the field you have committed your time and intellectual and spiritual energy to. While dissertations are often viewed as papers to survive and a long-distance marathon, they really do not have to be experienced in this fashion. Dissertations are opportunities for you to more deeply explore a specific aspect of your field of expertise with detail, dedication, and focus. Dissertations often become a foundation for future work and research interests and can become a transforming and liberating experience if they are allowed to be. Dissertations should not be that which you rush through to get to that piece of paper at the end.

At the Liminal Theological Seminary, dissertations are approached first and foremost from the perspective that you have already achieved the necessary knowledge that commiserates with doctoral conferment. At this stage of your work at LTS you are no longer a student but a colleague who is encouraged and supported through a year-long (sometimes longer) researching, writing, and experiential process that ensures when you leave LTS, not only will you have demonstrated your rigorous intellectual capacities, but will have also had an opportunity to expand and define your spiritual frameworks in preparation for service and/or scholarship. As LTS is a seminary, the dissertation plays a unique role in merging scholarship with spiritual clarification, expansion, and development. This is markedly different from traditional graduate education where the focus typically emerges on defining a new idea and rigorously arguing in defense of this idea through the collection of primary sources or through the support or refutation of that idea through experimentation. Your dissertation at LTS is as much about you, your spiritual voice and development, as it is about what has come before you. In this, your dissertation is a part of you and should not be viewed with academic distancing. Spirituality and religion are domains of human life that straddle the public and the private; the positivist/materialist and the personal/phenomenological.

So remember the dissertation is as much about your spiritual and religious unfolding and expression as any sacred activity you engage in.

Welcome to the final steps at LTS!

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Contents

An Overview of the Dissertation Process	3
Choosing Your Topic.....	5
Choosing Your Dissertation Modality	6
In-Depth Exploration of Modalities	7
Scholarship	7
Experiential/Personal Modality	7
Ministerial/Tradition Modality.....	8
Mixed Modality.....	8
Choosing Your Committee.....	8
Prospectus.....	9
Introduction Chapter.....	11
Background Chapter.....	13
Research Chapter.....	15
Conclusion Chapter	16
Submitting Your Dissertation.....	17
Reference List & Other Basic Formatting Issues	17

An Overview of the Dissertation Process

The dissertation process at LTS is different from traditional academic institutions and is designed to help you develop and support your work as you move through the process, rather than to have your work hang in the balance of two defenses (the Proposal Defense and the Dissertation Defense) and the traditional three-member committee. Specifically, your dissertation is broken down into several steps (each elaborated later in this handbook for the four types of dissertations you may write):

1. Mode of Dissertation: Scholarship, Experiential/Personal, Ministerial/Tradition, Mixed Modality
2. Prospectus: your prospectus is the roadmap for the scope of your dissertation. This is where you start, which will rarely look similar to your finished product.
3. Introduction Chapter(s): this is the first chapter of your dissertation that details where you are going with your work and foundational information.
4. Background Chapter(s): this is the second+ chapter of your dissertation that details how you have come to your ideas for your dissertation in greater, elaborative depth. This integrates prior knowledge and demonstrates how your dissertation is linked to the spiritual/religious field it is embedded within.
5. Research/Design/Intervention Chapter(s): this is the application of your ideas that demonstrate the applicability and ways in which your ideas could be integrated within the community.
6. Conclusion Chapter(s): this is where you pull together the material AND the process; in other words, you reflect on your goals of the introduction and the outcomes of the research here. This component brings your work into the field and demonstrates how the field changes by this work, while at the same time speculating on new ideas and questions.

At each step you are required to select two professionals/individuals whose expertise or perspective will help you expand your ideas and provide you feedback. These professionals may change during each step whereby you may ultimately arrive at 8 individuals who have read through and reviewed your work if you so choose (you do not need external reviewers for your prospectus). They do not need to grade your work, but are there to help you clarify your work and stimulate new ideas. Your proposal (chapters 1, 2, and part of 3) is an in-depth discussion between you and I on the direction of your research, your logic, and areas that may require deepening. This too is not graded but seen as a kind of author-editor meeting whereby you have an opportunity to evaluate your trajectory. Your final dissertation is another discussion on the finished product and an opportunity for final reflection on this process and your work.

Choosing Your Topic

The most essential step in dissertation writing is the topic. Many students begin thinking of their dissertation topics during the first year of graduate studies, some wait until they immediately start their work. Whenever you begin to start thinking you want to keep in mind a few things:

1. You have to love your topic. If you do not love what you are researching, chances are you'll lose interest and find the process unbearable. As such coming to a topic often requires sitting with who you are and the field you are studying and finding what inspires you and what ignites your passion. This is where all your topics should come from.
2. Uniqueness. Dissertations are essentially one-of-a-kind. This is often strictly associated with coming to a new intellectual idea; however at LTS the uniqueness essentially comes from respecting yourself and your own unique way of understanding the world and your chosen spiritual path. As such, as you come to a "new" topic, the importance is your passion and capacity to develop the topic rather than whether it is wholly unique.
3. Enough research. Dissertations are lengthy written works and as such it requires a lot of references to fully flesh them out. In this fashion, when you select your topics take time to do a search for literature. The more literature the easier it will be to write your work. If your topic has very little written—it doesn't mean you can't do, you'll have to single-handedly develop the literature on the topic. In short you may have more work cut out for you than a topic with a robust literature resource.
4. Religious/Spiritual Context. As you are working on a seminarian dissertation your topic must be situated within a religious and/or spiritual context. Be sure that your topic fits with your spiritual and/or religious identity. If it doesn't it may be more difficult to dig into the topic or fully engage with the topic. Again, this doesn't mean you can't engage in a topic that is in opposition to your own beliefs, just recognize if you opt for this kind of dissertation you'll have to be mindful of personal bias (you'll need to be aware of this even if you opt for a topic that resonates with you as well).
5. Skill. For any research topic you select, you want to make sure you have or are able to obtain the knowledge skills required to successfully research the topic.
6. Social Change and Ecological Mindfulness. LTS requires that you examine the social justice/change and ecological implications in your work. This does not have to define your work, but as this seminary is seeking to promote ecologically mindful spiritual practitioners and individuals who are vested in the restoration of equality among human beings and a more compassionate world, your topic should examine these dimensions or have implications for these areas.

Choosing Your Dissertation Modality

As seminary education is a unique merging of both scholarship and spiritual exploration, the kinds of dissertations possible must mirror this unique scholastic setting. As such, you have the option of selecting a type of dissertation that unfolds in four modalities:

1. **Scholarship.** The Scholarly Dissertation is one that is primarily rooted in intellectual foundations and processes linked to an element of religious practice, spiritual experience, or religious/spiritual frameworks. The Scholarly Dissertation seeks to examine something new and explore what research supports this new perspective. It requires specific skills for research that includes acquiring, critiquing, and integrating a large amount of primary and secondary sources. It may also include specific research-design skills ranging from quantitative to qualitative work. An example of the Scholarly Dissertation might be applying Process Theology to Neopaganism.
2. **Experiential/Personal.** Religion and spirituality are deeply felt experiences. As a seminarian this often translates to an even deeper relationship to your spiritual framework than the general public through a sense of calling. Dissertations through this modality are focused primarily on firstperson experience (knowing through one's senses [phenomenological]). It is a reflective dissertation that explores the nuances of your personal calling and experience in your chosen path. These experiences are further contextualized and grounded within other first-person accounts and primary and secondary resources. If this is a mode choice, your dissertation will typically be broken down into a developmental-revelatory process rather than the outline noted in the prior section (more on this later).
3. **Ministerial/Tradition.** Another unique aspect of seminary life is the emphasis on service to the wider community that adheres to your chosen religious/spiritual path. This dissertation provides an opportunity for you to clarify what your path is and its overall structure. This dissertation would adjust the "Research" chapter to instead define components/structure of your path (more on this later).
4. **Mixed Modality.** This is the final option that blends or merges any of the other paths into a cohesive whole. If you opt for this path, the creation of your dissertation will often require the inclusion of the standard sections coupled with any unique elements.

In-Depth Exploration of Modalities

Scholarship

A scholarship dissertation is one that looks very similar to that which is seen at traditional graduate education institutions. It involves conceptualizing something new within an existing knowledge base that allows that knowledge base to expand and grow. While dissertations can be revolutionary in this front leading to a direct challenge to the paradigm of the existing base, most students work conservatively and often narrowly rather than seeking to overhaul an entire scholastic field. Narrow focus allows for in-depth discovery and exploration and with a topic that has substantial research history can be readily expanded into the typical 100+ page dissertation. However, too narrow or too unique can lead to coming up short on research sources. If you are working on a topic that is either of these cases, I would recommend examining it through a mixed-modality, which allows you to rely on other types of sources for support. Finally, a scholarship paper can include actual research—whereby you design an experiment or work with human subjects. Experimental research or the involvement with human subjects requires what is known as an Institutional Review Board assessment *prior* to beginning this work (more on this later). Scholarship dissertations may be a rewarding process, not only providing you a firm foundation for future academic-based research, but also providing an opportunity to craft a publishable journal article and dig deeply into a broad function of human behavior and society in greater depth.

Experiential/Personal Modality

Phenomenological research, knowing through personal experience, has grown in interest in many academic fields. It is based on philosophical work by Edmund Husserl (see *Ideas*) and has been widely elaborated in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. It may be roughly understood as privileging the perspective of the “I” as a viable source of illuminating truth. While clearly we could argue counter philosophical positions, this mode of knowing has become increasingly popular within academia as a means of restoring the first-person experience as having something important to contribute to the world of knowledge. In short, it counters modern-day materialism that views empirical, so-called objective, modes of knowing are the only “truth” modes. A dissertation within the experiential/personal modality is ultimately a phenomenological dissertation.

Structuring a phenomenological dissertation can be challenging. Your introductory section highlights the overall trajectory of your experience and personal vision; while your background chapters explores the influences that have shaped this vision. In your research chapter, you are the subject and object of your research. In this you are both researcher and the researched; the knower and the who that is being known. In this fashion, your research section is your “Reflection” chapter—this is where you critically reflect on your spiritual experiences and life. We move out of the influences of your life and its shape to give voice to your reflection and learning. This is how you have learned what you have learned—how you have come to this knowledge, how you experience your knowledge. You may wish to look at as theoretical models for this chapter, such as:

- Flower, J. (1995). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development*. New York: HarperCollins. (Original Publication 1981)
- Roehlkepartain, E. C., King, P. E., Wagener, L., Benson, P. L. (2006). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Campbell, J. (1973). *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- As well as tradition, religion, spiritual- specific modalities of spiritual development, as well as first-person narratives modeling spiritual development and narrative.

Ministerial/Tradition Modality

If you opt to specify a ministerial practice or define a tradition, your dissertation will either broadly or specifically examine the structure and function of that tradition or practice. While religions differ in their answers, they are all defined along the following paradigmatic components:

- Logic: the order and sequence of arguments, persuasions, and the underlying reasoning (this may also relate to dogma).
- Epistemology: how and what can be known within the faith/tradition; what is its purpose.
- Axiology: the values around which the faith/tradition revolves, this also leads to issues of ethics
- Ontology: the nature of reality—how life IS situated within the religious or tradition's framework
- Methodology: techniques engaged in to elucidate ontology (think ritual, prayer, magic, etc.)
- Cosmology: the conception of and nature of the divine and the cosmos. Cosmology may be roughly further broken down into the following components (they may or may not be viable within all religious and philosophical frameworks):
 - arche: originating principle, first cause, beginning;
 - logos: organizing principle and fundamental knowing in the universe (primordial wisdom);
 - theoria: the witnessing position of the other—what “we” would come to see in the universe through contemplation;
 - nomos: the rules of things; laws of nature, laws of life;
 - theios: divinity or concept of the divine, god/desshead;
 - nous: the mind, consciousness, the act of knowing the divine

These elements would be a critical component of a formalized structure of either a new tradition or situating a process within a tradition. Additionally, this structure is also an excellent organizational model to keep in mind when examining research and its relationship to your chosen religious/spiritual topic. Knowing where the research fits at the broadest level of paradigmatic organization can go a long way to helping get to core aspects of each article to situate it within your own discussion.

Mixed Modality

The Mixed Modality dissertation is one that allows you to merge any of the three prior modalities into a cohesive whole. This may emerge blending the personal with the academic and experimental as this allows you access to multiple ways of knowing. It may be the blending of the tradition with the academic, allow you to interview participants of a tradition, examine its religious history, while also exploring a renewed or new manifestation. This allows a great deal of flexibility and options that a single modality does not and it also allows for a multitude of perspectives and thus expands what your dissertation can know and how this knowledge may be applied and generalized.

Choosing Your Committee

Traditional dissertations involve the selection of three members who provide guidance and evaluation through your process. The first member is known as your dissertation chair (at LTS Dr. MacDowell functions in this role). The Chair is responsible for guiding you through the nitty-gritty process of your

work and typically has expertise in the field you are working on. Your remaining committee members are broken down into Content and Research expertise (typically). One member is experienced in the content of your research; while the other has experience in your mode of research—your methods. Your threeperson committee then evaluates your work as a whole at two points—the middle and the end. At the conclusion of your dissertation, the Department Head and the committee members will ultimately determine whether your work meets the university standards. LTS functions a little differently.

Because LTS views your dissertation as not only an opportunity for you to fully express your own expertise, but to also provide an avenue for you to begin to assert yourself as a scholar and leader in the field, your committee experiences is one that is both networking in orientation and revolving and thus allows for plurality of perspectives. In this fashion you select two individuals to serve as your peer reviewers for each stage of your writing process; you may select two individuals to review your work throughout the whole process if you so choose. In this fashion, LTS prefers to think of this process more akin to professional journal writing: a peer review process.

Your peer reviewers should provide you with different perspectives than your own. They may relate to the field you are exploring or be entirely disconnected. Ideally, you have a balance of both—one who is capable of examining your work from *within* the field/knowledge area and one who is without it and can look at it with fresh eyes and questions. The goal of this individual is to read and evaluate your work critically and as such, it's important to recognize that a good reviewer is one that *doesn't like everything*. In this fashion, it is sometimes better to select someone who is *not a friend*. Further it is important that you do not select someone whom you serve as a spiritual advisor, minister, priest/ess, healer or counselor as this creates an unethical double relationship. Your peer reviewer will be required to complete a form and return it to Dr. MacDowell noting the relationship and the completion of an evaluation form, which you may request a copy of once it is received by Dr. MacDowell (All dissertation forms are available online). Please note your reviewers do not need doctorates or masters to serve well as reviewers. Many qualified individuals do not have the opportunity to attend graduate school but have spent years developing and refining their knowledge in a specific spiritual or religious path.

So characteristics you want in a peer reviewer:

1. interested in your success and your work.
2. has adequate time to devote to your work.
3. capable of giving you constructive feedback & different perspectives.
4. knowledgeable/expertise in your field (for at least one member).
5. knowledgeable in related fields (or in your own journey) or broadly knowledgeable.

Prospectus

Your prospectus is the first official document you will write and turn in during the dissertation process. Writing the prospectus should take time and careful consideration as this will ultimately provide you with a roadmap for the full scope of your dissertation. A prospectus is essentially a fleshed out outline of your dissertation and includes several critical (required) elements that will ultimately help guide your work. It's important to also remember that your prospectus is a document that means *potential* or *anticipated* goals and directions, rather than defining what you will follow exactly. In short, your prospectus gets you thinking and started, but is changeable. Let's look at the required parts of your Prospectus:

1. Title of Dissertation—a dissertation title should provide a brief (under 12 words) description of your research purpose. Unlike books, a dissertation title tends to be a little more dry (although feel free to be creative) as it tends to focus on providing a snapshot

introduction of the main purpose of the text to come. In your prospectus, your title is tentative, but again helps get you thinking about the purpose of your text.

2. Type of Dissertation Modality—you can change this modality as you work, but thinking about which modality contextualizes your research allows you to begin from a firm structure that can guide the research and writing process.

3. Introduction to Interest Area—this provides a brief overview of what you are doing. This should provide a brief, but supported (referenced) background to your ideas and what you hope your dissertation will prove, discover, or describe in relation to these ideas. This is the *context* of your dissertation—where it is situated within the larger fields of knowledge.

4. Theory/ies or Conceptual Frameworks—All dissertations make some kind of knowledge claim; this section allows you to articulate what your hypothesis is (your knowledge claim) and how this hypothesis is grounded. In other words what prior concepts or theories support your line of inquiry and, if you engage in any form of experimentation, support your methods. For example, let's say you argue that active prayer is more effective for spiritual development than prayer that involves repetitive scripts. You would want to identify what underlying theories or prior research supports your conclusions or leads you to believe your ideas are likely true, as well as possible theories that support any mode of experimentation you apply. If you are not doing an experimentation, this section may be less defined and would revolve around a more detailed conceptualization of where your ideas are situated and what informs them. In this it may be an extended introduction.

5. Purpose—Ideally all dissertations have a fundamental purpose—a reason for being written beyond the achievement of a degree. This is the section of the prospectus where you articulate the goals of the dissertation that you allude to in the introduction. This is what you plan/hope to “do” in the dissertation.

6. Proposed Research Method—all dissertations involve research and a lot of it. Research is defined as that which allows you to elucidate the purpose of your research and to support/question your hypothesis (what you think it all means). Research involves at the most basic level integrating literature; but it may also involve experimentation of some kind. In this section you articulate what kinds of research you will need to “do”.

7. Research Design—if you are employing some mode of experimentation, you would need to discuss what type of design you will be utilizing (quantitative [statistical], qualitative [this includes methods such as journaling, experiential activities and self-report, etc.], and mixed methods [mixture of statistical and quantitative]). If you opt to engage in research, recognize that you need to have demonstrated competency in the research method you so choose. This means taking statistical courses for quantitative methods, etc. If you work with experimentation, you will also need to complete an IRB application if this modality involves living beings to ensure your interventions conform to ethical requirements of LTS. Additionally you will need to:

- a. Describe the population you plan to study (the approximate number of individuals, characteristics of individuals, how you will select them, and reason for selection);
- b. Types of data you will collect (self-reports, interviews, artwork, tests, measures, etc.)

8. LTS has two main social agendas: Ecological Mindfulness and Social Change. All dissertations are expected to include and consider their findings within the framework of how they may contribute toward positive social change and justice and/or ecological mindfulness. Both of these are required to be considered within the scope of the dissertation.

This is not a graded document, rather it is a document that allows me to better support your research and to guide you in directions that will maximize the outcome of your study and writing. It also allows you and me to spot potential areas of difficulty in the process. Further, this early process requires that you engage in a cursory overview of what research exists to ensure you have enough information to springboard from.

Introduction Chapter

Your first chapter in your dissertation is the Introduction. Your Introduction is a comprehensive overview of what you plan on exploring and the historical context of this exploration. If it's a personal experience, this introduction situates your experience within your life. Your Introduction is typically the component of your dissertation where you spend the most time exploring your own ideas. At LTS the following elements of your Introduction are required:

1. Abstract—this is a short paragraph that is placed before your Introduction and is usually about 120 words. It describes the overall problem/topic being addressed and its purpose and any theoretical foundations or context that is essential. It summarizes the critical questions you are asking or the ideas you are seeking to explore and your chosen design for your research (this would be the rationale for your dissertation modality). Finally your abstract would conclude with a statement on the implications of your work—how it would impact the religious structure you are exploring, the ecological implications, and social change implications.
2. Background—your background provides a snapshot of the critical history of the subject area you are developing or exploring. It communicates to the reader the *essential* information about what has inspired your dissertation and what has influenced it. You can think of this as the set-up to the bulk of your dissertation and what you will explore in greater detail in the next major chapter(s) in the literature review. This ensures that any reader coming into the dissertation gets where you are coming from and is given the critical information to make sense of your purpose and goals. The key with this section of your Introduction is to keep it specific to your purpose. The final paragraph of this section should lead into your next section by briefly identifying how the background links to your specific focus.
3. Dissertation Focus—this is the section of the dissertation where you introduce your purpose that has been briefly stated in the prior section. This is typically the largest area of the first chapter. This is where you define the overall trajectory of your work, what you plan on examining, and why. It also corresponds to your specific methodologies you plan on utilizing (in the case of LTS dissertations this would typically equate to the selection of your dissertation modality, unless you are actually planning to conduct a study). If you are choosing a topic that is linked to or draws upon prior concepts, theoretical foundations, or philosophical orientations that you are drawing upon in your work; you would take the time to highlight these and how you are incorporating them into your work.

4. Assumptions—this is the section of the dissertation where you take time to assess your personal bias and the assumptions the framework you are examining holds. All knowledge comes with truth claims that are often unarticulated but literally “assumed” as facts in evidence. A good dissertation has a substantial self- and conceptual reflection to highly what beliefs are held to be true. It is not about refuting these beliefs or truisms, but rather ensuring integrity of your own work, reducing possible bias, and also providing transparency to the reader so that they know where you are coming from. Rigorous examination is required for this section and you are expected to consider alternative, contradictory perspectives to help examine your logic, highlight bias, and illuminate assumptions.

5. Limitations—there are always limitations for any concept or idea or intervention or religion. This is the section, similar to Assumptions, that highlights what your dissertation *won't be able to do*. It highlights any potential factors that could inhibit the outcome of your work or impact your work's capacity to be applied for other individuals. If you are writing a personal story, the limitation is that it reflects your own experience and may not reflect others. If you are writing about a tradition, there may be a limitation in terms of *who* may benefit; if it is a spiritual intervention it may be characteristics of individuals who will likely not be able to perform this role. In statistical-based research this is often aspects of the research design that cannot be controlled for and as such places limitation on how the outcomes may be applied or generalized.

6. Delimitations—this is what your dissertation *will deliberately exclude* or the boundary around your research. It is the parameters of your work that you will not cross. For example, if you designed an experiment, this would detail characteristics of participant exclusion in the experimental design.

7. Social Change & Ecological Implications—this is the aspect of the Introduction that discusses how your dissertation will promote social change and ecological mindfulness. LTS requires that your work have an anticipated beneficial impact on society and the natural world. It is possible that your work will have no impact, but as part of the process careful exploration of how to maximize the chance of a beneficial impact is required.

8. Definitions—this is a section that is exactly as it purports to be—a list of terminology and definitions. In the introduction you will define any terms utilized in your work that may not be understood by someone coming to this dissertation without direct experience in your field. This allows any reader examining your dissertation to gain a brief and clear background in your field. It also ensures that you describe any term that you may be utilizing differently than how it may be traditionally utilized. For example, if your work re-envisioned traditional concepts in theology, you will need to define each of these concepts in your Introduction. This section will change from the time you write it to the time you complete your whole work as you will likely add to this list or reduce it with each subsequent chapter completion and edit.

There is a lot of leeway within these main headings, depending on your modality and topic. When you begin to write your Introduction you will be required to submit a fleshed-out outline of your introduction to me prior to its writing to ensure that you are on the write track with your chosen modality and subject and your organizational needs. As such, you are not going through this process alone. Also, you may find that one chapter introduction is simply not enough space to fully examine your intentions—as such you are readily allowed to expand your chapters. In this capacity, it is recommended that you rely on Part Sections to differentiate your introductory chapters from your background and design ones.

Background Chapter

Following your Introduction chapter(s) is the Literature Review or the Background Chapter(s). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a rich exploration of the ideas that have come before your own and have given shape to them. While traditional dissertations look for *how* you go about collecting your background information, LTS is more interested in what you actually utilize for your background. However, there is one exception: You are required to obtain the *bulk* of your resources from academic journals, relevant primary book sources, or relevant magazine. You should not be relying upon the Internet for work as the quality of information posted rarely meets the standards for academic work. This is not to say that you cannot utilize information posted to the Internet, just be sure it is appropriately documented and reputable. If you have doubts, it's a good sign that it's not the best source. Now with that said, your background chapters explore in-depth all foundational material that supports your underlying dissertation direction. Some key things to include in your work:

1. Adequate breadth and depth of research utilized. If you are utilizing one text, then your dissertation will not pass. As dissertations are demonstrations of knowledge *and* academic skill, you are expected to examine a wide range of sources and to critically explore them. Breadth refers to the wide scope of resources—most dissertations include hundreds of primary sources. In fact a good rule of thumb is to research until you come down to literature that other writers refer to and that you find yourself being directed to work you've already read. It's a good idea to *read* all bibliographies in journals and books and utilize these as directions for other reading ideas. In writing a dissertation it is the literature review that typically takes the longest to complete—precisely because of the breadth requirements. *Depth* refers to your capacity to analyze and integrate what you read. You do not simply quote from material, but *discuss* the implications of the work *to your ideas*. And with this you are *expected* to examine and discuss information that runs *counter* to your own ideas.
2. Justification for Study Focus. Your research review ultimately provides support for the direction of your dissertation. When readers are done with reading this in-depth background, they'll be able to say "Yes, I can see why you are going in that direction."
3. Design Methodology. For those of you who elect an experimentation modality, you are required to provide a substantive discussion on the why you elected the design you did and the literature review relevant to the application of your statistical or qualitative model.

Some critical tips to this section:

1. Do not excessively quote. Quoting from material should be utilized only if (a) you simply cannot reword the material and flow it into the text and/or (b) the quote provides an impactful statement that will serve to impress upon the reader a significant point. Be sure that anytime you do quote, you clearly discuss the quote. Quotes *must* be cited.
2. Map out your chapter(s) so that your literature review flows from point A to point B. It should be organized like a traditional critical essay. If you have a lot of information, consider breaking down topics into individual chapters.
3. You will be reading a substantial amount of information to complete this section correctly. It's a good idea to set up your computer or purchase index cards to begin collecting

quotes and relevant page numbers and complete reference information *before* you start writing. Having been through this process myself twice—you lose information quickly when you have to organize so much. It’s also a good idea to sit and write out a summary of a book chapter or article you have just read to help you clarify your reaction to it and identify key aspects that fit with your ideas.

4. What happens if you simply do not have enough literature? If you are working on a dissertation that is a relatively obscure topic or something that is so new it hasn’t been done, you will need to sit down and think about the topic and what factors gave rise to it. That’s where your literature review lies. No concept comes from thin air—it all ties to other ideas and cultural structures or revelations by other people. As such, consider mapping the history of your ideas in terms of what factors gave rise or supported its unfurling. You’d be surprised just how much information suddenly comes to the surface when we move passed the confines or limits of our set idea. For example, if you were looking into modern-day hip-hop movement and its role within urban youth, you’d likely look at rock and gospel influences, but you might forget to look at the liberation calland-response music in pre-Civil War South and the historical linkages and traumas. This might then lead you to examine something called Slave Syndrome, a traumatic intergenerational response to histories of enslavement. In short, when you think you’ve reached the end of possible resources, dig further.

5. Because this will ultimately be one of the longest aspects of your work—be sure you pick a topic you enjoy because by the time you are done, you will have read *everything* there is to know on it. You definitely do not want to get sick of it half-way through the process.

6. Accessing resources: Your library is your friend. Most libraries now have searchable academic databases that allow you to locate academic journals and many of these have full-text articles. Printing out or writing down citations allows you to go to the library and access journals for copying or reading. Also your local library can generally order you any books you need. Additionally, if you live near a university, you can utilize their library as a guest to hunt through journals. Finally, “Google Scholar” is a great resource for locating material online from reputable resources. These are great ways to save money, but still access a rich plethora of material. Always take good notes and write the complete citation of your book, article, or chapter (more on this in a minute.)

It is through an exhaustive literature review that you’ll ultimately be able to shape your argument your dissertation makes. This review allows the readers to see you logic—where you are coming from and how you are going about getting to a destination. A good review discusses information that is “pro” your point of view, but also “against” your point of view and allows you to craft an argument as to why you may still be right even under this “against” situations. For example, in a recent paper, I argued that pet ownership lead to distinctly positive health outcomes for all age groups. I provided substantial research to support this position. However, I also found research that ran contrary to this position. In order to make this article as truthful as possible, I had to address these contradictory studies. Thus my hypothesis ultimately had to change to: pet ownership under *most* circumstances was beneficial for health; however in the presence of allergies, phobias, or financial hardship ownership could lead to negative health effects; further individuals may experience negative outcomes due to the death of the pet leading to possible complicated grief and increased stress and thus deleterious health effects. In short a good review allows you an opportunity to see *all* sides of a situation.

Research Chapter

This chapter will be the most diverse between any two individuals at LTS. The content of this chapter depends entirely upon which modality you have chosen for your dissertation. In short, this is the *applied* chapter. This is where you *show* the reader your ideas. It may be a discussion of a comprehensive tradition, it may be an experiment, it may be fully articulated personal vision. A way to think of this chapter is to return to your Introduction and look at the sections that follow your “background” or “opening” section. This is where your work takes center stage and you extend what has come before into a new direction. Here are some possible contents:

1. **Quantitative Study:** this chapter would detail your experiment and report the actual outcomes of your experiment. For example, I might be interested in understanding how churchgoers respond to different modes of textual criticism of the New Testament. I might design a survey using a Likert scale; randomly divide parishioners from a local Methodist Church, and provide an analysis of a passage in the Bible using a literal interpretation and another utilizing a postmodern interpretation. I would also likely administer a pre-test control measure on the passage I was going to use. I would then administer my post-test survey and compare the two groups utilizing a simple statistical analysis. In my Research Chapter I would detail my study design, survey construction, and outcomes. You **MUST** have competency in research design and statistical application to utilize this mode of design. You will need to complete an IRB if you plan on working with other individuals.
2. **Qualitative Study:** A qualitative study is one that seeks to understand something or elucidate an outcome through a non-statistical mean. For example, if I repeated the above study without a survey that translates into a number, I might instead interview parishioners individually about their experience and understanding. I would tape record my interview and later transcribe it. I might then utilize a theory known as Constructive Theory to understand how I would go about interpreting my tapes. I would then utilize this chapter to describe my study and report my results. Depending on how you collect and utilize data, background in Research Design may be necessary. In general, this mode of study is flexible and open. It allows you to directly impact with others to see how a certain experience affects them; this may be mixed with a more nonstudy approach whereby you are looking to manifest a specific spiritual tradition or technique and want to demonstrate its application and its response. You will need to complete an IRB if you plan on working with other individuals.
3. **Mixed-Method:** A mixed-method design has both quantitative and qualitative elements. The section of this design is generally utilized to general richer data and information. Quantitative provides empirical information that may typically facilitates more firm conclusions; however qualitative data is more descriptive and provides greater depth and often leads to richer questions and even contradictions to the quantitative. You **MUST** have a background in statistical analysis and research design to adequately utilize this modality. You will need to complete an IRB if you plan on working with other individuals.
4. **Non-studies.** If you are not seeking to *prove* something, then this chapter is about establishing or demonstrating something new. For example, if you are crafting a new spiritual tradition, this chapter(s) would detail this process in great depth. You will need to complete an IRB if you plan on working with other individuals.

Some key issues that should always be at the forefront of your mind in this chapter:

1. Honest—sometimes things don't work and the not working is actually just as important as when you do get a result that supports your ideas. If things do not work out, that requires both reporting and discussion. Everything you do in this chapter must be honestly and completely reported.
2. Ethical—if you are working with others, you must adhere to a strict ethical guideline outlined in your IRB; you will be required to be upfront and honest with any individual directly involved in your design.
3. Limitations—just because we *want* something to be true, does not necessarily mean it will be or that we will find it or that what we develop will actually work well. It's okay and that is a part of discovering new ideas and new ways of seeing. You do not need to go back to the drawing board and start over.
4. Simplicity & Realism—dissertations can readily get out of hand. For example, in my health psychology dissertation I wanted to do a population study—this would have required more than 2,000 participants both working on quantitative measures of health and qualitative analysis of diaries from all participants. Clearly this would have been impossible for one person both financially and time wise and would have led to marked mistakes in analysis. As such, I simplified the structure to a population study in my county—it served to be relatively representative of the broader US population and still allowed me to draw conclusions, but it wasn't unmanageable: 200 individuals. You need to keep your work within your means and your skills. Dissertations are rarely the time to go out and gain new skills, such as learning a new language or learning how to run multivariate ANOVAs. This isn't the time to demonstrate what you could do, but what you *can* do. This is the culmination of who you are and what you've learned. You may find ideas for future studies from your dissertation—write them down and save them for another date. For now, look at what you need to do to illuminate your dissertation's primary purpose.

Conclusion Chapter

The final chapter or part of your dissertation is the conclusion. And just as it sounds and just as you've read in countless books—it is the summary of your work. It is in this chapter you have several goals:

1. Pulling together all of the work from prior chapters within an amplified discussion of your research chapter findings or processes;
2. Discussing any limitations your dissertation has that have been further clarified in your prior chapters—what your dissertation *can't do*;
3. Discuss social and ecological implications of your dissertation—how your work may be expanded into these areas of human life and in what ways, if any;
4. Discuss future issues that may need further examination or development based on your work.

This chapter may be aptly described as the “where-to-from” chapter. It is also the place to locate any ideas you left on the curb due to being overly complex or undoable in your work, so as to provide ideas for any readers who may be inspired to take up your ideas and explore them. Finally, it is the place for final thoughts. LTS privileges the personal so do not be afraid to make this section personally reflective.

Submitting Your Dissertation

Once you have completed each chapter and have had each chapter reviewed, you can begin to make the final edit for final submission. Dissertations that meet all the necessary requirements and have demonstrated appropriate intellectual caliber for the doctoral degree will be awarded a passing grade. At which point you will be informed of your completion of your doctorate. Dissertations that fail to meet the standards may be asked for revisions; upon receipt of a revised passing document you will be awarded your doctorate. Dissertations that require more than 2 major revisions will not be accepted and you will not be awarded a final degree from Ocean Seminary College. Major revisions often reflect failure to demonstrate breadth and depth, failure to consider alternative arguments, failure to demonstrate clear and consistent logic, failure to adequately match one's ideas with application, and/or failure to demonstrate linkage of ideas with the associated religious or spiritual field. Remember throughout your writing process you will be supervised and are encouraged to turn in sample work as you go to avoid any major revisionary work at the conclusion of your studies.

Reference List & Other Basic Formatting Issues

I prefer students utilize the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Manual of Style* in the writing and structuring of their dissertation. This is generally a clean style that does not typically encourage the use of footnotes. Citations are made within the body of the text and include author last name, publication date, and page number (if relevant) and these correspond directly to a reference list. It also encourages you to include all your thoughts within the body of your text rather than inundate your text with distracting footnotes. However, you may be used to another mode of formatting such as the Chicago Manual of Style or the MLA. You may select which formatting you prefer, providing you are consistent in its application. I am familiar with all major modes of formatting.

Some general rules:

1. Dissertations are expected to be *at least* 25,000 words, there is no upper limit.
2. Spelling mistakes are not permissible. You are required to meticulously review your work. I generally recommend spell-checking paragraphs as you go.
3. Grammar mistakes are not permissible. Please visit the LTS Writing Center for tips on ensuring your work is grammatically correct. The best option is to do a separate proof for grammar and read your work aloud. This will help catch most grammar mistakes as our brains are innately wired for organization.
4. Dissertations will be checked for plagiarism; if found you will be dismissed entirely from LTS.
5. Double space your work when it is complete.
6. Margins are set at 1" top, bottom, right, and left.
7. Indent the first line of each paragraph to 0.5 margin.
8. Apply a consistent heading style. Typically, they are:
Heading 1 *Heading*

2

Heading 3

Heading 4

9. Direct quotes longer than 45 words should be indented and flush at 0.5 margin; no quote marks utilized.
10. Periods, commas, and other grammar points are contained *within* the final quote mark, not placed outside—this is American style.

11. Header should include: Last name, partial dissertation title, and page number.
12. Always cite any idea or quote that is not your own.