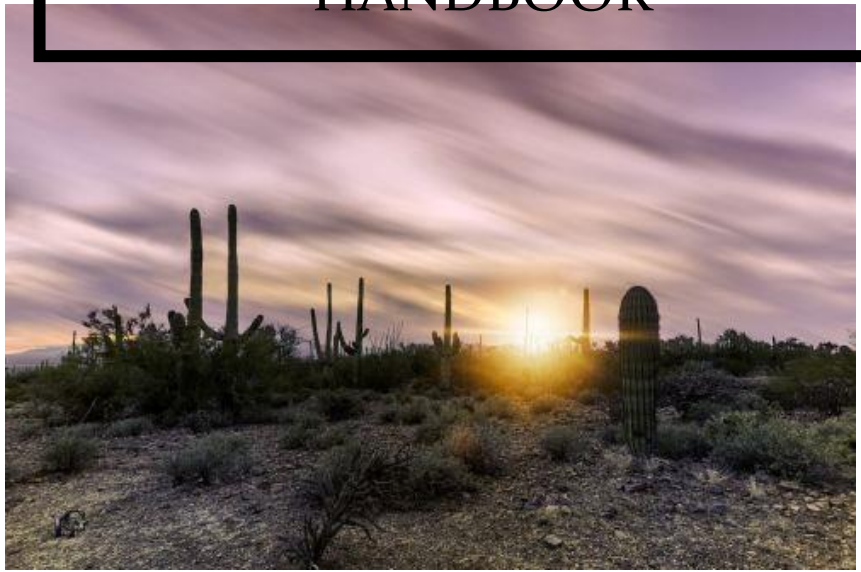




RCTE / 2024-2025
DISSERTATION WRITER'S
HANDBOOK



The Dissertation Writers Handbook

2024-2025 / Table of Contents

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Book recommendation: *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation* by Sonja Foss and William Waters

Other helpful links include <https://grad.arizona.edu/gsas/degree-requirements/doctorphilosophy#dissertation>, “[Expert Advice: Thesis/Dissertation](#)” and “[Expert Advice: Job Search/Career Planning](#)”

Dear Reader,

This Dissertation Handbook outlines the dissertation process to answer questions such as these:

- 1) How do you choose a topic?
- 2) How do you put your committee together?
- 3) What resources are available to write a dissertation?

If you have a question, please contact your dissertation director. If there is still some confusion, please contact the Program Director and/or the Program Assistant.

Thank you,

The RCTE Faculty

Revised: September 6, 2022

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Chapter 1: What is a Dissertation?

Timeline and Process

After students have passed the written and oral parts of the comprehensive exam, the Graduate College will advance them to **doctoral candidacy**, assuming they have completed the required coursework listed on their **approved Plan of Study** and have no other obstacles to graduation aside from completion of the dissertation. Students' bursar's account will be charged \$35 in candidacy fees, though fees are subject to change. The Graduate College will notify students by email when they have been advanced to candidacy and charged the fees. [Please see the dissertation timeline posted on the Graduate College page.](#)

Planning, researching, and writing your doctoral dissertation is the culmination of your graduate studies and your launching pad for moving into the next phase of your career. In the recognition that your career may head in different academic and nonacademic directions, the RCTE faculty have are expanding your options beyond the traditional monograph-style dissertation.

Important points to remember:

- Once you pass your Comprehensive Exam, you will be **automatically charged \$35** by the Graduate College for your **degree candidacy fee**.
- As soon as you know who will be on your committee please fill out the Dissertation Committee Appointment form.

Selecting a Topic

To find a timely topic that is of interest to the discipline and you, you will need to reflect back over the ideas you have been developing in your courses and comprehensive exams and then consider what gaps, issues or problems in the field you would like to address. You want to select a topic that will do more than get a dissertation written. The dissertation should open out into further research. In the eyes of hiring committees, *the dissertation will define who you are as a potential colleague* and your possible future contribution to the field. It pays to find a topic that may do well by you in all these respects.

You may have heard that you should begin thinking about your topic for your dissertation fairly early in the Program.

Here are some specific ways you can help this thinking along:

- Volunteer as a CCCC bibliographer (see Director) or look through Dissertation Abstracts International.
- Examine the recent programs for professional conventions.
- Review professional disciplinary journals from the last ten years.
- Think of papers written for classes as ways of investigating possible topics. If papers for classes can become chapters in your dissertation, you are way ahead.

- Continue to discuss your research agenda from your Qualifying Exam with your mentor.
- Use the Comprehensive Exams. You can develop your Reading List in such a way as to advance your work on your dissertation. Comprehensive Exams are intended first of all to examine general knowledge of the field to show readiness to do more specialized work, but it is often in preparing these lists that a topic comes into focus.
- Consult sample dissertation proposals on file with RCTE Program Assistant.
- Review dissertations (available through the [UA library on ProQuest](#)).

The RCTE Program offers three alternative formats for the dissertation:

- A traditional monograph dissertation with multiple research-based chapters, traditionally 5 chapters
- A portfolio dissertation comprised of three or more published and unpublished articles (details on this option are in part 4 of the Graduate College’s [Dissertation Formatting Guide](#)), and
- A multimodal dissertation that may take various print and nonprint forms, for example a creative or journalistic monograph with or without photographs and illustrations,
 - a documentary film project, or
 - a digital application or platform with supporting documentation that is developed from the dissertation proposal.

You should discuss the format of your dissertation with the RCTE Director in your annual reviews as you advance through the program and prepare for your dissertation proposal. Multimodal dissertations will require more advanced consultation. You may wish to consider related projects in your Qualifying Portfolio and in your ICR. You may also need to discuss the technologies, format, and feasibility of the project with faculty inside and outside the program before you begin drafting the dissertation proposal. RCTE faculty will also need advanced notice to help you plan because we will all be working together to develop the specifications and expectations for this new option for the dissertation.

As you brainstorm on how these alternative approaches may fit into your career plans, you should consider not only how you will get the support you need to complete your project but also how the project may be received by hiring and promotion committees, especially if you intend to search for a tenure-track job with research expectations. These concerns are addressed in Vimal Patel’s *Chronicle of Higher Education* article: “[Ph.D.s Embrace Alternative Dissertations. The Job Market May Not](#)” (2016).

Whatever format you choose, the RCTE faculty are committed to supporting you and helping you get the support you need from those with the necessary expertise, but you are responsible for

planning ahead to ensure that you will have the technological resources and expertise needed to complete the project.

- You should speak with a faculty member with whom you would like to work as your dissertation director no later than the beginning of the fall semester after having passed your Comprehensive Exam Portfolio.
- After identifying a dissertation director, you should work with that faculty member to invite other committee members and project collaborators and begin assessing what you will need to complete the proposed project.
- Once you have identified a committee, you have until the **eleventh week** of the semester after you've passed your Comprehensive Exam Portfolio to schedule a meeting with your committee to approve your dissertation proposal.

This timeline should give you plenty of time in which to craft your ideas into a well-developed and feasible project proposal, especially if you plan ahead and work closely with your dissertation director to inventory the skills and resources you will need.

Chapter 2: Putting Your Committee Together

Important points to remember:

- Select your dissertation director *first* before selecting any other committee members.
- Your dissertation director must come from your major program of study (RCTE).
- Your proposal--even in draft form--can help you recruit committee members.

Begin the process of actively recruiting your dissertation committee early in the summer or fall semester immediately *after* successfully completing your comprehensive exams. Your committee should meet the following requirements:

- The **Graduate Council** and the **Faculty Senate** have approved a **central requirement of a minimum of three members committee members**, all of whom must be University of Arizona tenured, tenure-track, or approved by the Graduate College as equivalent.

Dissertation committees should consist of the following faculty members:

- 1) **dissertation chair** must be CORE RCTE faculty, or if you select a co-chair, they may be affiliate faculty,
- 2) second reader can be faculty from the core *or* affiliate faculty list,
- 3) third reader can be *any* graduate faculty on campus.
- 4) Special members, such as University members from outside the University of Arizona or community members, must be approved by the Graduate College.

Your director must be from RCTE. The other two members (2nd reader) should also be from RCTE (affiliate included) and 3rd reader can be any member of the UA faculty eligible to serve on a graduate committee. You may have additional outside members, but a minimum of three of your committee members must be current University of Arizona faculty members that are tenured, tenure-track, or approved as tenure equivalent. (Tenure equivalency must be given by the Graduate College. The program director cannot designate that status.) All outside members must be approved by your dissertation director, the program director, and the graduate college.

Selecting a Dissertation Director

Select your director based first on her/his/their expertise (primarily) of the subject area or methodology of your project. Other options you should consider when selecting a dissertation director:

- Engagement with your work: Does the faculty member work in related areas? Do you work well with the person? Has the person worked with your writing in a way that has been helpful?

The dissertation director, also referred to as the committee chair, is the most important member of the committee because she/he/they will be the principal reader of your drafts and advisor on

research and even your recommendation letter writer. Other members of the committee may read your drafts only on special occasions and for specific purposes. They are not required to provide feedback through the process. Before starting the writing process, you should negotiate a clear understanding with each as to what they wish or do not wish to read.

Co-directors

You may have a circumstance in which you want co-directorship of your dissertation. For example, if you would like an Affiliate Faculty (see page 10 of RCTE Handbook) to director your dissertation, they can *only* serve as co-directors on your committee. If you do have co-directors on your dissertation, make sure that they work well together.

Other Committee Members – 2nd / 3rd / 4th readers

Think of all the professors you take classes from as potential members of your dissertation committee. You should write up a draft dissertation proposal before forming your committee. At a minimum, you should give committee members a brief outline before asking them to serve.

Frequency of Feedback and Committee Members Responsibilities

Members of the committee, *other than your director*, may decide to read your drafts only on special occasions and for specific purposes. They are not required to provide feedback through the process. **Before starting the writing process, you should negotiate a clear understanding with each as to what they wish or do not wish to read.**

[Additional Graduate College Guidelines](#)

*All dissertation committee members are expected to attend the final defense.

Chapter 3: The Dissertation Proposal

Important points to remember:

- It is advised that you should meet at least **3-4** times with your Dissertation Director during the semester you are writing your dissertation proposal.
- Dissertation proposals tend to be 10 - 25 pages long (single-spaced, 1" margins) depending on the number of chapters anticipated for the completed manuscript.
- The Program Assistant will provide you with an internal form for you take to your dissertation proposal defense meeting. Once you submit the signed form and the proposal to the Program Assistant, they will sign off and indicate in GradPath that it has been submitted.

The Dissertation Proposal is a document that advanced (All But Dissertation – ABD) graduate students compose in order to clarify for themselves and their advisors why and how they will research, organize, and write their dissertations. It is less of a blueprint—which is, by definition, a fixed and fully formed set of specifications— than an “architectural scheme,” that is, a somewhat detailed sketch that systematically captures the essence of a project and describes an action plan for carrying it out. Such a document can emerge in many ways and the writing and presenting of it serves many functions.

Dissertation Proposals tend to be 10-25 pages long (double-spaced, 1" margins, 12-point typeface, in MLA format or a citation format that is appropriate to the topic) depending on the number of chapters anticipated for the completed manuscript and the details that need to be included to demonstrate the feasibility of the project. (Work with your dissertation director on the length of the proposal.) If you are proposing a digital project, you should consider presenting a prototype or other proof-of-concept illustrations, for example, a storyboard for documentary film.

If your dissertation involves research with students, faculty, external communities, or other human subjects, you should complete the required training and submit your proposed research to the UA Internal Review Board, as detailed on [this page](#).

Students typically find that through drafting the dissertation proposal—a process that is equal parts idea generation, sifting, reviewing, selection, and description— they become keenly aware of several needs as they build their expertise:

- when their theoretical frameworks need bolstering,
- when their research questions are too vague,
- when they are being overly ambitious about their objectives, and
- when their research methods do not fit the question.

Once identified, such needs and weaknesses can be addressed and corrected.

For faculty, dissertation proposals are a chance to help students hone their professional academic skills and avoid some of the research and writing obstacles that can only be identified with experience. It also gives faculty a chance to become oriented to each particular student's way of thinking about certain kinds of problems, from philosophical paradoxes to time management issues. By discovering such information early on, faculty are in a much better position to offer helpful counsel throughout the actual dissertation writing process.

As you develop your proposal, be mindful of the various strengths and weaknesses of your committee members and assemble a document that will give each of them the most useful picture of your project as you envision it. Say, for example, you are planning to write a dissertation on the impact of social media on students' online interactions in a composition class. If you know that one of your committee members has expertise in the area of teaching composition while another has done more specialized research on teaching on line, then you might want to add a sentence or two that will help each of these members to understand your project given their scholarly strengths and limitations. To put it simply, write your proposal like the trained rhetor that you are.

Your expertise with assessing rhetorical situations and audiences will help you achieve your broader purpose in writing your proposal, which is the same genre as a book proposal. While dissertation proposals are a bit different than those for books, many of the elements are the same. In writing the proposal with the help of your Dissertation Director, and in presenting it to your Dissertation Committee, you (will gain excellent experience with a professional and rhetorical art that could have a profound impact on your ability to advance in the academy and beyond. (See Chapter 6 of this Handbook).

Lastly, a significant factor in the successful completion of both the dissertation proposal and the dissertation is careful stewardship of your time. It is imperative that once you have completed your Comprehensive Exams that you select and or consult with your Dissertation Director as soon as possible (within four weeks at the outside), preferably with a first rough draft or notes on your dissertation proposal in hand. As you move forward, your Director will work with you on early drafts of the Proposal and help make it a much more cohesive document.

** (See the Program Assistant for Dissertation Proposal samples.)

Dissertation Proposal Elements

Your Dissertation Proposal should have the following elements, though the structure may vary if you are doing an empirical research study or a multimodal dissertation that adopts a more narrative structure. This outline is not meant to imprison your creative process as you design your dissertation. Rather, they are meant to provide a simple structure through which you can easily record for yourself and convey to your committee members the basic plan you have for doing your dissertation. Faculty members are well aware that this plan will gradually change as your research matures and your arguments become clearer. This is a common phenomenon when planning any major project.

1. Description of the Project

- Initial statement of the issue or problem and its implications
- Focused research question and general overview of approach

2. Defense of the Approach

- Explanation of why this research needs to be done, including the importance of the problem and the potential contributions to the discipline
- Overview of methodology and/or theoretical framework

3. Chapter by Chapter Outline

This section generally outlines the arguments of the chapters and the ways they advance the overall argument, though the chapter summaries may also be organized around the format used in empirical research studies with an initial overview and subsequent chapters on the methods and other elements. More hybrid and narrative formats are also possible.

4. Projected Research

This section should review the research on the major issues, concerns, and questions and summarize the major lines of research to be pursued. You may list the resources you imagine you will need to consult to complete this project, including

- readings you expect to do (include all bibliographic information);

- people you will interview;
- films, television programs, recordings, and videos to consult;
- special libraries and archives to visit; and
- community events and consultations to consider.

5. Timetable: Your timetable toward completion should include entries for the following:

- completion dates for each chapter's draft and revision;
- the months in which you plan to be on the job market (most students find that working on the dissertation during these months—usually October through February—nearly grinds to a halt);
- the projected date of the defense;

In developing your timeline, do not forget to take into account the buffer periods at the start and end of each semester (during which faculty may choose not to respond to your chapters), as well as holiday, and semester and summer breaks.

If, after reading over the finished draft of your dissertation proposal, the outline of the project seems a bit hazy and unclear, that may well be okay since writing the dissertation itself will inevitably clarify many things as you go. Nonetheless, you will know that you have a solid draft of your proposal—neither too sketchy nor too elaborate—when you have completed all of the sections listed above, read over the entire draft, and—perhaps in addition to feeling that the chapters are a bit misty—have the sense that it represents an exciting and manageable project given your timeframe and available resources. If you do not get this sense after rereading it, keep working on it until you do. Then submit the draft to your Director to see if she or he thinks the proposal is ready to go to committee.

***The portfolio dissertation proposal** will generally take the form of a proposal for a traditional monograph dissertation except there may not be a single unifying frame of reference for the three or more articles included in the portfolio. Your dissertation proposal will develop into the overview that you will submit with your portfolio.

According to Graduate College guidelines, your committee will decide on the articles to be included in the “Article-Based Dissertation Option.” Your portfolio should include:

- one more chapter that “present a summary of the research, an explanation of the student's contribution if it was not individual research, and an explanation of how this research contributes to the student’s field.”
- References in articles included in the portfolio should also be included in a references section.
- If your portfolio includes work that has been or will be published, you will need to will need to use an alternative format specified in the [Dissertation Formatting Guide](#), which provides additional details on the required format.

***The multimodal dissertation proposal** may be a good option for you if you have multimedia skills that a traditional dissertation format will not enable you to develop in ways that will advance your career goals. If you select this option, you should recognize that the RCTE program does not have shared experience and models for this approach to a dissertation, though some of our faculty have strong skills in related areas, and the university has many resources that you may be able to enlist.

The project proposal is especially crucial to a multimodal dissertation in a digital or film format. Before submitting your proposal, you will need to complete preliminary work such as completing your [Human Subjects Protection training and approval process](#).

You will also need to plan ahead to consider where you will archive your digital materials, especially if you wish to limit the distribution of a film or application. Details on archiving video and other files are included on the [ProQuest Support Center](#).

The proposal should have these elements:

- An overview of the theoretical, historical, and/or genre framework for the project;
- A detailed account of your partnership with any group or community who will be a significant part of your project (including the concluded IRB review if required)

- A discussion of the technical expertise that you have developed and need to develop to complete the project along with an account of how you will access the applications and expertise that will be needed,
- An analysis of existing models or examples that are comparable to your project, and
- A professional justification for how this project will help you advance your career goals.

Here are some resources that can help you decide if this option is doable and appropriate for you.

First of all, you will need to be a trailblazer. As Rebecca Zak notes in one of the sources cited below, “if we waited for the pedagogical and proverbial path to be mapped out for us, we’d miss unlimited opportunities for teaching and learning.” On the other hand, multimedia writing is not exactly uncharted territory in rhetoric and composition, and the Graduate College has provisions for submitting multimedia dissertations. Finally, there are publication venues, undergraduate majors, and interdisciplinary research centers that value and support such work.

While interest and support are growing for digital dissertations, there are not the same sort of genre specifications as there are for the traditional monograph dissertations that are submitted by thousands of doctoral students each year. Here are some sources that will help you think about this alternative career pathway:

- ✚ Rebecca Zak’s [“I got my PhD by making YouTube videos – and so can you”](#) (2014) takes note of the requirements at several universities, outlines how such issues as attention span limitations factor into multimedia projects, and makes the case for working through the lack of guidelines and models to do the work you want to do.
- ✚ Justin Schell’s [“A Multimodal Dissertation as an Alt-Ac Launching Pad”](#) (2014) outlines the process Schell went through to create a hybrid dissertation that included text and documentary film work, the resources and support that were needed, and the importance of the fact that he was not planning on seeking a tenure-track job.
- ✚ [“Beyond the Dissertation as Proto-Monograph: Examples and Reflections”](#) includes related dissertation projects and analyses on the [#alt-ac media](#) commons site.
- ✚ The [Digital Dissertation Guidelines](#) from the History and Art History Department at George Mason University provide useful specifications and criteria for what has become known as “born digital” dissertation projects, though the expectations are focused on the assumption that such projects are to be judged primarily as contributions to research.

- ✦ [Tool Directories](#) from Purdue University Fort Wayne is one of many digital humanities sites that includes links to a wide range of digital resources for creating multimodal dissertations.

- ✦ Jason Palmeri's dissertation [Multimodality and Composition Studies](#) (2007) provides an overview of the broader history of multimodality that can help you position your project within developments in our field if you wish to use a nontraditional dissertation to launch an academic career in rhetoric and composition.
- ✦ [Shaping the Digital Dissertation: Topics in Knowledge Production](#) is a database that is being edited by Virginia Kuhn, Anke Finger, and Kathie Gossett that should provide additional resources and guidelines.

Dissertation Proposal Review Meeting

As noted in the Sample Post-Comprehensive Exam Timeline above, your Dissertation Director will work with you on preparing your proposal and will decide when it is ready to go before your committee. This meeting is one hour in length and will be a chance for you and all of your committee members to meet and discuss your proposal in detail. Their comments may address issues such as:

- the soundness of your methodology;
- the clarity of your writing;
- the cohesiveness and clarity of your arguments, both those within individual chapters and the one that stretches across the entire dissertation;
- the importance of your project to the field;
- the reasonableness of your timeline;
- the lack of key resources noted in your “Projected Research” section;
- comments about how this project may help or hinder you on the job market and in your postdoctoral work.

NB: It is at the discretion of individual committee members whether or not they will provide feedback on the proposal prior to the official Dissertation Proposal Meeting.] The proposal is sent to the committee at least ten days before that meeting. At the meeting the proposal is discussed. It may be accepted as is, returned for minor revisions, or returned for major revisions.

If the revisions are major, another proposal meeting must be held. Additionally, the student will likely need to discuss with the Dissertation and Program Directors the matter of not having an approved dissertation proposal until the second semester after the comprehensive exams.

Human Subjects Review


If you are proposing to do a project involving human subjects (interviews, oral histories, observation studies, and/or experiments), you should begin the process of receiving formal approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as soon as your Dissertation Proposal has been approved. To learn more about this process and to figure out if your research will need IRB approval, see Appendix A.

Unsatisfactory Progress

If, after one year from the date of the successfully completed Oral Comprehensive Exams, your dissertation committee concludes that a sound proposal has not emerged, it may recommend to the Program Director that you not continue graduate studies in the UA RCTE Program.

Chapter 4: Writing the Dissertation

Important points to remember:

- You have to stop reading at some point.
- Start writing early.
- Set a regular writing schedule.
- Have a life.  Engage in wellbeing strategies.
- Primary responsibility for responding to drafts lies with the Chair. Other committee members may or may not respond to drafts.
- This time overlaps with the [JOB SEARCH](#) process. (See sub-section below.)

**Here is a [ProQuest link](#) that also gives excellent advice on the writing of the dissertation.

Doing the Writing

Don't postpone writing until you are ready to deliver the last word on the subject. Dissertations are never the last word on the subject and never as good as their writers want. They may reflect disparate demands by committee members more than the writer's viewpoint. They are almost never publishable without substantial revision.

On the other hand, your dissertation will play an important role in getting you a job, and if your dissertation is not something that can become the basis for your first book, you will be at a disadvantage in your efforts to get promoted or to move to another job.

The following tips have helped many of our RCTE dissertation writers move through the process quick, efficiently, and successfully landing a job!

- **Start writing early.** Don't wait until you have done "all the reading." You will have to do the reading you will have to do, but if you are writing as you do it, your reading will be much more efficient and effective.
- Set up a **regular writing schedule.** Keep to it. Allow yourself latitude in some matters, but not in keeping to your writing schedule.
- Form a **writing group with people** on your timetable. Writing groups can give you valuable feedback and support. Being in a group helps you keep to your schedule, too.
- Give yourself deadlines. Give a schedule to your Chair. This will also help your Chair budget time to read your drafts.
- When you and your Chair feel that chapters or portions of the dissertation are ready for editorial response, the chapters or portions of the dissertation should be given to all committee members at the same time. Use the Dissertation Chapter Review Form as a cover sheet for all materials submitted to the committee.

- Primary responsibility for responding to drafts lies with Chair. Other committee members may or may not respond to drafts.

All submissions of drafts to committee members must have the official Chapter Review Form with the following information:

- Table of contents/outline of whole dissertation.
- Candidate’s sense of where the draft is in the writing process, what is left to be done to complete the writing.
- What revisions have been done since last submission.
- Specific questions about the drafts to which response is desired.

Remember, the Chair will read your drafts carefully. If you want other members of your committee to read your drafts, you should ask them specific questions. The other members will need to be focusing most of their attention on the dissertations they are directing.

Have a life. Come to talks. Sit in on classes. It is easy to feel isolated when you stop taking classes.

Submitting dissertation chapters for publication while still working on the dissertation

Because your dissertation topic is timely and relevant in our field, you may find that while you are writing your dissertation chapters, you may come across a call for papers (CFP) for a journal’s special edition or a special collection of chapters in methods or research. What a great opportunity. Yes, you may submit a proposal for such a CFP, but do so in consultation with your dissertation director, as well, you should advise your committee of your submission.

If your proposal or chapter is accepted, you will be working closely with the editors in terms of the revisions and direction of the chapter. In this case, the dissertation director can decide to take an advisory role in the dissertation chapter. However, your dissertation director will still have input into the overall work of the dissertation. Please see the top of page 12 for rules on Portfolio Dissertation.

The Job Search – Overlap with writing the dissertation

**Here is a link from ProQuest with [“Expert Advice: Job Search/Career Planning”](#)

Completion of the dissertation and going on the job market go hand-in-hand. The FALL semester before you defend your dissertation is also designated as the time that you will go out on the job market. If you plan to go on the job market the same year that you are completing your dissertation, you MUST have a major portion of the writing done and circulated to your committee by the beginning of the fall semester (RCTE Policy.) Importantly, hiring committees will not be interested in you unless you can convince them, with concrete evidence, that you will have defended your dissertation by the time you come to work. If they have doubts, they may ask for letters from your Chair or the Department Head.

Here’s what you need to know to prepare for this time:

The SUMMER right before the FALL of your final year you defend your dissertation is also a crucial writing time. Per RCTE policy, graduate students are required to have three (3) chapters

completed and circulated to their dissertation committee *before* they can move forward with the job search process. With this policy, it is important then that you plan your writing time over that summer accordingly. This policy is set to protect you as you move forward with completion.

****Please be in close contact with your dissertation director about the timeline of your work.***

This 3-chapter completion policy is in place for several reasons. Having the dissertation mostly completed with 3 chapters will give you both breathing room for the intense effort of the job search and time to revise and make changes with any of the comments made by your director and/or committee.

*If you are working on a portfolio with 3 chapters, then 2 of the chapters must be completed and circulated.

*If you are working on a multimodal dissertation project, 2/3 of the project must be created and ready for review by the committee. Please have your dissertation chair provide a letter to the committee and the director indicating your progress and that you will have the project ready to defend if a job is accepted in the fall or spring of that year.

Each FALL, the RCTE program supports and schedules the [JOB WORKSHOP](#). You must have the 3 dissertation chapters circulated in order to attend. This workshop includes help with and review of:

- Letter writing skills and tips,
- Review of teaching, administrative, and personal statements that are asked for during the hiring process,
- CV workshops, and
- Mock interviews.

Chapter 5: Defending Your Dissertation

Important points to remember:

- Check-in with the [Graduate College](#) early for important [timelines and due dates](#).
- Ask for letters of recommendation early. ****Note:** In order to ask for letters of recommendation from your committee, you must have 3 fully completed dissertation chapters submitted to and seen by your dissertation chair.
- Set the dissertation defense date at least two months in advance.
- Set the dissertation defense date at least two weeks before the final due date of the dissertation to the graduate college. This allows you time to attend to the edits, revisions, and formatting.
- A few weeks before you defend, familiarize yourself with the UA Graduate College “[Archiving the Dissertation](#)”
- If possible, have a colleague or friend in your program read through your paper. They may catch mistakes your committee members do not. (This is why writing group relationships are so important!)

The time passes *quickly*, and you are now two semesters away from defending the dissertation. You have now (before the fall of your final year) completed 3 full chapters, with all of them approved by your dissertation Chair. (This is RCTE policy.) The fourth chapter is also more than half-way completed and the fifth chapter is burning a hole in your outline. In other words, you are so close to finishing, you can taste it. Your hard work and dedicated time have paid off!

According to *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation* by Dr. Foss and Dr. Waters there are three parts to a dissertation defense:

- [Preparation](#)
- [Defense](#), and
- [Follow-up](#).

Preparation

Sonja Foss, a communication scholar, would say that the dissertation defense begins when you start writing the dissertation. While in the phase of writing the dissertation, you are honing your knowledge on your topic, digging deep into the research, and learning ways in which to apply that knowledge. Though you may have amazing scholars sitting on your committee, your topic and writing remains distinctive to you and the discipline with which you are framing it. After defending the dissertation, you will be considered the expert in that topic.

Here are some other tips from *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation* by Dr. Foss and Dr. Waters

- Attend dissertation defenses of your friends and colleagues in rhetoric and other fields.
- Have your manuscript reviewed before the defense date in order to have all the formatting correct.
- Submit the full dissertation at the minimum of two weeks before the defense date. Ask your committee if they want a digital or paper copy. It is your responsibility to get them a paper copy if they request it.
- Review the [PRE-Submission checklist](#) through the Graduate College.

To eliminate any surprises, it is important to keep close contact with your dissertation director in the last few months of the process. Set bi-weekly or even weekly-meetings with her/him. Some of these meetings are just to check-in. Also in those meetings, you should bring up any concerns that you may have regarding your committee's feedback (or lack of feedback), and discuss them with time.

Defense

Before the defense, talk to your Dissertation Director about her/his expectations of the process during the dissertation committee.

[Final Defense Instructions.docx | Powered by Box](#)

Here is a brief summary of the dissertation defense:

- Before the defense, prepare a 20 – 25 minutes presentation that proves a brief overview of the main points of your dissertation to include - research question, literature review as it relates to your theory, methods and analysis, major findings and recommendations for future research.
- After your presentation, the invited audience will be asked to step outside and the defense – a two hour discussion / question / answer session will commence.
- Anticipate questions from your committee in which they identify a weakness in your research and what you will do this work in the future.
- You will be kindly asked to step outside for committee deliberation time.
- The desired outcome is that they will invite you back into the room and say, Congratulations, Dr. _____. They will give you immediate feedback and a pass with no revisions / with revisions. It is *rare* that a graduate student does not have to write revisions. So more than likely, you will be asked for revisions. It's normal.

Follow-up

After your dissertation defense, set a meeting with your director to review the revisions and edits that were requested from the committee.

Chapter 6: After the Dissertation

CONGRATULATIONS! You have just completed a major milestone in your career as well as your life! Go celebrate.

However, you are not completely done! Immediately following the dissertation defense, make the changes and edits your committee asked for. Also, at this point you are now familiarized with the [UA Graduate College Dissertation Formatting Guidelines](#). You will want to visit them again.

It is difficult to overemphasize how important a milestone the dissertation represents in your professional development. If you put in the requisite time and effort, it will be the springboard into your first job and a steady stream of professional publications that will help you achieve tenure and promotion. Inserting your perspective into the disciplinary conversation is a challenging albeit rewarding process that requires becoming familiar with a large body of knowledge and an understanding of some historical traditions.

Hopefully, your steady reading through the reading list in your first few years of the program, your preparation for the preliminary exam in the comps workshop, and your own efforts in building an individualized reading list based on your dissertation topic will enable you to feel confident in speaking and writing to Rhetoric and Composition audiences. Learning about appropriate publication outlets, whether these be journals such as *College English*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, or a university or commercial press, will enable you to position your dissertation work for publication.

The program encourages students to explore the contents of professional journals and university press books lists early on in their graduate school careers. Speak to faculty, who have recently published articles in certain journals or books in lists that interest you, about their experiences. RCTE faculty are available to help you revise your course papers and dissertation chapters for publication. Faculty might even be willing to share their recent book proposals with you. Crafting a journal article or book proposal takes a lot of time and effort so think ahead to ensure a positive result.

Your dissertation chapters represent the lifeblood of your future professional career; therefore, think about them in terms of future publications and not just in the short term. There are a number of publications that speak to how graduate students can enter the professional conversation in Rhetoric and Composition and beyond.

Two key texts are:

- Olson, Gary and Todd Taylor. *Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.
- Swales and Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*, 3rd Ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press ELT, 2012.

Appendix A: Sample Timeline for Completing the Dissertation Proposal

With the comprehensive exams over, *take a moment to breathe*. It is understandable that you will want to catch up on everything you may have been neglecting while preparing for your comprehensive exams: sleep, teaching and family responsibilities, and so on. The comprehensive exams are completed in April and May after which you should begin to think of a 1) a dissertation topic, 2) putting your committee together. This suggested schedule offers plenty of time to

- collect your thoughts and materials,
- clarify your research into a single and doable project the several dissertation ideas you have been contemplating,
- undertake some preliminary research to flesh out that idea, and
- work through some of the organizational details with your Director and Committee.

The following is a *suggested agenda* to move from finishing your Comprehensive Exams to filing your approved Dissertation Proposal. Some students may prefer a less regimented route, one that perhaps involves drafting the dissertation's first chapter early in the semester, then converting that into the structured proposal toward the middle of the semester. In any case, use whatever brainstorming, researching, planning, and writing techniques that suit you best to develop a proposal that is exciting, doable, and promising for your future work. **End of Spring Semester - April - May**

- Finish Comprehensive Exams

Since the semester comes to a quick close after the comprehensive exams, it would benefit you and your prospective dissertation director to schedule a short meeting before the end of the semester. Discuss possible topics, look toward to the future, a develop a timeline of t due dates for the dissertation proposal draft.

However, scheduling a meeting so quickly may not always be possible because of the hectic nature of the end of the semester. If you are not able to meet with your first option of dissertation director, send an email with a clear intention of wanting her/him to direct your work and propose that you meet soon thereafter. Having your dissertation director selected with their confirmation by the beginning of the summer is the ideal situation. However, you can reach out to professors during the summer, however, remember, they may take much long to respond.

Summer Immediately after the Comprehensive Exam

- Many times graduate students at this phase continue to teach during the summer months. However, it is an *excellent* opportunity to continue reading works directed toward your research as well as reading previous dissertation proposals. You may even start a draft!

Use this time wisely. It could set you up for early success!

In the fall (after passing of comprehensive exams), you will:

Schedule your dissertation proposal meeting!

***Note – you should meet at least 3 – 4 times** with your dissertation director during the semester you are writing your dissertation proposal. Keep her/him informed at every step of this process.

This is a *suggested timetable*. We have set this timetable to give you a structure and direction. You may not hit all of these deadlines as each person works at their own pace. So don't panic if you don't hit *exactly* each of these targets. Your own experience may deviate a bit. These steps are, however, important to the process. Again, work closely with your dissertation director and committee to determine the dates of submission and the proposal meeting.

Important, the proposal should be defended by the last day of classes in the fall. If this **deadline is not met**, then you will need to **petition the director for an extension**.

Suggested Timetable Weeks 1 – 3

- Meet with your dissertation director to discuss *no more than three solid research questions or lines of inquiry for your dissertation*. You can begin this process by taking an inventory of past and current research interests (consider your Specialization Statement from the Comprehensive Exam), successful seminar papers and conference talks you have given, and theories and readings that captured your imagination. You will also want to think about what kinds of theoretical frameworks would support your project best.

Weeks 4 - 5

- Make a final decision about which idea to pursue for your dissertation and notify your Dissertation Director of this decision by email.

Week 5 – 8 – Completing the draft and selecting your dissertation committee members

- Develop a solid draft of your Dissertation Proposal—including all the required elements (See dissertation proposal elements on page 9 —and submit it to your Director. On the first page of the draft, provide a date (one week away) by which time you need your Director to return the draft of your proposal to you with substantive comments for revision.
- With a solid draft of the proposal completed, now is a good time to circulate the proposal to select faculty members that have 1) already agreed to serve on your dissertation committee or 2) to inquire if they are interested and willing to serve on your committee.
- You should have committee members selected and confirmed by this time (2nd Reader, 3rd Reader, and optional, 4th Reader)

Week 9

- Continue finessing your proposal while your Director reviews your draft.

Week 10

- Meet with your Director to review her or his comments on your draft proposal.
- Begin revising your proposal. **Week 11**
- Finish revising your proposal and send it to your Director, again with a one-week deadline noted on the front page.
- *Optional:* At your discretion or at the request of individual committee members (or potential committee members) you may informally circulate the proposal the relevant faculty for their feedback. Committee members are under no institutional obligation to comply with your request for feedback on your draft proposal.

Week 12

- Review the latest feedback on your proposal and revise if necessary.
- Once this second round of revisions has been completed, ask your Director if you may circulate it to the Dissertation Committee and proceed to the final stage, the Dissertation Proposal Meeting.
- If the proposal has been approved for circulation, assemble the necessary forms, signatures, and copies and give them to your committee members. Also, send out a reminder email message to everyone on your committee reminding them when and where your Dissertation Proposal Review Meeting is.
- If the proposal has not yet been approved for circulation, continue to work with your Director to get it into circulatable shape. This may require you to adjust your timeline for getting your proposal approved. If you will be postponing the Dissertation Proposal Review Meeting, email your committee members to let them know this. **Week 13-15**
- Meet with your committee to discuss your proposal. (See dissertation proposal meeting on page 17)
- If the proposal is approved, file the RCTE Dissertation Proposal Approval Form (available on the RCTE Website or from the RCTE Program Assistant) with the RCTE Office. This form must be completed by you and your Dissertation Committee and filed with the Program Assistant in order for you to be considered at the “All But Dissertation” (ABD) stage.
- If the proposal is not approved, meet with your Director as soon as possible to arrange a new timeline for submitting a revised proposal.

Note on timetable: While the faculty strongly discourages you from taking more than a semester to complete your dissertation proposal and have it approved, they recognize it is sometimes necessary. In such circumstances, you will need to petition the Program Director for an extension and request a letter of support for your petition from your Dissertation Director.

Your petition letter should include (1) a detailed explanation of why the extension is necessary, (2) how much additional time is needed to complete the proposal, and (3) a timeline to completion of the Ph.D. **NB:** The longer the extension you request, the more likely the petition will be denied.

Appendix B: Divergent Paths through the Dissertation Process

There are occasions when the divergence from an approved dissertation proposal becomes so great that the entire process needs to be reassessed. In such cases, it is up to your Dissertation Director and the Committee Members (and sometimes the Program Director) to determine how to proceed.

Consider the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: After having a proposal approved and working on the dissertation for four months, a student realizes that his heart isn't in the project, and worse, that it may be setting her up for a professional trajectory she does not want. She wants to start fresh, with a different project and possibly even different committee members.

Comment: This situation will clearly call for a new committee to be formed and a new Dissertation Proposal to be written. Assuming the student has the time and financial resources to allow for such a dramatic change, there is nothing necessarily wrong with making this potentially very wise—if difficult—decision. In this or similar cases, both the student and Director will need to be in close conversation with the Program Director, as the issue of “Timely Progress” may need to be addressed.

Scenario 2: After having a proposal approved and writing the first half of the dissertation, a student realizes that one of her proposed chapters is too ambitious and now needs to scale back its claims and objectives.

Comment: In this instance, the student can probably just send a note to everyone on her committee notifying them of the situation and asking if they have any objection to her scaling back the chapter in question. Unless the Dissertation Director advises otherwise, the approved Dissertation Proposal need not be revisited.

Scenario 3: After having a proposal approved and writing one chapter, a student realizes that he and his Dissertation Director are not working well together. In fact, the tensions are so high that the student is experiencing writer's block. Worse, the Dissertation Director is the Program's recognized expert on the subject of the dissertation.

Comment: The first thing to do in this case is to get the lines of communication open again. This solution might require some mediation by the Program Director or Department Head, or perhaps a candid one-on-one conversation. If some resolution cannot be achieved through these means, the Program Director may—after consultation with all relevant people—elect to dissolve the Dissertation Committee and direct the student to form a new committee and to write a new dissertation proposal. As in any situation where there is significant conflict between a faculty member and student, the Program Director should be put in the loop as soon as possible so that she or he can help change the student's situation into one that is more productive.

Scenario 4: After having a proposal approved, writing two out of five chapters, going on the job market, and securing a tenure-track position, a student realizes that she does not have enough time to write three more chapters by the end of the semester. As a result, she wants

to cut one of the chapters so that she can arrive at her new institution with her Ph.D. in hand.

Comment: This would be considered a major change to the dissertation without sufficient scholarly cause. Unless the student can provide a sufficiently compelling scholarly argument to her committee concerning the proposed dropped chapter, such a change will likely be denied. In this case, the Dissertation Proposal serves as a kind of contract specifying the work to be done. A major change like this one would require the entire committee's approval, as well as the filing of an amendment to the approved Dissertation Proposal.

Scenario 5: After having a proposal approved and writing two chapters, a student realizes that one of her proposed chapters no longer makes sense to include because it is not as relevant as she thought it would be when she wrote her proposal. She now wants to drop that chapter entirely and either spend more time working on the remaining chapters or add a new chapter that has a closer bearing to the latest direction of her research.

Comment: As in Scenario 4, this significant change to the structure of the Dissertation as outlined in the Proposal would require the approval of the entire committee and the filing of an amendment to the approved Dissertation Proposal with the Program Assistant. This student has a significant advantage over the student in Scenario 4, however, because she has a defensible scholarly reason for dropping the chapter. Depending on the circumstances, the Committee might ask that other chapters be expanded to reflect the new situation, or they might ask that a new and more relevant chapter be proposed to replace the excised one. These changes would not require a new proposal, but rather a series of email messages among committee members and possibly the Program Director. When a new agreement has been made concerning the final shape of the dissertation, a note outlining the change (i.e., an amendment) should be sent to the Program Assistant so that this information can be added to your file.

Appendix C: Human Subjects Research in RCTE

****This section of the Dissertation Writing Handbook was reviewed and approved by UA IRB 08/2018.**

For further information, see the Research Gateway page of Compliance.

There are many more subsections, but these are among the most important.

Compliance: <https://rgw.arizona.edu/compliance/human-subjects-protection-program>

Guidance and Procedures: <https://rgw.arizona.edu/compliance/human-subjects-protectionprogram/guidance-and-procedures>

Current Guidance: <https://rgw.arizona.edu/compliance/human-subjects-protectionprogram/Guidance-and-procedures/HSPP-guidance>

If you are proposing to do a project involving human subjects (interviews, oral histories, observation studies, and/or experiments), you should begin the process of receiving formal approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as soon as your Dissertation Proposal has been approved. The IRB is a part of the University of Arizona's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) that is charged with reviewing all projects that involve human subjects. All researchers and research assistants who have contact with human beings under test or analytical conditions for the purposes of research must pass a test—the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative-Social and Behavior Science test (CITI-SBS)—on the legal guidelines established to protect these research subjects.

The Program Assistant has copies of the manual on which this test is based (Cynthia McGuire Dunn and Gary Chadwick. *Protecting Study Volunteers in Research: A Manual for Investigative Sites*. Boston, MA: CenterWatch, Inc., 2001); you may also find copies on reserve at the Library under the title "Protecting Study Volunteers in Research." Passing this test will yield for you a Verification of Training Form (VOTF), which you will need to submit along with your IRB application. The faculty recommend that students doing human subjects research receive their VOTF prior to their Dissertation Proposal Review Meeting.

NB: Before you begin collecting data based on your human subjects, your project must first be reviewed and approved by the IRB. If it is not, any data that you have collected will be prohibited from use in your dissertation and you may incur other penalties depending on the judgement of the IRB.

As an advanced graduate student working on a dissertation, you will be registered as the principle investigator (PI) for your project. One advisor must also be listed on your VOTF who has undergone the CITI-SBS training, though this person does not have to be a member of your Dissertation Committee. Be aware that if your research involves students or instructors in the Writing Program, there is an additional approval process that you must complete; speak with the Director of the Writing Program to learn more about this process. Also, your Dissertation Director must have recently passed the CITI-SBS in order to oversee your work; be sure to request in writing a copy of her or his certification for your records.

The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

(CITI) is a national organization that develops protocols for training researchers in to effectively protect their research subjects. CITI was founded in March 2000 as a collaboration between the University of Miami and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center to develop a web-based training program in human research subjects protections.

At the University of Arizona, such training is required for any researcher—no matter their rank, field, or position—doing using human subjects.

CITI-SBS is the CITI test with a Social Behavioral Science focus (as opposed to a Biomedical focus).

Students will take the CITI-SBS course. The online exam involves the following modules—each consisting of some readings and a short quiz—and can take up to six hours to complete:

- Introduction (no quiz)
- Students in Research
- History and Ethical Principles
- Defining Research with Human Subjects
- Regulation & the Social & Behavioral Sciences
- Assessing Risk in Social & Behavioral Sciences
- Informed Consent
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Research with Protected Populations—Vulnerable Subjects: An Overview
- Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects

Your progress through the test can be saved after each module so that you can return to the test later; this makes it convenient to take over a series of days and at your own pace. The test is not difficult, and many people find it quite interesting and edifying.

Indeed, the faculty recommend that all graduate students take the test and become certified simply for the perspective it will give you on the history and ethics of human subjects research.

Appendix D: Human Subjects Research Review Timeline

1. While working on your Dissertation Proposal, determine if your project uses human information or is actually research on humans. If the former is the case, IRB review *may* be unnecessary.

If the latter is true, your project will have to undergo some form of IRB review.

An easy way to determine if your project is likely to need IRB approval is ask yourself these three questions taken from the *Investigator's Handbook for the Protection of Human Participants in Social and Behavioral Research*:

- Does my project involve living individuals about whom I am conducting research such that I obtain data through intervention or interaction with the individuals, obtain identifiable private information, or cause these individuals to become recipients of or participant in research involving experimental materials? If so, then according to U.S. federal regulations your research involves human subjects and must be reviewed. If not, then:
- Does my project involve a systematic investigation (i.e., a predetermined method for studying a specific topic, answering a specific question, testing a hypothesis, or developing a theory), including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (i.e., activities intended to be extended beyond the institution through publication or presentation, or could otherwise influence current theory or practice), but does not meet the definition of a “clinical investigation” (i.e., any experiment that involves test material and one or more human subjects and that is subject to the Food and Drug Administration regulations)? If so, then according to U.S. federal regulations your research involves human subjects and must be reviewed.
- Does my project rely on demonstrations given to particular audiences (e.g., teaching demonstrations) or on service programs (e.g., community literacy projects)? If so, then your project *may* require IRB approval and you should contact HSPP to ask for assistance in making the determination.

If you are pretty sure that you will be needing to get IRB approval for your project, obtain a copy of *Protecting Study Volunteers in Research: A Manual for Investigative Sites* (Dunn and Chadwick, 2001) from the RCTE Program Assistant.

Read through this book to familiarize yourself with the issues before you take the online training. Students who use human information and/or conduct research on humans for any purpose other than seminar papers (done within a graduate course) must take the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) with a Social Behavioral Science focus [CITI-SBS]. This is an online training module with self-paced lessons and exams. The entire training will take 6 or more hours for most people (and students can take the modules over several days). After completing the CITI-SBS, students must print out the verification of their training and the dates when the exam was passed.

The next step is to complete the Project Review Form and the Verification of Training Form (VOTF). It is necessary to have an advisor for both the PRF and VOTF who has completed CITISBS training. Important: this advisor does not have to be the dissertation director or even a committee member.

Students must also obtain a “site authorization letter” for the location where the research (including recruitment) will occur (Writing Program, high school, community organization, church, etc.). The letter needs to come from the principal, director, or minister of the site.

Scenarios

For the purposes of research, information from students' writings, experiences with students, and interviews with students are all considered human data or information. What matters to the HSPP is

- what you are using the data for, and
- whether or not you will gather it for research purposes.

What is research? Ultimately, the decision about whether or not the use of human information meets the definition of research is determined by the researcher.

For example, scholars often get ideas about research simply by being in the midst of their academic environment. Scholars constantly use their senses to absorb information that might or might not turn into a theory that might or might not then turn into a research project. Always ask yourself what your purpose is in using human information. If you have human information to support a theory, if you have a collection of data that you can talk about, then you have probably conducted research.

Consider the following scenarios as a way to think about your own emerging project:

A GAT wants to give an oral presentation or write a paper for a graduate course at UA and wants to cite student work, conduct student interviews, and/or cite student experiences or incidents from her own class to support her argument.

This use of data falls under the purview of educational work and does not require the GAT to take the CITI exam nor get Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) approval.

However, should the GAT later wish to use the information she collected for her graduate course in a conference talk or publication she would need approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Human Subjects Protection Program to do so.

A GAT wishes to anonymously quote a student conversation, narrate an incident from class he is teaching, or summarize something a student wrote on the mid-term exam in a conference presentation or publication.

If the use of this data is a single event, it is probably not research. If, however, the GAT's observations are becoming part of a research agenda, then he should set up an open project with HSPP that will allow him to collect narrative observations, take notes, make recordings, and so forth over a period of five to ten years. The GAT would need to get disclaimer forms approved and take the CITI exam in order for this kind of human information to be used in later research projects (e.g., in a dissertation).

A GAT is giving a talk at a professional conference or is sending a paper off for review by an academic journal. The talk or paper contains anonymous samples of student writing, excerpts from student interviews, and/or anecdotes about experiences the GAT has had with students over the past several years.

In this scenario, the GAT will need to take the CITI training because she is "using human information." At this point, however, the GAT is not conducting research and so does not need to

get consent from the students to cite their work because the information (data) has been rendered anonymous.

That said, the GAT will need to get Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) approval. This is because U.S. federal regulations recognize that scholars sometimes collect information for nonresearch purposes but then later decide to use the information in a publication or for presentation.

This information is called “pre-existing data.” If the GAT wants to use this type of data she would need to complete the HSPP Project Review Form and indicate that some (or all) of the project’s data was initially collected for non-research purposes but that she would now like to use it for research.

A GAT is giving a talk at a professional conference, is or sending a paper off for review by an academic journal or is writing his dissertation. In this project, the GAT is using work from his English 101 students at the UA to support his thesis (e.g., comparing two groups of students with different variables, collecting all student writing over one or more semesters in order to understand some aspect of writing, etc.).

The GAT needs to take the CITI training. In addition, the GAT must complete the Project Review Form and the Verification of Training Form (VOTF) prior to conducting his research. Because he is a graduate student, he must also have an advisor who has CITI training and who will sign off on his work. This individual does not have to be his dissertation director or even a member of his committee. In addition, the GAT needs to complete the HSPP application before he gathers his data. Finally, he must obtain a site authorization letter from the UA’s Writing Program Director who administrators the site in which he wishes to conduct his research. If any of his students are under the age of 18—as sometimes happens in English 101 courses—the GAT will also need to obtain written permissions from both the minor students themselves and from their legal guardians.