WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION - GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN EDUCATION

Thesis and Dissertation Rubric

Overview: The thesis/dissertation is a significant *process* in and *product* of a master's (thesis) or doctoral (dissertation) program. Writing a thesis/dissertation is a process of developing expert knowledge and demonstrating understanding, skills and critical thought processes as a researcher. Writing a thesis/dissertation requires a student to apply and refine skills learned throughout the program including research design and implementation, data analysis and interpretation, and scholarly writing and reporting. This rubric has been designed for these purposes: (1) to provide guidance for students about the standards and criteria by which their thesis/dissertation will evaluated, (2) to provide shared standards and criteria for supervisors as they mentor graduate students in the research and writing process, (3) to provide a shared set of expectations for students, supervisors / supervisory committees to inform ongoing, continuous improvement of multiple drafts of the thesis/dissertation, and (4) to establish and communicate common standards, criteria and expectations for examiners.

Instructions

There are two sections to this assessment rubric. The first rubric (formative) is designed to guide students and supervisors in the preparation and writing of the thesis/dissertation. The second rubric (summative) is designed to guide examiners in evaluating the thesis/dissertation and in writing the examiner report.

Prior to the thesis/dissertation writing process, Graduate Programs in Education and the supervisor should provide the rubric to students; The supervisor can use the rubric to discuss the components, the expectations and the levels of performance in the thesis/dissertation that are expected by the program.

During the thesis/dissertation writing process, students and supervisors should treat writing as an iterative process that requires multiple revisions and reworkings before a final version of the thesis/dissertation is produced. As part of the ongoing consultation and formative feedback cycle for individual chapters and the overall thesis, supervisor and supervisory committee requests for revisions and improvements are understood to be a standard component of mentorship and continual improvement. With this understanding, the rubric is useful as a guide that the student can use in organizing and writing the thesis/dissertation and the supervisor and supervisory committee can use to provide ongoing formative feedback.

Prior to the oral examination/defense, each member of the examining committee should carefully read and evaluate the quality of the thesis/dissertation. The summative rubric is a tool to guide that review and evaluation process as it has been designed using the components of the Faculty of Graduate Studies Examiner's Report on the Thesis. The rubric can be used as a guide in the review of the thesis/dissertation, and the preparation of the FGS Examiner's Report.

After the thesis/dissertation oral examination/defense, examining committee members may choose to provide the supervisor with the rubric and comments describing areas of weakness so the supervisor can use the feedback to assist the student in addressing any areas of concern. In the case of a failed defense, examining committee members may use their ratings and comments to support their decision.

Formative Assessment Rubric – To Guide Preparation and Writing of the Thesis/Dissertation

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Outstanding
Abstract	The abstract is wordy, poorly written, or omits one or more components: description of the study, a brief statement of the problem, exposition of the methodology and methods, or a summary of findings and implications.	The abstract provides a concise description of the study, a brief statement of the problem, exposition of the methodology and methods, and a summary of findings and implications.	The abstract provides a concise, compelling description of the study, a brief statement of the problem, exposition of the methodology and methods, and a summary of findings and implications. It is intriguing and incites interest.

Introduction			
	Unacceptable	**Acceptable**	**Outstanding**
Introduction	The introduction fails to adequately make the case for the importance of the topic. It fails to adequately present the purpose, significance, and/or nature of the research. It does not present an outline or overview of the research.	The introduction provides an overview of the context, background and focus of the study, significance, and how the study will be conducted. *For doctoral students writing a dissertation, how results will contribute to theory (PhD) or professional knowledge and/or practice (EdD) is clearly stated.*	The introduction is well written and compelling, provides a clear overview of the study, presents the significance of the research problem, and provides a clear overview of the organization of the thesis/dissertation. *For doctoral students writing a dissertation, how it will contribute to theory (PhD) or professional knowledge and/or practice (EdD) is compelling, innovative, and insightful.*
Problem	The problem is poorly stated, addresses a problem that is already well researched, or fails to articulate a meaningful problem. The nature of the problem and the selected means to analyze it are misaligned.	An articulated problem describes the issue, phenomena, or problem, and is situated in a clearly defined context. A brief summary of the literature substantiates the need for the study with references to more detailed discussions in the literature review.	Problem is stated in "researchable" terms (i.e., described so that the reader can see the value of exploring the issue and the ability of the researcher to accomplish the inquiry). The theme of the inquiry is suited to the nature of the problem; the scope of the inquiry clearly delineates and is suited to the problem and to the strategy for inquiry
Purpose and Research Questions	The purpose of the study is either unclear or not significant. Research questions are vague, not clearly connected with the problem, or do not provide a set of approaches to analysis	The research purpose is described explicitly, succinctly, and unambiguously. It clarifies how the problem will be addressed and is relevant to the methodology. Research questions are specific, answerable, and clearly connected with the problem.	The purpose of the study is described in a logical, comprehensible, and explicit manner. The purpose and theoretical stance are consistently related to each of the steps in the research, findings, and conclusions.
Rationale and Significance	There is a lack of clarity regarding how this research supports and/or informs knowledge generation and/or theory development and/or professional application and positive change.	A sound justification for conducting the study is provided along with clear summary of the possible benefits.	Notable argumentation in support of research pointing to gaps in the literature. The significance of the research is clearly established, with indications for future studies included.

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Outstanding
Researcher Perspective / Assumptions	The researcher's perspective (philosophy, stance) is not presented, or it is the sole viewpoint represented. Assumptions are either not acknowledged as such or are vague and unrelated to the research questions and framework.	Some forms of research require the researcher's role in planning and conducting the study to be explained. Relevant researcher assumptions, beliefs and perspectives may need to be made explicit.	Researcher perspective is acknowledged throughout. Assumptions are acknowledged and tested. Findings are assessed with due consideration of these elements.
Definition of Key Terms and Constructs	Meanings of specific terms are not clearly defined. General understanding of meanings and uses are taken for granted, creating confusion. Sources of key terms are not identified. Constructs (analytical tools, ideas, theories) are used with little context or operational definitions.	The meanings of unfamiliar, discipline-specific or key terms or constructs are made explicit. Terms are operationally defined or explained – making clear how the terms will be used in the study. All definitions are properly cited from authoritative sources.	Key terms are thoroughly explained, impeccably cited, and their use is justified for the study. All necessary definitions are provided to make the study clear for the reader and useful to other researchers. Key theoretical elements are well explained, appropriate to the research, and provide tools for future inquiry.

Literature Review		
	Unacceptable	**Acceptable**	**Outstanding**
Critical Literature Review	The literature review is marked by plagiarism or deliberately misuses sources. It reveals misunderstandings of basic concepts of conventions of the field, cites only articles that are dated or marginally relevant misses, omits, or ignores important studies, areas of literature, or researchers who have done similar studies. The literature review is poorly written with sloppy errors.	The research questions guide the selection of bodies of literature analyzed in the review Primary sources and peer reviewed scholarly publications are emphasized along with credible secondary sources. The strategies used for searching are delineated. While limited in scope, creativity, or originality, the review demonstrates technical competence and understanding of basic levels of theory and its application.	The literature review displays a deep understanding of a massive amount of complicated, peer-reviewed literature, describes the content and organization of the review, and the strategy used for searching.
Analysis and Critique	The literature review does not handle theory well, is missing key literary information, or contains incorrect information.	The literature review demonstrates an adequate analysis and critique of each topic area guided by the research questions. Each topic is competently covered: the major issues, debates, and perspectives are addressed.	The literature review demonstrates a clear analysis and critique of each topic area guided by research questions. It is not merely summative and descriptive. Each topic is comprehensively covered: the major issues, debates and perspectives are addressed.
Synthesis and Rationale	There is a limited understanding or integration displayed of literature reviewed. The thesis/dissertation fails to present a background and basis for the study, to acknowledge key problems with existing research, and/or to present an organized and meaningful analysis of existing literature in the subject/discipline.	Findings are synthesized across studies; different research outcomes, perspectives and methods are compared and contrasted. Gaps, debates, and/or shortcomings in the literature providing a rationale for the study are discussed. The review distinguishes what has been and what still needs to be accomplished in the area of study. It provides evidence that the current study addresses some gaps in the literature.	Findings are synthetized across studies and disciplines, comparing and contrasting outcomes, perspectives, and methods. The rich data from multiple sources demonstrates a command over the material and effectively connects the current study to existing literature. Documents gaps in the literature and convincingly documents how the current study will address them through theory development and or professional application.

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Outstanding
Conceptual or Theoretical Framework	The review offers no central organizing concept or theoretical underpinning; provides merely a descriptive catalogue of others' ideas; uses theory inappropriately, misinterprets, or does not adequately explain why certain theories are being used (theory is not properly adapted to the situation); and/or does not align theory with the research questions, literature review, or methods.	The review clearly articulates a well-presented framework, and the categories in the framework are clearly linked to research questions. Ways in which the conceptual and/or theoretical lens was used to align analytic tools with research questions and thereby to guide data collection, analysis and interpretation are described.	The theoretical framework describes how the research design derives logically from the problem statement. It presents a strong, cohesive, and comprehensive theoretical basis for the study that continues as a theme through the stages of the dissertation, presenting an insightful, elegant explanation for the overall inquiry and offering a contribution to others' research by presenting a new tool that addresses new aspects of the research problems with a sophisticated association among the elements of the analysis.

Method(s)		
Unacceptable	**Acceptable**	**Outstanding**

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Outstanding
Rationale for Research Methodology / Methods	The scope and/or strategy of the inquiry are inappropriate for the stated problem. The relationships among the problem, the cited authorities, plan of inquiry and conclusions are poorly drawn. There is little thematic or logical connection between the problem, the research strategy, the findings or the conclusions.	The ontological and epistemological conceptualization(s) of the research (e.g., positivist, interpretivist), tradition or paradigm (e.g. quantitative/qualitative research), the research methodology (e.g. quasi-experimental, case study, narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, action research, grounded theory), and methods (e.g. survey, semi-structured interview, focus groups), along with a rationale for selecting these to address the research questions are aligned and logically derived from the problem or issue.	The ontological and epistemological conceptualization(s) of the research (e.g., positivist, interpretivist), tradition or paradigm (e.g. quantitative/qualitative research), the research methodology (e.g. quasi-experimental, case study, narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, action research, grounded theory), and methods (e.g. survey, semi-structured interview, focus groups), along with a rationale for selection are aligned and logically derived from the problem/issue. The scope and/or strategy of the inquiry flow clearly from the stated problem. Relationships among the problem, the cited authorities, plan of inquiry, and conclusions are comprehensibly drawn.
Setting, Sample and Data Sources	The research setting, sample, participant selection procedures, and/or data sources are not effectively described and not justified in relation to the research questions.	The research setting, sample, participant selection procedures, and data sources are appropriately described and justified in relation to the research questions.	The research setting, sample, participant selection procedures, and data sources are very clearly described and justified in relation to the research questions.
Data Collection and Instrumentation	Justification and description of some or all data collection methods, tools, and/or the role of the researcher in the data collection is inadequate.	All data collection methods, tools, instruments, and procedures are justified and described. The role of the researcher in the data collection procedure is described	All data collection methods, tools, instruments, and procedures are clearly justified and described in detail. The role of the researcher in the data collection procedure is precisely described.

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Outstanding
Ethical Considerations	Documentation of ethical considerations, procedures, and/or the steps taken to ensure compliance with Research Ethics Board requirements is inadequate or not provided.	Ethical considerations, procedures used to protect participant rights, and the steps taken to ensure compliance with Research Ethics Board requirements are detailed.	A concise and relevant description of ethical considerations, procedures used to protect participant rights, and the steps taken to ensure compliance with Research Ethics Board requirements are provided.
Validity Trustworthiness Treatment Integrity	Little or no documentation is provided of appropriate measures taken to determine validity or to establish trustworthiness to enhance the study's credibility and dependability.	Appropriate measures are taken and adequately documented to determine validity or to establish trustworthiness to enhance the study's credibility and dependability are provided	Extensive documentation is clearly provided of well accepted measures taken to determine validity or to establish trustworthiness to enhance the study's credibility and dependability are provided and adequately documented
Limitations and Delimitations	Limitations (external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or outcomes) and delimitations (conditions or parameters intentionally imposed to limit the scope) are inadequately addressed.	Limitations (external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or outcomes) and delimitations (conditions or parameters intentionally imposed to limit the scope) are adequately explained. *(In some fields, limitations will be addressed in conclusions.)*	Limitations (external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or outcomes) and delimitations (conditions or parameters intentionally imposed to limit the scope) are clearly and concisely explained.
Setting, Sample and Data Sources	The research setting, sample, participant selection procedures, and data sources are not effectively described and/or not justified in relation to the research questions.	The research setting, sample, participant selection procedures and data sources are appropriately described and justified in relation to the research questions.	The research setting, sample, participant selection procedures and data sources are very clearly described and justified in relation to the research questions.

Results		
Unacceptable	**Acceptable**	**Outstanding**
Descriptions and justifications of the methods and tools used to analyze the data are underdeveloped.	How and when the data were analyzed is articulated. If a software program was used in the analysis, it is clearly described. Systems for keeping track of the data and emerging understandings (research logs, reflective journals, cataloguing systems) are clearly described.	The process by which the data were analyzed is succinctly articulated. Procedures for dealing with discrepant cases are described. Software used is described, and the systems used for keeping track of data and/or emerging understandings are clearly described. How the theoretical framework (if applicable) informed data analysis is transparent.

Note: The "Data Analysis" label appears in the leftmost column of the Results table.

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Outstanding
Presentation of Findings	Alignment to research focus / topic and overall coherence is lacking or substandard identification and presentation of patterns, relationships, and themes is utilized. Interpretations and conclusions are poorly stated or lacking or the arguments presented do not link back to the literature.	The findings build logically from problem and design, and address problems outlined in the literature review. Discrepant/nonconforming data included; patterns, relationships, and themes are supported by data, and all salient data is accounted for.	The findings build logically from the problem, research questions, and research design. Narrative data are connected and synthesized through substantive explanatory text and visual displays (where appropriate). The data presented in support of the findings provide adequate and convincing evidence of the findings. Inconsistent, unexpected, or discrepant data are noted and discussed. All salient data are accounted for in the findings. Patterns, relationships, and themes described in the findings. Applying findings to broader and / or diverse contexts is apparent.

Conclusions/Discussion		
	Unacceptable	**Acceptable**	**Outstanding**
Discussion and Conclusions	There is little thematic or logical connection between the problem, the research strategy, the findings, and the conclusions. The conclusion makes ill-founded conclusions based on disjointed findings. The conclusions are weak or unconvincing.	Thematic or logical connections between the problem, the research strategy, the findings, and the conclusions are presented. A discussion of the findings is provided with solid arguments that are supported and follow thematic reason	Thematic or logical connections between the problem, the research strategy, the findings and the conclusions are eloquently and accurately articulated.
Recommendations & Future Directions	Recommendations for practice, policy, and further research are not justified by the findings and conclusions.	Recommendations for practice, policy, and further research are justified by the findings and conclusions. Significance is described (knowledge generation, professional application, positive social change).	Recommendations for practice, policy, and further research are justified by the findings and conclusions and are actionable.

References

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2012). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Lovitts, B. E., & Wert, E. (2009). *Developing quality dissertations in the humanities: A graduate student's guide to achieving excellence*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

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University of Mississippi. (n.d.). *Written dissertation scoring rubric*. Oxford, MI: School of Graduate Studies in the Health Sciences. Retrieved from
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Summative Assessment – Prior to Exam and for the Examiner's Report

	Unacceptable (does not meet program standards)	Acceptable (expected level of attainment for the program)	Outstanding (worthy of nomination for a major award)
Use of Relevant Literature and Techniques	The literature review does not cite sufficient relevant sources (omitting important studies) or cites irrelevant or out of date sources, or misinterprets the literature. Writing suggests that the student did not read the articles closely and does not use the literature to provide a context and rationale for the research.	The literature review adequately incorporates the current literature demonstrating understanding of key issues and an acceptable analysis and synthesis. The review demonstrates acceptable discrimination between important and unimportant literature and uses the literature to provide a context for the problem.	The literature review demonstrates critical and analytical thinking about and synthesis of current literature and may include integration of literature from other fields. The literature review takes into account the history and context of the research problem, and the student adds personal insights and uses the literature to advance the argument.
Organization	Relationships among the problem, the cited authorities, plan of inquiry, and conclusions are poorly drawn. Organization is inelegant and transitions are awkward or missing.	The thesis/dissertation is logically and systematically organized. The chapters add up to an integrated whole. The thesis/dissertation demonstrates technical competence, but the writing is pedestrian and plodding. There is an obvious relationship between the problem, the background, design, and findings. Chapters, headings and subheadings, and transitions assist the reader to comprehend the continuity and significance of the work.	The thesis/dissertation is very well written and organized and synthesizes interdisciplinary information. It connects components seamlessly so that all steps in the thesis/dissertation are related to each other. The chapters comprise a coherent whole; headings, subheadings, and transitions between sections and chapters are smooth and coherent.
Literary Competence	The thesis/dissertation is poorly written with a rambling and sloppy presentation and errors in spelling, grammar, and mechanics that interfere with the content and readability. The most current APA publication guidelines are not followed.	The thesis/dissertation is written in scholarly language. Clarity, simplicity, parsimony, and appropriate English characterize the writing. Sources are correctly documented using the most current APA format.	The thesis/dissertation employs sophisticated scholarly writing. Additionally, the writing is powerful with cadence, rhythm, and movement. It is largely free of spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors and spotless use of APA style including citations and references. Errors are so few and so minor that the reader can easily skim over them unless specifically searching for them.
Logic of Enquiry	The scope and/or strategy of the inquiry is inappropriate for the problem. The relationships between the problem and the plan of inquiry are unclear or poorly drawn.	The value to the field of addressing the problem is clear and follows a logical line of reasoning. There is a relationship between the nature of the problem and the inquiry, and there is a connection between the problem and the patterns and relationships.	The problem is well described, and a clear line of reasoning demonstrates the research process and logic and shows the reader the value of exploring this issue. The inquiry fits the nature of the problem, and the patterns and relationships between components are clearly explicated.

Argumentation	The purpose of the research is poorly or unclearly stated, and the significance of the literature is missing. Other studies are listed, but themes and gaps in the literature are not clearly identified or explored. The arguments provide substandard identification and presentation of relationships and do not provide application to broader contexts.	The purpose of the research and the significance is stated. Gaps in the literature are identified but not explored deeply. The thesis/dissertation identifies how this research supports the field and/or discipline and arguments are linked to the literature and provide some new perspectives and limited reference to application to broader contexts.	The purpose of the research is articulated exceptionally well, and the significance is stated with strength and conviction. The argumentation in the thesis/dissertation informs and supports current research in the field and/or discipline and addresses an important gap. Arguments presented emerge from a deep, critical review of literature and new perspectives are clearly presented and supported. It relates research to a broader context and is presented creatively and critically.
Degree of Sophistication	Development of content in the thesis/dissertation is restricted, incomplete or unclear, and there is a lack of fluency in expression	Development of content in the thesis/dissertation is adequate with stated positions and supporting information; fluency of expression is acceptable. The path of the argument flows logically.	Development of content in the thesis/dissertation is full and richly developed (focus, relevance, explanations, support) and shows sophistication in fluency of expression.
Originality	The student asks a question or poses a problem that is trivial, weak, unoriginal, or already solved, so it includes results that are obvious, already known, unexplained, or misinterpreted.	The student explores a problem and makes a small contribution to knowledge. There is a good question or problem, or a new methodological approach and findings contribute to new understandings in the field. The thesis/dissertation contains some original ideas, insights, and observations but less so.	The student asks a new question or addresses an important question or problem or contributes a new methodology that is original, significant, ambitious, brilliant, clear, coherent, compelling, concise, elegant, engaging, insightful, persuasive, sophisticated, surprising, and thoughtful.
Contribution to the Discipline, Field or Profession	In the thesis/dissertation, the student does not make a meaningful contribution to the field.	In the thesis/dissertation, the student makes a modest contribution to the field but does not open it up.	In the thesis/dissertation, the student addresses an important problem that is of interest to a larger community and changes the way people think. The results and conclusion of the dissertation pushes the discipline's boundaries and opens new areas for research. The significance of the research is clearly articulated (e.g., knowledge, generation, professional application, or social change).
Ability to Undertake Future Research	The overall thesis/dissertation does not provide evidence of the skills necessary to undertake future independent research. As such, the student demonstrates limited skill in coming up with relevant research questions, or conducting a literature review, or designing and conducting an appropriate study that answers the research question, or utilizing appropriate analysis techniques and tools, or presenting results that answer the research question, and/or providing a discussion on the relevance of the results, applicability to the field, and future directions, and using acceptably scholarly writing.	The overall thesis/dissertation provides evidence of the student's skill in developing relevant research questions, conducting a thorough literature review, designing and conducting an appropriate study that answers the research question, utilizing appropriate analysis techniques and tools, presenting clear and concise results that address the research question, and providing a discussion on the relevance of the results, applicability to the field, and future directions using acceptably scholarly writing.	The overall thesis/dissertation provides clear evidence of the student's skill in coming up with relevant, original research questions that are pertinent to the field, conducting a sophisticated and thorough literature review, designing and conducting a sophisticated study that addresses the research question, utilizing appropriate analysis techniques and tools, presenting clear and concise results that answer the research question, and providing an advanced discussion on the relevance of the results, applicability to the field, and future directions using powerful, clear, scholarly writing.