

Thesis and Dissertation Guide



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Introduction

Graduate students are tasked with completing research projects considered to be essential gateways to their specific field or discipline. These projects, what we call theses for master's students and dissertations for doctoral students, are classic parts of our education system and carry with them a tradition of scholarly ability and excellence. Theses and dissertations are the culminations of particular degree tracks and completion of them signals that you have reached a point in your academic career where you can stand among your peers as an expert in an area of your discipline.

When you complete a thesis or dissertation, you are showing that you can conduct research in your discipline that adds knowledge to your field. While both a thesis and a dissertation are the culmination of your degree program, a dissertation is also considered a culmination of your professional education as part of your terminal degree in your field.

Before we turn to the parts of this guide, it's important to point out that the process of engaging in and completing thesis/dissertation work can be quite different from classwork you've completed or what you will do for publishing your work in journal or text form. You may have written papers or conducted experiments while in class, but those were structured to fit within a class experience and there was more oversight of your work. Thesis and dissertation research and writing is more independent than classwork and requires you, the student, to take the lead. Publication in a journal or text will require you to follow a particular format of the publishing agency and while publications must be thorough, it is unlikely that you will be required to publish at the level of detail as what is expected in your thesis or dissertation. A thesis/dissertation should walk the reader through the process including proposal development, methodological inquiry, research compliance approvals, and what you would do different had you had the foresight to know. A thesis/dissertation is often the start of your research agenda.



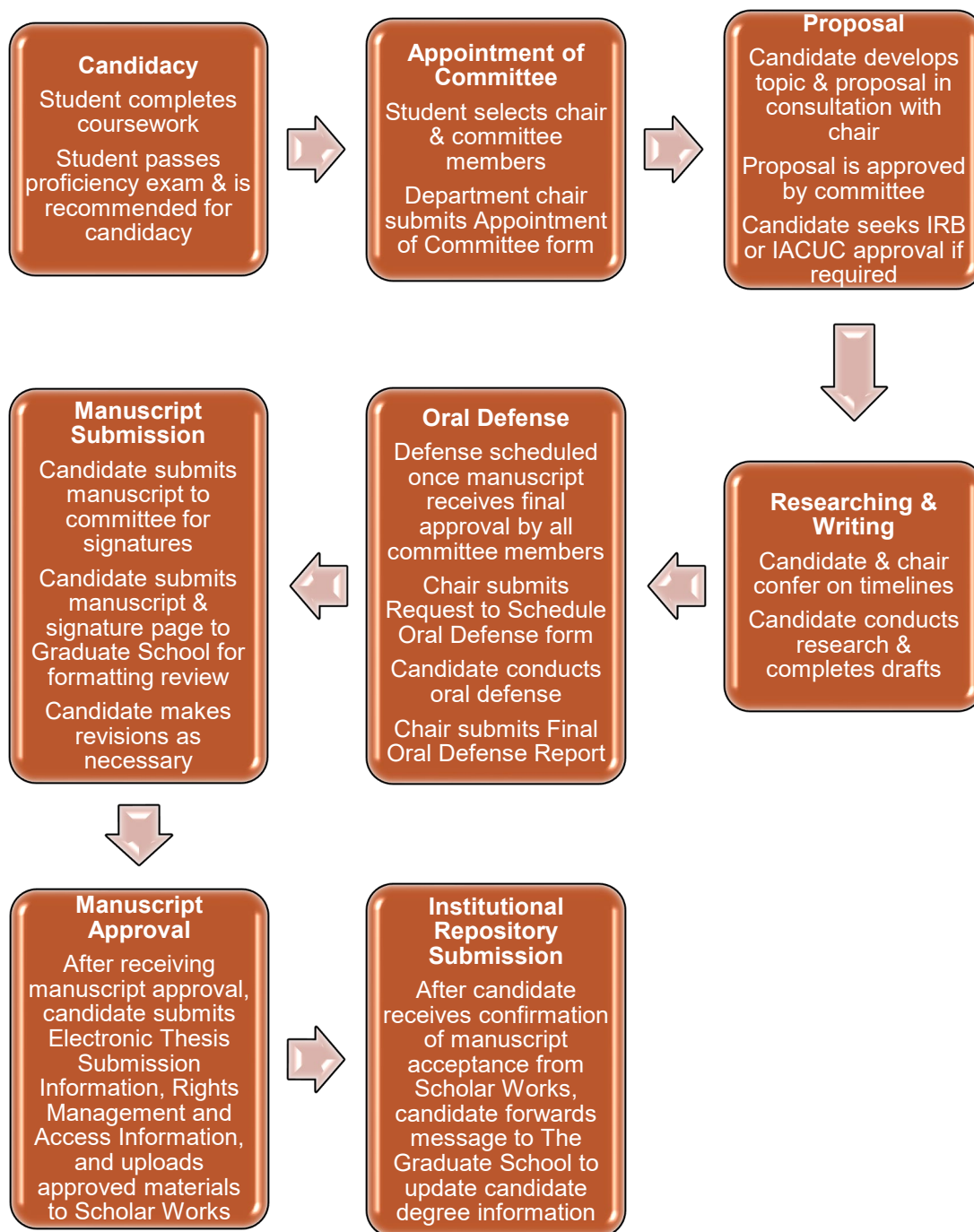
“As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.”

Antoine de Saint Exupery

Thesis/Dissertation Process

Figure 1 below is a general overview of the thesis/dissertation process here at UT Tyler. We say general because your program may have some differences and for master's candidates (meaning those writing a thesis), you may not have an initial candidacy step.

Figure 1



Master's and doctoral programs begin with coursework requirements, the classes you complete that are not your thesis or dissertation. A master's student will often begin work on their thesis while still engaged in coursework especially since most master's degrees are two-year programs. For a doctoral degree, you are generally required to complete your coursework and then take a proficiency exam. If you pass your proficiency exam, you are admitted to candidacy meaning you are not just a doctoral student but a doctoral candidate. For a doctoral candidate this is normally the point when you begin the dissertation process. For this guide, you, the student researcher will be referred to as candidate whether you are a master's or doctoral student.

Committees are a primary component of both the thesis and dissertation process with committees normally having three to five members with one member serving as chair. Your committee chair is the main advisor for your research. Not only can your chair offer you guidance and support, but can help you better understand that academic research, while often independent, is also influenced by and reviewed/overseen by others in the field – your peers – hence the peer-review publication process.

“A research agenda is a strategic plan that outlines the goals, priorities, and areas of investigation for future research endeavors. It serves as a roadmap, guiding researchers toward meaningful and impactful work.” (WHO)

Some programs have a process for pairing candidates with chairs based on research interests and experience, and in other programs you, the candidate, will be responsible for asking a faculty member to be your advisor and serve as your chair. Your chair should help guide you through the process and help steer you to decisions that will enable you to make it over the hurdles of research. It is important to develop and maintain a positive, professional relationship with your chair. It's also important to remember though that your chair may have other theses or dissertations they are overseeing along with the classes they teach and their own research. Much like how you have a multitude of responsibilities, so does your chair. You may not get an immediate response from your chair when working with them on your research, but that could be for a variety of reasons, so don't get discouraged. This last statement is important throughout your thesis/dissertation process – don't get discouraged. You may have a clear, well-organized

research plan with detailed steps and a timeline to follow, but this doesn't mean things will go the way you expect. If you've made it to this point, don't let frustrations derail you. Graduate research can feel like a lonely task, but it is giving you the experience to serve as a lead researcher and lead author.

In addition to your chair, you'll have several other members of your committee. Those members may be chosen for a variety of reasons – maybe you need a theorist or a methodologist who can answer questions or give direction on aspects of your research. You may want someone who both practices in the discipline and who's an academic to give insight into applications of what you're looking into. There are a lot of ways to put together your committee, so keep in mind who would serve you well on that committee.

The next phases of the thesis/dissertation process tend to be more discipline specific. Developing your proposal, conducting research, and the writing/citation style you use are dependent upon the discipline. It's always best to review materials specific to your discipline especially during these phases.

TIP: Instead of deleting sections of your manuscript during revisions, cut and paste the material into an electronic folder. Why? Because sometimes the material doesn't work right then, but you may want to return to it later. Plus, it can be hard to part with something you've written. This way, it's not gone, it's just not in this manuscript.

While much of the thesis/dissertation is discipline specific, there are some common issues that should be considered across disciplines when engaging in research. These include consideration of timelines, budget/resources, and ethics and compliance.

November 2025

[Addressing lone working for PhD students](#)

“My experience: the reality of isolation and loneliness

I'm a 4th year PhD student . . . I felt prepared. But when I arrived, I discovered I'd vastly underestimated how isolating it would be. Even with supportive supervisors, even when actively networking on Twitter and looking for research groups to be a part of, and even when seeking out other PhD students, the unwelcome sensation of solitariness persisted.

I transitioned from a motivated, engaged undergraduate student managing a bustling social life, extra-curricular commitments and academic enthusiasm, into a solitary PhD student, struggling to self-motivate myself alone in a new city . . .

When I looked online, I realised I was not the only one – far from it. . . I felt that strange sense of reassurance you experience upon discovering that others have shared your unfortunate circumstances.”

By Chrissie Thwaites, May 24, 2024

a. Timelines

You cannot rush a thesis/dissertation. It's important to develop a plan for what needs to be accomplished and put together a general timeline to follow. Include each step of the process including developing research questions, writing the literature review, conducting experiments, waiting on survey results, etc. Because of the independent nature of a thesis/dissertation, developing a timeline and devoting time to the project will help you finish in a more efficient manner. Remember though, that life happens, and you may end up needing to revisit the timeline you established.

b. Budget/Resources

You may have a great research plan, but do you have the resources to put that plan into action? Will you need specialized equipment and lab space? Do you need to travel and if so, is it a short trip to conduct an interview or do you need to spend substantial time observing a location? Is there a software program you need to have updated or a survey service that you need to purchase a subscription for? These are important considerations when planning your research.

c. Ethics and Compliance

Something that cannot be emphasized enough is ethics in research. Compliance issues such as following laboratory procedures and requirements with human and animal subjects are important to maintain the integrity of your research. Maintaining ethics and ethical standards in conducting research and writing are a reflection on you and your discipline and can have lasting impacts on your reputation in your field.

“As our own species is in the process of proving, one cannot have superior science and inferior morals. The combination is unstable and self-destructing.” ([Arthur C. Clarke](#))

After the committee has reviewed the manuscript, and given their approval, the oral defense date can be set. What is an oral defense? An oral defense is a chance for the candidate to present their research to an audience in a formal to semi-formal setting. The general process is

as follows. The thesis/dissertation chair introduces you, the candidate. You then give a presentation (often 20-30 minutes) of the thesis/dissertation including the research problem, the methods, findings, etc. After the presentation, the audience is invited to ask questions about the research. After audience questions, your committee will normally ask a series of questions in the public space. After that, the audience is dismissed and there is a closed session where the committee will determine whether you have successfully defended your research. If so, then you may still have some minor changes to make to the manuscript, but the changes should be minor. If you do not pass, then major revisions are likely needed along with another oral defense. At UT Tyler, it is optional for the thesis oral defense to be open to the public, but a dissertation defense must be open to the public. The oral defense notice will be sent out to faculty and staff via email by the Graduate School.

TIP: Presenting your research, as a whole or in part, at a conference can provide external feedback and help prepare you for your defense.

Following a successful defense, you will need to have a signature page completed where each committee member signs the page, which will be included as part of the manuscript submission. When you submit your manuscript to the Graduate School, you are **almost** finished. The initial submission is for formatting review. The Graduate School does not edit the content of your manuscript but does a basic review looking for errors and formatting inconsistencies. This is considered a technical review of your manuscript. You may need to make some mechanical revisions. Once the manuscript review is complete, you submit the manuscript with required documents to Scholar Works. You will receive a confirmation message and will forward that message to the Graduate School. At this point, the process is complete!

Multi-Paper/Portfolio Dissertations

A traditional dissertation is a large research project that consists of a set of chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. A multi-paper or portfolio dissertation takes a different approach and **may only be used with academic department permission**. What is a multi-paper or portfolio dissertation? It is a set of related articles you have completed that are separate chapters in the dissertation. Each article can be a stand-alone manuscript but are thematically related and conceptually coherent.

The Graduate School guidelines for a multi-paper/portfolio dissertation are below. **Your specific program may have heightened standards.**

1. There must be a minimum of three articles/chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion chapter. The introduction chapter should provide context for the overall theme of the dissertation and the conclusion chapter should show how the chapters are thematically integrated.
2. The dissertation should contain an inclusive abstract. In addition, each chapter must have its own abstract since each can be a stand-alone manuscript.
3. The dissertation can include both published and unpublished articles/chapters. The candidate must be the sole, major, or equal contributor of three minimum articles/chapters. If an article/chapter has a co-author, the co-author should be acknowledged and a release letter from that co-author must be included in the appendix where they agree to allow that article/chapter to be in the dissertation.
4. Appendices are encouraged and may include items such as co-author consents, IRB approvals, raw data, survey documents, interview transcripts, etc. These items should provide context and/or support for the dissertation.
5. Format must be consistent for all chapters. If the article was published, the format should be changed to coincide with the format of the rest of the dissertation.
6. There should be a single reference list for the entire dissertation. Separate reference lists should not be included after each article/chapter.

While the Graduate School strongly encourages publication of research results, students are reminded that preparation of a thesis/dissertation and preparation of a manuscript for publication are two separate operations. Certain mechanical stipulations for submitting manuscript copy to a publisher may differ from those specified by the Graduate School and may not be acceptable.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Chair, Committee Members, and Candidates

**If the academic department does not provide students with a program-specific handbook addressing these topics, these guidelines will apply.*

Roles and Responsibilities of the Chair

- The Chair is expected to be familiar with current policies and procedures in the program and The Graduate School.
- The Chair is responsible for guiding the candidate to produce graduate level, original scholarship in the proposed topic area. This typically involves meeting with the candidate to develop the idea for the project and reading drafts of the written proposal, guiding the candidate to set a realistic timeline for completion of the thesis/dissertation, setting expectations for draft submissions and turnaround times, and guiding the selection of committee members.
- The Chair submits the Appointment of Thesis/Dissertation Committee form for Graduate School Approval.
- When the Chair is satisfied with the quality of the proposal, the candidate schedules a meeting of the Committee at which the proposed study is discussed. The proposal is given to committee members at least two weeks before the date of the proposal meeting. Unless otherwise directed by the Chair, committee members do not review drafts of the proposal.
- The Chair will guide the candidate in the selection of methods/procedures for data collection and analysis and assist the candidate in navigating the IRB approval process.
- The Chair will read the work in progress and suggest revisions and will regularly confer with the candidate to discuss the progress. The Chair can be expected to provide feedback on all aspects of the written documents including grammar and clarity of writing; organization of the literature review; thoroughness of studies presented; quality of the methodology proposed; appropriateness of proposed statistics; and formatting. The Chair approves both the abstract and final draft of the manuscript before it is circulated to the committee.
- The Chair will help prepare the candidate for the defense.
- The Chair schedules the oral defense (mandatory for dissertation; optional but recommended for thesis). The Chair facilitates the defense (Guidelines for the Conduct of a Dissertation Defense; Guidelines for the Conduct of a Thesis Defense), checks the manuscript after its readers have suggested revisions, approves the final copies, and ensures all committee members have signed off on the final copy before the manuscript is submitted for the final formatting check.

- The Chair is expected to always maintain a respectful and professional attitude.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Committee Members

All members of the candidate's committee share responsibility in ensuring that the candidate produces high-quality scholarship.

Committee members are responsible for reading manuscripts within the agreed-upon minimum time frame (per committee member), suggesting substantive editorial changes, and providing rationale for their support and critiques. Committee members who perceive major flaws that are likely to result in a candidate's unsuccessful defense should discuss these concerns with the candidate and Chair immediately.

Committee members are expected to always maintain a respectful and professional attitude.

Committee member's responsibilities include:

- Committee Members are expected to be familiar with current policies and procedures in the program and The Graduate School.
- In cooperation with the Chair, advising the candidate from the proposal stage through the final defense.
- Provide subject matter expertise as requested by Chair or candidate.
- Reading drafts and providing meaningful feedback at each stage of the process.
- Guiding the candidate in the selection of methods/procedures for data collection and analysis.
- Corresponding with the Chair and candidate as needed for clarification/resolution of methodological issues during the process.
- Faculty who wish to resign from a committee should demonstrate courtesy by directly informing the candidate.
- Assist the Chair in conducting the thesis defense.
- After the candidate successfully completes the manuscript and defense, the members, as well as the Chair, sign the manuscript.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Candidate

The candidate is expected to engage in active preparation of the process from the onset of the program. Candidates are responsible for choosing a topic for approval, submitting proofread drafts of materials to the Chair, preparing adequately for meetings, thoroughly reviewing all

policies and procedures, and communicating on a regular basis with the Chair via email, phone, or other communication modality.

Candidates are expected to maintain contact with the Chair throughout the process to ensure that the research and writing adhere to the agreed-upon plan. As the project is the candidate's responsibility, s/he must frequently keep the Chair informed of progress. The candidate should contact the Chair in the event of any significant changes in his/her personal or professional life which may interfere with program completion. To document face-to-face meetings as a part of this process, immediately following a face-to-face meeting (within 48 hours), the candidate should email the Chair with a summary of the discussion.

The candidate is expected to always maintain a respectful and professional attitude.

Candidate responsibilities include:

- Candidates are expected to be familiar with current policies and procedures in the program and The Graduate School.
- Candidates are required to maintain continuous enrollment while working on their thesis/dissertation and must be registered for credit hour(s) the semester they defend.
- In accordance with the Committee Composition/Dissertation Committee guidelines in the Catalog, candidates are expected to contact appropriate faculty to serve as chair and committee members.
- Candidates should be aware that some committee members (including chairs) may resign from a committee if the candidate does not make timely progress toward completion.
- Candidates are responsible for consulting with the Chair and listening to the Chair's advice.
- Candidates will confer with the Chair to set deadlines to make sure that they are working at a reasonable pace.
- Candidates and the Chair will develop a timeline for draft submission.
- Candidates should avoid consulting the full committee for feedback without prior approval of the Chair.
- Candidates who wish to change committee members should demonstrate courtesy by communicating about the change directly with the faculty involved.
- Candidates should expect to make multiple revisions to their draft throughout the entire process.
- The defense may only be scheduled once the manuscript has been given final approval by all committee members.

- It is the candidate's responsibility to be familiar with the Graduate School Calendar and the deadlines for filing for graduation, scheduling the defense and the final manuscript submission.

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts occasionally arise between candidates and their dissertation/thesis chairs or committee members. Sources of conflict may include but are not limited to disagreement about a timeline for completing the project, disagreement about the direction of the study or the interpretation of the results, and disagreement about the content, style, and editing of the dissertation or thesis manuscript.

If a conflict is disrupting the progress of the dissertation/thesis, the candidate should follow the procedures below.

1. The candidate must first make a documented attempt to resolve the issue with the chair or committee member who is involved in the conflict.
2. If unable to resolve the conflict, the candidate may follow up with the chair (except in those instances when the conflict is with the chair), followed by the program coordinator or the department chairperson.
3. If the conflict cannot be resolved within the department to the satisfaction of all parties, the chair or the candidate may forward the disagreement in writing to the dean of the College for further mediation.

Guidelines for the Conduct of a Defense

This section was adapted from Duquesne University

These guidelines describe the general conduct of a defense at The University of Texas at Tyler. The responsibility for the defense belongs to the committee chair, and departures from these guidelines may occur for various reasons.

What is a defense? A defense is an oral presentation and discussion of a study. The purpose is to share the results of the study and to demonstrate to the committee and the academic community that the candidate has done work of sufficient quality to receive the degree and is able to speak to it in an open forum.

Chairs do not allow candidates to schedule defenses until the quality of the manuscript is acceptable. It is expected that if the candidate speaks to his or her study as well as s/he has written about it, s/he will be successful in the defense.

Who attends? The candidate and his or her committee members attend the defense.

Defenses are open to any interested members of the academic or professional community. Only the presentation and questioning portions of the defense are open; individuals who are not members of the official committee will be excluded from other portions of the defense. Faculty who are not members of the committee may not question.

Personal guests (adult friends or family members) may attend, but this should be approved by the committee chair ahead of time. Personal guests who attend should realize they are attending a professional meeting as observers and may not ask questions.

What is the order of events? This varies and will depend in large part on discussions between the committee chair and the candidate. The customary practice is to begin with the chair welcoming the attendees, and then the candidate making a presentation based on the research. The purpose of the presentation is not to substitute for the committee's reading but rather to demonstrate that the candidate can speak to what he or she did.

Speaking about one's research is an academic skill that is different from writing the study.

Presentations have been done in many formats: seated at a table with the committee or standing in front of a large or small audience, with or without the aid of PowerPoint slides.

The format itself is not as important as the substance and should reflect the most effective way to communicate to the audience. Questions should be held to the end. The chair will inform participants at the start of the defense how questions will be managed. After the presentation, the committee asks questions designed to:

- Explore further some of the candidate's methods, findings, or theoretical and practical applications of results.
- Allow the candidate to demonstrate what he or she knows about the general topic.
- Probe what the candidate learned in general, or about his or her professional practice, from conducting the study.

The questions may range quite broadly, from very specific to very general. They may be retrospective, intended to ask about something that was already done in the study, or prospective, intended to get the candidate thinking about future possibilities or uses for the findings. They may include open-ended questions to which there is no known or "right" answer as well as closed questions about literature, theory, methods, or findings. It is not "mean" to ask "hard" questions. The intent is for the candidate and all the attendees to learn as much as possible about the study, the new knowledge the candidate's study has generated, and the candidate's fitness for the degree.

After the candidate speaks and the committee finishes with their questions, the committee excuses the candidate and any observers to discuss whether the candidate should pass, and the defense form should be signed.

- If the entire committee approves with no changes, they all sign the signature page, and the candidate proceeds to final format approval.
- If the entire committee approves with changes that are deemed editorial and/or cosmetic, they all sign the signature page, and the candidate proceeds with final editing and subsequent format approval.
- If the committee requests specific changes, they will give the chair the responsibility of seeing that they are made; in this case, the committee members except for the chair sign the signature page, and the chair waits until he or she is satisfied with the revisions before signing.
- If the committee decides that the candidate's defense was not of sufficient quality to merit passing and that he or she needed to repeat the defense, no one will sign the signature page.

In summary, the following basic script is a recommended process to insure a complete, clear presentation of the study and examination of the candidate.

- Presentation by candidate.
- Committee members ask questions and discuss study.
- Committee adjourns for final evaluation; observers and candidate are excused.
- Committee calls the candidate back in to review required changes in the manuscript.
- Post-meeting announcement to observers of outcome of committee deliberations.

Guidelines for Preparation of Thesis or Dissertation

All theses and dissertations must conform to the policies and procedures set forth in these Guidelines and the current University Catalog. Forms and instructions can be found online at [Thesis and Dissertation Center](#). Contact gradmanuscripts@uttyler.edu with questions regarding these policies and procedures. In addition, please note the following:

Submission and Review Requirements. You must indicate which citation style you are using when you submit your manuscript for review. You must include the reviewer's embedded comments when you submit your revisions.

Deadlines. It is the student's responsibility to meet all deadlines established and posted by your College, The Graduate School, and Registrar's Office. Students should work with their thesis/dissertation committee chair as deadlines near to ensure their availability for reviewing and approving the manuscript. To view deadline dates, see [The Graduate School Calendar](#).

Projects. Students completing a master's project in lieu of a thesis should check with their advisor concerning the appropriate format. If the department or college does not specify a format for the project, then students must follow the thesis/dissertation format guidelines.

Manuscript Preparation. The following guidelines must be followed regardless of the style guideline/manual chosen. These guidelines ensure that all manuscripts prepared at The University of Texas at Tyler have a uniform and professional look.

Style and Format. Select a style manual or journal format established by your department or committee and consistently follow that style throughout the manuscript except where UT Tyler guidelines state otherwise. As researcher and author, the graduate student has full responsibility for the form and substance of the manuscript. Templates are available at [Thesis and Dissertation Center](#).

Pagination. Do not place numbers on the Title Page, Signature Page, Copyright Page, or Acknowledgments Page. Beginning with the first numbered page (the Table of Contents) follow the guidelines of your chosen style manual.

Final Copies. No printed copies are required by The Graduate School. Check with your committee chair for departmental requirements regarding printed copies.

Checklist of Common Errors

(Compare to your manuscript draft)

1. Table of Contents. Be sure that:

- ☐ ALL subheadings are included, and they appear **verbatim** inside the document's text.
- ☐ Follow the selected citation style closely regarding margins and the different levels of headings.

2. Text. Be sure that:

- ☐ No **BOLD** type is used except for headings, or when required as part of a formula.
- ☐ No "1-liners" (also known as widows or orphans) appear at the **top** of pages.
- ☐ No sub-heading is left hanging by itself at the end of a page.

3. Tables, Figures, & Other Illustrations. Be sure that:

- ☐ All terms "Table" or "Figure" are consistently in either all capital letters or upper & lowercase.
- ☐ Tables that are continued on subsequent pages must include table column headings at the top of each page.
- ☐ Tables/figures that are continued on subsequent pages must include the title and (continued) at the top of each page. For example:

Table X (Continued)

4. References. Be sure that:

- ☐ Materials actually used are your REFERENCES. Background material goes in a BIBLIOGRAPHY.
- ☐ You have followed your chosen citation style exactly.
- ☐ There are no "split" citations from one page to the next.
- ☐ You replace all underlined materials with italics.

5. Appendices. Be sure that:

- ☐ If you only have one appendix, it is still labeled "Appendix 1 (or I)" or "Appendix A".
- ☐ Subsequent pages of multi-paged Appendices are titled: Appendix A (Continued).
- ☐ Appendix documents meet margin requirements.
- ☐ Use a 1-inch margin at top of page for each new appendix.
- ☐ Appendix pages with tables or figures have table or figure titles as well as Appendix headings.

6. Images. Be sure that:

☐ Images/charts are clear and legible. The reader should be able to read/see it clearly.

7. Signature. Be sure that:

☐ Make sure to watch auto-capitalization. Word always tries to capitalize 'by' and 'of' when they come at the beginning of a new line.

☐ Don't forget the period after D. in Advisor Name, Ph.D., Committee Chair.

8. Pagination. Be sure that:

☐ Pagination begins on the Table of Contents page and follows your chosen citation style.