

Doctoral Dissertation Writing: A Systematic Review of Challenges, Characteristics, and Scholarly Processes

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Received: 29/08/2025	Abstract <i>Completing a doctoral dissertation is a landmark achievement in a researcher's life, signifying the capability for independent thinking, extensive research, and contributory work in a desired academic area. Writing a dissertation is one of the most arduous periods of doctoral education, but it holds immense value. It represents a complex interplay of intellectual, technical, and affective requirements. This systematic review is grounded in a wide range of literature from academia to explore the major challenges faced by doctoral students, including choosing a research topic, selecting appropriate methodologies, effective time management, overcoming writing blocks, and psychological distress. Furthermore, the review outlines the key characteristics of a successful dissertation, including originality, methodological rigor, analytical thinking, and scholarly writing. Each stage of the dissertation journey is examined, ranging from initial planning and literature review to data analysis and preparation for defence, offering an interactive guide for doctoral students. Findings indicate that the timely completion of the dissertation is highly associated with institutional support, the quality of supervision, the availability of research training, and compliance with academic requirements. By synthesising key findings, this review aims to enhance the clarity and confidence of doctoral students and programs in navigating the dissertation process.</i>
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1. INTRODUCTION

The doctoral dissertation marks the culmination of a graduate student's academic scholarship and intellectual achievement. It reflects much more than a routine requirement; it is a reflection of the candidate's capacity to handle complex research issues independently, build new knowledge, and make meaningful contributions to their scholarly domain (Cargill & O'Connor, 2021; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). As Boote and Beile (2005) underscore, the dissertation demonstrates command of the available literature, methodological complexity, and capacity for developing and testing important research questions. Hart (1998) also defines it as a synthesis of concepts and empirical work that advances knowledge frontiers, while Ridley (2012) also emphasizes its dual role as a product of scholarship and a transformative individual experience.

Notwithstanding its central place as the intellectual hub for doctoral study (Golde, 2000), writing the dissertation is a significant hurdle for most candidates. The range of these hurdles varies from choosing an apt topic to synthesizing heterogeneous literature, conceptualizing sound methodologies, managing time, and acquiring academic writing competency (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts,

2005). These challenges can compromise the quality of the dissertation and delay the completion of the doctoral program within the scheduled timeframe.

In considering the complex and multifaceted character of dissertation writing, a comprehensive understanding of its characteristic features, processes, and challenges is vital. While various studies have examined varied aspects of dissertation development, scholarship within the area remains fragmented and not synthetically integrated. It is to bridge this gap that this systematic review attempts to synthesize foundational texts and empirical studies together to map the intellectual, procedural, and affective dimensions of the doctoral dissertation experience.

By reviewing the scholarly literature on writing dissertations, this article responds to three main questions: the challenges faced by doctoral candidates, the features of high-quality dissertations, and the sequential steps of their production. By this synthesis, the article intends to provide practical suggestions to doctoral candidates, supervisors, and institutions toward enhancing doctoral education, enabling scholarly development, and hence increasing dissertation completion rates.

2. METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2021) guidelines to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor. The review aimed to synthesize empirical and conceptual studies addressing the process, challenges, and characteristics of doctoral dissertation writing.

2.1. Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive and systematic search was conducted across five major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar (via Publish or Perish), and PubMed/PMC. The search covered the period from 2000 to 2024 and was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters published in English. Search strings were developed using Boolean operators and combinations of keywords related to the research focus, including “*doctoral dissertation*,” “*PhD thesis*,” “*academic writing*,” “*dissertation writing process*,” and “*doctoral writing challenges*.” An example of a core search string used in Scopus was: (“doctoral dissertation” OR “PhD thesis”) AND (“writing challenges” OR “academic writing” OR “doctoral writing process”)

Additional sources were identified through reference-list screening of key studies and targeted hand-searching of major journals in higher education and academic writing.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

1. Addressed doctoral-level dissertation or thesis writing processes or experiences;
2. Focused on challenges, characteristics, or determinants of doctoral writing;
3. Were empirical (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) or conceptual/theoretical; and
4. Were published in English between 2000 and 2024.

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused on undergraduate or master’s theses;
2. Did not directly discuss the writing aspect of dissertations;
3. Were non-academic (e.g., blogs, commentaries, opinion pieces); or
4. Were inaccessible in full text.

2.3. Screening and Selection Process

The review process followed the PRISMA framework, encompassing the sequential stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, to ensure systematic and transparent reporting. Titles and abstracts were first screened for relevance, followed by a full-text assessment of potentially eligible studies against the inclusion criteria.

2.4.Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from the included studies were extracted using a structured coding sheet that captured study design, population, focus, findings, and thematic relevance. A thematic synthesis approach was used to identify patterns and recurring themes related to the writing process, challenges, and institutional or supervisory influences.

This rigorous, multi-stage methodology ensured a comprehensive and transparent synthesis of the literature on doctoral dissertation writing, allowing for both conceptual clarity and practical insight.

3. THEMATIC FINDINGS

Thematic synthesis of the selected literature revealed three general areas at the center of doctoral dissertation writing: the issues doctoral students face, the qualities of good dissertations, and the process of writing a dissertation. The themes speak to the intricacy of creating dissertations and provide a comprehensive framework for examining academic thought on doctoral research.

3.1.Characteristics of a Doctoral Dissertation

A doctoral dissertation is widely regarded as an academic work that possesses a variety of definitional characteristics inherent to its scholarly excellence and contribution. Paramount among these is originality, extending beyond the selection of a fresh topic to encompass the introduction of new theoretical ideas, innovative approaches, or new perspectives into existing knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014). This original contribution is the essence of distinguishing a dissertation as a worthwhile contribution to academic society rather than a compilation of pre-existing research.

Substantively linked with originality is methodological rigor, which mandates that the design of research, data collection, and analysis must be conducted in a clear, reliable, and valid way. Rigor involves the open presentation of methods that are reproducible and critically justified to ensure the credibility of findings (Shadish et al., 2002; Higgins et al., 2011). Methodological soundness of this kind is critical to ensure the trustworthiness of the research and make contributions to disciplinary norms.

Also indicated are the scope and depth of a dissertation. This entails an extensive and rigorous literature review to locate the piece of research from which it will discover its own body of knowledge and in-depth discussions with richly detailed and nuanced data analysis (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008; Brause, 2012). All these indicate scholarly depth and analytical sophistication at the doctoral level.

Another fundamental requirement is the display of critical thinking and writing skills. Doctoral students must engage the literature critically, establish coherent and persuasive arguments, and write reflective discussions of their research findings and procedures (Swales & Feak, 2004; Facione, 2011). The critical engagement not only gives substance to the intellectual value of the dissertation but also shows that the candidate can contribute constructively to scholarship.

The doctoral dissertation is an academic artifact demonstrating mastery of the research topic and engagement with the broader scholarly discourse, reflecting the candidate's readiness to contribute as an independent researcher. Its quality is governed by academic writing conventions—clarity of structure, logical progression of ideas, and adherence to proper citation practices—which collectively ensure coherence and scholarly rigor (Cargill & O'Connor, 2021; Ridley, 2012).

3.2.The Dissertation Writing Process

The process of writing a dissertation has traditionally been viewed as being iterative rather than linear through successive drafting, feedback, and revision to produce an effective and rigorous piece of academic work (Swales & Feak, 2004). Kamler and Thomson (2014) identify significant milestones in

the process, including choice of the topic, proposal development, data collection, analysis, and defense, each requiring careful attention to academic and practical considerations.

The initial and most likely the most challenging task is the choice of topic, demanding reconciliation between research interest, practicability, newness, and academic relevance (Rudestam & Newton, 2015; Maxwell, 2013). Effective choice of topic demands aligning the field of research with the agenda of a discipline and addressing significant lacunae in knowledge (Ridley, 2012). Maxwell (2013) and Locke et al. (2013) emphasize that the topic should be not only of interest to the candidate but also productively respond to debates that are current in the field.

Proposal development is the next important step after choosing a topic. This step involves writing clear research questions, setting goals, giving an overview of the literature, and suggesting a strong approach (Murray, 2011). Kamler and Thomson (2014) say that a well-written proposal is the intellectual basis for the dissertation since it makes sure that everything fits together and that the research path is apparent.

The literature review stage is fundamental for situating the study within existing scholarship. Hart (1998) describes the literature review as a mapping of the academic terrain that identifies contradictions, gaps, and trends. Swales and Feak (2004) stress that effective literature reviews go beyond summary to critically synthesize previous work and construct conceptual frameworks that justify the research focus.

The methodological phase comprises the formulation and implementation of research designs appropriate to the research objectives and questions. Creswell (2014) cites the necessity of selecting proper qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, clearly demarcating the sample groups, and upholding ethical measures during data collection and analysis. Rudestam and Newton (2014) classify the alignment of research questions and methods as being essential to producing valid and reliable results. Phillips and Pugh (2010) further stress that precision and critical thinking in data interpretation are essential in connecting findings to larger research objectives.

Throughout these stages, writing is a repeated, cyclical activity. Swales and Feak (2004) note that drafting, feedback, and repeated revision act to sharpen clarity, coherence, and academic force. This cyclical process supports the developmental character of dissertation work, where continued refinement shapes the final scholarly product.

The final major stage is the dissertation defense, a formal examination that assesses the candidate's mastery of their research area and intellectual independence. Rudestam and Newton (2014) describe the defense as a performance where candidates justify their methodological choices, defend their interpretations, and articulate the significance of their contributions. Golde (2000) and Rose et al. (2014) highlight that this phase also reflects the researcher's maturation, requiring the ability to engage constructively with critique and participate actively in academic discourse.

Embedded within the entire dissertation process is the duality of academic writing and critical thinking. Critical thinking enables doctoral students to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and build valid arguments (Facione, 2011; Elder & Paul, 2020). Academic writing provides the formal conventions utilized to present findings succinctly and persuasively, and these conventions require clarity, logical order, and correct citation conventions (Swales & Feak, 2004). Mastering voice, tone, and audience competence also contributes to cumulatively enhancing the effectiveness of scholarly communication (Murray, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013).

The structural components of a dissertation are well-established and serve distinct but interconnected purposes. Typically, a dissertation includes an introduction that presents the research problem followed by a literature review which situates the study within scholarly debates; also, a methodology chapter details research procedures while results report the data collected; a discussion interprets the implications of findings and finally a conclusion that offers theoretical and practical contributions (Creswell, 2014; Swales & Feak, 2004; Booth et al., 2016). Each chapter must align with

and support the overarching research narrative, ensuring coherence and scholarly rigor throughout the paper.

3.3.Challenges in Dissertation Writing

Dissertation writing presents doctoral students with a complex array of problems that can bring progress to a virtual standstill quite effectively and affect the overall quality of their scholarly work. One of the most pervasive, perhaps, of these problems is time management; dividing dissertation writing and research among personal, professional, and academic responsibilities often proves to be challenging, resulting in procrastination and extremely high stress levels (Lovitts, 2002; Gardner, 2009; Hopwood et al., 2011; Pyhältö et al., 2012). This is usually compounded by resource constraints and extraneous pressures inappropriately placed on students from less resource-endowed contexts, particularly from African and Arab contexts where research and institutional support are very low (Zohri, 2016; Aldoukalee, 2014).

Emotional distress and psychological burnout are also prevalent issues during the dissertation process. Anxiety, fear, and alienation are not unprecedented, and these are usually exacerbated by inadequate supervisory guidance and institutional oversight (Sword, 2012; Murray, 2011; Sparkman & Doran, 2019; Alkathiri & Olson, 2019). Bireda's (2015) study on Ethiopian female doctoral students also highlights how institutional, family, and cultural pressures converge to make emotional exhaustion and low motivation possible. These emotional distresses are accountable for disengagement and, if not regulated through empathetic supervision and mental health treatment, can lead to burnout or dropout (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Park et al., 2021; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Writing difficulties are another major challenge for doctoral students, especially for those writing in a non-native language. Most of the students struggle to organize good arguments, stay concise, and maintain a formal academic tone (Kitchenham et al., 2009; Lea & Street, 2006). This is particularly the case for Arab and African students composing in English as a second or a foreign language, wherein linguistic competence issues—like vocabulary limitation, clichéd sentence repetitions, and poor use of cohesive devices—undermine clarity and logical sequencing (Ahmed, 2010; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2010; Ma, 2021). Jomaa and Bidin (2017) and El-Freihat (2021) point out that citation rules, evaluating sources, and maintaining academic integrity make the writing process even more difficult, and therefore, special academic writing support and training courses are required, which cater exclusively to these students' needs.

Adherence to academic writing conventions is critical for the credibility and scholarly impact of a dissertation. Effective writing requires clarity, logical structure, coherence, and rigorous citation practices (Swales & Feak, 2012; Murray, 2017). McQuillan (2021) warns against informal language and stresses the importance of disciplinary tone and style. Kennedy and Kennedy (2012) identify well-structured paragraphs and transitional devices as key to achieving clarity and coherence, while Hartley (2008) and Paltridge and Starfield (2013) underscore the necessity of logical progression throughout the dissertation narrative.

Citation integrity, as a cornerstone of scholarly writing, demands consistent and accurate referencing to acknowledge intellectual debts and prevent plagiarism, thus enhancing academic credibility (Swales & Feak, 2004; Pears & Shields, 2019). Hart (1998) further notes that critical evaluation of sources distinguishes high-quality scholarship from superficial reporting. Yet, many doctoral students—especially those in under-resourced environments—struggle with access to study materials and effective citation practices, which vary with gender, work, and marital status, underscoring the importance of tailored academic support (El-Freihat, 2021).

Regardless of their discipline or academic background, the majority of doctoral students experience persistent issues with academic writing. Issues with logically organizing ideas, adopting an acceptable academic voice, and avoiding repetition are particularly common (Kitchenham et al., 2009; Gardner, 2009). They are typically compounded by insufficient

writing support, limited institutional attempts to address them, and unrealistic expectations placed on students (Murray, 2011; Lea & Street, 2006). The problem is especially sharp in most Middle Eastern universities, where Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs are not common yet, restricting the provision of advanced academic writing instruction to students (Al-Zubaidi, 2012).

Inadequate supervision also chokes progress. Several studies have documented the negative consequences of poor or mismatched supervisory relationships, including low motivation, progress plateauing, and increased emotional strain (Zohri, 2016; Terentev et al., 2021; Denis et al., 2019). Strong support networks—both peer and familial—can, however, serve as effective buffers to such difficulties. Owens et al.'s (2020) and Byers et al.'s (2014) research emphasize the importance of building academic communities centered on mentorship, intellectual stimulation, and emotional support.

Taken together, the issues facing doctoral students at the dissertation phase are interrelated and multidimensional. They traverse a range of domains, including time management, psychological pressure, language proficiency, quality of supervision, institutional responsiveness, and resource availability. Addressing such complex issues necessitates holistic, context-specific solutions. These might include increased funding, tailored academic writing support, formal mentoring programs, access to mental health services, and improved supervisor training. Such initiatives are important not only for improving completion rates but also for a healthier and more productive doctoral experience overall (Zohri, 2016; Elgamri et al., 2024; Sparkman & Doran, 2019; Alkathiri & Olson, 2019).

4. DISCUSSION

The evidence from this systematic review sheds light on the intellectually demanding, emotionally draining, and multifaceted process of creating a doctoral dissertation. Beyond being an intellectual endeavor in its own right, the process of creating a dissertation becomes an intensely transforming experience involving intellectual development, emotional resilience, and moving through academic and institutional stratification. Through a high degree of synthesis of the literature, three interconnected dimensions have been defined as constitutive of this process: (1) the essential features of a strong dissertation, (2) the recursive and multi-phased nature of writing, and (3) the individual, academic, and institutional challenges that candidates often face in the process.

Central to any dissertation is the guarantee of novelty, methodological sophistication, and intellectual contribution in substance. They are not ceremonies—these conditions are core academy values and criteria for ascertaining a researcher's competence to join the academia (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Hart, 1998; Shadish et al., 2002). The demand for innovation is particularly acute; doctoral students must be able to identify areas where there is a lack in existing literature, propose new theoretical insight, or apply new research methodologies (Boote & Beile, 2005; Brause, 2012). Meeting this expectation can be exhilarating as well as intimidating—particularly in disciplines where theoretical frameworks already exist or in which innovation is difficult to achieve. Also, the dissertation demands remarkable critical thinking and intellectual maturity, hence not only a graduation requirement but also a gateway to academic identity formation and scholarly discourse (Ridley, 2012; Facione, 2011).

The dissertation writing process has been well-documented in the literature to be nonlinear and recursive with interweaving and entwining phases of idea generation, literature review, research design, data collection, analysis, and academic writing conventions (Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Swales & Feak,

2004). These activities are cognitively challenging and emotionally volatile, with students generally experiencing alternating episodes of confidence, uncertainty, motivation, and fatigue (Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Murray, 2011). The activity of honing research questions, obtaining methodology, and redrafting in response to critique captures the fluid and recursive nature of intellectual thinking (Maxwell, 2013; Locke et al., 2013). This is made even more difficult by the requirement to synthesize large amounts of literature, maintain the narrative's consistency, and be consistent in argument and academic voice (Hart, 1998; Ridley, 2012).

However, the path to completion is rarely smooth. Numerous studies have noted the snares that hinder the progress of dissertations, including time management, emotional distress, writing difficulties, and inadequate institutional support (Lovitts, 2002; Gardner, 2009; Sword, 2012). Time management is an extremely broad issue, with students tending to struggle to balance research responsibilities with teaching, work, and home tasks (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005). Lack of planning and procrastination, often compounded by poorly specified milestones or poorly organized timelines, can lead to stagnation and burnout (Lovitts, 2002).

The other side of the literature focuses on emotional challenges. Exclusion, fear, and lack of confidence are some of the most common, especially in the protracted periods of individual study and in circumstances where supervisory feedback is sporadic or devilishly critical (Murray, 2011; Sword, 2012). The psychic strain is not just individualistic. Research has shown a link between psychological stress and attrition and low completion rates for doctorates (Golde, 2005). These findings support the argument that doctoral success is as much a function of emotional resilience and networks of support as it is of intellectual ability.

The writing itself is one of the most demanding aspects of the doctoral journey. Academic writing conventions such as clarity, organization, coherence, and citation are challenging for a large number of candidates (Swales & Feak, 2004; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012). Non-native speakers of English, students from underrepresented populations, and those with minimal or no background in academic writing conventions are particularly confronted with these issues (Lea & Street, 2006). Academic writing style and citation honesty are not simply technical requirements—they are markers of disciplinary belonging and intellectual authenticity (Pears & Shields, 2019; McQuillan, 2021). Nevertheless, the lack of overt instruction in writing conventions and the tendency to demote writing to a support skill exacerbate the problem. Hartley (2008) and Paltridge and Starfield (2013) argue that effective academic writing depends on logical development, paragraphing, and transitional flow, but these elements are not given priority in doctoral education.

One key conclusion of the literature is that dissertations cannot be written outside the institutional context. Universities play a significant role in shaping doctoral experiences by the kind of support system they provide (Rudestam & Newton, 2014; Golde, 2000). The kind of programs that provide structured writing workshops, one-on-one mentoring, peer support groups, and clear guidelines are more likely to promote student growth and reduce student loss (Rose et al., 2014; Murray, 2017). Yet the institutions that think of dissertation writing as a test of independence without scaffolding are most likely to be causing student loss.

The supervisory relationship is particularly crucial. Effective supervision is not just about knowledge of the research field but also emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and concern for student development (Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Gardner, 2009). Supervisors who continuously offer feedback, promote intellectual independence, and give helpful guidance help students cope with the ambiguities of dissertations better. Where such guidance is lacking, students find themselves confronted with delays, confusion, or disengagement (Lovitts, 2002; Golde, 2005).

Last but not least, the doctoral dissertation emerges from this review not only as an academically achieved document but as an enriching, profoundly human endeavor that lies at the intersection of knowledge creation, personal growth, and organizational culture. It is a mix of conditions that defines success in this endeavor: intellectual passion, emotional stamina, sound mentoring, and solid support networks. The issues that doctoral candidates face are not signs of personal deficiency but

manifestations of the high demands and structural deficiencies inherent in current systems of doctoral education. A more compassionate and balanced approach to doctoral preparation—one that recognizes the affective, social, and rhetorical dimensions of writing a dissertation—is overdue to meet the needs of the next generation of scholars.

5. CONCLUSION

Doctoral dissertation writing is a complex, iterative process requiring originality, theoretical insight, methodological rigor, and scholarly literacy. Students face recurring challenges—academic writing, time management, isolation, and unclear expectations—often compounded by limited institutional support.

This review frames dissertation writing as a developmental, socially mediated endeavor rather than a purely individual task. Success depends on robust institutional scaffolding, including mentorship, peer support, writing resources, and mental health services.

By emphasizing both the intellectual and emotional demands of dissertation writing, this review highlights the importance of systemic support to improve completion rates and reduce attrition. Future research should evaluate interventions that strengthen writing skills, supervisory guidance, and institutional frameworks. Doctoral programs and policymakers are urged to implement comprehensive support strategies that equip students to navigate the dissertation process with resilience, competence, and confidence.

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