MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY
Ph.D. in HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
Dissertation Guidelines for a Qualitative Research Study

The guidelines presented in this document provide a framework for formatting your Dissertation based on a qualitative study method. Your Dissertation chair and committee members should be consulted to define the components and sequence of your Dissertation based on these guidelines. All students using a qualitative method in their research study must follow the Marywood Dissertation Format found in the Ph.D. Student Handbook:

a.) Title Page

b.) Copyright Page/Information

c.) Abstract/Statement by Author

d.) Dedications (Optional)

e.) Acknowledgements (Optional)

f.) Table of Content:

a. Chapter 1: Introduction

b. Chapter 2: Review of Literature

c. Chapter 3: Research Methodology

d. Chapter 4: Results/ Discussion
e. Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

g.) References

h.) Appendices

i.) List of Figures

j.) List of Tables

Guidelines pertaining to the ‘Table of Content’ have been elaborated in the Ph.D. Student Handbook. When forming a Dissertation Committee, Marywood’s Ph.D. program requires the submission of a research proposal that includes all the items listed in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and the appropriate literature references, written in the future tense. Upon completion of the research study, then all chapters within the Dissertation are revised and written in the past tense. References included in the research proposal and Dissertation are written and listed according to the most current edition of APA (American Psychological Association).

(Note: The items listed below are not intended to be headings in the dissertation, but simply outline the elements that are included in a typical dissertation.)
Table of Content:

I. Chapter 1: Introduction – Describe the topic of study and why the study needs to be conducted.

a.) Background: Briefly summarize research literature related to the scope of the research study. Describe the gap in knowledge in the discipline that the research study will address. End the section by explaining why the study is needed.

b.) Statement of the problem: State the research problem. Provide evidence of consensus that the research study is current, relevant, and significant to the discipline. Frame the problem in a way that builds upon or counters previous research findings. Address a meaningful gap in the current research literature.

c.) Purpose of the Research Study: Provide a concise statement that serves as the connection between the research study and the focus of the study. Provide details on the intent of the study, e.g., describe, compare, explore, develop, etc. State the concept/phenomenon/paradigm of interest.

d.) Research Question(s): State the research question(s).
e.) Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Research Study:

Each study must include either a theoretical foundation or a conceptual framework section (some studies may include both).

f.) Theoretical Framework: Identify the theory or theories and provide the origin or source. State concisely the major theoretical propositions and/or major hypotheses with a more detail explanation in Chapter 2. Explain how the theory relates to the study approach and research question(s).

g.) Conceptual Framework: This applies to both qualitative and quantitative studies, and some epidemiological studies. Identify and define the concept/phenomenon that grounds the study. Describe concisely the conceptual framework with a more detailed analysis in Chapter 2. State how the framework relates to the study and key research question(s) as well as instrument development and data analysis where appropriate.

h.) Nature of the Study: Provide a concise rationale for the selection of the study design. Briefly describe the key concept(s) and/or phenomenon being investigated. Briefly summarize the methodology, e.g., from whom and how the data will be collected and analyzed.
i.) **Definition of Terms:** Provide concise definitions of key concepts or constructs. Define terms used in the study that have multiple meanings. Include citations that identify support for professional literature for the definition or operational definition.

j.) **Assumptions:** Clarify aspects of the study that are believed, but cannot be demonstrated to be true. Include only those assumptions that are critical to the meaningfulness of the study. Describe the reasons why the assumptions were necessary in the context of the research study.

k.) **Scope and Delimitations:** Describe specific aspects of the research study that are addressed in the study and why the specific focus was chosen. Define the boundaries of the research by identifying populations included and excluded and theories/conceptual frameworks most related to the area of research that were not investigated. Address any potential transferability.

l.) **Limitations:** Describe the limitations of the research study related to the design and/or methodological weaknesses (including issues related to limitations of transferability and dependability). Describe any biases that could influence the research study outcomes and how they will be
addressed. Describe any reasonable measures to address the limitations.

m.) **Significance:** Identify potential contributions of the research study that advance the knowledge in the discipline, practice, and/or policy.

n.) **Summary:** Summarize the main points of Chapter 1 and provide a transition into Chapter 2.

II. **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter constructs a platform, using the known literature/knowledge that will help to achieve a substantive knowledge about the problem being addressed. Review of literature involves exploring all the previous research studies and knowledge relevant to your anticipated research. It should be used to inform:

- The problem and its significance
- The theoretical or conceptual framework
- Key variables and/or Concepts
- The research methods
Advisors/Dissertation Chairs should be contacted to make sure that all the elements of the topic are being covered in the review and that the research studies are appropriate and thorough.

The following elements are the framework for the process and components of a literature review and are not intended to be subheadings of Chapter 2:

A.) Introduction: Restate the research questions and the purpose of the study. Provide a concise synopsis of the current literature that establishes the relevance to the research study.

B.) Description and Critique of Scholarly Literature:

Keep in mind that scholarly review of literature focusses on primary sources such as peer-reviewed research and journal articles rather than secondary sources like textbooks. Each literature should be described and briefly critiqued identifying their strengths and weaknesses, for example:

- “For theoretical discourses, indicate: source of theory, overlap/disparity with other theories, how well they have been empirically verified.
- For conceptual discussions, indicate: sources of concepts, overlaps/disparity with other concepts, how well they have been empirically verified.

- For empirical studies, indicate: research questions, strengths and weaknesses of methodology, results, conclusions and implications.”

(UALR, 2013)

The written review/studies should be organized under major topics, theories, research questions or methods. Be careful, not to create a biased review by covering only prior literature that supports your predispositions and disregards other literature. Literature should be consistently critiqued as failure to do so is likely to compromise your research. Pay attention not to ignore weaknesses in studies that support your predispositions and not to over-critique studies that contradict your predispositions.

C.) Theoretical Foundation (as appropriate)

Name the theory or theories. Provide a source or origin of the theory.

Describe major theoretical propositions and/or major hypotheses, including delineation of any assumptions appropriate to the application
of the theory. Provide a literature and research-based analysis of how the theory has been applied previously in ways similar to the research study. Provide the rationale for the choice of this theory. Describe how and why the selected theory relates to the present research study and how the research questions relate to, challenge, or build upon existing theory.

D.) Conceptual Framework (as appropriate):

Identify and define the concept/phenomenon. Synthesize primary writings by key theorists, philosophers, and/or seminal researchers related to the concept or phenomenon. Provide key statements and definitions inherent in the framework. Describe how the concept of phenomenon has been applied and articulated in previous research and how the current research study benefits from this framework.

E.) Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts:

Describe studies related to the constructs of interest and chosen methodology and methods that are consistent with the scope of the current research study. Describe ways researchers in the discipline have approached the problem and the strengths and weakness inherent in their approaches. Justify from the literature the rationale for selection
of the variables or concepts. Review and synthesize studies related to the key concepts and/or phenomena under investigation to produce a description of what is known about them, what is controversial, and what remains to be studied. Review and synthesize studies related to the research questions and why the approach selected is meaningful.

F.) Summary and Conclusions:

Concisely summarize major themes in the literature. Summarize what is known as well as what is not known in the discipline related to the research study. Describe how the current research study fills at least one of the gaps in the literature and will extend the knowledge in the discipline. Provide transitional material to connect the gap in the literature to the methods described in Chapter 3.

III. Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The type of method to be used in a research study is dictated by the literature review and the research question/hypothesis, i.e., what is the author planning to test? The information provided in the research proposal related to methodology is written in the future tense, however after conducting the study and data collection Chapter 3, it is then converted to
past tense. (NOTE: Participant recruitment and data collection cannot start until you have received an approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB)).

A sample brief outline is shown as follows:

A.) Introduction:

Restate the research study purpose as described in Chapter 1.

Preview the major sections of the chapter.

B.) Research Design and Rationale:

Restate the research question(s) as described in Chapter 1. State and define the central concept/phenomenon of the research study.

Identify the research tradition. Provide the rationale for the chosen tradition.

C. Role of the Researcher:

Define and explain your role as the observer, participant, or observer-participant. Reveal any personal and professional relationships the researcher may have with participants, with emphasis on supervisory or instructor relationships involving power over the participants. State how any researcher biases and/or power
relationships will be managed. Report any other ethical issues as applicable, e.g., conducting the study within one’s own work environment, conflict of interest or power differentials, justification for use of incentives, etc. Describe the plan for addressing any ethical issues within the study.

D. Methodology: Needs to be described in sufficient depth and detail so that other researchers can replicate this study.

Identify the population (if appropriate). Identify and justify the sampling strategy. State the criterion/a on which the participant selection was based. Establish how participants were known to meet the criterion. State the number of participants/cases and the rationale for that number. Explain the specific procedures for how participants will be identified, contacted, and recruited. Describe the relationship between saturation and sample size. Identify each data collection instrument and source (observation sheet, interview protocol, focus group protocol, video-tape, audio-tape, artifacts, archived data, and other kinds of data collection instruments. Identify the source for each data collection instrument (published or
produced by the researcher). If historical or legal documents are used as a source of data, then demonstrate the reputability of the sources and justify why they represent the best source of data. Establish sufficiency of the data collection instrument(s) to answer the research question(s).

**For Published data collection instruments:** Who developed the instrument and what is the date of publication? Where and with which participant group has the instrument been used previously? How appropriate is the instrument for the current research study? Where modifications implemented? Describe how content validity will be/was established. Address any context- and culture-specific population in developing the instrument.

**For Researcher-Developed Instruments:** Basis for instrument development (literature resources, pilot study). Describe how the content validity will be/was established.

**Procedure for Pilot Studies:** Include all procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection associated with the pilot study. Describe the relationship of the pilot study to the main research
study, e.g., what was the purpose of the pilot study? Include the IRB approval letter in the completed dissertation.

**Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection:** For each data collection instrument and research question, provide the following details: From where will the data be collected? Who will collect the data? Frequency of the data collection events. Duration of the data collection events. How will the data be recorded? Follow-up plan if the initial recruitment results in too few participants. Explain how the participants will exit the study (describe any debriefing procedures). Describe any follow-up procedures.

**Data Analysis Plan:** For each type of data collected, identify the following: Connection of data to a specific research question; type of and procedure for coding; list software used for analysis; manner of treatment in discrepant cases.

**Issues of Trustworthiness:** Credibility (internal validity): describe appropriate strategies to establish credibility, such as triangulation, prolonged contact, member check, saturation, reflexivity, and peer review. Transferability (external validity): describe appropriate
strategies to establish transferability such as thick description and variation in participant selection. Dependability (the qualitative counterpart to reliability): describe appropriate strategies to establish dependability such as audit trails or triangulation.

Confirmability (the qualitative counterpart to objectivity): describe appropriate strategies to establish confirmability such as reflexivity.

Intra- and intercoder reliability (where appropriate).

**Ethical Procedures:** Agreements to gain access to participants or data should include the actual documents from the IRB application. Describe the treatment of human participants to include IRB approvals, ethical concerns related to the recruitment materials and procedures and the plan to address them. Ethical concerns related to the data collection/intervention activities including participant refusal or early withdraw from the study and a plan to address them. Describe the treatment of data concerning whether the data were anonymous or confidential and any concerns related to each.

Protections for confidential data storage, dissemination, who will have access to the data collection, and when the data will be destroyed. Describe any additional ethical concerns such as
conducting the research study within one’s own work environment, conflict of interest or power differentials, and justification of incentives.

**Summary:** Summarize the main points of the chapter and transition to Chapter 4.

### IV. Chapter 4: Results/Discussion

This chapter contains the results/findings by performing data analysis of the data collected from the research study. Briefly review the purpose of the research study and research question(s). If a pilot study was conducted, then report any impact of the pilot study on the main study, e.g., changes in the instrumentation and/or data analysis strategies. Describe any personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experience at the time of the study that may influence interpretation of the study results, e.g., changes in personnel, budget cuts, or other life-events.

Present participant demographics and characteristics relevant to the research study. State the number of participants, the location, frequency, and duration of the data collection. Describe how the data were recorded.
Present any variations in the data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. Describe any unusual circumstances encountered in the data collection.

**Data Analysis:** report the process used to move inductively from coded units to larger representations including categories and themes. Describe the specific codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the data using quotations as needed to emphasize their importance. Describe the qualities of discrepant cases and how they were factored into the analysis.

**Evidence of Trustworthiness:** Credibility: describe implementation of and/or adjustments to credibility strategies stated in Chapter 3. Transferability: describe implementation of and/or adjustments to transferability strategies stated in Chapter 3. Dependability: describe implementation of and/or adjustments to dependability strategies stated in Chapter 3. Confirmability: describe implementation of and/or adjustments to confirmability strategies stated in Chapter 3.

**Results:** address each research question (Chapter 4 maybe organized by the research questions or by patterns or themes). Present data to support each finding (quotes from transcripts, documents, etc.). Discuss discrepant
cases/nonconfirming data as appropriate. Include tables and figures to illustrate results, as needed, following the APA guidelines.

**Summary:** Summarize the answers to the research questions and provide a transition to Chapter 5.

V. **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

In this chapter provide a brief summary of the problem along with the nature of the study and why it was conducted. Concisely summarize the key findings.

**Interpretation of the Findings:** Describe in what ways findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline by comparing them with what has been found in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. Analyze and interpret the findings in the context of the theoretical and/or conceptual framework.

**Conclusions:** Provide a strong “take home” message that captures the key essence of the study.

**Recommendations:** Describe the recommendations for future research that are grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study as well as the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.