

RUBRIC FOR A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION



See also

A personal learning manifesto – [\[Link\]](#)

A learning manifesto – pragmatics – [\[Link\]](#)

Two members of my studio/lab at Stanford have successfully defended their doctoral dissertations this year. Congratulations to Anne Duray and Anja Krieger with their research into the history of archaeological approaches to the Bronze Age/Iron Age transition in Greece (Anne), and the human experience in antiquity of seafaring in the eastern Mediterranean (Anja).

I will pick up their extraordinary insights into these topics at another time. Here I wish to offer some thoughts on the concept of a dissertation or thesis, how best to think of it in relation to its evaluation by a committee of academic readers.

Writing a dissertation is a rite of passage in the academy and it is far too much surrounded in mystery, hype, and misunderstanding. So I am going to cut through to

pragmatics, because I think this is the best mindset to adopt in what can be a daunting challenge as a graduate student – when some hold that a dissertation is meant to be a report on research that is to be considered significant in one's chosen disciplinary field!

I am also quite aware that what I have to say here is not the view taken by many of my colleagues. But it is grounded in a pedagogy that I have thoroughly explored and practiced over four decades, along with many others. I have tried to summarize what I have learned in a personal learning manifesto posted here – [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#), and where references and publication can be found.

Dissertation rubric – a checklist

It's best to hold that a dissertation is meant to display competency in the research process, rather than adding somehow to a body of knowledge that might be associated with a disciplinary field.

So here are the key questions that should be asked of a dissertation and answered in the positive.

- Is there a coherent thesis/proposition?
- Is the thesis/proposition relevant to debates in a disciplinary field?
- Are such debates adequately covered?
- Does the dissertation handle a coherent body of data?
- Are the data adequately controlled and managed?
- Is there adequate articulation and transformation of data into workable information and an argument related to the thesis/proposition?
- Is the argument coherent?
- Is the argument mindful of method and theory?
- Is the argument delivered through a scholarly apparatus (involving the likes of transparency and clarity, acknowledgement of sources, use of citation)?
- Does the dissertation draw appropriate conclusions?
- Does the work hold future potential relevant to a knowledge/research community, disciplinary field, program or project?
- Is the dissertation an appropriate result of three to four years of research. This is an essential pragmatic basis of evaluation.

As far as I am concerned this is it. Answer yes to the questions and you are done.

