InsideHigherEd

June 7, 2022

How to Share Your Dissertation With a Broader Audience

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Terry O'Banion offers 10 guidelines for successfully transforming your work into an academic article (or two) that reaches more readers.

At long last, you've finished your dissertation. But, unfortunately, for all the work you've put into it, it may only be read by members of your committee, your editor if you needed one and maybe your mother. Still, ideally, it contains original research that's important enough to share with other people in your field.

The best way to do that is for you to write an article based on your research for an academic journal or some other venue. You might consider writing scholarly journal articles or more informal editorials, opinion pieces, blog posts and so on for the popular press, which also have value. The research articles carry more weight in academe, however, and are the focus of this essay.

The challenge of writing a research article is that you have had to follow a fairly distinctive formula in preparing the dissertation, and you must abandon that formula in writing the article. But if you believe that colleagues in your field will be interested in your research, you should consider writing an article soon after you pass the final doctoral defense. Waiting too long to write it encourages procrastination, may make your data out of date and may cause any committee member who might volunteer to review your article drafts to lose interest.

Another factor should compel you to write an article soon: as a new doctoral graduate, you have joined a special club of highly educated aspiring leaders in your field, and your committee members, program leaders and others will expect that you will add to the knowledge in your discipline by writing. You have a professional obligation to make this commitment to your mentors and colleagues a reality. And finally, you will have recently learned a great deal about good writing just by completing the dissertation, and it will be helpful for your future success if you continue to improve your skills by continuing to write.

In my own publishing experience, I have written 18 books, 24 monographs and reports, 28 chapters in other books, and more than 200 articles. I have also published three articles from my dissertation and have worked with more than 100 doctoral students in my career as a professor of higher education at the University of Illinois, the University of Texas at Austin, Nova University, Kansas State University and the University of California, Berkeley. I have always encouraged

students to write an article or two based on their dissertations, and I am pleased to share what I've learned over the years in 10 guidelines.

- 1. **Determine if and why an article based on your research is worth publishing.** Ask yourself: Is the topic of the dissertation relevant to the important issues in your field? Does your study address an issue in a creative and innovative way? Do your findings answer significant questions? If the conclusions and implications were implemented, would they make a difference in practice? One way to answer some of those questions is to ask a member or two of your dissertation committee to weigh in at the conclusion of your defense.
- 2. Take some time to acquaint yourself with the primary publications in your field. You should have a good start because of the many journals you referenced in your dissertation and the reading you do as part of your work. Identify several journals that seem likely to publish on topics and issues related to the subject of your dissertation. Then, before you even begin thinking about how to write the article, read the guidelines the journal sets for potential writers—format requirements, standards for word length, suggestions for reference guides, abstracts required and the like. You can usually find them on the internet under the title of the journal.
- 3. **Trim down your research to a hard core of the most relevant findings.** This can be challenging, because you spent so much time addressing all the components required in a dissertation that everything you wrote is important to you. But an article is a compressed version of your study featuring only the key points that will interest a journal editor or potential reader. Be clear whom your audience is for the article, and write in a tone suitable for that audience.
- 4. **Consider extracting more than one article from your study.** In cases where you have more than one research question, you may be able to write several articles. Your literature review may also lend itself to another piece. In these situations, you may be able to use modified sections on methodology and other components in all the articles you write.
- 5. Make good use of your dissertation abstract. If a journal's guidelines require an abstract, you only need to modify the one you wrote for the dissertation to ensure it reflects the content of the article. If no abstract is required, you can still use the dissertation abstract—modified, of course—as the introduction to the article. In an introduction, you need to tell readers, as briefly as possible, the purpose and significance of the study so they will understand what to expect and will want to keep reading.
- 6. **Determine the most appropriate citations.** In a dissertation, the section on a review of the literature is often the longest. In an article, you may include a brief section on the specific literature related to the points in your article, or you may sprinkle relevant quotes and citations throughout the piece.
- 7. **Include a section on methodology, but pare it down to the basic essentials.** You worked hard on this chapter in your dissertation to make sure you could illustrate to committee members—especially the professor with strong research credentials—your understanding of research methods. In the article, make a case for the research methods you selected to frame the study, and be certain to include pertinent information on participants, sample size, surveys, site selection, interview processes and so on.
- 8. Clearly state your findings and results. This is a key section, as it's when you answer the reader's "So what?" or "Where's the beef?" question. You may use tables to illustrate

- your answer, but don't overdo it. A narrative explanation of the findings, in lieu of a complicated table the reader has to interpret, works better.
- 9. **Finish with an analysis section where you make meaning for your audience.** This is what you have learned and concluded about the topic at hand—accurate, focused, limited to the scope of the context and relevant to the profession. You probably don't need a section on conclusions if this section is framed appropriately. And you do not need to suggest further research, which is a common element in dissertations but not in journal pieces.
- 10. **Be judicious with references.** You will have many more references in the dissertation than you will need for the article, because you want to inform your committee that you have covered the subject thoroughly. In the article, you only need to cite references to information specifically in the article and may actually include references to new information not in the dissertation. Since you may have been working on the dissertation for a number of years, you probably know some relevant contemporary quotes and other information you can add. And if your subject is a hot topic, you can undoubtedly add new quotes and information that would make your article as up-to-date as possible.

Final Steps

You should now have a draft of your article, but you still have more to do. Ask a colleague who will be frank with you to review the draft and critique it. A professor on your committee would be an excellent choice as a reviewer. Or if you have colleagues who have published articles, ask one to review yours. Also ask a member of your communications staff to check it for clarity and correct grammar. Secure as much feedback as you can from reliable sources.

After making sure that you comply with all the guidelines of the journal you've selected, send the article on its way, but submit only one at a time. Some journals only ask you to send an email with the article attached; others will require you to submit the article through a more complicated process.

Be patient. You may hear from more informal venues in one or two weeks. The more formal and established journals will probably send your article to reviewers in the field, which will take longer. After receiving the reviewers' critiques, if the editor thinks your article is promising, you will receive those critiques and be asked to edit your article to comply with the recommendations. If the critiques are reasonable to you, send your revised version back as soon as you can. If you think the critiques are not reasonable—and sometimes that's the case—thank the editor and indicate you will not continue to revise your article.

The important conclusion to reach at this point: do not give up. If you followed the guidelines above, you began this process by determining with input from friends and professional colleagues that your article was worth publishing. So stay with it, and keep revising and sending it to other journals. And if, after a little while, you ultimately decide the effort is not going to achieve the outcome you want for this particular article, then start work on your next one.

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