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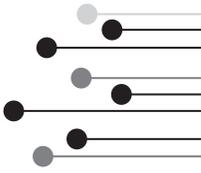
# Before the Dissertation

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# How to Begin



**B**efore beginning the phenomenological dissertation endeavor, one must first be sure that one's methodological choice is appropriate for what one aims to accomplish for dissertation. Is phenomenological methodology the appropriate method for the research questions proposed? Before moving forward, one must understand the purpose of phenomenological research and, more important, what one will need to understand and accomplish as a phenomenological researcher. Phenomenological research differs substantially from all other qualitative methods.

## What Is Phenomenological Research?

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First and foremost, philosophy is the foundation of this kind of research. Any student who aims to complete a quality phenomenological research dissertation will need to study philosophy. Students are commonly required to incorporate a theoretical framework of their choosing for dissertation work, but the theoretical framework for phenomenological research is always phenomenology. There are two main philosophies to study for choosing a fitting phenomenological method: Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. It is certainly fine to use a different theoretical framework but only as a secondary framework to phenomenology. More on this is presented in Chapter 2.

Second, phenomenological research is strictly aimed at understanding experiences as lived. Meaning-making is essential to phenomenological inquiry but only within the construct of experience. A phenomenological research study is used to answer the question, "What is it like to experience a certain phenomenon?" If this same question is posed to enough people in a certain situation, a researcher can analyze multiple experiences of the same situation and make certain generalizations of a particular experience. This sounds simple enough, but it is precisely the simple

concept of studying ONLY experience that brings about confusion. In general definitions of phenomenological research, one might find some explanations that state that phenomenological research is used to study or understand people's perceptions or perspectives of any particular situation. While this explanation is technically true (after all, perceptions and perspectives are all parts of experience), it can mislead a beginner researcher when constructing research questions. Phenomenological questions (both research questions and interview questions) are limited to experiences and do not ask about opinions, perceptions, perspectives, or any other thoughts about a topic. Within an experience, a person makes meaning of that experience, has perceptions about that experience, and interprets that experience, but the experience is neither meaning, perception, nor interpretation. A participant may state, "I think my grandmother hates me." While the participant is experiencing a thought and perhaps a feeling, the experience with his grandmother is not present. Hence, this statement would be about a perception rather than an experience. A phenomenological researcher would first note that this statement is indeed important and relevant to the participant and would then ask the client to explain the content of an experience. "Can you give me an example of when you thought your grandmother hated you and what happened at that moment when you felt that way?" The participant can then give an experience to illustrate the perception. Perhaps the participant talks about an instance when Grandmother reacted in a certain manner that elicited the thought or feeling of "my grandmother hates me." This would communicate the experience instead of a perception and would enable the researcher to analyze experience only.

Feelings of participants are different from perceptions or assumptions within the realm of experience. Participants can discuss what their experiences were like as lived experiences, and they can also discuss how they felt during those experiences. Discussions about lived experiences make it possible for others to imagine those experiences in their minds and what they were like. Discussions about the feelings of those participants in those experiences would communicate what the people having those experiences were like. Both approaches would be acceptable in phenomenological methodology. A phenomenological researcher must constantly make this differentiation throughout data collecting, data analysis, and research writing.

Last, phenomenological researchers endeavor to make a phenomenon a “meaningful named reality” (Willis, 2001, p. 2). Something is meaningful in that it refers to the person who experienced a certain phenomenon. Through participants’ vivid depictions of their experiences, phenomenological researchers construct a meaningful reality through data analysis. Phenomenological researchers pause and look at a phenomenon as the lived experience of some activity and illuminate its specific characteristic as experience rather than trying to turn it into an abstract structure and comparing it to other structures. Reality is always understood in terms of consciousness rather than some objective thing that exists completely outside of what we know or think. Hence, the aim of the phenomenological researcher is “to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual’s consciousness” (Phillipson, 1972). Phenomenological researchers also aim to reveal their lived experiences as they focus on named phenomena and how they have an impact on their experiences. In the end, they are not concerned with generating abstract concepts or hypotheses but aim to bring together the objective and subjective dimensions of experiences as lived.

## Purpose of This Book

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Now that you have determined that phenomenological research is indeed the correct methodology for your dissertation, let me move forward to explain the purpose of this book and how it will help you complete a phenomenological dissertation from start to finish. To begin, it is important to note that this book is written in the simplest how-to fashion for novice researchers; it is in no way intended to be used as a rigid technique with no room for modifications. Phenomenology is about personal experience, and personal experience varies from researcher to researcher. Hence, so should your phenomenological method. However, this very notion of encouraged variation within phenomenological research is the source of much confusion for novice researchers wanting to complete their first phenomenological research studies.

Alterations within phenomenological methodology continue to increase, and with those alterations, more debates emerge on how to most effectively execute phenomenological research

in practice. Confusion about how to conduct suitable phenomenological research makes this field difficult for dissertation students to grasp. Because of my experience as a phenomenological researcher and a professor guiding scholars in training through the dissertation process of writing a phenomenological dissertation, this text has evolved over time and is grounded by the many questions and concerns my students have had as they struggled through the process of writing their phenomenological research dissertations. My goal throughout this book is to give dissertation students practical answers on how to design a phenomenological research dissertation from beginning to end. It is no easy feat, but student frustration is not usually for lack of resources. From the experiences of my students, I have indeed found that the wealth of information on phenomenology and phenomenological research can be the stumbling block.

*“There are so many bits and pieces scattered among several books, but nothing that is very thorough. I need a clear and thorough explanation of the different kinds of phenomenology research methods. Who are the key players for each type? Are all these philosophers connected to each other?”*

In this text, I provide a step-by-step process on how to write a phenomenological dissertation. This guide is meant to be simple and rudimentary for the first-time phenomenological researcher. I believe this is the best place to start. Only after mastering the beginner steps can novice phenomenological researchers begin to excel in further writing and developing expert phenomenological research studies that encompass their individual groundings in the philosophical traditions. This text is not intended to reduce the richness or complexity of phenomenological research through a series of how-to strategies. It is, however, meant to be the simplest step-by-step guide a novice phenomenological researcher can access. The process of beginning and finishing a high-quality phenomenological research dissertation is most certainly attainable.

The front and center of this entire text are the many questions, frustrations, and eventual achievements of dissertation students moving through the writing of a phenomenological research dissertation. I asked several of my dissertation students to provide me questions they had about starting their phenomenological research dissertations, and they were eager to oblige. The confusion and

frustration are surely valid. In fact, one student said, “I think your book is so needed and wish that it was already completed so I had it to reference as I do my dissertation.”

In this book, I not only answer the above questions but answer them in a step-by-step guide mirroring the dissertation process. Doing a phenomenological dissertation for the first time is often daunting and requires skills and knowledge that are different from those taught in many university and college programs, which often tend to dominate training in qualitative methods.

*“I feel dumb because I really only studied quantitative research in undergrad and graduate school. Is that normal? Should I already know how to do some of this?”*

While this text is a step-by-step guide for the beginner phenomenological research student, it is not a rigid method with no room for modification. Readers should read this book as a set of guidelines and recommendations for getting started rather than a permanent prescription for all future phenomenological research. To that end, it is purposefully written in the most basic way so that readers can grasp practical techniques to use in their first phenomenological research endeavors. As in any research, and I would argue especially in phenomenological research, a person first carefully implements a tried and tested strategy, and with gained confidence deviation and expansion of process and method later materialize.

The most important thing to remember in phenomenological research is that philosophy is just as important as techniques. Dissertation students who are well grounded in phenomenological philosophy will only then be able to create distinct and acculturated data analyses. It is only through the personal understanding of phenomenological philosophy that researchers can create superior phenomenological research. This can be intimidating, especially for the dissertation student who has never read any philosophy. Phenomenological philosophy can be extremely complex and difficult to understand. Many students would rather skip right over it and get to the techniques of phenomenological research, but that is missing the point completely. One simply cannot do this research well without grasping key philosophical ideas. I believe everyone can understand phenomenological philosophy if it is taught in a straightforward way, and it is my hope that this book will be helpful in that respect.

## Organization of This Book

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This book is written for dissertation students, so it is structured like the dissertation: Chapters 1 through 5. After readers move through the chapters and finish with the end of the dissertation, I provide additional chapters that are written for future expansion of phenomenological research as well as to provide additional information about this research process. Readers are encouraged to read each chapter in order without skipping chapters. Since each chapter is written to parallel the dissertation, readers can simultaneously work on their dissertations as they progress through this book.

## Part II: Writing the Dissertation

### Chapter 2

#### Introduction and Literature Review

#### Literature Review

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Even though the literature review is the second chapter of the dissertation, I address it in the introduction because students need to extensively review the literature on their topics before they can design their proposals. I guide students on how to develop a researchable topic and then explore literature, using a step-by-step system in the chapter. Because the length and focus of this book limit an extensive expansion of how to write all elements of literature reviews, I offer more resources on where students can attain more detailed guidance, should they need it, by providing a Suggested Reading section at the end of the chapter. Suggested reading sections are included at the end of every chapter to provide readers with further guidance without overwhelming them with too much information in this book.

#### Introduction

In writing the introduction, a dissertation student must properly introduce the study. In this section, I provide a model for writing a high-quality introduction for the dissertation. Within this section, I include important information on how to present a

balanced summary of literature, how to construct a good problem statement and a high-quality purpose statement, how to create good phenomenological research questions, how to create a phenomenological theoretical framework, how to know whether the phenomenological method is appropriate for the proposed study, how to delineate between phenomenological terms and tensions like interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology and descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology, the role of philosophy in this type of research, and how to write information thoroughly and succinctly. I also briefly guide students in how to write effective Chapter 1 sections, such as Definitions, Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations, Significance, and Summary.

## **Problem Statement**

What makes a good problem statement? This is the primary question I answer for readers to guide them in developing a quality problem statement to substantiate their research study. The seemingly simplistic structure of a well-written problem statement is one of the most difficult for dissertation students to master, until now.

## **Purpose Statement**

In addition to the problem statement, the purpose statement is the other most important statement in a dissertation. In this section, I will guide students on how to write this statement, providing scripts that will help illustrate an effective structure.

## **Theoretical Framework**

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Theoretical frameworks serve as lenses in phenomenological studies, and they are a consistent source of confusion for dissertation students attempting to write phenomenological dissertations. In this section, I present the two main theoretical frameworks that dissertation students can use to frame their phenomenological studies, namely the phenomenology of Husserl (for transcendental or descriptive phenomenological dissertations) or Heidegger (for hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenological dissertations). The use of additional frameworks to frame a phenomenological study

(like feminist theory, for example) and how to construct it within a phenomenological framework is also explained here in a step-by-step manner. These are two of the most common questions students ask in constructing their theoretical frameworks:

1. Who are the foundational philosophers or theorists associated with phenomenological research?
2. How do I identify which is best for guiding my research topic?

## Chapter 3

### Methods

Phenomenological methods differ from the other qualitative approaches in a significant way, and the groundwork of philosophy is a large factor in this differentiation. In this chapter, I explain how to construct a good phenomenological methodology and how to analyze data in a step-by-step manner so that someone else can replicate the study by reading the methodology. In this discussion, I also include information on how to use sampling, how to collect data, the role of triangulation, journaling options, and representation of all information in figures and tables. Some of the questions asked by students about their Methods sections that I will address in this text are the following:

1. Which sampling methods work best for phenomenological research?
2. What are acceptable data collection methods and coding procedures specific to phenomenological research?
3. How do I ensure that my interviewees stay within the parameters of my “funneled” topic?
4. Is it OK to have someone else transcribe research interviews?

### Validity and Reliability

In this section, I show students how to address issues of validity and reliability in their studies and how these steps differ from quantitative methods. I cover strategies that are both easy to

implement and more difficult to implement for phenomenological dissertations. Strategies include triangulation, member checking, addressing bias, thorough descriptions, peer debriefing, auditors, and time spent in the field. Not all are necessary or practical, and I find that many of my students have described strategies in their dissertations that surround their intent to provide valid and reliable results that are not realistic. This section is one of great importance for students to read, and I guide them in writing this section of their dissertations more effectively and pragmatically.

## Data Analysis

For the data analysis portion of this chapter, I guide students in constructing step-by-step data analysis procedures that fall in line with their theoretical frameworks. If students choose to use descriptive or transcendental phenomenology, their data analysis procedures will differ from those students choosing interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological methods. The incorporation of philosophical groundwork within the analysis is unique to phenomenological methods, and I describe how to accomplish this step in detail. These are some of the common questions I will also answer for students about analysis that they have asked me:

1. How do I know I am starting the coding process right?
2. Is there a coding process that is easier to learn to help frame the data interpretation process?
3. What if I feel that I'm just making up themes? What if I miss themes?
4. When I am analyzing the interview answers about experiences, there will be several things brought up that may not be experiences but opinions or viewpoints. How do I determine which segments to focus on?

## Using Software

Using software for data analysis can be a point of contention for phenomenological researchers. I introduce readers to the concerns and benefits of using data analysis software in completing quality phenomenological analyses. I also provide practical

guidance on what software data analysis might entail should a student choose to use software as a tool.

## Journaling

Students are most often confused with the decision of whether to journal and how to journal when analyzing their data or when they interview participants. The decision to journal may or may not be appropriate depending on the type of phenomenological study that is chosen. I discuss these differences and guide readers on how to journal appropriately (when necessary) for specific phenomenological methods, when journaling is appropriate, when it is not, and how the chosen phenomenological discipline will dictate journaling as a tool for addressing bias.

## Interviewing

Phenomenological interviewing is different from other research interviews. Students often have questions about how to conduct appropriate interviews. In this section, I cover how to determine appropriate interview techniques, such as individual interviews, follow-up interviews, and focus groups.

## Abstract

The proposal of the dissertation consists of the first three chapters. After it is written, it needs to be submitted for formal review, and an oral defense typically follows. Before submitting the first three chapters, a student needs to begin the document with an abstract, and an abstract is typically written last as it summarizes the document. In this section, an example of how to write an appropriate abstract is discussed.

# Chapter 4

## Results

A quality results chapter in a phenomenological dissertation differs from other qualitative dissertations in that it needs to be grounded in phenomenological philosophy. In this section, I show dissertation students how to clearly write their data analysis

results, how to ground them in phenomenology, and how to insert the results of the data analysis back into the Methods chapter so that the steps of the data analysis can be easily tested for validity and reliability.

## **Presenting Findings**

Students are often confused on how to display data in a purposeful way. Many times, they simply display the data they have instead of presenting their best examples and relating them back to their research questions. In this section, I provide readers with the best strategies to present their phenomenological research findings. I show them how to sufficiently report their data from the analysis to support their conclusions in the form of quotations from the transcripts and their researcher observations.

## **Connecting to the Theoretical Framework**

Students do not often understand that their findings need to relate back to their theoretical frameworks, and in this section, I give them instructions on how to connect their findings to their frameworks effectively.

## **Going Back to Chapter 3**

At this point, students will have finished their Chapter 3: Methods, but that is not really the case since they will need to now go back and insert relevant quotes from their Chapter 4: Results to better illustrate their data analysis steps. In this section, I guide them through this process and explain the importance of this step, which has much to do with ability to replicate the study.

# **Chapter 5**

## **Discussion**

One of the most impressive qualities of a comprehensive discussion chapter is the comparison of one's own results with the ones presented in literature. Dissertation writers should not simply discuss their thoughts on the results and note implications for future research. Indeed, these elements are included, and discussed in

this chapter, but they are incomplete without a dialogue with literature. In this chapter, I show readers how to present a thorough phenomenological dialogue between data analysis results and the literature review.

## **Dialogue With Literature**

In this section, I teach students how to write a dialogue with the literature. The importance of connecting their results with their literature reviews is covered in detail here along with some examples on how this might look in a dissertation.

## **Implications for the Field**

Many times, students are still unsure about how to provide recommendations from their findings, specifically in the area of choosing which lived experiences apply. I give them specific guidance on how to identify the most important contributions of their research and help them write about how their findings contribute to what is already known in their fields as well as how to broaden and challenge current field knowledge.

## **Limitations**

In this section, I explain that all research has limitations in the interpretation of findings. Readers are taught how to explicitly address the major limitations of their research along with their implications. Readers are guided on how to be selective, focusing on the most relevant limitations to their research findings.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

In this section, I teach students that research findings can have various implications that contribute toward such different areas as the development of theories or identification of content that requires future research. I show readers how to provide detailed outlines for future research based on their findings rather than writing about general suggestions. This is often a challenge for students writing phenomenological dissertations because they have difficulty identifying specifics from lived experiences.

# Part III: After Your Dissertation

## Chapter 6

### Other Phenomenological Studies

Within the Western tradition of phenomenology, there are three major disciplines: transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and existential phenomenology. There also exist a number of phenomenological research methodologies that do not explicitly use Husserlian or Heideggerian techniques. In this chapter, I present some alternative phenomenological methods that focus on rich descriptions of lived experience and meaning but do not strictly adhere to these disciplines. Some of these methods are these:

critical narrative analysis (Langdridge)

dialogal approach (Halling, Leifer, & Rowe)

Dallas approach (Garza)

embodied lifeworld approach (Todres)

interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin)

lifeworld approach (Ashworth)

lived experience human science inquiry (van Manen)

open lifeworld approach (Dahlberg)

I also discuss existential-phenomenological methodology in more detail. This chapter is intended to help readers expand their viewpoints on phenomenological method. It is recommended that this chapter be used only after students complete their phenomenological dissertations using Chapters 1 through 5 and move on to complete future phenomenological studies.

## Chapter 7

### Creating Your Own Phenomenological Method

I wrote this chapter for dissertation students so they could expand their viewpoints on phenomenological method even further and

show them how to experiment with alterations in future studies. It is also recommended that this chapter be used only after students complete their first phenomenological studies, their dissertations, and move on to complete more phenomenological research as scholars.

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