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Overview of the Master's Degree and Thesis

(Continued)

> Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing.
>
> —Abraham Lincoln

If you are reading this page, congratulations! This signifies that you have already successfully completed a bachelor's degree in your field, a major accomplishment. Now you are ready to embark on the next phase of your educational journey, completing a thesis for a master's degree. The **master's degree** is a postbaccalaureate degree conferred by a college or university upon candidates who complete one to two years of graduate study (Glazer, 1988). Why congratulations and not condolences? Because whether or not the master's degree is the highest professional degree in your field or a gateway to doctoral studies, completing the thesis will open many doors for you, both personally and professionally. The intent of this book is to give you a blueprint of the research process as well as provide you with step-by-step guidance on how to write the actual thesis, one chapter at a time.

The Master's Degree

There is a vast number of types of master's degrees in a variety of disciplines and specialty areas. The two main types of academic degrees at the master's level are the Master of Arts and the Master of Science. The **Master of Arts (MA)** degree is typically awarded in the disciplines of arts, sciences, social sciences (e.g., education, psychology), and humanities (e.g., history, philosophy, religion). The **Master of Science (MS)** degree is typically awarded to students in technical fields such as engineering, nursing, mathematics, and health care management but can also be in the social sciences ("About Graduate Education," n.d.). Table 1.1 lists a variety of master's degrees in the humanities and social sciences.

Table 1.1 List of Master's Degrees in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Master of Applied Anthropology (MAA)
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS)
Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)
Master of Criminal Justice
Master of Counseling
Master of Education
Master of Fine Arts (MFA)
Master of Liberal Arts (MLA, ALM)
Master of Liberal Studies (MLS)
Master of Mass Communications
Master of Occupational Therapy
Master of Science in Nursing
Master of Social Work (MSW)
Master of Special Education

In some fields, the master's degree is referred to as a professional degree or terminal degree (not the same as terminal illness). A **terminal degree** is the generally accepted highest academic degree in a field of study. Some examples of terminal master's degrees are the Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Social Work (MSW), Master of Fine Arts (MFA), and Master of Public Administration (MPA). For the purposes of this book, no distinction will be made between the MA, MS, or professional degrees, as all will be referred to as the "master's degree."

Depending on the discipline and the institution, there may be several pathways to obtain the master's degree. In some cases, students may take a certain number of units through coursework and complete a fieldwork project at the end of their studies. For example, graduate students may submit a project related to a particular topic such as a curriculum unit, a handbook or manual, or even a visual arts performance. In other cases, students may take courses and pass a comprehensive oral or written exam at the end of their studies. In still other cases, the degree may require coursework and a thesis or research study. There may be a combination of the options mentioned involving coursework, an exam, and a final project or study. Although each discipline has its own specific requirements for the master's degree, they all share a commonality of having a cumulative or final activity to show that students have "mastered" the necessary content. Thus, before you proceed in your studies, it is best to find out the requirements for the master's degree within your own discipline, field, and institution of higher education. For the purposes of this book, I will only address the master's thesis option.

Benefits of Obtaining a Master's Degree

There are many benefits of obtaining a master's degree. Again, this depends on your particular discipline or specialty area. As mentioned, the master's degree is sometimes the terminal degree for the field. Thus, if you hold a master's degree, you would be considered an "expert" in the field and highly regarded. This would also allow you to obtain a high-ranking position such as curriculum director, program manager, or faculty member. For example, if you hold a master's degree in education, you would be able to teach full-time at a community college or teach as a part-time adjunct instructor at a four-year college or university. If you are a K–12 classroom teacher with a master's degree, some school districts will increase your salary because of the number of postbaccalaureate units that were completed.

A master's degree may also increase your value in the job market. For example, in 2000 in the field of journalism and mass communications, 90% of master's degree recipients had at least one job offer at the time of their graduation (with a mean of 2.3 job offers per recipient) compared to 82.4% of bachelor's degree recipients (Becker, Vlad, Huh, & Prine, 2001). Imagine you are applying for a job in marketing at a cutting-edge firm. If the human resources manager receives 300 applications, he or she may separate applicants into two piles—those who have advanced degrees and those who have bachelor's degrees. In order to save time, the manager may look only at the pile of applicants with master's degrees or consider these applicants first (O'Donovan, 1997). In other words, having a master's degree may give you an advantage during the screening process (it is up to you to wow them at the job interview!). Further, depending on the discipline, the master's degree may also be the minimal degree requirement for certain jobs or positions (such as managerial positions) and may also increase your starting salary.

In addition to the tangible benefits, another major benefit of obtaining the master's degree is the amount of personal satisfaction that it brings. I always tell my students (especially when they are on the verge of giving up), "Yes, it is a tremendous amount of work; yes, I know that you have not seen your children in a week, and yes, I understand that the dog is angry at you. However, when you are done and you have completed your master's degree, no one can take that away from you." This usually keeps them going for about a week. The point is that although it will seem like a long (and virtually endless) journey, and it will not always be easy to see the finish line, once you bring your final draft to have it bound and copied, a unique sensation will overcome you (unrelated to the fatigue). This sensation comes from knowing that despite the adversity and hurdles, you have accomplished your own personal goal, acquired by only a small proportion of the general population. Thus, the master's degree will open many personal and professional doors for you; it is up to you to find them and walk through.

Master's Degree Program

If you are thinking about or preparing to write your master's thesis, most likely you are at the end or toward the end of your master's degree program. A **master's degree program** is a graduate-level, postbaccalaureate program in a specific field or discipline that typically involves a culminating activity, project, or thesis. Although master's degree programs are not typically designed to teach students how to write a thesis, the course of study and experiences from the program benefit you greatly as you go through the research and writing process for the thesis. First, the master's degree program provides you with multiple opportunities to learn the critical and core content in your field or discipline. This content knowledge will help you as you select an appropriate topic to study, one that is both relevant and significant to your field, and frame your research interests. Next, most master's degree programs require students to take course(s) in research methods. This experience will help you research the literature, analyze and synthesize research articles, develop answerable research questions, and create a rigorous, yet feasible, design for your study. Thus, throughout the thesis-writing process, you will be constantly relying on the content knowledge and experiences that you gained from the master's degree program to demonstrate that you have "mastered" the content and associated research skills in your field or discipline.

Master's Thesis Committee and Chairperson

Another critical benefit of almost completing your master's degree program is getting to know the different faculty in your program! By this time, you will have a better sense of which faculty would be the most compatible in terms of working style and research interests to select as your chairperson. The **chairperson** is the faculty member who is assigned or selected by the graduate student to advise him or her throughout the master's thesis process. Keep in mind that your chairperson may be different from your faculty adviser or department chairperson. At some institutions, the program selects the chairperson for you while in others you select your chairperson as well as the other members of your committee. Typically, there are three faculty members on your master's thesis committee: the chairperson and two committee members (i.e., readers). However, it is best to check with your institution because this number can vary from two to five members. Most commonly, it is required that the chairperson be a faculty member within the degree program while the committee members could be faculty from within or outside the program and department. Again, it is a good idea to check with your institution as to the specific criteria for the selection process.

If you are allowed to pick your own chairperson, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, your chairperson is not the coauthor of the master's thesis. In other words, he or she will not be writing the thesis *with* you (or for you). Rather, the role of your chairperson is to guide and direct your study. This does not include writing, editing, conducting research, or collecting or analyzing data. In other words, your chairperson will assume that you have all the necessary skill sets to complete the thesis—he or she will be there to facilitate the process. Another thing to consider when selecting a chairperson is his or her area of *expertise*. Having a chairperson who is familiar with the topic of your thesis is helpful as he or she can offer suggestions on critical research literature. The chairperson that you select may also have expertise in a particular research design that you want to utilize in the study. Another factor to consider when selecting a chairperson is *fit*. Here, you should consider whether or not you could have a positive working relationship with the faculty member. Keep in mind that you are not trying to make a new friend, but you do want someone who will offer insight and constructive feedback on your work. Finally, make sure to consider whether or not the faculty member is *accessible*. The role of the chairperson can be time-consuming (especially when it comes to the writing part); so do not pick a person who is already overwhelmed with his or her other responsibilities.

Once you have selected a chairperson, set up an initial meeting to discuss how you will work together. Each chairperson will vary on how he or she will want to work with graduate students, so it is critical for you to know and follow his or her expectations. See the *Resources* section at the end of this chapter for a list of possible questions to ask at your initial meeting. These questions will help you and your chairperson get off to a great start with a mutual understanding of your working relationship.

What Is a Master's Thesis?

For the purposes of this book, the master's thesis is an empirically based research study that is an original piece of work by the graduate student. An **empirically based** research study is based on data that are produced by experiment or observation (rather than opinion). The thesis must be an original piece of work because it represents the student's culminating research and writing abilities. Thus, this book focuses on the research process and a traditional five-chapter thesis rather than an artistic performance or production. Completing a thesis demonstrates your ability to conduct original research, review the existing literature, collect data, analyze the results, and discuss conclusions and draw implications from your research. Moreover, the completion of a thesis represents your perseverance, discipline, and scholarly writing.

The Difference Between a Master's Thesis and a Term Paper

One of the biggest hurdles for students when writing the master's thesis is adjusting from the writing style of a term or research paper format, a common expectation at the undergraduate level. There is a qualitative difference between the master's thesis and a term paper. As mentioned, the master's thesis is based on original research on a particular topic conducted by the student. In comparison, the term paper is typically a summary of research or other sources about a particular topic. In the term paper, there may be a subject or question that will be answered using examples from books, journals, articles from newspapers, and so on to support the findings (Raygor, n.d.). However, the student is not conducting a research study in order to answer the question. For example, a term paper may consist of presenting the argument that the use of technology via e-mail and cell phone has actually decreased rather than increased the quality of relationships within society. The student would then cite research and other sources to persuade the reader and support his or her argument. For a master's thesis, on the other hand, the student would develop a research question and conduct a full literature review on the topic. Then she would collect data, perhaps administering a survey to 200 people at random to find out their perspectives about cell phone and e-mail use and the quality of their social relationships. Finally, she would analyze the data and discuss the conclusions and implications of her findings (based on the data that were collected).

The Difference Between a Master's Thesis and a Doctoral Dissertation

In some cases, you will hear the word "thesis" used to refer to both master's and doctoral degrees. More commonly, universities use the term thesis to refer to the requirement for a master's and a dissertation for the doctorate. A **dissertation** is typically the culminating requirement for a doctoral degree. The difference between the thesis and the dissertation depends on your particular discipline, specialty area, and institution. In many instances, there are more similarities than differences between the two, especially when considering the "traditional" research form of a master's thesis. For example, both the thesis and dissertation studies should follow a *systematic* process where there is a researchable problem, literature to support and contextualize the problem, data collection methods (e.g., sampling, measurement instruments), analysis of the data, and discussions and conclusions based on the results of the study.

However, at every step of the process, the dissertation may require the student researcher to go into more depth and/or breadth. For example, at some institutions, the dissertation must include a theoretical rationale or

conceptual model that relates to the problem. Sometimes the purpose of the dissertation could be to develop or to refine an existing theory. This is not commonly required for a master's thesis. The dissertation may also require a larger sample size or complicated sampling plan, more measurement instruments, and complex statistical or rich qualitative analysis of the data. Thus, the length of the dissertation study (both in time spent collecting data and page numbers) may be significantly longer than the master's thesis.

Another distinction between the dissertation and the master's thesis is the number of people involved in the process. For the dissertation, most institutions require that the doctoral student form a committee with a chairperson, and two, three, or sometimes four other faculty members who serve as readers. Students have to "defend" their dissertation proposal to the committee members before they are allowed to proceed with the study and a final defense after they have completed the study. For the master's thesis, it is more common for the student to work with his or her assigned faculty chairperson and one other faculty member throughout the process.

Finally, another important distinction between the two is the focus or purpose of the study. For the master's thesis, the focus of the study can be referred to as *applied research,* which is "conducted for the purpose of applying, or testing, a theory to determine its usefulness in solving practical problems" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 6). For example, a graduate student who is getting a master's degree in education might conduct a study around a particular issue in his or her classroom, such as using a new reading comprehension strategy. The results of the study would have direct application to his or her teaching and students. For a dissertation in this area, the focus may be broader, such as exploring differences across subgroups of students (e.g., by ethnicity, ability, age, socioeconomic status) on national or statewide reading assessments. The results of the study may have application to teacher training at the university level, policy implications, or serve as an initial study for a line of research. In other words, the master's thesis may have a narrow practical focus whereas the dissertation may have a broader and theoretical focus. Although both have practical implications, the master's thesis may be more directly related to a present or immediate problem. Thus, one way to differentiate between the two is to think of the dissertation as a more complex and sophisticated master's thesis. In fact, when I advise students on their master's theses, I am constantly reminding them that this is to prepare them for their dissertation!

Components of a Master's Thesis

For the purposes of this book, the master's thesis will consist of five distinct chapters. Each chapter has a specific focus and objective. The titles of the five chapters are: (1) Introduction, (2) Review of the Literature, (3) Methods,

(4) Results, and (5) Discussion. The structure of the five chapters is the same whether you are conducting a qualitative or quantitative study. A **qualitative research study** delves into a particular situation in order to better understand a phenomenon within its natural context and the perspectives of the participants involved (Gay et al., 2006). A **quantitative research study** includes but is not limited to research using descriptive, correlation, prediction, and control (cause-effect) methods. Depending on your research questions, selecting a qualitative or quantitative research design affects how you conduct the study (methods) and analyze and interpret the data (results). Each chapter will be described briefly here. There will be a more comprehensive discussion of how to write each chapter of the thesis in Chapters 5–9. To avoid confusion, I will refer to chapters of this book with numbers (e.g., Chapter 1, Chapter 2) and chapters of the master's thesis with their word forms (e.g., Chapter One, Chapter Two). Keep in mind that your school or program may use other terms, such as "sections," to refer to the different components of the master's thesis.

Chapter One, Introduction

Chapter One introduces the topic of the thesis to the reader. The critical part of writing Chapter One is to establish the statement of the problem and research questions. Basically, you are justifying to the reader *why* it is necessary to study this topic and *what* research question(s) your study will answer. Usually, the topic is based around a particular problem area that you want to focus on (I will discuss how to select an appropriate topic in Chapter 2). For example, if your master's degree is in social work, your topic of interest may be homeless single women with children, and the specific problem may be that these mothers are not able to find appropriate child care or educational services for their children because they are always in transition. However, before you introduce the reader to the specific topic and problem, you have to first provide the reader with the broader context (the general problem) and consequences related to the topic. In other words, before you discuss the specific problem, you need to contextualize your topic within the larger problem. For example, you would first discuss the problems related to homeless women with children in general and use national or state data and statistics to support your claims. This part would include the consequences related to the social and emotional effects on the mothers and their children.

Chapter One of the thesis includes a section on the *Statement of the Problem* (information about the specific problem), *Background and Need* (the background literature related to the problem), the *Purpose of the Study* (the focus and goal of the study), *Research Questions* (what questions the study proposes to answer), and other significant sections. In this chapter, you need to support all of your claims and positions using citations from

empirical research studies, government reports and data, Web sites, and theory and opinion papers. How to write Chapter One and its major sections will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter Two, Review of the Literature

Chapter Two introduces the reader to the research literature related to the topic. The critical part of writing Chapter Two is to identify the most relevant and significant research related to your topic rather than conduct an exhaustive search. Basically, you are informing the reader of the *critical* studies that have been conducted related to this topic. This provides the reader with the background information that he or she needs to understand the problem(s) related to your topic. The literature review also provides the justification for your study as you indicate the gaps and weaknesses in the existing research. Chapter Two provides credibility to your study as it shows you have done your "homework" in reading the research for this topic, and your study is "grounded" in the research. In other words, your thesis did not simply appear from thin air; instead, it was developed because there was a need to conduct the study, and it will contribute to the body of research related to this problem.

In order to organize Chapter Two, you will first start with an introduction about the general problem and your topic. Then you will provide an advance organizer, which indicates what will be covered in the literature review. For the purposes of this book, you will cover three areas that are related to your problem. The **advance organizer** explicitly states the three areas of research that will be addressed and the order of the discussions. This will help to structure the literature review and manage the research articles that you find. For example, in the social work example, three areas related to the problem could be: (1) homelessness and its effect on children's development, (2) quality of parental interactions between homeless mothers and their children, and (3) collaboration of school and social agencies. Where did these areas come from? Do not worry; the three related areas will emerge as you read the existing literature and develop the *Statement of the Problem* and the *Background and Need* sections in Chapter One and the literature review in Chapter Two.

After you have introduced the three related areas, you will locate and synthesize three to four research articles (with empirical data) for each of the three areas related to the topic. Each section should start with a brief introduction about the area and end with a summary paragraph to recap the main points and limitations within the area. At the end of the literature review, there should also be a summary that ties together all of the literature related to the topic. How to write Chapter Two and the three major sections will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 6.

Chapter Three, Methods

Chapter Three explains the research methods and design that were used to conduct the study. The critical part of writing Chapter Three is to describe the actual procedures that were used to conduct the study. Basically, you are informing the reader of *how* the study was conducted. Thus, you need to include detailed descriptions about every aspect of your study. Chapter Three will include the following components: (1) *Setting* (where the study took place), (2) *Participants* (the individuals who participated in the study and how they were selected), (3) *Instructional* or *Intervention Materials* (any materials or instructional strategies that were used to conduct the study), (4) *Measurement Instruments* (the tools you used to collect data), (5) *Procedures* (how you collected the data and/or implemented the study), and (6) *Data Analysis* (the statistical or qualitative techniques that were used to analyze the data). Enough detail should be included so that another researcher could replicate your study. How to write Chapter Three and the major sections will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 7.

Chapter Four, Results

Chapter Four reports the results of the study. The critical part of writing Chapter Four is to present the findings from the data collection process in Chapter Three. Basically, you are informing the reader of *what* was discovered. This chapter integrates a narrative, numerical, and/or tabular presentation of the outcomes of the study, depending on whether you have conducted a qualitative or quantitative study. In Chapter Four, you will report the results of the data analysis for each variable and measurement instrument that was discussed in Chapter Three. For example, if you conducted a qualitative study, you would provide a narrative description of the findings in relation to the research questions. If you conducted a quantitative study, you could include descriptive statistics for each participant or for the entire group (or both). **Descriptive statistics** are the basic level of statistical analysis for a data set from a sample group. Typically, reported statistics include the mean, median, mode, variance, and standard deviation. If you conducted an intervention for a large group or more than one group of participants in the study who received different treatments, you could apply inferential statistics to indicate any differences observed in performance before and after the intervention or between the two groups (if appropriate). **Inferential statistics** are the higher level of statistical analysis where inferences are made from a sample to a population. Inferential statistics may also include hypothesis testing and set probability levels to test for statistically significant differences between groups (or treatments). How to write Chapter Four and the major sections will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 8.

Chapter Five, Discussion

The last chapter in the thesis, Chapter Five, discusses the results from Chapter Four and draws conclusions about the study's findings. The critical part of writing Chapter Five is to discuss the findings in relation to the statement of the problem and the research questions that were identified in Chapter One. The discussion section includes the significant findings and the researcher's interpretation based on the results. You may also discuss the relationship of your findings to previous research conducted in the literature. Chapter Five also includes a section on *Limitations*. The limitations section discusses the limitations or weaknesses of the study's design or findings. Another section in Chapter Five is the *Recommendations for Future Research*. In this section, you make recommendations for future areas of research that should be conducted related to your study (e.g., follow-up). Additional recommendations could include those for actions, policies, or procedures related to the study's findings. Finally, the last section of Chapter Five is the *Conclusions*. In this section, you will identify the critical conclusions about the results (e.g., lessons learned) and their implications. How to write Chapter Five and the major sections will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 9.

Quantitative Versus Qualitative Studies

Thus far, I have briefly mentioned quantitative versus qualitative studies, assuming you know the difference between the two types. Because you are reading this book, it is likely that you have taken or are currently taking a course in research methods, so I will not go into too much detail about the different research designs. However, since the type of study you conduct, whether quantitative or qualitative, informs the writing of the five-chapter thesis, I will briefly distinguish the two broad methods and give examples of possible topics from different disciplines. Note that what drives a researcher to conduct either a quantitative or qualitative study is not so much a match to the personality of the researcher (although this is important), but the research question(s) that needs to be answered.

Quantitative Methods

Studies that use quantitative approaches collect numerical data to answer the research question(s). **Numerical data** are mathematical data (i.e., numbers). Quantitative methods include but are not limited to research using descriptive, correlation, prediction, and control methods (Gay et al., 2006). The researcher can measure the outcome of cause-effect scenarios with single or multiple independent variables. The **independent variable** is the variable that is deliberately manipulated (e.g., cause) by the researcher to produce a change in the dependent variable. The **dependent variable** is the variable that is observed to see if there is a change (e.g., effect) in response to the independent

variable. The researcher cannot manipulate the dependent variable. In quantitative research, typically, **deductive reasoning** is used, which is moving from the general to the specific. Typically, a quantitative researcher has a set **hypothesis** (prior to conducting the study) based on a theory that he or she tests in order to support or not support the given hypothesis. In quantitative studies, a hypothesis involves making assumptions or predictions based on probability distributions or likelihoods of events.

Data are often collected with one or several measurement instruments. **Measurement instruments** are data collection tools (e.g., surveys, observations, tests) that are used to measure changes in dependent variables or variables of interest. The data are recorded in numerical format such as a percentage score, grade point average, mean score, or rating. After the data are analyzed, the hypothesis is either confirmed or unsupported. Quantitative studies typically have large sample sizes and can also have multiple groups within the sample. In addition, the researcher may have limited direct interactions with the participants in the study. Once the data are collected, descriptive or inferential statistics are applied to inform the results. Some of the strengths of quantitative methods are that the researcher has control over many aspects of the study and given a large sample size, the results of the study can be generalized to a broad population.

Quantitative studies can be conducted in many different disciplines and topics, again depending on the research question(s). For example, in counseling, a study could be conducted on the effects of parents' divorce on children's social and emotional behavior for 4-year-olds at one preschool. In criminology, a study could be conducted surveying adolescents whose parents are incarcerated to assess their attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement. In organization/business management, a study could be conducted on the relationship between employees' use of self-care strategies to mediate stress (e.g., exercise, yoga, meditation, acupuncture) and their level of productivity. In social work, a study could be conducted on the effects of having aging parents on sibling relations within Asian American families. Finally, in education, a study could be conducted on differences in math scores between female and male high school students in coed or same-sex classrooms. As you can see from the examples mentioned, there is no limit to the topics and studies across the disciplines that can be conducted using quantitative methods. Notice that all of the mentioned potential studies would require numerical data collection using surveys, tests, and/or observation checklists.

Qualitative Methods

Studies that use qualitative approaches collect nonnumerical data to answer the research question(s). **Nonnumerical data** are narrative data (i.e., words). There are many different kinds of qualitative research designs. Some commonly found approaches in the social and health sciences literature are narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and

participatory action research (Creswell, 2007; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers do not start their study with a hypothesis that they set out to find support for or to test. In qualitative research, typically, **inductive reasoning** is used, which is moving from the specific to the general. A qualitative researcher starts with specific situations, finds patterns or themes in the data, establishes a tentative hypothesis, and then develops theories or conclusions. Data are often collected through extensive and detailed field notes, observations, interviews, and focus groups with the participants in a natural setting (i.e., the researcher does not control or manipulate the environment). Qualitative studies typically have small sample sizes, which allow the researcher the time and opportunity to have extensive interactions with the participants. Once the data are gathered, they are coded, analyzed, and organized or categorized according to the themes and patterns that emerge. This provides the researcher with results in a narrative format. Some of the strengths of qualitative methods are that the researcher has investigated a topic in depth, interpreted the outcomes based on the participants', not the researcher's, perspectives, and created a holistic picture of the situation.

Qualitative studies are becoming more popular and can be conducted in many different disciplines and topics. For example, in counseling, a study could be conducted on the perceptions of single parent Latinas on utilizing mental health services. In criminology, a study could be conducted on how incarcerated teenage mothers cope with raising their children in juvenile detention centers. In organization/business management, a researcher might be interested in how volunteerism affects employee motivation and satisfaction at a nonprofit organization. In social work, a study could be conducted on the factors that promote resiliency within domestic violence victims. Finally, in education, a researcher could conduct an ethnographic study on the experience of first generation African American college students. As you can see from the examples mentioned, there are certain topics that require using qualitative methods such as interviews and observations to answer the research question(s).

Although quantitative and qualitative approaches have been described separately, it is important to keep in mind that these approaches fall on a continuum rather than on polar opposites. Neither method is considered to be better or more important than the other. In fact, studies with mixed methods, where both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, are possible, and may even strengthen the results. For the purposes of this book, however, quantitative and qualitative methods will be discussed separately in Chapter 7 (methods) and Chapters 8 (results) since these are the main areas where the distinction between the two methods is the greatest.

Style Form

All scholarly writing such as books, journal articles, reference materials, dissertations, and theses must comply with a style form. Style form refers to

both writing style and editorial style. The **editorial style** is a set of rules or guidelines that writers must adhere to for publishing manuscripts, books, and so on. Some of the critical elements include how to format headings, citations, references, tables, figures, and so forth. The style form developed by the **American Psychological Association** (referred to as APA style) was selected for this book and the master's thesis because it is commonly used in various social science disciplines such as education, psychology, sociology, business, economics, nursing, and social work. Specifically, I follow the fifth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2001). The APA manual is a reference book that has the rules and guidelines for the APA writing and editorial style. As new issues arise, the manuals are revised or updated on the APA Web site (http://www.apastyle.org), so make sure that you are following the most current edition. The APA style is widely accepted in the behavioral and social sciences, but the particular style form varies by discipline or academic departments. Other common form styles include the Chicago style from the University of Chicago Press and the Modern Language Association (MLA) style, which is widely used in the humanities. Check with your chairperson for the one that applies to your thesis.

The thesis must be written in a format that complies with a style form, so it is always helpful to be familiar with the style form as you begin to write. However, the style form is not a research method. Rather, it is a tool to use in communicating your thesis. In this book, Chapter 10 is devoted to helping you comply with the APA style. The placement of the chapter late in the book does not diminish its importance. If you have used the APA style for previous papers or are familiar with the style form, this chapter will be a review for you. If you have not used the APA style before, I recommend referring to Chapter 10 as you proceed through the data collection and writing process for each chapter.

Summary

Congratulations on getting through the first chapter of the book (only nine more to go)! You should now have a sense of the overall thesis and feel energized, empowered, and ready to embark on this educational adventure. Thank you for allowing me to be your tour guide. In the next chapter, I will discuss how to select a research topic and questions. I wish you all the best of luck and will lead you to the finish line (and pull you through if I have to)! Here is a summary of the most critical points from Chapter 1:

- The master's degree is a postbaccalaureate degree conferred by a college or university upon candidates who complete one to two years of graduate study.

- In some fields, the master's degree is referred to as a professional degree or terminal degree, meaning that the program or degree is the highest academic level for that profession rather than a gateway to the doctoral degree.

- The master's program provides you with multiple opportunities to learn the critical and core content in your field or discipline and research methods.

- For the purposes of this book, the master's thesis is an empirically based research study written in five distinct chapters.

- Chapter One introduces the topic of the thesis to the reader and establishes the statement of the problem and research questions.

- Chapter Two introduces the reader to the research literature related to the topic and identifies the most relevant and significant research.

- Chapter Three explains the research methods and design that were used to conduct the study and describes the actual procedures.

- Chapter Four reports the results of the study and presents the findings from the data collection process in Chapter Three.

- Chapter Five discusses the results from Chapter Four in relation to the statement of the problem and the research questions that were addressed in Chapter One and draws conclusions about the study's findings.

- What drives a researcher to conduct either a quantitative or qualitative study is not a match to the personality of the researcher (although this is important), but the research question that needs to be answered.

Resources

Common Obstacles and Practical Solutions

1. A common problem that students face at this stage is feeling overwhelmed with the magnitude of the thesis. Words that come to mind are, "What did I get into?" If you are feeling anxious because you have never conducted research or written something like a master's thesis, do not panic! This book (and your chairperson) will help divide the parts into manageable and feasible chunks and guide you through the entire process. However, it might be helpful for you to review the text and notes from any research methods course that you took.

2. Another common obstacle that students face at this stage is trying to decide between conducting a quantitative or qualitative study. Instead of

putting pressure on yourself to make that decision now, it is better to let the design emerge as you read the existing research and develop your research questions.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

Before you delve into the thesis, it is a good idea to take some time to make the "mental shift" from the type of conceptualizing and writing that was required in your undergraduate years and the type of conceptualizing and writing that will be required for the master's thesis. In addition, now is a good time to think broadly about the issues and problems in your discipline and whether they would be amenable to quantitative or qualitative methods. The following reflection/discussion questions will help to guide this process.

1. What constitutes a master's thesis? What are the similarities and differences between a master's thesis and a term paper? What are the similarities and differences between a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation?

2. What are the similarities and differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods? Brainstorm and discuss critical research problems in your specific field or discipline. What would be the best method(s) to address these research questions? Provide the pros and cons of selecting each method.

Try It Exercises

The following exercises (Activities One and Two) will help you to identify potential faculty to serve as your chairperson and committee members as well as prepare for that first critical meeting with your chairperson. Activity Three is designed for you to research the professional and personal benefits of receiving a master's degree in your field or discipline. This knowledge will help keep you motivated as you progress through the thesis knowing that when it is all done, you can reap the rewards!

1. Activity One: For this activity, focus on the faculty within and outside of your master's degree program.

   - Make a list of all the professors/instructors from whom you have taken a course.
   - Make a list of all the professors/instructors with whom you have worked on projects outside of coursework.

- Review the professors/instructors' curriculum vitae (usually available on the university Web site), and list the professors/instructors with whom you have common (research) interests.
- Make a list of potential professors/instructors who could serve as your faculty chairperson and additional committee members.
- Create an e-mail message that gives a general overview of your research interest(s) and ask one of these professors/instructors if he or she would be willing to serve as your master's thesis chairperson or committee member. Set up an initial meeting.

2. Activity Two: The first meeting with your chairperson is very critical. This meeting sets the tone for future meetings and also clarifies the expectations for the relationship between you and your chairperson.

- Make a list of questions that you would ask at the initial meeting with your chairperson. Keep in mind that you may only have 30 minutes with your chairperson, so the questions should be succinct and related to your thesis. You should also be prepared to answer questions that your chairperson might have related to his or her expectations of you. The following is a list of possible questions that may be included in your list:

1. How often should we meet—weekly, biweekly, as needed?
2. What are the best times to meet—mornings, afternoons, evenings—and where?
3. What is the best way to contact you if I have to schedule/cancel an appointment?
4. In which format should I present drafts—electronically by e-mail or with hard copy?
5. What is the typical turn-around time to receive feedback for my drafts?
6. What is the typical turn-around time you will want me to return the next draft?
7. What are some tasks I should be doing while waiting for feedback?
8. What resources are available on or off campus to help with writing, editing, and data analysis?

3. Activity Three: For this activity, focus on personal and professional benefits of receiving a master's degree in your field or discipline.

- Imagine that you have completed your master's degree and have been asked to give the keynote address at your graduation. The department chair has asked you to conduct research in your field/discipline related to how the degree will enhance/further your career goals. You have to write a five-minute speech that addresses the professional and personal benefits of receiving your master's degree (as well as thanking everyone who supported you along the way).

Key Terms

- advance organizer
- APA style
- chairperson
- dependent variable
- descriptive statistics
- dissertation
- editorial style
- empirically based
- hypothesis
- independent variable
- inferential statistics
- master's degree
- Master of Arts (MA)
- Master of Science (MS)
- master's degree program
- master's thesis
- measurement instruments
- nonnumerical data
- numerical data
- qualitative research
- quantitative research
- terminal degree

Suggested Readings

- Ercikan, K., & Roth, W. M. (2006). What good is polarizing research into qualitative and quantitative? *Educational Researcher, 35*(5), 14–23.
- Fletcher, K. M. (2005). The impact of receiving a master's degree in nonprofit management on graduates' professional lives. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 34*(4), 433–447.
- Labaree, D. F. (2003). The peculiar problems of preparing educational researchers. *Educational Researcher, 32*(4), 13–22.
- Little, S. G., Akin-Little, A., & Lee, H. B. (2003). Education in statistics and research design in school psychology. *School Psychology International, 24*(4), 437–448.
- Morrow, S. L. (2007). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: Conceptual foundations. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*(2), 209–235.
- Patenaude, A. L. (2004). No promises, but I'm willing to listen and tell what I hear: Conducting qualitative research among prison inmates and staff. *The Prison Journal, 84*(4), 69S–91S.
- Sternberg, E. (1994). What is a master's thesis in planning? *Journal of Planning Education and Research, 7*(13), 284–289.
- Yauch, C. A., & Steudel, H. J. (2003). Complementary use of qualitative and quantitative cultural assessment methods. *Organizational Research Methods, 6*(4), 465–481.

Web Links

- APA Style

  http://apastyle.apa.org/

- The Chicago Manual of Style Online

  http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html

- Education Portal: Glossary of Master's Degree Programs
  http://education-portal.com/article_directory/Glossary_of_Master's_Degree_Programs.html
- Modern Language Association (MLA)
  http://www.mla.org/
- The Princeton Review: Grad Program Search
  http://www.princetonreview.com/grad/research/programProfiles/search.asp