

Tips for writing qualifying papers
Grad Committee, Department of Communication

The point of writing qualifying papers is to develop the expertise you need to do dissertation research on your own. The qualifying process should give you the analytic tools you need to become an independent researcher and writer. That is why it is so hard, and takes so long. In the process, you learn to become an author, learning to put your authorial voice on paper where it can be studied and refined. The qualifying paper is not about substantive materials alone, but about your relationship to extant literature in your fields of interest.

Developing the papers should entail intense conversations with faculty about the works you think you need to read and understand for your work. While you are working on the papers, you should develop bibliographies of things you think you should read, and find faculty who are willing to read those materials with you (and assign related reading material they recommend to augment your suggestions). This should be the basis for a COGR299.

The meetings with faculty for 299s should be opportunities for you to pose your own intellectual questions and try thinking about them with the help of the faculty. Some grads prefer to do most of this work with their advisors. Others prefer to work with a number of different faculty members because they have expertise in literatures relevant to their areas of interest. The advisor is not always the best person to read with. In doing these 299s, students should be prepared to write something on the topic by the end of the

quarter just to assess their progress in becoming qualified in that area. Reading for the orals papers is both a way of testing one's ability to do this kind of work by talking with faculty, and also a place to start writing down ideas that will go into the final paper.

Qualifying papers are defined in the Graduate Handbook as reviews of literature, but sometimes people talk about a “lit” paper and an “empirical” paper. There are two ways of reviewing literature. You can review literature in a field or set of fields of interest to you; this is a “lit” paper. Or you can review a literature to make sense of a particular (limited) piece of data; this is an “empirical” paper. Both are reviews of the literature and demonstrate your mastery of major themes and arguments, as well as shifts in emphasis. But each is a very different form of writing, entailing different skills. Both ways of reviewing the literature can help qualify you for doing independent research, so mentors often recommend one of each. But some students prefer to do two “lit” reviews. It is not a good idea to write two “empirical” papers. Writing one empirical paper allows you to practice the analytic approach you want to use for the dissertation, while leaving the lit review to define an audience and the intellectual field you want to address and enter.

The “lit” review paper should define an intellectual field that can serve as a foundation for your career, and not just the topic of your dissertation. This will necessarily include literatures relevant to your dissertation topic, but will put your empirical interests in context. This paper should contain the books you like best, and books about the issues that most interest you. The point of the paper should be not only to characterize the field(s), but also locate yourself and your future work within it. Think of yourself as

entering the conversation these books initiate or engage. The purpose of writing such a qualifying paper is not to produce a series of book reports about the content of that field, but to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the literature and to consider how you hope to contribute to the work in that field.

An “empirical” qualifying paper, in contrast, is generally organized around an empirical case. If you have original data to analyze, you can write up something like a journal article in which you review the literature related to your object of study. If you want to learn how to do the kind of research you need to do for your dissertation, you choose a small piece of empirical data related to your project and review the literatures that can help you analyze it. In that case, you present the case that you want to understand (as a problem to explain), argue what literatures you need to understand to address that case, discuss the importance of the case to those literatures, and analyze the representative piece of empirical data that you have chosen for your paper. This exercise in analysis is not a classic lit review, but the paper should demonstrate your ability to address a literature, using an empirical case. It is important in writing an empirical paper to choose a very specific topic so that you will not attempt to write your dissertation before you have the data to do so.

In some cases, an empirical lit review can be methodological rather than theoretical. If you are interested in developing a new research method or applying an existing one to a new kind of empirical case, you can talk about that for the qualifying paper. You can look at methodological options used by other researchers, the advantage of the work you want

to do, the alternative methods you decided not to try, and how the methodological choices you make affect the outcome of your research.

The greatest problems grads have in writing these papers is putting their voice into extant intellectual debates. They tend to want to elaborate their position on theoretical or methodological issues without really assessing what others are doing and why. Or, they describe the literature in the field without mentioning why they are doing it or what they hope to accomplish.

The best way to start writing such a paper is to follow a formula that requires you to include both your own ideas and those of others. You can change the introduction to the paper later to satisfy your own sense of aesthetics, but you should begin this way.

In this paper, I am looking at ...

I am doing it because / in order to ...

I will approach the topic by ...

This is a valid way to address the problem because ...

Looking at the literature this way allows me to ...

The result is useful to communication scholars or the field of communication because ...

Setting up the paper this way, and working on how to think about these issues, will allow you to figure out what you want to do and give you guidelines for doing it well. Once you

know what you have to say, you may want to keep this form. Until you know what you want to say, it will seem very awkward. Nonetheless, it is a good starting point.

Qualifying papers should be 30-40 pages long. If you write more than this, you should think about how to consolidate the literature review around schools of thought, putting information in the footnotes on differences among approaches within those schools. In either case, remember: you are not writing your dissertation or even chapters of the dissertation (although you may later use sections of your qualifying papers in the larger work). Finally, you do not have to repeat for your committee the long process of becoming qualified, reviewing every book and paper you read in detail. But you want to cite the things you read so you can be examined on them, if appropriate.