
Definition of Key Terms in Your Dissertation: How to Decide What to Include or Not?

Why Do I Need to Define Terms?

A section that you will be required to include in your dissertation is a Definitions Section. You may wonder why you need to define terms that may seem simple or public knowledge to you, but the reality is that this section is actually of paramount importance because it:

- Provides readers with the necessary background knowledge or *foundation* to understand the concepts that will be used throughout your whole research, allowing readers to have a better understanding of the concepts, factors, and context in your study.
- It makes sure that readers will grasp the *fundamental concepts* of your study in the specific way you are using them. Quite often, people have different and various understanding of the very same concept, so you want to ensure that the way your research is presented, is the very same way it is interpreted.

Which Terms Do I Define?

Now that you know why you need a definitions section in your dissertation, let us get to the practical bit of this handout. Have a look at these recommendations to consider when selecting the concepts or definitions you want to include, or leave out, in your study.

- Define terms that are *fundamental* for your dissertation; those that you will *frequently* use in most sections of your study.
- Keep in mind, there is absolutely *no need* to incorporate common knowledge terms. What do we mean by this? Here is an example:

Let us pretend we are doing research on nurturing international business research through global value chains literature. You do not need to include definitions for *research*, *business*, *international*, *global*, etc. These terms are common knowledge and are mostly understood the same way by everyone. For this specific example, the author should consider including the definitions of *global value chains*, *international business* as conceptualized in this study, or any other terms that have a specific meaning within your study field.

- For any definition included, it is vital to make *clear* how these terms are used in your study.
- Do you have some *technical terms* in your study? These must be included in your definitions section as it is important to explain them before they are formally introduced to the readers.
- Consider the concepts incorporated in your literature review: This is key to allowing readers understand and engage with your theoretical foundations in an effective way.