Sometimes knowing **where to start** in the dissertation process can be overwhelming! We’ve compiled a list of decisions you will need to make to help guide you through your process. You can download this list and check off the boxes as you go (these all are suggestions, if you find that a certain step makes more sense to you in a different order, feel free to trust that)!

Keep in mind that some steps will happen concurrently - you can see the process as a cycle.



**Step One: Topic to Question**

To begin, you need to determine what you want to study and how that can add to what is already available through research. You can do this by answering:

☐ What topic do you want to focus on?

☐ What topic motivates you or interests you? (you can think about what you enjoy reading about, what issues you feel passionate about, change you want to see happening)

☐ What problem exists within this topic that you want to address?

☐ What has already been researched on this topic? (research

☐ Where is there a gap for you to add to what has already been published on this topic? (keep track of the articles that are applicable to your study - these will be used in the development of your literature review)

☐ What is the purpose of your research?

☐ What are your research questions (central and sub-questions based on what you identified above)?

☐ Pause and look back at your topic, problem, purpose, and gap. Do they align? If you answered your research questions, would that give you the information you needed to achieve your purpose?

**Need help?** [Developing Research Questions](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RxQY7GPChUyR0uQk4To2mmXRaDIIP7H4/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Two: Significance and Framework**

Now that you have an idea of what you want to study, we need to define the blueprint (or framework) of the study.

☐ What is the significance of your study? (Essentially, here you are answering, ‘so what’? Think about who your research will matter to/who it will benefit)

☐ What framework will you use to then build your study? Identify either the theories or concepts you will use to develop your theoretical or conceptual framework.

**Need help?** [Conceptual/Theoretical Framework](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rZtse3-Iu_rdUKnB-tyZLR4ni-BLQaJg/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Three: Literature Review**

Continue to collect and synthesize information from scholarly sources regarding what is already known about your topic.

☐ Research scholarly sources on your topic: what are the main works that have been written on the topic, what works have been written based on those main works, what connections exists between them?

☐ What has been published on the concepts/theories you are using as a framework?

**Need help?** [Writing the Literature Review](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JzFmoqA7MoU_YHnovaA5Hn9AbTd40D2q/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Four: Research Type and Design**

☐ What type of data do you need to answer your research questions? (From this, you will be able to identify what type of research design you will need to use)

☐ Would you like to quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research?

☐ What has previous research done and how did that inform your research type and design?

☐ What will your research design be?

☐ [Qualitative research design](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LLyx-FXpdPQY4HpS86EQ52gDZVxAsaJa/view?usp=sharing)

☐ [Quantitative research design](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-KGOsWPln59KHhBDriWbXHBAfUwPF_cx/view?usp=sharing)

☐ [Mixed methods design](https://drive.google.com/file/d/14-8VXJz2WiCPdeniXONeSOTJrfeac5kh/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Five: Population and Sample**

You will have determined what you want to know about a topic or problem, and now, you can identify who you will need to gather information from in order to best answer the questions posed.

☐ Who is your target population and sample group?

☐ How many people will you use as your sample? (how did you choose that number?)

☐ What has previous research done and how did that inform your choice of sample/population?

☐ How will you reach your population/participants?

☐ What are the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation in your study?

☐ What type of sampling method will you use?

**Need help?** [Sampling Methods](https://wijar.westcliff.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Methodology-.pdf), [Selecting Your Sample](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1y1vKwp-Qkp8Ifq1Wp60-0naUnr0f3Op3/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Six: Data**

At this point, you can determine what data you will need, how you will collect it, and how you will analyze it.

☐ What will you use as your data collection instrument? You can answer:

☐ What data do you need to collect from your participants?

☐ What instrument will you use? (survey, observation, archival data, case studies, etc.)

☐ What has previous research done and how did that inform your choice?

☐ How will you analyze the data?

☐ What method best fits your research focus?

☐ What steps will you follow in analyzing the data?

**Need help?** [Qualitative Data Collection Instruments](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m_Hb0nxknEM5efolxQw1K6aO_b02oN-S/view?usp=sharing), [Quantitative Data Collection Instruments](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nZ4sAF20bdkch3sUhlwTBgPIJjGDogDz/view?usp=sharing), [Qualitative Data Analysis Methods](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VsRUNiSymOh5XD1TaZmVBc1ODuGVlLJI/view?usp=sharing), [Quantitative Data Analysis Methods](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1llNiRQlHqaZS--E3oSC9Qla7FnTyz1Vo/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Seven: Research Procedure Plan**

☐ What is your plan for research? This should be a step-by-step guide regarding every step you will take. Some considerations include:

☐ Engage in pre-research first. Identify what is out there and what others have done before designing your own study/plan.

☐ Recruitment procedures

☐ Location and equipment needed

☐ Interactions with participants and ethical considerations

☐ Collection of data and protection of it

☐ Analysis of data

**Need help?** [Developing a Research Procedure](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QYj2rlhjTMOwIHLmsoNSub02n2-SCGzRL_uX7-7TNJY/edit?usp=sharing)

**Step Eight: Creation of Materials**

☐ Determine the materials you must create and the approval you must obtain from necessary parties

☐ Are you conducting research at an institution where you need: (a) a permission letter from someone in authority; (b) IRB approval (if the institution has their own committee, you need approval from both Westcliff IRB and the institution where you will be collecting your data)?

☐ Are you using a survey, interview, observation, etc. to conduct your research? Create the questions you will ask or template you will use.

☐ Are you using a data collection instrument that was designed by someone else? Request permission to use this.

☐ How will you obtain consent/assent if you are using participants? Determine the plan and create the consent/assent form.

☐ Are you collecting archival data? List the sources you will collect this data from. (Some databases/websites are private and require permission for use).

☐ How will you recruit your participants? Write the recruitment letter/email/banner out fully.

**Need help?** [Consent Form Sample](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zX2eckvOlmydDLvFsUtQ7pKual8_m9HQ/view?usp=sharing), [Recruitment Letter Sample](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hgcTd0xb6Wwg8ofFGU4DxsyzWu-M9QpT/view?usp=sharing)

**Step Nine: Submit Your Application to Westcliff IRB**

Prior to conducting any research, your research plan must be approved by the Westcliff IRB. In order to submit to the IRB, you must have completed the IRB training, the CITI training, and have received approval from your Dissertation Chair.

☐ Select the correct application to fill out as per your research.

☐ Submit your application to the IRB.

Please note, you will be submitting a ***prospectus*** and ***proposal*** in alignment with your department’s dissertation plan. These steps were not included in this guide. This guide was meant to help you in the curation of content.

For help on the prospectus, proposal, or any other chapter included in the dissertation, please set up a consultation with a doctoral writing specialist.