Methods and Tools for Completing Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) Theses

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By

Jacques Digout, Sylvain Senechal
and Charbel Salloum

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures xi

List of Tables xiii

List of Boxes xv

Introduction xvii
- To whom is this book dedicated?
- What is this book for?
- How to use this book?
- What is a template and how to use it?
- Note about the authors

Notes about the Authors xxv

Acknowledgements xxvii

Chapter 1 1
A research project for a manager
1. Research in general, research in management 2
   1.1. General definitions
   1.2. Management research paradigms
   1.3. The objectives of management research
2. The eco-system of research in management 19
   2.1. Universities and research
   2.2. Hierarchy of scientific publications in management
   2.3. Division between academia and management
3. The Doctorate of Business Administration 36
   3.1. Presentation of the DBA
   3.2. The DBA research subject
   3.3. The DBA thesis supervision
4. The DBA three-step global organization 48
   4.1. Classical and article-driven thesis
   4.2. Classical TAT methods
   4.3. The three-step method

5. Interviews with experts 61
5.1. Professor Dominique Colomb: The transmission of research mindset adapted to the design of a DBA thesis
5.2. Professor Zheng Lihua: Interculturality in international exchanges in the context of a DBA thesis
6. Templates 66
6.1. Template 1: Research project
6.2. Template 2: Examples of writing the research context
6.3. Template 3: English transition words to help you
6.4. Template 4: Oral presentation of the research project
References 77

Chapter 2 79
Understanding what has been done so far
1. Exploring the literature 80
1.1. What is background literature?
1.2. Finding research sources
1.3. Finding other sources
2. Synthetizing and exploiting the literature 91
2.1. Literature review method
2.2. Exploiting the literature
3. Designing the theoretical model 97
3.1. Most famous models in management science
3.2. The adoption of a model for the study
4. Defining the research objectives 122
4.1. The nature of research questions
4.2. Defining the research problem
4.3. Designing the hypotheses
4.4. Designing the objectives in action research
5. Interviews with experts 130
5.1. Professor Bertrand Fauré: The nature of scientific knowledge
5.2. Professor Wang Xiao: The DBA: Cross vision of research cultures
6. Templates 133
Template 1: Synthetizing background literature
Template 2: Exploratory factor analysis
Template 3: Displaying the research model
Template 4: Oral presentation of literature review
References 142

Chapter 3 145
Organizing and designing the study
1. Defining the appropriate research paradigm 146
1.1. Deductive and inductive approaches
1.2. Circular iterations between theory and practice
1.3. What choice for a DBA thesis?
2. Defining methods 154
2.1. The threefold tilter
2.2. Study objectives and choice justification
2.3. Qualitative vs. quantitative methods
2.4 Overview of classical method choices
3. Qualitative methods 158
3.1. Main principles
3.2. Techniques for data collection
3.3. Preparing the qualitative analysis
3.4. Analyzing qualitative data
4. Quantitative methods 182
4.1. Main principles
4.2. Measuring
4.3. Psychometric properties of measuring scales
4.4. Building and testing measures
4.5. Most common quantitative methods
5. Combining methods 223
5.1. Mixed methods
5.2. Case studies
5.3. General design of the research
6. Interviews with experts 241
6.1. Professor Laurent Bertrandias: Advanced methods in marketing research
6.2. Professor Nicolas Arnaud: Advanced methods in communication science
7. Templates 246
Template 1: Research questions
Template 2: Developing hypotheses
Template 3: The typical semidirective interview
Template 4: Marketing scales
Template 5: Oral presentation
References 256

Chapter 4 261
Conducting and concluding the study
1. Collecting the data and exploiting the data 262
1.1. Sampling
1.2. Advice for data collecting
1.3. Verifying the psychometric properties of the constructs
1.4. Displaying the results and answering the hypotheses
2. Concluding the study 271
2.1. Academic and theoretical contributions
2.2. Limitations and agenda for future research
2.3. Managerial contributions and recommendations
3. Writing the final thesis 274
3.1. The scientific style for writing
3.2. Presentation of thesis structure
3.3. APA style and Oxford style
3.4. Academic rules of citation
3.5. Checklist for your final document
4. Advice for the oral defense 287
4.1. The preparation of the oral defense
4.2. The participants
4.3. The proceedings of the oral defense
5. Interviews with experts 289
5.1. Professor Rhona Johnsen: The expectancies toward the quality of the DBA thesis in management
5.2. Professor Denis Lacoste: The just balance between pertinence and rigor
6. Templates 292
Template 1: Synthesis of the thesis
Template 2: Writing qualitative results
Template 3: Writing quantitative results
Template 4: Analyzing the research findings
Template 5: Oral presentation
References 312

Appendix A 315
Thesis review cards

Appendix B..... 329
Testimonies

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: General structure of this book

Figure 1-1: Conceptions of reality and epistemological paradigms
Figure 1-2: The funnel-shaped design of the research question
Figure 1-3: Simplified design for a three-step DBA thesis
Figure 1-4: Evaluation process for DBA thesis projects
Figure 1-5: The three-step method for the DBA project

Figure 2-1: Example of a Boolean search
Figure 2-2: Example of open data application from the French Government
Figure 2-3: Global hierarchy of source credibility
Figure 2-4: The "KMV model" of relationship marketing
Figure 2-5: Simple example of theoretical model
Figure 2-6: The extended marketing mix
Figure 2-7: Product life-cycle theory
Figure 2-8: Ansoff's growth matrix
Figure 2-9: Porter's five competitive forces
Figure 2-10: Value chain analysis (VCA)
Figure 2-11: Original structure for the balance scorecard
Figure 2-12: Structure for a strategy map
Figure 2-13: Disruptive innovation
Figure 2-14: Business model canvas
Figure 2-15: Management by objectives
Figure 2-16: The situational leadership model
Figure 2-17: Hofstede's cultural dimensions model
Figure 2-18: The tree-view nature of the problematic

Figure 3-1: Induction and deduction
Figure 3-2: The circular iteration between theory and practice, deductive study
Figure 3-3: The circular iteration between theory and practice, inductive study
Figure 3-4: Clinical and motivational approaches
Figure 3-5: Funnel-shaped and inversed funnel-shaped questioning grids

Figure 3-6: Framework of means-end chain analysis
Figure 3-7: Example of semiotic square by Floch (1990)
Figure 3-8: The measuring process
Figure 3-9: Example of iconic scale
Figure 3-10: Hierarchy of variable types
Figure 3-11: Reliability analysis with SPSS 23
Figure 3-12: Reliability and validity
Figure 3-13: Typology of the most common quantitative methods
Figure 3-14: Example of a simple causal model
Figure 3-15: Three basic mixed methods designs
Figure 3-16: Four basic types of design for case studies
Figure 3-17: A global framework for research

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Commented structure of each chapter
Table 2: The logo associated to the features of this book
Table 3: Synthesis of the functions of the templates

Table 1-1: World top-ranked universities (economy and business)
Table 1-2: French top-ranked institutions (economy and management)
Table 1-3: CNRS world ranking in marketing (2016)
Table 1-4: Academic and practical knowledge
Table 1-5: The vision of Ph.D. and DBA programs in Harvard Business School
Table 1-6: Different formats for TAT
Table 1-7: Synthesis of qualities and defaults of TAT formats

Table 3-1: Comparison between deductive and inductive reasoning
Table 3-2: Qualitative vs. quantitative methods
Table 3-3: Qualitative methods: The must and the must not
Table 3-4: Compared strengths of participant observation and qualitative interviewing
Table 3-5: Content analysis using narrative outline
Table 3-6: Example of variable operationalization: Experimental Gen-Y multidimensional ethics scale
Table 3-7: Three types of indexes to evaluate structural models
Table 3-8: Generally accepted levels of quality for indexes of SEM
Table 3-9: Six mixed methods

Table 4-1: Example of reliability and convergent validity results
Table 4-2: Example of discriminant validity results

LIST OF BOXES

Box 1-1: The example of Priscille DJOMEN
Box 1-2: The example of Yazid DEBBICH
Box 1-3: The example of Zhenghuan ZHANG
Box 1-4: The example of Patrice MAILLOT
Box 1-5: The example of Simon-Pierre NGUIMBOCK
Box 1-6: The example of Salman KHAN
Box 1-7: The example of Marija LAZAREV

Box 2-1: The example of Christel GAYET
Box 2-2: The example of Lawrence MAO
Box 2-3: The example of Micheline KHAZZAKA

Box 3-1: The use of participant observation in management research
Box 3-2: The use of triangulation methods

Box 4-1: The size of the sample in a quantitative study
Box 4-2: Specific structure of three-paper thesis

Box 5-1: Abstract of Prof. Rhona Johnsen's testimony
Box 5-2: Abstract of Zhenghuan ZHANG's testimony
Box 5-3: Abstract of DBA participants' testimonies about professional skills
Box 5-4: Abstract of DBA participants' testimonies about teaching and research.
Box 5-5: Abstract of DBA scholars' testimonies about self-accomplishment

INTRODUCTION

To whom is this book dedicated?

You have been a business manager for a long time, and you have gained much experience. You already have reached the most common professional goals (being a director, managing a large team, taking big decisions), but you still miss something you fail to explain … is it the social and professional need for acknowledgment in your career that leads you to engage in research? Is it the intuition that you will be more competent after following a doctoral program? Professor Pierre Volle, from University Paris-Dauphine displays a list of motivations for managers to engage in a DBA program:[1]

- Give a scientific scale to your "intuitions."
- Gain legitimacy/visibility in your professional sphere.
- Access a global vision of the strategy of a firm, its functional organizations including the latest projections in theoretical research within a scientific method framework.
- Participate in a significant way to the evolution of knowledge in your domain of expertise by reviewing your business practice.
- Become a high-level consultant.
- Work at a high level in your field of expertise and at the heart of your company.

At the very beginning of the project, the motivations are high; the "student managers" think they have great contributions to share with the entire world… but they often lack methods, tools, and organization. Moreover, entering a doctoral program at the university is not considered as simple, and even a Ph.D. thesis does not seem to fit the predefined objectives.

[1] http://edba.dauphine.fr/en/why-an-edba.htm

What is this book for?

After supervising many research scholars for many years, we realized the necessity for this book. Indeed, many research books are directed to pure scholars and the vocabulary used is often esoteric; hence no publication seems to really address managers willing to engage in doctoral degrees. Besides, research and researchers often seem to be far from the "real world." It is even difficult to managers and academic people to meet and to organize their collaboration, due to cultural differences, different timetables, and many other causes.

Usually, research is achieved by scholars, not by managers. When beginning a DBA thesis project, the participant often wonders about many subjects: what discipline, what objectives, what thesis format, what subject, what data collection, whether starting by reading the literature, or observing the environment, or collecting data. Which aspect am I supposed to begin with? How to frame a research project?

First, this book is a method book. We have conceived it not only as a simple and accessible display of the most current research methods, but also as a complete and operational methodology guideline. This book has been conceived to accompany managers through the entire process of a DBA thesis; it provides theory and practice, both indispensable for the achievement of the research project. This book draws much on the contributions of major references, and tries to offer simplified, clear, and applicable standards for DBA participants. The main objective is, on the one hand, the synthesis between rigor and details in the use of methods, and on the other hand, soundness and intelligibility in handling those methods with special adaptations for the specific case of the DBA.

Second, this book illustrates a living experience, because doing a thesis is a human adventure. "Non-classic" students starting a doctoral project are facing an utterly new world where they do not measure the codes and methods. That is why this book contains many testimonies from DBA scholars, both participants and supervisors. This aspect will help readers to project their own cases toward new formulations and valuable solutions. The objectives of this book are detailed as follows:

- Helping the DBA participants have a global vision of management research;
- Identifying, explaining, and discussing the theoretical approaches and methods pertinent for a DBA thesis;
- Providing tools and templates for the design of a DBA thesis;
- Giving insights into the ways to leverage your DBA thesis.

How to use this book?

General structure of the book

Through our experience and accumulated knowledge, we have designed a "three-step method" to achieve the difficult project of writing a DBA thesis. This tailor-made method is specifically designed for managers willing to accomplish a doctoral degree.

Thus, the book is divided into five chapters: one preparatory step (the research project), three steps for the thesis itself (step 1 for background literature, step 2 for research design, and step 3 for closing the study); the ahead and concluding chapter holds advices to help DBA doctors empower their new skills. This "1+3+1" step approach will strongly favor a clearer vision of an article-driven thesis. Figure 1 summarizes the general structure of the three-step method and therefore the structure of this book.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the preparatory step, and chapters 2 to 4 are dedicated to the real three steps of the three-step method. Each chapter corresponds to one step of the research progression. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the post-DBA thesis period; it helps you to leverage your DBA in your personal life, in your firm, in your career.

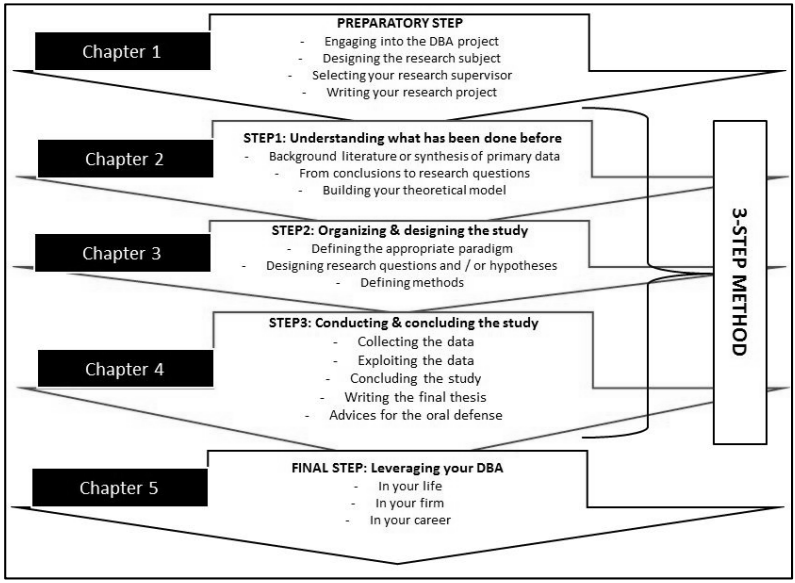


Figure 1: General structure of this book

Each chapter will accompany you alongside your progression and will give you the keys to perform the ongoing step. The core advantage of this book lies in its practical aspect:

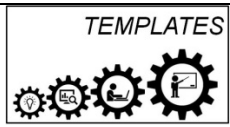
- You discover theories and methods (reading the "content" sections).
- You directly use delivered tools (using the "templates" section) to start and to structure your research project.

Guided tour of the book features: Alongside this textbook, diverse types of classical objects (figures and tables) will be found, which is classical. What is more in this book is the presence of specific objects, dedicated to providing a living experience of DBA research:

- templates
- testimonies from DBA participants
- testimonies from supervising professors
- thesis review cards

To make the presentation clearer, specific logos have been used to help the readers easily find the resources and hence better exploit this book. Table 2 presents the logos used as milestones:

Table 2: The logos associated to the features of this book

	This logo is present in all sections developing subjects or tools for which a template has been designed. The exact page to find the template will be detailed near the logo.
	This logo announces specific boxes containing abstracts of the DBA scholars' testimonies; they are inserted in the sections, as relevant insights. The full-text testimonies are available at the end of the book.
	This logo announces specific boxes containing testimonies from DBA research supervisors. The testimonies are placed in the end of each chapter. References to these testimonies are made in the text.

	This logo announces synthetic thesis review cards. They are placed in the end of the book. References to available review cards are made inside the text, in the relevant sections.

What is a template and how to use it?

A template is a "shaped piece of rigid material used as a pattern for processes such as cutting out, shaping, or drilling."[2] This definition from the Oxford dictionary comes from the dressmaking universe, but it well describes the utility of a template: to help beginners (or even confirmed professionals) achieving difficult or technical precision tasks. The Cambridge dictionary gives this definition: "a pattern made of metal, plastic, or paper, used for making many copies of a shape or to help cut material accurately."[3] This definition, very nearby the first one, extends the possible application to industry, and to the fact that when using a template we can produce large series of standardized objects. In computer science, a template is "a system that helps you arrange information on a computer screen."[4] Here the linkage with a physical object is no more present, but we have kept the notion of a guideline, a common thread enabling you to be guided in the most difficult (or the more technical) aspects in your tasks.

In management education, templates have been used for a long time too. Generally, a template is a virgin document where you must fill in forecast gaps. A template is a working document; it differs from a simple form, because it gives you the general shape you need to adopt for your future document. In terms of methods, the template is gradually filled and mastered alongside your progression, and the template is little by little going to become your document. To conclude, we can say that a template is, or can be a:

- method and format guideline
- blank document to start with, a reliable framework
- set of tools focused on the step you are preparing
- selection of possible formulations and presentations

[2] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/template
[3] http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/template
[4] http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/template

Templates are the originality of this book. Indeed, many research books promise they are focused on methods, but give the impression of a great complexity. We have tried to find a good compromise between the ambition of scientific excellence, and a relative simplification of processes so managers could more easily design a DBA thesis project. Templates are this link between theory and practice, leading the managers and DBA participants step by step through a DBA thesis project, from the conception of the project to the final oral defense. A template is a document designed to help you write a specific part of a complex, larger document. Templates are thus adapted to key paragraphs, sections, or documents alongside the thesis process. There are sixteen templates and one "appendix template," dedicated to the final synthesis of the thesis.

The templates are divided into the four active steps of the thesis process. Templates are not all like one another. They are designed following different logics and purposes, thus they are divided into four themes:

- project conception and presentation
- background literature and model development
- methods and study design
- results and conclusions

Each theme includes four parts and ends with a template dedicated to an oral presentation. The "appendix template" is considered out of the four themes. Table 3 shows a synthesis of the functions of the templates of this book.

Table 3: Synthesis of the functions of the templates

Template		Formal Function	Framework Function	Method Function
1.1	Research project written document	++	+++	+
1.2	Writing the context of the research	+++	+	+
1.3	English transition words and scientific style	+++	+	++
1.4	Presentation of the research project	++	+++	+
2.1	Exploratory factor analysis	+++	++	+
2.2	Synthesis of literature review	++	+	+++
2.3	Displaying hypotheses and model	+++	+	++
2.4	Presentation of the theoretical part	+++	+	++
3.1	Research paradigm and mode of reasoning	++	+	+++
3.2	Choice of methods and justification	++	+	+++
3.3	General design of the research	++	++	++
3.4	Presentation of methods and study design	++	++	++
4.1	Empirical results and answers to hypotheses	++	+	+++
4.2	Research findings and managerial contributions	++	+++	+
4.3	Thesis final structure	++	++	++
4.4	Presentation of the final thesis	++	+++	+
App	Synthesis of the thesis	++	+	+++

Formal function: In this case, the template is a prewritten document from which you must benchmark. It is not really a "fill in the gaps document," because the situations are impossible to standardize beyond certain limits. The formal function helps you begin writing the document, by adapting it before it becomes your document. This "formal" function is somehow also a "help-to-write function:" Templates make suggestions of writing for specific sections of the thesis (i.e., English transition words, or synthesis of the literature). These templates give key words and key sentences to use.

Framework function: In this case, the template summarizes the various parts of a global document (i.e., the research project, or the structure of the thesis). They are linked to structure aspects, suggestions of presentation of the paragraphs or the slides; they give ideas for presenting concepts.

Method function: Method templates are designed to help you in critical moments (i.e., guidelines for semidirective interview, or the exploratory factor analysis). Method templates suggest the necessary steps, by structuring methods and key aspects.

NOTES ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jacques DIGOUT is a professor at Toulouse Business School where he gives Marketing, eMarketing, and research methodology courses. He is the Academic Director of the Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) and of the specialized Master in Marketing Management & Communication (M2C). He also holds the Digital Marketing Chair and is responsible for the Marketing & Communication Networks Research Lab. His papers were published in international scientific ranked journals where he is also a member of the editorial review board. He has published many books on eMarketing, eRecruitement and advertising with Pearson, Dunod, Vuibert, and De Boeck.

Sylvain SÉNÉCHAL is a professor at University Toulouse 3 (IUT de Tarbes). He graduated his master degree in TBS and obtained his Ph.D. at Toulouse School of Management (TSM). After about ten years as a business executive, he became a consultant, and then a researcher in marketing and research methods. He published articles in international journals such as *The Journal of Business Ethics*, *Innovative Marketing*, and *La Revue Française du Marketing;* he also presented papers in several international conferences, including *The AFM International Marketing Conference*. Sylvain Sénéchal has supervised more than 100 research dissertations, with bachelor, MSc, MBA, and DBA participants; he is a member of the TBS Scientific Committee.

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He is a research associate at CEREFIGE Lorraine University and a visiting professor at Sorbonne University/Panthéon-Assas, IAE Lyon 3, IAE de Lille 1, IAE de Metz, and Toulouse Business School.

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CHAPTER 1

PREPARATORY STEP:
A RESEARCH PROJECT FOR A MANAGER

Synthesis of the chapter:

1. Research in general, research in management
2. The ecosystem of research in management
3. The doctorate of business administration
4. The DBA three-step global organization
5. Interviews with experts
6. Templates

References

1. Research in general ... research in management

In this section, we first define science and epistemology, in a simple and general manner. Then the main paradigms in management research are briefly presented. The section is closed with the presentation of the objectives of management research, starting in general and ending with a focus on the DBA case.

1.1. General definitions

1.1.1. Science

According to Encyclopedia Britannica:

> Science is any system of knowledge that is concerned with the physical world and its phenomena and that entails unbiased observations and systematic experimentation. In general, a science involves a pursuit of knowledge covering general truths or the operations of fundamental laws.[1]

According to the Oxford dictionary, science is:

> the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.[2]

To go beyond these quite similar and formal (moreover not very exciting) definitions, we first must remember that science is exciting. Science enables the discovery of the universe; it is accountable for our understanding of how things are, and may be in the future. Moreover, science is one of the most thrilling adventures in the world: discovering something nobody had discovered before. The list of the applications of science is endless in our everyday lives, and so is the list of projections in our minds about what science really is: *white lab coats and microscopes, an astronomer peering through a telescope, a naturalist in the rainforest, Einstein's equations scribbled on a chalkboard, the launch of the space shuttle* ... To be clear, we must keep in mind a definition of science coming from the scientific community. According to a blog from Berkeley University:

[1] https://www.britannica.com/topic/science
[2] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/science