Creating a Roadmap

Creating a roadmap of your dissertation early in the process can help you sort out what will be included in the final document and also where each piece might fit in relation to other pieces. The roadmap can help you in several ways as you draft the document:

- It can serve as a repository of your initial ideas so that you can visually see your options when trying to decide what to work on next;
- It can serve as a reminder of how ideas/pieces connect to each other so that you can more easily maintain adequate transitioning as you write pieces of the document;
- It can serve as a checklist of sections to be completed so that you can see your progress through the document; and
- It can help you clarify your thinking about the topic.

There are several different methods you can use to help you create your roadmap. These are described below. Note, however, that you may use more than one method on your roadmap, or you may use more than one method but at different stages of the process. You might use an outline for the entire document but a map or flowchart for an individual chapter.

Lists

Lists are exactly what they sound like—a collection of topics/words/phrases jotted down in the order you think of them. As a starting point, you might consider approaching this as a "brain dump" in which you write down just about anything and everything that comes to mind. You can then use bullets to clearly delineate individual items. Once you have created a running list, you will probably want to group items in some logical manner and label them to indicate why they were categorized or grouped in a particular way.

Maps

Mapping is sometimes called *clustering*. You start by placing a subject in the center of the page in a circle. Around it, you write ideas in their own bubbles, using lines to link bubbles that relate to one another. For the dissertation, you might want a single map of the entire project, with the overall research question in the center bubble and the individual chapters or sections in branching bubbles across the page. In addition, you might also want a more detailed map of each of those chapters or sections, with the main point of the chapter/section in the middle and only material related to that chapter in the branching bubbles. Mapping allows you to see how various pieces relate (or, sometimes, don't relate).

Some resources you might try are…

- Miro (sticky note-based online platform)
- Google Slides
- PowerPoint and other Office programs
- Physical paper or a journal

Nut-Shells

The phrase "in a nutshell" means that you tell someone just the gist or essence of something, in this case, of your thoughts and research work. You can create a roadmap of your dissertation using these nut-shells. Write very short, one- or two-sentence explanations of the project as a whole and of the various parts of the project. You can use this method before beginning in order to get a broad overview of the entire project, but you can also use the method as you write individual sections to help you determine exactly what you are trying to say with that section. Use phrases like the following to get you started:

- I want to write about . . .
- My research demonstrates that . . .
- This study contributes to the field by . . .

Outlines

An outline can be as detailed or as big-picture as you wish. The main idea, for instance, might be the main idea of a paragraph, but it could also be the main idea of a chapter, with the supporting points being pulled from paragraphs.

Method 1: Topic outline

I. Main idea
   a. Supporting point
   b. Supporting point
II. Main idea
   a. Supporting point
   b. Supporting point
   c. Supporting point
   d. . . .

Method 2: Sentence outline

I. This is like a topic outline, but each point is a complete sentence.
   a. Even your supporting points are complete sentences.
   b. This encourages you to be quite clear about what you are trying to say.
II. These complete sentences might turn out to be topic sentences of paragraphs or thesis sentences of large sections.
III. . . .

Method 3: Skeleton outline

- Introduction
   o Why the topic is interesting
   o Relevant background information or context
   o Research gap or focus
   o Clearly stated research question
   o Clearly stated thesis or statement of argument

- Body
    - List of necessary chapters or sections
        - methodology
        - justification for the approach
        - data/research
        - counter-arguments, etc.
    - Indication of what goes in each chapter or section
    - Indication of how the argument works through those chapters or sections
        - focus
        - purpose/point
        - supporting research
- Conclusion

Visuals

Sometimes a project is best represented visually, with pictures or flowcharts. You might draw a diagram of how the various pieces of your argument fit together, or you might use sticky notes to move around various pieces of data until you find an organizational plan that makes sense, which you then draw on a sheet of paper. If the logic of your argument is complicated enough, you might find a flowchart useful for following the logical threads between individual pieces of information. Note that visuals you create for the purposes of a roadmap may or may not end up in the final project. Initially, at least, they are for your personal clarity of thought; whether or not they will prove useful to readers may be determined closer to the final stages of the writing process. As mentioned in the "Maps" section, Miro is an online resource that allows you to type and place sticky-notes on a virtual whiteboard, which some may find more useful than using actual sticky notes.