

Analysis of Dissertation Proposal

Prepared for

Prepared by Angela di Gualco

Writing Coach & Editor

Table of Contents

Summary	3
Abstract.....	4
Chapter 1 Introduction	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review	5
Chapter 3 Research Design/Methodology.....	7
Appendices.....	8
Questions for Further Thought	8
Additional Recommendations	9
Formatting	9
APA Style	9
Navigation	9
Table of Contents.....	10
Writing	10
Tone	10
Paragraphs	10
Using Quotes.....	11
Abstract vs Concrete	11
Passive Language	11
Word choice	11
Vary Sentence Lengths and Structures	12
Editing vs Revision.....	12

Summary

The dissertation is the final, culminating project of a doctoral education. As such, the purpose of the dissertation is to provide an opportunity for a student to showcase what they have learned and, especially, to highlight their ability to think critically and apply theory to a problem in the field. Additionally, this affords the candidate the opportunity to make an original contribution to the current research as well as to prove their readiness to initiate change that is culturally and socially needed. The committee will also be evaluating the dissertation for excellent writing skills including organization and logical progression, explanation and application of research methodology, and a thorough and meaningful analysis of the findings from a sound research study.

Overall, you have a considered, exhaustively researched, well-written dissertation that is informative, interesting, and full of pertinent literature. Well done! While there is still a little bit of work to do before submitting your proposal, you should feel great about how much you have accomplished so far. The remaining work falls into two categories: bringing everything together more cohesively and polishing the writing.

As we discussed on Zoom, a more focused research question – a problem to be solved – would inform your introduction, literature review, and methods chapters. Rather than exploring the literature and theories that can be applied to African American students, explain how the current literature is failing to address the problem to be solved and how your research will fill that gap. You should have an idea of what one answer to the problem might be. At a basic level, this is the reason for your study: to prove whether your answer is correct. Usually, what you think the answer is will be at least partially right and you will provide recommendations based on the results of your study in your final dissertation. Furthermore, you will also discuss, in those later chapters, the gaps in your own research and suggest future research as part of your recommendations in the Summary and Discussion.

Once you decide on the problem and your solution for it, you will most likely want to revise your proposal. You have a strong and solid dissertation that needs fine tuning. The introduction and literature review are detailed and interesting. To make them stronger, provide more relevant details and avoid repeating the same phrases throughout. The first two chapters should provide a firm grounding that provides the reader with an understanding of the need for your study and the current literature related to the problem, all of which prepares the reader for the methods, findings, and discussion chapters to come.

The third chapter would benefit from many more specifics about how you will carry out your study. Some information was included in the appendices but should be addressed before then. Discuss the concrete steps you will take from how to obtain a list of people to invite to your study; the number of attempts to recruit participants; the number, duration, and frequency of focus groups; to how you will code and collate the responses from the focus groups, etc.

I am concerned that your focus group questions are too few and too open ended. You may find it difficult to compare one participant's answers to another. Participants may interpret the questions differently than you intended and not provide a response that is helpful. I recommend having back up questions ready that may be more directed. Another suggestion might be to define terms and discuss the NACE competencies before asking your questions of the participants.

Additionally, if there is a lack of research on the experience of Black Americans, it will be difficult to show that their experience is different at a PWI than a historically Black university. You might consider discussing this in relation to the limitations of your study. Your study cannot represent the experiences of all African American undergraduates because your study is being undertaken at one smaller, private university that is predominantly white and the focus group may be quite small. Either way, in the Summary and Discussion chapter of your final dissertation, you should state that further research is needed because your study is undertaken at only one PWI with particular characteristics and the results will not be representative of the experience of all Blacks at a PWI. Nevertheless, the study will prove to be highly beneficial. Once you have a more focused research problem, you will be able to anticipate the many ways your results can be useful which will be a highlight for your readers.

Lastly, your dissertation committee is made up of scholars and educators who are immersed in educational theories but may not have your practical experience in career counseling. It may be best for you to define terms and provide examples of things such as current practice and specialized career education (how is this different from standard career education?). Also, making the connection between theory and practice with concrete details will be helpful for the committee (and demonstrate your critical thinking and synthesizing abilities).

Abstract

Per your note, I did not comment on the content of this section. To conform to APA Style, the abstract should be on its own page before the table of contents and after the title page. After the table of contents comes chapter 1. (More on the table of contents below.)

Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter should provide a background that will prepare the readers to understand the problem, current research, the goals of your study, and why it is necessary. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to discuss why this topic is of interest to you and how (specifically) it fits within your work as a career educator. As an introduction to the dissertation as a whole, this chapter will be easier to write (or revise) after the literature review (lit review) and methods chapters have been written (or revised).

An interesting history of career education is provided but I feel that more details and timeframes would make this section stronger. To prepare your reader for further chapters and to understand why your study is so important, spend more time discussing the difficulties African Americans have faced and how their experience has been different from whites. Also discuss the unique career needs of African Americans.

Describe career readiness. Provide reasons why this might solve a problem. Define a concrete problem that can be solved rather than citing a lack of research. I'm certain you can come up with a strong research question that will utilize most or all the research you have already done and all of the writing you have completed so far. It will be a matter of refining your discussion to make the content weave together more strongly. Narrowing your focus to a particular problem will provide new ideas for better cohesion.

Career Construction Theory is stated as your framework in this chapter, but NACE is stated to be the framework in a later chapter. As I read what you wrote about both of these, it was clear that they are

stronger together. Discuss how NACE relates to CCT. Then provide an indication of how these two theories will be used together in your study.

Some of the sections in the intro don't match those listed in the guidelines. As a result, some of the required topics seem to be missing. The context of the study is the setting where the study takes place. This is where you talk about the University as a unique PWI and how that will affect your study – both positively and negatively.

I think section 1.13 should be an appendix. The dissertation guidelines do not require a definition of terms in the introduction but the instructions for the appendices say to include “anything else that supports the reader’s ability to engage critically in the reading of your proposal.” So, definitely include the table there but explain terms in the narrative where they are used.

Likewise, define terms in your discussion of the history of career readiness and development. Also explain the specific reasons why it is important understand the history and the current state of things and why this is so critical to the future. What is missing? What will be gained? You might mention a few ways on how society will look for everyone when equity and inclusion for African Americans is the norm rather than the exception.

Make this chapter even richer in details than it is now in order to make it as interesting and informative as possible. Take the opportunity to impress and engage your audience in the introduction. Follow up your discussion of the past and present with a view of a better future. The future will be what needs to change and how that might look. A wonderful, hopeful, optimistic view of the future. I love the Howard Thurman quote in your email. Humanity needs African American’s to be equal and able to make their unique contributions to society. Unfortunately, too many people operate from a scarcity mindset, rather than one of abundance, and have a bottom line of “what will this do for me?” Why don’t you show them using the power of words?

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The literature review serves several functions. First, it provides a background of the problem according to current research. Second, it highlights your ability to synthesize the information in relation to other research and to your proposed study. You will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the literature and compare their similarities and differences. Presentation of current research also allows you to discuss how they are lacking in relation to the problem you wish to solve. That leads you directly into the methods chapter where you will discuss how your research will fill the gap and how it might solve the problem.

The literature should be well-organized by topic or theme, with each subsequent theme or topic building upon the last until, at the end, a greater understanding than each individual study is arrived at by the reader (guided by you). The theoretical framework(s) that will be applied to your research study should be discussed in detail. I think that CCT and NACE figure prominently so consider how these weave together to enable you to complete your study.

The lit review contains many interesting research articles and, in some places, you have described relationships between the work of different researchers particularly well. The chapter would be more cohesive if this was done in more areas. This chapter would also benefit from a stronger introduction so that, from the outset, the reader has an idea of what ties all this disparate research together. Discuss

some of the topics and themes you found in the introduction rather than just describing the structure of the chapter.

This chapter brings in a variety of literature but often explains it only at a high, or more conceptual, level. Provide more concrete details of the research. You can connect the various articles/books through their similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses, topics, or themes. Avoid a chronological structure. That works really well in the introduction for discussing the history of, and advancements in, career theory but it wouldn't work as well here. When they are organized by theme or topic, that progression will inform your summary of them for the introduction to this chapter and make it easier to transition from one paragraph to the next.

Discuss the "scaffolding" necessary to understand the studies presented in chapter 2 in the introduction. Focus more on the literature that is pertinent to the problem you want to solve. What problem do you hope to solve? What research has already been done towards the problem you hope to solve? What is missing in the literature? What will be different about your study? How will it contribute to the literature? With a stronger research question, the connections between the literature - and to your study - will become clearer.

When you discuss the literature you have selected in support of your research question and your study, be more firm/positive/affirmative/certain when you discuss results. Avoid "may" or "will likely result in". Put the uncertainty with the research, not the outcome: "the research suggests (or supports) increased/enhanced/improved outcomes in career readiness when career counselors/administrations/faculty do (something)."

I felt that the strongest, most cohesive, and most interesting part of your lit review was when you were discussing the needs, familial support, and barriers to success for African Americans and think that you should select a research problem related to that. I felt a lot of emotion there. When people pursue paths with heart, the results are much richer. Follow your heart and then use your head to consider what career educators need to know and do to support African Americans and fine tune your focus questions around those areas. Remember to discuss how these aspects of the Black experience in America contribute to their unique career readiness needs. This fits right in with your discussion of CCT and taking the stories of African Americans as well as with research in the lit review that said to let the students take the lead in their career education with the educator overseeing the process. Furthermore, this is related to the NACE competencies so bring that in here as well. I didn't feel that chapter 3 was connected to this part of the lit review, and I think both chapters would be stronger if you connect the study methods (your career frameworks) back to this aspect of the research you found. You might consider adding more details about this in the introduction rather than just mentioning "the unique career needs".

The conclusion for the lit review is very short. This chapter is more than 40 pages, discusses many studies, current and recommended career services for African Americans, and the family/cultural life of African Americans and the impact of those things on their career readiness. I think your summary of the main points of the chapter could easily be several paragraphs or even a few pages. The information about what is to come in the following chapter could be discussed in more detail across a page of its own.

Chapter 3 Research Design/Methodology

The purpose of the Methods chapter is to explain in detail how your study will be executed beginning with recruitment and ending with how the data will be analyzed. The guidelines provided by the school are very explicit regarding the details that should be included and merit reviewing prior to undertaking revision of this chapter.

You have a strong framework for the methods. It will benefit from detailed information about each step involved in executing your study. Specific information on how recruitment will take place, how long the focus group sections will last, etc. are missing. How many people will be in each group and what activities are planned? Why not describe the characteristics of your planned focus groups here? When and where will they take place? Is there a maximum number of participants per group? How long do you anticipate each meeting to take? How will you break the ice and help each attendee feel comfortable discussing their family situation, career development experiences, etc. in front of others? You should go into detail about when/where/how you will explain your research, confidentiality, and obtain permission from participants. Including more figures/graphs/tables of information would be helpful in this chapter. Quantify in minute detail what the process will be. Also consider (and write more about) study aspects such as data collection and back up. For instance, will you transcribe participant responses word for word or just what you think is significant from the Zoom recordings? If the latter, how can you tell what is significant? How long will this take you? What is the plan if a recording is corrupted or lost? Will you be taking notes during the focus groups? Make your plan as detailed as possible for the committee.

Similarly, quotes are provided related to the type of research you will undertake but these are very abstract and can be discussed more concretely in relation to your study. Elaborate on the questions. Why they are phenomenological? What types of experience will they elicit? How you will you structure the answers?

Having a focused research question will inform the details that should be discussed. As mentioned previously, the research question is too broad. It isn't actually a question. It is a statement. It is a fact that there isn't enough literature about the career readiness of African Americans. It is a fact that racism and other factors limit or even prevent African Americans from securing satisfying careers that pay well. In contrast, racism is a problem to be solved. Lack of familial support is a problem to be solved. They are big, broad social problems which will require many solutions. Perhaps a better research question is *why* aren't African Americans career ready (if, in fact, they aren't)? Why aren't Blacks making use of career services? How can career professionals make up for a lack of familial support so that African Americans can be career ready? What can be done to decrease the wage gap? Once you focus on a particular problem, you will come up with sub questions that need to be answered in your study. How can your study provide the answers or provide solutions that will help African Americans obtain good jobs quicker and easier? Figuring this out will help you revise this chapter and better focus your introduction and lit review, making the whole dissertation more cohesive. Use your expertise as a career professional to inform your research.

Consider how your experience as an African American working and studying at a PWI might influence your interpretation of the data. What can you do to mitigate "researcher bias"? Add these considerations to the Role of the Researcher section.

Have you thought about how to make your focus groups more engaging and thought-provoking? Could you plan activities that help participants to identify and discuss sample behaviors for the 8 competencies? If you make it a learning experience as well as an opportunity to talk about themselves, more people might be interested in participating. You can advertise the study as an opportunity to learn more about career competencies while helping a grad student with research. It's a win-win with the participants benefiting as well (beyond a \$5.00 Wawa card).

Appendices

This section should come after the reference list and be formatted per APA Style. I assume you are only inviting African American students who are enrolled at the University. I think you are obtaining a list of students and their contact information from another department on campus. If not, explain (in chapter 3) how you will identify individuals to invite, how you will obtain their contact information, how many times you will email them, the number of posts on social media, and number of text messages. Will you email and text the same students? This is not clear in the appendices or in the methods chapter.

I think your proposed communications can be streamlined based on whether or not you are only inviting African Americans and with regards to the length of the social media post and text message. The Prospective Research Participant Survey can include more of the disclaimers and study information so they can be eliminated from the posts and text messages. You might consider formatting the disclaimers with bullet points rather than in a paragraph format to make it easier for individuals to see the important information you want them to see.

Questions for Further Thought

Answering the following questions can bring clarity about your project and help you figure out where to direct some of your time during revision.

- Who is your intended audience? What are their areas of expertise? What information do they need in order to understand the problem, current research, your study, findings, and recommendations? I think your committee is knowledgeable about educational leadership and much of the research you discuss, but do they have experience providing career education or an expansive knowledge of career theory?
- Is there some hope to be drawn from the fact that, despite the great disparities, African Americans have made great strides in the last 50 years? And, now that we are beginning to focus on this, will they make even more significant advances over the next 50 years?
- It seems that one research problem might be that Blacks are not as prepared as whites. What are some of the reasons for that? In what ways can you confirm this hypothesis or show why this may be? Answers to these questions could help you focus your study, the literature used to support it, and inform your discussion.
- Do you need to survey white students in order to compare their answers with the African American students? How do you know if African American career readiness and preparedness is different if you can't compare these things? Or is this based on your experience in the field? If so, discuss that in the introduction.

- What are the unique characteristics of the University that may make it stand apart from other PWIs? How might this impact your results and inform the application of your recommendations to African Americans at other PWIs?
- If you are taking life stories, will individuals feel comfortable discussing their family of origin in a group setting?
- Do you plan to tell study participants that you work at the University, in Career Education? I think it is important because you don't want them to find out on their own and wonder why you withheld the information or whether, in the course of your work, you might use or disclose their personal information.
- Related to the previous bullet, how do you think working at the university where you will conduct your research will influence or impact the study? Is it possible that you will already know some of the participants? And, if so, will they still be allowed to participate? Could it impact their willingness to share? Consider whether your experience in the field and at the University might bias the study or the results. Discuss this in the Role of the Researcher section of Chapter 3. If there are any potential biases or possible impacts to the study, document how you will mitigate those risks.

Additional Recommendations

In addition to the suggestions above by chapter, included below are some additional recommendations to optimize your dissertation.

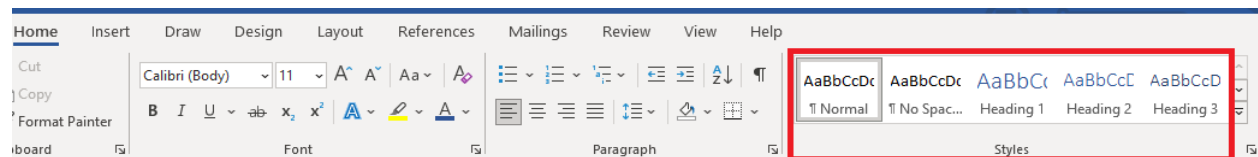
Formatting

APA Style

Your dissertation should be formatted per APA style 7th edition (the most current) this includes APA style citations, Reference List, Appendices, headings, headers, and footers. If you do not own a copy of the style manual, the [Owl at Purdue](#) has an online resource that is free to use. Sans serif fonts such as Arial and 11-point is recommended. The same font should be used throughout. Microsoft Word has many features to assist with formatting your dissertation. I will list a couple here. Additionally, I'm not sure that all of your in-text citations conform to APA Style so I suggest a review of those prior to submission.

Navigation

To make navigation easier in your document, I recommend the use of Styles. When you designate Chapters and sections as a heading, it allows a reader to go to a particular part of the dissertation with the click of a button. Microsoft Word allows the [creation of custom styles](#) so the headings can be set to any font/color/size that you wish (in order to conform to APA Style). This is done under the Home tab – Styles. Smooth and logical flow, aided by transitions, will enable you to eliminate some of your headings.

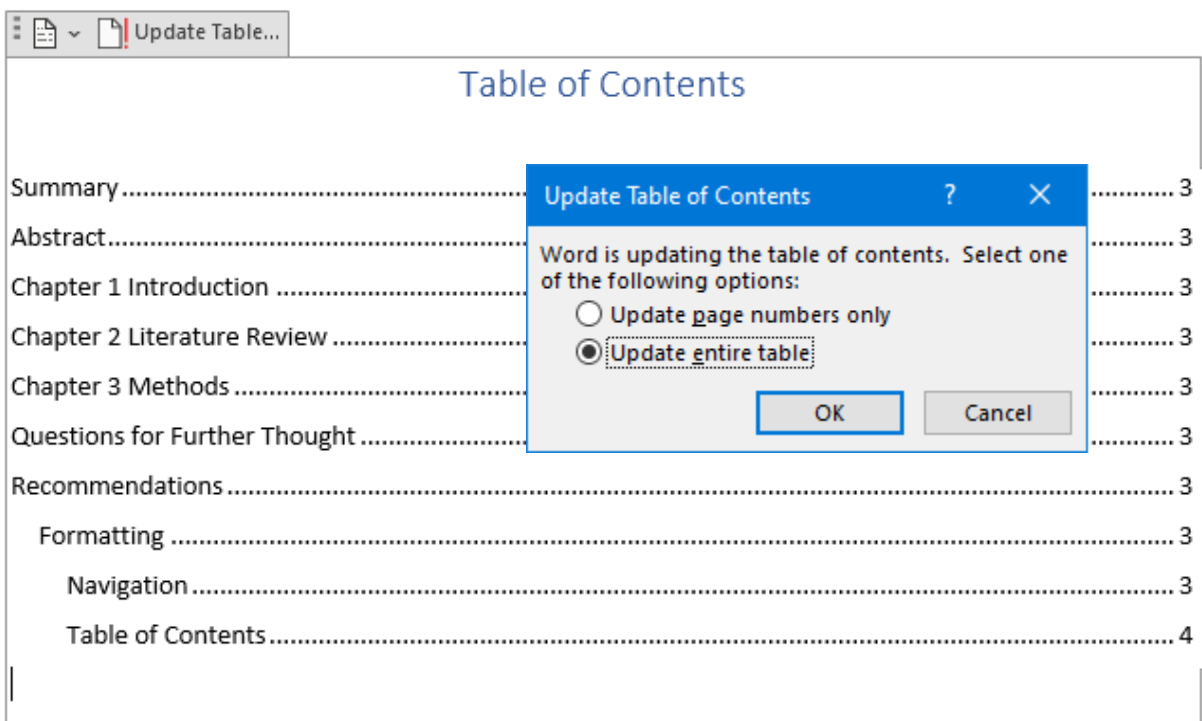


Then, you can click on the View tab and check the box next to Navigation pane. This report uses this feature so you can see what it will look like.

Table of Contents

Another handy feature of Word is the Table of Contents (TOC) which can be generated automatically based on the headings defined in the document. The TOC is found under the References Tab. Once you have a table of contents, you can easily update it as necessary by clicking inside the table and clicking Update Table. APA Style does not require the use of a TOC but has guidelines for a TOC should you use one. The dissertation guidelines don't specify whether a TOC is required but I recommend including one. You can check with your advisor to see if it is a requirement.

Additionally, it would be ideal to have only one TOC prior to the Abstract rather than one for each chapter. Headings that show all the requirements are being met can be distracting and interrupt the flow of information. Good writing with smooth transitions is preferable. Check with your advisor to see if they are acceptable in the proposal.



Writing

Tone

It is best to use third person throughout to maintain an academic voice. The guidelines state that, for the proposal, only the literature review must be in third person so that chapter should be updated now. Instead of “my study” use “this study” or “the proposed study”. Rather than using “I” use “this researcher”. I recommend updating the rest of the dissertation before final submission.

Paragraphs

Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that tells the reader what the paragraph is about. End each paragraph with a sentence that summarizes what was discussed. Then, you will be able to transition from one topic to the next more smoothly. It is helpful to consider how each paragraph relates to the next. I highly recommend the use of outlines so that you can see – at a high level – how your ideas are

organized. It will help ensure a logical progression of ideas. I used to share [this video](#) in my freshman comp classes. It's really good even though it is a cartoon geared toward high school students!

Using Quotes

Don't let quotes make your points for you. Quotes should be the support for your ideas. When you use a quote, write something more about it. Tie it into the topic of the paragraph or section. Tell the reader what it means, otherwise they may interpret it differently looking through the lens of their experience and education. Also, think of the dissertation as your opportunity to prove that you are a learned scholar (and professional) in the field. Explaining a quote after one is provided demonstrates your knowledge and synthesis of the information. It will be helpful to ask yourself how a piece of information relates to all the other bits of knowledge you have. Then decide if, together, they give you a deeper or broader understanding of the field than you had before. That is, after all, the purpose of education (and writing a dissertation).

Abstract vs Concrete

A lot of the quotes and concepts in the dissertation, especially in Chapter 3, are discussed at a more abstract level. It is helpful to provide concrete details while discussing abstract concepts. This is especially critical when discussing how theory applies to the study you will undertake. Many people have a preference for discussing (and learning) things abstractly or concretely. Good writing requires the use of both in order to reach more people in your audience. To provide assistance in this area, I have attached some slides from a presentation I used in my writing classes on a concept called the Ladder of Abstraction. These will show you how to move up and down the ladder of abstraction so that you can discuss theories and ideas at both an abstract and concrete level.

Passive Language

There is quite a bit of passive language in the dissertation: likely, potential, etc. Be as firm and positive as you can. The only uncertainties in your paper at this point should be the outcomes of your research. Discuss literature and your methodology choices using strong language. Since you selected Zoom, you already know it has appealing features that will complement your type of research (list out the reasons). Don't state that it is potentially appealing. Do you see the difference? When weak language is used in writing, it can damage the credibility of the writer. Be authoritative. You are an expert in your field. You are earning a Ph.D. and have done A LOT of schooling. And you are embarking on a research study that will contribute new information to the field. This is the culmination of years of effort. It's your turn. Own it!

Word choice

Collegians, career development, career readiness are used frequently throughout the document. To avoid overusing the same word or phrase, I recommend using the find feature (CTRL F) in Word to see how many times (and where) a phrase has been used. Then, under the review tab, Word has a thesaurus that you can use to update some instances of the repeated word. Collegians might be substituted with student, undergraduate, or perhaps scholar.

To maintain a scholarly tone without using a lot of big words and long explanations (as we have seen scholars do!), strive to use better words: 'whether' instead of 'if', 'significant' rather than 'important', instead of 'so' use 'therefore', try 'however' or 'unfortunately' instead of 'but'. Focus on clarity and

succinctness while avoiding being casual. Use words that better express your ideas and points in concrete detail. It is okay to be more general in introductory sections but, outside of that, be specific.

Vary Sentence Lengths and Structures

Many people tend to write mostly medium, long, or short sentences. This negatively affects the tone and pace of writing and can be tedious for readers. It is always a good idea to go back and break up long sentences, join up small sentences, or rearrange sentences to create a more engaging flow. Think about what you are expressing in each sentence and determine the best way to do that. Use short sentences when you want to make an impact. Use longer sentences when communicating related bits of information. Intersperse that with medium sentences to create a good flow.

Editing vs Revision

Revision is rewriting to fit a new vision for your dissertation. The purpose of this editorial assessment is to facilitate revision of your work. When you have finished revising, then you should begin editing. I've made several suggestions for improving your good writing. To make it easier, focus on one or two of the suggestions above at a time. For instance, you can make two quick passes looking for the usage of first person and repeated words and phrases. The find feature in Word will help you find all the 'I's' and 'my's' and repetition. Another look could focus on the use of quotes along with topic and summary sentences in paragraphs. A fourth pass could look at sentence lengths and structures as well as informal language. Revision and editing take time but they don't need to feel overwhelming. You got this!