Front Matter

Kate Turabian created a set of guidelines that adapted the Chicago Manual of Style for use by graduate students in the preparation of their dissertations and theses. Her role as Dissertation Secretary at the University of Chicago is legendary, and her work has resulted in a uniform format for dissertations across the United States that includes prefatory pages mimicking those found in monograph publishing. The functions of these pages are many; taken together, they succinctly draw out relevant information about the manuscript to facilitate its long term research use. These pages -- or front matter -- serve as a sort of shorthand for assessing and previewing the contents of a manuscript. But they are relics of the print age, having been designed to help navigate through large paper documents. What would constitute a digital front matter, designed to efficiently describe the "aboutness" of a digital project?

User Documentation for Digital Projects in Turabian Style

At our library, we looked at how to translate the functions of the publisher’s (print) front matter into the digital sphere. What information about digital projects should we be capturing and clearly identifying when students deposit them in the library? What is the digital equivalent of a “List of Figures”? When the project consists of a code repository, an online exhibit, or large quantities of SQL data, most graduate programs still require a textual component, such as a white paper, to accompany the submission. How could we help students "package" these many components in a way that lends itself to future library cataloging and anticipates the needs of outside researchers? Drawing on recent research in the digital humanities and digital dissertation case studies, we developed a set of guidelines for depositing digital dissertations and theses that attempts to bridge the function of print front matter with the unique characteristics of digital work. Our library’s guidelines include, for example, the inclusion of a manifest of technologies used, including system requirements and file characteristics, in order to better identify the project's infrastructure as well as its "aboutness."

By creating a standardized set of required information for digital projects, we can help solve the administrative hurdle to the adoption of more experimental methods and modes of publication.

Digital Manifest

All dissertations, theses, and capstone projects that include digital projects must include a “Digital Manifest” in the preliminary pages. List and briefly describe the components of the digital project to form an inventory or packing list of all elements that comprise the dissertation, thesis, or capstone project deposit. For each file included in the deposit, list the filename, a brief caption/description, and file type.

List of Variables

If the digital project is a database or includes code, a List of Variables must be included in the preliminary pages or as an Appendix. List variables on the left in alphabetical order and the corresponding description on the right. (For formatting details, see Turabian’s List of Abbreviations.)

Glossary of Functions

If the digital project is based on code, a Glossary of Functions must be included in the preliminary pages or as an Appendix to document the uses of functions and code. (For formatting details, see Turabian’s instructions for Glossary.)