Steps in Writing the Thesis or Dissertation

1. Choose a topic, make sure it is suitable for thesis/dissertation project, and make sure it is about your field of study (e.g., communication). Also think about the end result of your thesis/dissertation: Are you interested in presenting your research at a conference or publishing your research in an academic journal? Are you interested in the practical implications of your research that might benefit some organization or group of people? Will the thesis or dissertation project help you to do your current job better or prepare you to go into a Ph.D. program/get an academic job? How might your research have practical benefits beyond the thesis/dissertation itself? Discuss these issues with your advisor and committee. During your coursework, be thinking about what you would like to write about for your thesis/dissertation.

2. Begin literature review and background of topic review: Review enough material that you know the historical context of the issues/events/artifacts that you will be studying. For the literature review, include material that relates to your topic and some way in which you will contribute to your discipline. Discuss with your advisor your plan of action, your methodology, the issues/events/artifacts that will help make an argument/contribution to your discipline.

3. Begin writing the thesis/dissertation proposal. The proposal can be anywhere from 15-20 pages to the first three chapters. It could include the following parts:
Introduction to topic and what you want to study about that topic (3 pages)
Literature review so far (this does not have to be complete, but should be complete enough to provide a good sense that you have reviewed relevant work) (10 pages)
Proposed issues/events/artifacts for study, and research questions (1 page)
Proposed methodology (2 pages)
Bibliography (2-4 pages)
After you have written this proposal, in consultation with your advisor, you should have a thesis/dissertation proposal meeting, in which your committee will meet with you to ensure that everyone is on the same page about your topic.

4. The thesis/dissertation proposal will then become part of your thesis/dissertation, which could consist of the following chapters:
Chapter 1: introduction to topic, literature review/problem area, methodology, research questions (5-10 pages)
Chapter 2: literature review of relevant materials related to topic, your discipline, and other disciplines; other literature related to problem area within discipline that you want to address (15-20 pages)
Chapter 3: Methodology: description of approach to collecting data, whether surveys, scientific analysis, texts, ethnographies, or interviews (or some combination), description of theoretical framework for analysis (sometimes this goes in the literature review) (5-10 pages)
Chapter 4: Analysis of data: organize and code data into major themes that help you to advance an argument. Themes should be structured around the central argument of your thesis/dissertation. In qualitative work, you may have an idea of the argument you want to advance, but that can change as you begin to analyze your data. (25-40 pages; could be two chapters)
Chapter 5: Conclusion: explore how your analysis of data supports your overarching argument and what contributions your study makes to your discipline. This is an important part of the thesis/dissertation, and should be well-developed. (5-10 pages)

Timeline:
**Remember that committee members need approximately 1-2 weeks to read a thesis/dissertation proposal before the meeting date and approximately 2-4 weeks to read an entire thesis/dissertation before the final thesis/dissertation defense. Check with your advisor before you send the proposal or chapters to other committee members and schedule your proposal meeting/defense.
Month 1: meet with advisor to discuss topic, begin preliminary research, work on proposal for Institutional Review Board if you will be conducting interviews or using human subjects
Month 2: write thesis/dissertation proposal, set up meeting with committee, finalize IRB approval if needed
Month 3: begin data collection
Month 4: continue data collection and writing thesis/dissertation by chapters; sometimes it is most effective to start with chapter 4, and then add in other materials that you may need to chapter 2 and 3 later on
Month 5: consult with advisor on progress, continue data collection and writing
Month 6: consult with advisor on progress, continue data collection and writing
Month 7: submit draft of thesis/dissertation to advisor; work on revisions
Month 8: schedule your defense and submit the thesis/dissertation to the committee members with approval from your advisor
Month 9: make sure thesis/dissertation is formatted properly (submit to graduate school for formatting check), make final changes after defense, submit to graduate school