

## **Resources for Dissertation Writing**

The following sources were consulted during the creation of these handouts. For additional advice on dissertation writing, check out the following books.

Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis*. Henry Holt and Company: New York. 1998.

Bryant, Miles T. *The Portable Dissertation Advisor*. Corwin Press: Thousand Oaks, CA. 2004.

Casanave, Christine Pearson. *Before the Dissertation: A Textual Mentor for Doctoral Students at Early Stages of a Research Project*. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor. 2014.

Comer, Denise K. and Barbara Gina Garrett. *It's Just a Dissertation: The Irreverent Guide to Transforming Your Dissertation from Daunting to Doable to Done*. Fountainhead Press: Southlake, TX. 2014.

Cone, John D. and Sharon L. Foster. *Dissertations and Theses From Start to Finish: Psychology and Related Fields*. American Psychological Association: Washington, D.C. 2006.

Foss, Sonja K. and William Waters. *A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc: Plymouth. 2007.

Graustein, J.S. *How to Write an Exceptional Thesis or Dissertation: A Step-By-Step Guide from Proposal to Successful Defense*. Atlantic Publishing: Ocala, FL. 2014.

Rudestam, Kjell Erik and Rae R. Newton. *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Sage Publications: London. 2015.

## Managing Your Dissertation

The dissertation is probably the longest, most sustained, most complex piece of writing you have ever attempted. It's possible that the writing process that's worked for you before will have to be adjusted for this new task. Here are some tips to help you manage the planning and writing of your dissertation.

- 1. Set up a writing schedule.** Keep a paper or electronic schedule and block out the times that you will reserve specifically for working on the dissertation. Treat each of these timeslots as an important appointment with yourself. Be firm about not scheduling other appointments during those times. Setting aside specific regular writing blocks will help you avoid procrastination, and will give you designated times during which other responsibilities are not distracting you. If you schedule a whole day for writing, make sure to divide it into smaller blocks of time with breaks. Many people find they are more focused when they work intensely for 40 minutes intervals with breaks in between. Pomodoro timers have recently become a popular way to structure your writing day in this way – there are many available online.
- 2. Create a dedicated workspace.** Just as you've set aside a writing *time*, it also helps to have a writing *place*. This could be a library carrel, your home or department office, a café, a dining room table. If you like to work on campus, avoid places where colleagues or students usually come to find you. If you are working at home, avoid areas where you are likely to be distracted by the TV or family noise. (Also make sure you aren't bringing any distractions with you – there are several free programs that disable social media sites during selected times.) Find the place you work best, and then stick with it. If you visit the same place at the same times every week to write, eventually that place and time become associated with the act of writing, and it becomes easier to focus there.
- 3. Distill your argument into a single sentence.** Many writers find this challenging, but it will be worth it. Write your central thesis in a single, easy to understand sentence. Make sure it reflects all your major goals for the project. Imagine someone important has asked you what your dissertation is about and you have only ten seconds to tell them. (This may actually happen to you at some point, so it's good to be ready.) Write this thesis out on a notecard and post it somewhere prominent in your workspace. When you're feeling lost or on a tangent, refer back to it to keep you on track. Ask yourself: "Does what I'm writing get me closer to proving that thesis?"
- 4. Keep a research notebook.** It's helpful to have a place where you can collect all of your thoughts and discoveries. Find a nice, new, blank notebook that you can carry with you any time you might be away from your workspace researching. When you find something useful, or when a sudden idea strikes you, write it down in your notebook. It's ok if it's disorganized – you can always go back later and type your ideas out more clearly. The point is to always be able to write something down when you need to.

- 5. Visualize your ideas.** Don't feel trapped by the blinking cursor on your word processor. Many writers find it helpful, especially during the planning stages, to lay their ideas out visually. This could take many forms, depending on the type and stage of your project. Some find it helpful to outline, to lay out all of their ideas simply and linearly before writing. If you're dealing with a lot of interconnected ideas, try making an idea diagram, with your main argument in a circle in the center and related ideas connected to each other. You might do this on a dry erase board or a chalk board – it can help to stand and walk around while you're thinking. You can also try making copies of the pages of your research notebook and using highlighters to color-code related ideas or themes. These themes might become the main points of your outline. The more ways you have tried to visualize your project, the better prepared and organized you will be when you actually write.
- 6. Rewrite.** Spend as much time rewriting, revising, rethinking, and editing as you do drafting. There is a difference between the drafting stage and the revising stage, and both are important. In the drafting stage, you are just trying to get your raw ideas out on paper so you can see them all. You don't have to have perfect grammar or spelling. It's important that you allow ideas to emerge and concepts connect. Once all your ideas are there, then you can go back and rework so that they say what you really meant.

## Getting Stuck

Writer's block is a normal, though frustrating, part of the writing process. Here are some tips for avoiding or overcoming it.

1. **Cultivate a writing addiction.** Joan Bolker, author of *Writing your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*, suggests that you develop an addiction to writing. If you write a little bit every day, preferably at the same time and place, you will feel symptoms of withdrawal on the days you don't do it. If you cultivate a writing addiction, you are less likely to get stuck, and more likely to write your way through the problem when you do.
2. **Freewrite about your topic.** Freewriting is a tried-and-true method for working through writer's block. Set yourself a ten or fifteen minute timer, and tell yourself that you won't stop typing until that time is up. Write anything at all that comes to mind about your topic, in any order. Your goal isn't to produce finished pages; it's to get your mind and fingers moving again. By the time you're done, you might find you've uncovered a useful direction.
3. **Write about why you're stuck.** If you're having trouble even freewriting about your topic, tackle the problem head-on instead. Again, Joan Bolker suggests in *Writing your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* to "try writing about why you think you're stuck. Ask yourself questions, look for clues: how long have you been stuck, since when, what was going on then?" (95). Seeing the problem on paper can help you clarify what to do.
4. **Be spontaneous.** That writing addiction can help you avoid getting stuck. But if it happens anyway, try changing your pattern. Write in a new place or at a new time for a day or two. Write with pen and paper instead of computer. A small change in perspective might help shake ideas loose.
5. **Work in small steps.** Sometimes dissertation writers get stuck because they feel overwhelmed by the size of the project. When that happens, ignore the big picture for a few days and set yourself small, achievable goals. You'll feel good about accomplishing the goals you've set, even if they're small, and after a few days you'll find that your creative juices are flowing again.
6. **Consult your support systems.** Talk to your advisor or to your writing group. They know your work and can ask good questions to point you in the right direction.
7. **Talk to someone who is unfamiliar with your study.** Talking to someone who doesn't know anything about your work can force you to articulate your ideas more clearly and simply. Often, you will stumble on new ideas or directions.
8. **Don't punish yourself.** Some days you won't finish everything you planned to. If you turn writing into a punishment, it will start to feel like an unpleasant chore.

- 9. Just take some time off.** Everybody needs pleasant distractions from writing. It might be that you need some time to let your mind rest and recover before it's ready to move on to the next task. Think of rest and recovery time as a necessary part of the writing process rather than a distraction from it.

## Procrastination

“One of these days, I’m going to get help for my procrastination problem.” - Unknown

Here are some common reasons dissertation writers give for procrastinating, and some advice on how to get yourself moving.

**I can’t seem to get started. It’s so overwhelming.** Dissertations are huge and complicated projects. Instead of seeing it as one enormous year-long goal, try to see it as millions of tiny goals. Better yet, try to focus on the small steps you can take right now. If you think about what you can do today instead of all the things you will have to do eventually, it will seem much more manageable. Can you read five articles today? Outline your methods section? Type your references? A sense of accomplishment breeds confidence and energy, so be reasonable and fair to yourself. If you set five small goals and accomplish them, you’ll feel good about yourself and have more motivation to do more work tomorrow.

**I don’t know enough/haven’t read enough/don’t have a good enough hypothesis/haven’t worked out the problems well enough.** The dissertation is an unpredictable creature that evolves as you work on it, even through the very final revision. Which means that you must be comfortable with the idea that you will not have a complete picture of your dissertation when you start writing or researching. As you write, you will discover new ideas, discover new sources you didn’t know you needed. When you find those sources, your project will change, the writing will go in new directions. And so on. This recursive process of adjusting-as-you-go is normal. In fact, this underprepared feeling is probably as good a sign as any that it’s time to start writing.

**I need huge chunks of time to do this project, and I won’t have those until next summer/next month/next week.** Don’t sacrifice current progress for future efficiency. You might be able to work more *efficiently* with larger chunks of time, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get *something* done in the meantime. It’s not hard to find an hour long chunk of time three days a week. Make it an official part of your schedule. Even if you just write one page during that hour, that’s 40 or 50 pages over the course of a busy semester. Think of how much more efficiently you’ll be able to work next summer with that much work already behind you.

**I work better with a tight deadline.** Every dissertation runs into snags and unexpected setbacks. If you put off all of the work until the last minute, running into such problems can be devastating. If you’re really someone who works better under a deadline, build more frequent deadlines into your schedule, and find a way to make them seem real and consequential. Instead of seeing the defense date as the final deadline, set a deadline for research collection, a deadline for the proposal, a deadline for the first chapter, and so on. Share them with your advisor or family or writing group and ask them to hold you accountable - encourage them to ask you frequently about your progress. Alternately, set small rewards for meeting one of these deadlines, or small punishments for failing to meet one.

**Just one more episode/chapter/song/hyperlink first.** You need to have a life outside the dissertation, so this excuse is sometimes fine as long as you really mean it. Did you also say this to yourself before the episode/chapter/song/hyperlink you just finished? If so, keep your word.

## **Managing Work-Life Balance And Your Dissertation**

Sometimes you have to put your dissertation first, and sometimes you need to put it aside to manage other responsibilities like work, family, friends, and health. Knowing where and when to put your energy can be one of the greatest challenges of writing a dissertation. Here are a few pieces of advice to help you maintain a work-life balance.

**Make exercise, nutrition, sleep, and relaxation parts of your writing process.** It's important to build time for maintaining your personal well-being into your work week. You can't afford not to – many dissertation writers develop health problems over the course of their projects. The more time you spend sick, tired, or hungry, the longer the dissertation will take and the lower the quality your work will be. In addition, regular exercise and proper nutrition lowers stress levels, making you a happier and more efficient writer. So don't think of these as a distraction from your work; think of them as part of your work. From a time management perspective, it's better to put time for your health into your schedule than to lose entire days to stress or illness.

**Be selfish with your time.** Let your colleagues and students know that there are times when you will be unavailable because you are writing and researching. This is easy to do if you have made writing times a regular part of your weekly schedule. Learn how to say "no" to new responsibilities if they seem likely to distract you from either your project or the time you need to maintain your good health. If you live with family or roommates, check in with them regularly to negotiate times when you need to be left alone and times when they need you to be available.

**But not too selfish. Cultivate community.** Thinking is a social activity. Make sure that you have time to talk out your ideas with others and solicit feedback regularly. Have other people read your work regularly, and offer to read others' work just as often. Organize a writing group or dissertation support group where people can meet regularly to read and discuss their work or to talk about the dissertation process. It's easy to believe that your project is yours alone, but most dissertations don't get written without dozens of supporting contributions. In addition, staying engaged with your academic community helps keep your mind sharp and flexible.

**Make deadlines and keep them.** Making deadlines not only ensures that your work gets completed in a timely manner, it also helps you keep your work from imposing too much on your personal life. If you are diligent about working when your schedule says you should, and you are meeting deadlines, there's no reason to feel guilty about putting your dissertation aside at the end of the day.

**Understand that stress is normal, and plan ways to alleviate it.** No matter how carefully you schedule, how much you exercise, and how supportive your professional network is, the dissertation will still often be stressful. When you are feeling overwhelmed, like you're never going to finish, remember that this is normal, something that every dissertation writer has experienced. Take some time to engage in an activity to relieve your stress. Go for a walk. Do yoga. Read a few chapters of your favorite book. Cook a good meal. Watch a movie. Time spent on these things is not a waste if it relaxes you and leaves you ready to return to work with renewed energy and perspective.