

Dissertations

What this handout is about

Graduate school pundits often cite 50% or more as the attrition rate for ABD students (those who have completed All the requirements of their programs But the Dissertation). Why? This handout will not only answer this question, but also give you good, practical advice on starting, drafting, and completing your dissertation.

A quick tip—dissertation formatting

The Writing Center can't advise you about technical questions (for example, how to force Microsoft Word to set up tables correctly or format page numbers the way you want), but we know people who may be able to! See [this tip sheet](#) for more information.

Reasons for ABD inertia—the nature of the beast

Why don't doctoral candidates manage to get rolling on the dissertation any sooner, or KEEP rolling once they get started? Partly because the dissertation is a completely new experience that is much larger and more independent than your previous academic work.

1. Writing a dissertation is a completely new experience

To this point, being a graduate student has been, more or less, an extension of your earlier life as a student. Many people, in fact, go to graduate school because they have always been “good at school,” and want to continue with something that brings them success and self-confidence. The reading assignments, labs, papers, and tests you have been assigned as a graduate student may not have been so different from your undergraduate course work. The dissertation, on the other hand, is a new kind of academic project, unlike anything else you've done. It is the academic project that marks your transition from student to scholar.

2. Writing a dissertation is not only new, it's also a very large, very independent project

Writing a dissertation is a lot like writing a book. It is, by definition, a self-directed process. There are usually no weekly deadlines from professors, no regular discussions with classmates, no reading assignments, no one telling you what to do—you are on your own, writing something longer than you've ever written, and doing it without a net. This independence can make the process seem very intimidating.

3. The dissertation marks the transition from student to scholar and is stressful as a result

When you embark on this large, independent project, you may begin to ask yourself questions about your future in academia. After all, the dissertation is the beginning of the end of a graduate career. When you finish your dissertation, you have to change your life pretty dramatically —you may go on the job market, begin work as an independent scholar, develop classes, move out of a community that you have grown to love, and so on. You may also feel like your dissertation will begin to define your professional identity. You may feel like your research interests, your theoretical influences, and your skill as a writer may all be evaluated by this first piece of serious scholarship. Whether any of these points are true or not, you may find yourself questioning your commitment to your chosen profession or topic and unable to begin the dissertation.

So what can you do if you are questioning your commitments?

If you find yourself questioning your commitment to your dissertation or a career in academia, consider these tactics:

Do some soul-searching

This may be a time to ask yourself what the Ph.D. means to you and whether you really want to continue. Remember that what it means to you and what it means to your partner, family, or friends may be very different. You might make a list of all the reasons you want to get the Ph.D. and all the reasons you would rather not. You might try free-writing about your topic and the reasons it inspires you. You might plan out your life's possible courses for the next 2, 5, 10, or 20 years if you do and if you don't proceed with the degree. Through all this, ask yourself "What will make me happy? And why?"

Seek help from other sources of advice

If you are too close to your own graduate school anxieties to think critically about them, visit campus resources that can help you sort out your thinking on this difficult and important issue. Your advisor or colleagues in your department may be able to help you if you have a good relationship with them. Other graduate students, especially those who are about to finish or have finished, may be particularly helpful. University counseling services may prove helpful as well. They regularly talk with students about just this issue.

Remember that there is no shame in not pursuing this advanced degree

Many, many people lead happy, fulfilling lives, build lucrative and rewarding careers, make important contributions to knowledge, share interesting ideas with others, and generally get along just fine without three letters after their names. Deciding not to continue with a Ph.D. does not mean that you have "quit" or that others who remain in the program are smarter, more driven, or more virtuous than you are. It also does not mean that you have wasted the time and money that you invested in the degree up to the ABD stage. It may

simply mean that after considering your own personal motivations and goals, you decided this career choice wasn't for you—and that you plan to use the skills you honed as a graduate student in other ways that are more suited to you.

So what if you decide that the dissertation is for you? The good news!

You will build skills in writing your dissertation that you will use throughout your career

The dissertation is not a one-shot deal. Unlike the elaborate study strategies you developed in order to pass your comprehensive exams, writing the dissertation will enable you to start developing a set of valuable research and writing skills. Thinking analytically, synthesizing complicated information, writing well, and organizing your time will all serve you well regardless of the career you begin. If you choose a career in academia, the systems of support, research strategies, work schedules, and writing techniques that help you do the dissertation will help you write books, articles and lectures for many years to come.

The document itself may become an important part of your early career

If you take some care in developing your dissertation, the document can be transformed, after graduation, into a book or series of articles that can help launch your academic career. Unlike earlier course papers that just received a grade and were then shuttled off to a filing cabinet or trash bin, your dissertation can be used and revised for years to come. On the other hand, it can be an end as well as a beginning—you don't have to develop the dissertation beyond the completion of the degree if you don't want to. If you're sick of the topic, you can focus on just finishing it for the degree, and then move on to other projects.

With all that good news, what's the problem?

Sometimes, even if you appreciate the differences between the dissertation and previous work and know that you really want to complete the degree, you may still have trouble. Why? Both external and internal stresses can cause the dissertation process to be more difficult than it has to be.

Your topic, your advisor, and your committee: making them work for you

By the time you've reached this stage, you have probably already defended a dissertation proposal, chosen an advisor, and begun working with a committee. Sometimes, however, those three elements can prove to be major external sources of frustration. So how can you manage them to help yourself be as productive as possible?

1. Managing your topic

- Remember that your topic is not carved in stone. A lot of people change their topics as they work, paring down certain parts of the project or adding others. While you want to keep your advisor and committee informed about major changes in your focus, in most disciplines you do not have to follow strictly the research and writing plan that you suggested in your dissertation proposal. In fact, most people don't.
- Think about variables that could be cut down and how changes would affect the length, depth, breadth, and scholarly value of your study. Could you cut one or two experiments, case studies, regions, years, theorists, or chapters and still make a valuable contribution or, even more simply, just finish?
- Talk to your advisor about any changes you might make. He or she may be quite sympathetic to your desire to shorten an unwieldy project and may offer suggestions.
- Look at other dissertations from your department to get a sense of what kind of topic produces an acceptable dissertation—you may find that it's not the kind of huge masterpiece you were imagining and that you can work on a much smaller, more compact topic instead.

2. Managing your advisor

- At this stage in your graduate career, you should expect to assume some independence. By the time you finish your project, you will know more about your subject than your committee does. The student/teacher relationship you have with your advisor will necessarily change as you take this big step toward becoming his/her colleague.
- Talk with your advisor about how the two of you should work during the dissertation process. You might ask questions like: How often should I be in contact with you about my progress? Do you prefer to see whole drafts of chapters, relatively polished drafts, or are you happy to see smaller chunks of less-well-formed writing? If I give you a draft of a chapter on Monday, what do you think the turn-around time would be? Do you want to see the chapters in the order I write them, or in the order they'll wind up?
- Tell your advisor what kind of feedback would be most helpful to you. Sometimes an advisor can be giving unhelpful or discouraging feedback without realizing it. Letting him or her know, very specifically, what kinds of responses will be helpful to you at different stages of the writing process can help your advisor know how to help you.
- Keep your advisor informed. Advisors can be most helpful if they know what you are working on, what problems you are experiencing, and what progress you have made. A weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly meeting or progress report can prove helpful.
- Talk to other students who have the same advisor. You may find that they have developed strategies for working with your advisor that could help you communicate more effectively with him or her.
- If you have recurring problems communicating with your advisor, you can make a change. You could change advisors completely, but a less dramatic option might be to find another committee member who might be willing to serve as a "secondary advisor" and give you the kinds of feedback and support that you may need.

3. Managing your committee

- You may assemble your committee for the proposal defense, and then never see them until the final dissertation defense. That may work fine for you, or you may decide that you would prefer more frequent contact.
- Talk with your advisor about how committees usually work with doctoral candidates in your department.
- Ask the members of your committee whether they would prefer to see drafts of your chapters individually, or wait to see the final complete draft.
- Keep in regular contact with your committee, even if they don't want to see your work until it has been approved by your advisor. Let them know about fellowships you receive, fruitful research excursions, the directions your thinking is taking, and the plans you have for completion. In short, keep them aware that you are working hard and making progress.
- It doesn't hurt to talk to your committee when you're floundering either. Too often, we only talk to our professors when we're making progress and hide from them the rest of the time. If you share your frustrations or setbacks with a knowledgeable committee member, he or she might offer some very helpful suggestions for overcoming the obstacles you face—after all, your committee members have all written major research projects before, and have probably solved similar problems in their own work.
- It's important not to get too hung up on how your committee does (or doesn't) relate to you. Ultimately, you have to go forward no matter what they do.

“Too busy to work”: exhaustion, money, and time management

Even when you are dedicated to your dissertation and have no problems with your topic, advisor or committee, you can have trouble getting your dissertation written. Simple exhaustion, financial stresses, and family responsibilities can seem to conspire to keep you from doing the work that you need to do. While you can't do anything about many of these stresses —the rent needs to be paid, and the Grad School still wants you to know two foreign languages, for examples—you can change the way that you deal with these external concerns and minimize their impact on your psyche and productivity.

1. Seek help with the exhaustion

Often, graduate students juggle many personal and professional responsibilities while working on their dissertations. You may be teaching an undergraduate course, working a second job to make ends meet, seeking child care, writing conference papers, serving on committees, and more. All of these activities and worries can leave you feeling exhausted. Sometimes, finding time to exercise, meditate, or participate in relaxation programs (yoga, stretching, massage therapy, and so on) can help you cope with tiredness better, even if those things do little to alleviate the work load. The Student Recreation Center and Rams Head gyms offer several exercise classes that may prove useful and relaxing. Good nutrition can also go a long way toward improving your sense of well-being.

2. Seek external sources of funding

A fellowship, grant or scholarship can provide enough financial cushion that you can quit at least one job, and perhaps even find full funding for a year. The [Graduate School](#) offers [funding workshops and a GrantSource library](#) that can help you identify potential sources of funding. Full fellowships or grants, though, can be a mixed blessing. Often, having one part-time job or other commitment while researching or writing can help you structure your day, get to campus early in the morning, and so on. Without that structure, the day can slip by pretty quickly. With a whole year ahead of you with nothing to work on but the dissertation, there's a tendency to feel like you can put off the dissertation for a day, a week, or more—there's no sense of urgency. So while fellowships can be tremendously helpful, they also require great discipline to prove effective.

3. Work on time management

Effective time management can be another way to alleviate some of the external stresses of graduate school. **Here are a few strategies:**

- **Plan each day.** Block out the 30 minutes, hour, 3 hours, or whatever that you want to work on the dissertation.
- **Choose a scheduling strategy that works for you.** Some people like to schedule their daily dissertation work in terms of hours and minutes worked, and others in terms of “problems solved” or “pages written.” Figure out which works best for you.
- **Find a calendar, chart or other scheduling device that you like.** Some dissertation advice books offer elaborate scheduling mechanisms that require you to keep calendars of the entire year, of each month, of each week, and of each day (broken down by hour). This might be overdoing it, but find some sort of daily, weekly or monthly planner that makes sense to you and use it. Refer to it each morning to get a sense of what you plan to do each day.
- **Stick to your schedule.** If you write down that you will work on grading exams only until 2 P.M. and then turn to your dissertation, do it! Sometimes just setting that schedule can make you more efficient at grading (since you know you have only a set amount of time in which to get a lot of it done) and also ensure that you leave room in your life for the dissertation.
- **When planning your long-range goals, work backwards from commencement.** When do you need to turn in the dissertation to the Graduate School? To do that, when would you need to defend? To do that, when would you need to get it to the committee? Get specific—don’t use “this semester” as a deadline, use a specific date.
- **Don’t let immediate concerns take over the time you want to devote to this important long-term project.** It’s easy to let the dissertation (with no regular or immediate deadline) sit on the shelf because something with a more concrete deadline (a presentation to someone’s class on a specific date, for example) seems to be looming large. Plan for those events in advance, and don’t let them eat up all of your dissertation time.
- **Learn to say “No.”** Don’t accept every invitation to give a guest lecture, present at a graduate student forum, or attend a conference. Similarly, try not to agree to drive every needy friend to the airport, watch every neighbor’s cat while they’re away, and meet everyone you know at the Daily Grind at their convenience. If you find you can work steadily on your dissertation while doing some of these activities, by all means do them—but don’t feel guilty if you don’t have time to do a lot of favors for others right now.
- **If you are having trouble learning to say no or learning to budget time for your dissertation, try dividing your workload into “urgent tasks” (things that have impending deadlines) and “important tasks” (things that are important to you, but don’t have immediate deadlines).** Make sure that your important task (writing the dissertation) isn’t overwhelmed by things that are unimportant, but urgent. Organize so that you save time for what’s important and minimize the possibility of urgent items consuming your attention.
- **Finally, when all else fails, try the strategy of working on your dissertation for five minutes a day.** Surely you can find five minutes in between classes, after you brush your teeth, or while you wait for dinner to cook, right? Sometimes the biggest hurdle to time management isn’t finding big blocks of time in which to work—it’s simply starting to work in the available time. Once you work for five minutes (really work—no computer solitaire), you may find that another five minutes wouldn’t be so bad. Getting in the habit of working on the dissertation every day, even for a short period of time, can be an important time management strategy. As a side benefit, you may find that daily contact with your dissertation keeps it on your mind and enables ideas to percolate all day. If you’re keeping in daily touch with the ideas in your dissertation, you may discover that while waiting in line at the bank or

standing at the bus stop, you come up with new ideas and think through problems, and make your work go much more smoothly in the long run.

- **Think about this process as an opportunity to build self-trust.** When you make a promise to yourself that you will work for five minutes or an hour, keep it. Become someone you can count on.

Work smart: planning to work when, where, and how you work best

When scheduling your dissertation time, think about when, where and how you work best. By giving some thought to these details, you can ensure that the hours you schedule for dissertation work are productive.

1. Work on your dissertation during times that you are most productive

Do you write well in the morning, or are you too sleepy to do academic work? Can you work in the evening after a 9-5 day, or do you really need a break? Do you like to read/research on the same day that you write and, if so, do you prefer to write first and then turn to other sources, or the reverse? Once you determine the hours that are most productive for you (you may need to experiment at first), try to schedule those hours for dissertation work. If at all possible, plan your work schedule, errands and chores so that you reserve your productive hours for the dissertation. Directors of Graduate Studies and other employers may be pretty sympathetic to this desire to schedule your best hours for your dissertation—after all, the dissertation is your reason for being here and should be your number one priority.

2. Work on your dissertation in a space where you can be productive

- Figure out where you work well and plan to be there during your dissertation work hours. Do you get more done on campus or at home? There's no sense in planning to work at home two days a week if you wind up watching television every time you try to work at your kitchen table. Similarly, if you do your best work in your home study, try to avoid planning your days so that you are stuck on campus all day every day, without access to your best work space.
- Carrels work well for some people because they limit distractions—but others find them intolerably quiet and austere. Figure out whether or not one might work for you.
- If your work space is at home, make every effort to remove it from your bedroom. Many people don't sleep well if their work space and their sleep space are in the same room—their anxieties about their work can prevent them from getting to sleep quickly and having a restful night.
- Wherever you work, make sure you have good lighting, a comfortable, "healthy" chair, a sturdy desk, and whatever wrist-rests, mousepads, and so on you need to keep you posture and health in good order. The University Health and Safety office offers [guidelines for healthy computer work](#).
- If you get "stuck," try a change of scene. Take a book you've been meaning to read to a coffee house, to one of the campus libraries, to a park bench, etc.

3. Figure out how you work best, and try to work that way

- Develop rituals of work that might help you get more done. Lighting incense, brewing a pot of a particular kind of tea, pulling out a favorite pen, and other ritualistic behaviors can signal your brain that “it is time to get down to business.”
- Critically think about your work methods—not only about what you like to do, but also what actually helps you be productive. You may LOVE to listen to your favorite band while you write, for example, but if you wind up playing air guitar half the time instead of writing, it isn’t a strategy worth keeping.
- Decorate your work space for productivity. Some people find that having pictures of family and friends on their desk helps—sort of a silent “cheering section”—while others find that a photo of Mom and Dad just makes them homesick or dredges up fears of inadequacy. Some people work well with neutral colors around them, and others prefer bright colors that perk up the space. Some people like to put inspirational quotations in their workspace or encouraging notes from friends and family. You might try reconfiguring your work space to find a décor that helps you be productive.

The point is, figure out what works and DO THAT. If something seems to keep you from working, GET RID OF IT. And once you have the “ritual that works,” do it as often as you can when you write. Educational theorists have described “state-dependent learning,” which essentially means that the conditions under which one learns something are the conditions under which the individual is most likely to be able to remember and use that information. So working in a consistent setting can help you not only get great work done in discrete sessions but also pull together ideas from past work and use them constructively.

4. Don’t let the fact that you know when, where and how you work best prevent you from working in other times, places, and ways

Of course, while it’s ideal to plan your days to enable you to spend your most productive work time in your most productive work space working in your most productive method, you can’t always do that. So practice working elsewhere, and at other times. Being away from your favorite fountain pen is not an excuse not to write! Neither is losing your lucky rabbit’s foot, having to work on campus, or having to schedule something during your “work time.” Try to be flexible, and don’t use your rituals as excuses.

Graduate school regulations

Graduate students sometimes report that they feel bogged down by departmental requirements, graduate school regulations, and other bits of bureaucracy. **Here are a few tips to keep you sane:**

- Investigate graduation requirements early and plan a meeting with your department's graduate secretary or Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) to make sure you are making appropriate progress toward the degree.
- Keep a list or calendar of all the departmental and graduate school regulations and requirements and dates. Check things off as you complete them, and write down upcoming deadlines.
- Keep good records. If you are granted any exceptions to departmental or University rules or if you do anything unusual to fulfill a particular requirement, make sure that you get a letter stating that you have fulfilled the given requirement in writing and keep a copy of it. You never know when your current DGS might leave the position or retire. The next person to hold the job may not know about your exception and may not be willing to uphold it without written proof.
- Make sure, if you are using human subjects in your dissertation research, that you have followed all of the Graduate School regulations for your work. The human subjects paperwork can be quite time consuming and it is, of course, very important that it be done correctly.
- A final tip: follow the rules for margins, fonts, table formats, and so on in early drafts. It is much easier to write your dissertation with all the formatting correct than to have to reformat several computer files at the last minute.

Internal stresses that cause problems for dissertation writers

Some sources of graduate student stress are not external—instead, they come from within. Competition with other students, feelings of inadequacy, and plain ol' procrastination can all slow you down.

Competition

Competition is rampant among graduate students. Departments often hold meetings in which graduate students are ranked in order to determine who should be given funding or teaching appointments. Scholarships pick and choose the “best and the brightest,” and seminars can turn into arenas where students vie to make the smartest, most insightful comment in front of the professor. This competition can lead to a cut-throat atmosphere that encourages hostility and fears of inadequacy and also inhibits much-needed personal support. If you've reached the ABD stage, you've probably seen some of this action already. But what can you do if you feel that competition within your department is hindering your ability to get work done?

Remember that you are not in competition with the students in your department. Your only competition is more than likely with the graduate students at other universities who will be applying for jobs in your field at the same time you are. So you have NOTHING to fear from the other people in your department. After all, the people you go to grad school with will be the people who recommend you for tenure one day, review your book favorably, or greet you with a warm smile at your field's annual conference. Realistically, even the grad students at other schools aren't really your “competition”—rather, they are your colleagues. After all, if two people are writing dissertations on political theory in the civil rights movement, they may be in initial competition for jobs, but once they get jobs, they will be far more likely to work in a collegial way. They may present papers at the same conferences, be asked to review one another's work, edit journals together, and so on. Thinking of them as “the enemy” will do little to foster a positive spirit of academic professionalism.

If you are having problems with competition in your department, you can try to transform the sense of competition into one of cooperation. Try working on some collaborative projects with students in your department (like co-authoring a conference paper with a student doing similar research). Or form a writing and support group—the Writing Center can help you do that. Sometimes the idea of “we’re all in this together” can override the idea of “they’re all out to get me.” Remember, if you ever feel inadequate or like you “don’t measure up,” that almost everyone feels that way at some point or another. Many graduate students report feeling like a fraud at some time during (or through most of!) their graduate careers. Talking with one another may help you realize that the anxieties you have are shared by all, so there’s no reason to feel threatened by those who seem to be making more progress. Deep down, they’re as scared as you are.

It may be helpful to find a person who is AHEAD of you in the process (maybe a friend who has defended) to serve as support and to urge you to keep moving. It may also prove beneficial to help a student who is further behind in the program than you are, say, someone who hasn’t taken comps. Gathering wisdom from those who have gone before and passing it along to those who are coming up can foster a marvelous spirit of collegiality in a department and help everyone get more and better work done. If all else fails, and the competitive atmosphere among other students continues to cause you undue anxiety, don’t hang out in your department much. Come by to see your advisor. Stay in close contact with your committee. Meet bright, generous people in other departments. Let the Writing Center help you start an interdisciplinary writing group. Go to conferences and meet interesting supportive people on other campuses who will e-mail with you and share your joys, rather than trampling on them. Don’t let anyone else, in short, slow you down!

The procrastination monster

People procrastinate for a lot of reasons, some of which you already know. The key to beating procrastination, though, seems to be figuring out why you are procrastinating, so that you can develop strategies for stopping it. Good books and websites on the subject can help (see bibliography), and UNC resources are available to help with procrastination, writer’s block and other internal dissertation problems. The [University Counseling and Wellness Services](#) sometimes sponsors a dissertation support group, for example, that allows students to meet with a counselor in groups to work through dissertation problems.

Getting down to business: tips for writing consistently

Things to write when you don’t want to write

Okay, so you’ve figured out what you can do to manage the external stresses in your life, and you’ve done your best to fight your procrastination demons and do battle with feeling that you’re not worthy. You’ve got your workspace set up and time scheduled and you sit down to write and...nothing. Not a word is coming to you.

Here’s what to write when you don’t feel like writing:

- Make a list of all the little things you need to do for a given section of the dissertation, no matter how small. Write down everything that you need to do to get it out the door. Then when you don't feel like tackling something big, like relating a key point in your argument to the relevant literature, you can insist that you do something else, like photocopying an article you've been meaning to consult or checking your citations. You don't have to do everything on the list during the time you've allotted for dissertation work, but tell yourself that you DO have to do SOMETHING. You'll be surprised that the habit of getting something (no matter how small) done on the dissertation every day can be addicting.
- When you don't feel like writing, do "big picture" stuff that the graduate school needs you to do. Reformat margins, work on bibliography, and all that.
- Work on your acknowledgements. Remember all the people who have helped you and the great ideas they've helped you develop. You may feel more like working afterward.
- Write a part of your dissertation as a letter (or e-mail) to a good friend who would care. Sometimes setting aside the academic prose and just writing it to a buddy can be liberating and help you get the ideas out there. You can make it sound smart later.
- Free-write about why you're stuck, and perhaps even about how sick and tired you are of your dissertation/advisor/committee/etc. Venting can sometimes get you past the emotions of writer's block and move you toward creative solutions.

Boosts to keep you going

So let's say you DO feel like writing. **Here's some tips for how to go about it in a consistent way:**

- First, leave your work where you can see it and easily access it. If it's out of sight, it's out of mind. However, if you leave the next book you need to read on your desk, it's much more likely that you'll read it. Similarly, if you keep the chapter you need to edit active on your screen and don't have to dig through a bunch of files to find it, chances are it will be edited more quickly.
- If you're really feeling disorganized, clean your workspace. A clear desk and an organized set of notes can go a long way toward clearing your head and getting you back on track. Don't make the office-cleaning-ritual your number one choice for procrastination, though.
- Don't be afraid to work in "the wrong order." Some people like to work on one chapter at a time—the first chapter first, then the next chapter, and then the next until they are done. That's the model that a lot of us have for writing, but not everyone works like that. Some people find that they have to write up big ideas first, and then see how they fit together. Some people write chapter 5 before they write chapter 4. Some people do lots and lots of freewriting. The way to write a dissertation is the way that gets pages produced. If that means breaking the "rules," then break them.
- Give yourself permission to write the junkiest dissertation ever floated past an unwitting committee. That can be very liberating and help you get pages produced so that you can then edit them later. Get something on paper and then worry about making it perfect.
- Remember, when you feel anxious about the quality of your work, that dissertations aren't master works. They are your FIRST TRY at this, and no one's is really all that good, frankly. (Want proof? Order your advisor's dissertation from interlibrary loan.)
- Be reasonable. A lot of people beat themselves up with expectations to work 10 or 12 hours a day—many people recommend a max. of 4 or 5 hours. You simply can't write productively all day long, and trying will just burn you out. Schedule in breaks and time for procrastination. Your brain needs a rest every now and then—better to schedule one than to have your brain mutiny on you and take one anyway.
- Find the people in your department who are serious workers and emulate them. If you don't know who they are (often, they come to campus much earlier and leave much later than the rest of us, making them elusive indeed!), ask your advisor. He or she can probably tell you who they are. Ask them to share their tips with you and try out their advice.
- Similarly, find the non-workers in your department (they're easier to find—check the nearest coffee shop), and try NOT to emulate them. It can be easy to fall into a sort of fraternity/sorority of alleged dissertation writers who are bound by the mantra, "I'm not getting any work done." You certainly won't get any work done if you hang out with those folks.
- Write your dissertation in single-space. When you need a boost, double space it and be impressed with how many pages you've written! Then add the page numbers—it's even longer!
- As you print out chapter drafts, bibliographies, and such, put them in a notebook with dividers for each section. You'll see the notebook get thicker and thicker as the semester goes along, and it will encourage you to keep working.
- Finally, quit while you're ahead. Sometimes it helps to STOP for the day when you're on a roll. If you've got a great idea that you're developing and you know where you want to go next, write "Next, I want to introduce x, y, and z and explain how they're related—they all have the same characteristics of 1 and 2, and that clinches my theory of Q." Then save the file and turn off the computer, or put down the notepad. When you come back tomorrow, you will already know what to say next—and all that will be left is to say it. Hopefully, the momentum will carry you forward.

Feedback, rewards, punishments, and pre-wards as motivators

Many people use rewards, feedback, and punishments as motivators in the dissertation process. **Here are some examples:**

- A writing group, your advisor, trusted friends, and loving family members can all give you feedback that can be a motivator. When you are looking for motivational feedback, choose people to ask who you know will give you the sort of feedback you need to keep you going. Grandmothers are great at telling you you're brilliant, for example.
- And tell them what kind of feedback you want. It's okay to tell a reader, "I know this is rough, but I just want to make sure that you can understand my main argument." Then when they come back and say, "Yes, I understood," you can feel great!
- Give yourself rewards along the way. When you meet a deadline, have coffee with a friend, rent a movie, buy yourself an ice cream, write a letter to a friend, or do something else that will make you feel good about your accomplishment. Having a tangible reward, however small, can provide some added motivation to get work done.
- Some people schedule daily motivational rewards. If they really love to do the crossword, get a cappuccino, or watch a particular show every day, they tell themselves they get to do that thing after they have done the allotted amount of dissertation work.
- Punishments can also work. Some people find it useful to say, "If I don't get this done by that date, then I can't do _____."
- Pre-wards can also work. Instead of waiting until you've done the work, do something that makes you feel great before you sit down to write. That way, you'll be refreshed, recharged, and ready to work.

Feeling like a professional

One of the most important parts of becoming a scholar is feeling like one. The transition from student to scholar is a huge mental step toward completion. **Here are a few tips that can help:**

- Some people find it helpful to think about the dissertation as a regular, full-time job.
- Attend conferences and read broadly in your field.
- Deliver papers on your research (if writing up papers for conferences helps, rather than hinders, your progress on the dissertation).
- Start conversations with scholars at other schools who do similar work, and engage in exciting, intellectual conversations. Guest lecture in a friend's classes.
- Dress the part.
- Essentially, do things that help you feel like you have a legitimate place in academia. Some people find that if they pretend to be something they don't think they are for long enough, that they become it without even realizing they have done so.

Will

It may sound silly, but a major part of the dissertation writing a dissertation is simply having the will to write it –making yourself do it, even when you don't want to. The dissertation is a marathon, not a sprint, and it will take endurance, determination, and perseverance. Developing and sustaining the will to complete a complicated, long-term project is a habit that will serve you well in other areas of life.

Get silly

Take time to laugh at the process and at yourself. Make up a Top 10 lists of “rejected” dissertation titles. Figure out who would play whom in the movie version of your dissertation (or of your dissertation defense)! Come up with “dissertation proverbs” that will help you survive. **Here is a list of some we've heard:**

- “P” stands for Ph.D.
- A good dissertation is a done dissertation.
- What do you call a grad student who barely squeaks a lousy dissertation past her committee? Doctor.
- You ain't painting a masterpiece.
- It's not the last word on the topic; it's the first word.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find additional publications. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#). We revise these tips periodically and welcome feedback.

Books on dissertation writing, procrastination, and graduate school:

Becker, Howard S. 2007. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

While Becker's book is geared toward social scientists, writers in other disciplines will probably find it useful. Becker draws on his experience as a sociologist and as the leader of a course on writing for graduate student. He focuses on the process of writing, from developing a writing persona, to getting started, to editing. His chapter on “Getting it Out the Door” may prove especially helpful to graduate students. His tone is generally humorous, but some may tire of the sociological examples he uses.

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

Joan Bolker, a clinical psychologist and writing counselor, does not, in fact, tell you how to write your dissertation in only fifteen minutes a day. She does, however, explain how starting with fifteen minutes of work each day might lead to a habit of work that will lead to the successful completion of a dissertation. Her psychological training is particularly beneficial in the sections of the book where she describes the many underlying reasons behind graduate students' inability to do consistent work. She offers suggestions for handling all sorts of roadblocks. Some of her recommendations are long-range, large-scale changes like cultivating a “writing addiction.” Others are short-term, quick fix solutions, like making a list of all the things

you want to jump up and do while writing (like cleaning the oven, paying the bills, edging the lawn, etc.), promising yourself that you can do them when you have completed your allotted amount of work for the day. “You’ll be amazed,” she promises “how much less attractive the items on your list look once you’ve finished your writing that day” (pg. 90). Some may find her suggestions to take out additional loans or hire help with cleaning or child-care unrealistic, given their finances and the job market, but on the whole she offers useful advice.

Burka, Jane M., and Lenora M. Yuen. 1983. *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It Now*. Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing.

Psychologists Burka and Yuen divide their book into two parts—“Understanding Procrastination” and “Overcoming Procrastination.” They describe the different habits of procrastination and the reasons behind them in the first section, focusing on fear of success, fear of failure, fear of losing autonomy, fear of separation, and fear of attachment. They also describe how people become procrastinators. In the second section, they offer concrete advice for resolving problems with procrastination and explain how to set goals, schedule, improve timing, set up support, and so on. The book offers great insight into a very common problem.

Fitzpatrick, Jacqueline, Jan Secrist, and Debra J. Wright. 1998. *Secrets for a Successful Dissertation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.

Written in an inviting, often humorous style, this book deals with the mechanics of writing a dissertation (how the process works, how to organize literature reviews, and so on) as well as the more intangible aspects, such as the development of support groups and personal organizational strategies. The book includes a number of short and helpful checklists and “top secrets” set off from the main text for easy reference. The appendix provides a list of action words to introduce quotes, a list of suggested items for inclusion in a research proposal, a statistical decision tree, a list of general action verbs, and an impressive annotated bibliography of books on writing, research, confidence, public speaking, computers, and more. The authors’ backgrounds are in education and counseling.

Mauch, James E., and Jack W. Birch. 1983. *Guide to the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Conception to Publication*. New York: Marcel Dekker.

The authors offer a no-nonsense approach to planning your project, conducting research, writing, working with your committee, defending the dissertation, and developing it further. The book includes a number of charts, forms, and checklists to help you along the way. The book seems geared toward the dissertation writer who knows what he or she wants to do, and just needs some solid advice on form, planning, and strategy to move them in the right direction. If you know what you need to do and how you ought to do it, but just can’t seem to get moving, this book might not prove as useful as some of the more “touchy feely” titles on this list.

Peters, Robert. 1997. *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student’s Guide to Earning a Master’s or PhD*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Peters covers graduate school from deciding to go in the first place to completing the degree, offering valuable advice at every step along the way. (Skip the section on whether or not you should go to graduate school if you’re feeling down—it includes some depressing, if accurate, assessments of the job market.) Of particular interest to the dissertation writer are the chapters entitled The Doctorate: History and Hurdles, Managing Yourself, Choosing and Managing Your Thesis Committee, The Thesis Topic: Finding It, The Thesis

Proposal, The Thesis: Writing It, The Thesis Defense, Dealing with Stress and Depression, The Social Milieu and Swimming with the Mainstream: Returning Students, Women, Minorities, and Foreign Students. The book is based on interviews with graduate students, faculty members and counselors, and the real-life experience of the interviewees is particularly helpful. Peters offers a friendly and encouraging style, sound and realistic advice—and a sizable dose of humor.

Sternberg, David. 1981. *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*. New York: St. Martin's.

A sociologist and advisor to many graduate students, Sternberg focuses on moving the student from ABD to Ph.D. His chapters explore topic selection, filing systems, proposal-writing, research, writing, committee relations, “the Dissertation Dumps,” the defense, and the post-defense uses of the dissertation. Sternberg does strike somewhat of a balance between the “buck up” school that says “Just write the thing and quite whining” and the sympathetic school that is inclined to tell you “it’s okay,” hold your hand, and validate your feelings. On the whole, his suggestions tend to center around developing a plan for completion and adhering to it despite doubts, rather than exploring the doubts themselves in great depth. Some of his advice may seem dated. For example, in discussing sexism, he writes “deep-rooted sexism is still a fact of graduate university structure and hierarchy” that can be “exploited by a woman.” He concludes that the “feminist ABD has to suspend her struggle for that ongoing cause during the two years of the dissertation struggle.” (p. 150)

Helpful websites:

[Advice on Research and Writing](#): Lots of links on writing, public speaking, dissertation management, burnout, and more.

[How to be a Good Graduate Student](#): Marie DesJardins’ essay talks about several phases of the graduate experience, including the dissertation. She discusses some helpful hints for staying motivated and doing consistent work.

[Preparing Future Faculty](#): This page, a joint project of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the Council of Graduate Schools, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, explains the Preparing Future Faculty Programs and includes links and suggestions that may help graduate students and their advisors think constructively about the process of graduate education as a step toward faculty responsibilities.

[ASGS](#): Offers other links and an archive of articles and advice.

[Dissertation Tips](#): Kjell Erik Rudestam, Ph.D. and Rae Newton, Ph.D., authors of *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*.

[The ABD Survival Guide Newsletter](#): Information about the ABD Survival Guide newsletter (which is free) and other services from E-Coach (many of which are not free).



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