

Completing Your Dissertation Without Tears

Your dissertation is your union card. It is your entry into the academy. *But writing a dissertation can seem overwhelming.* It's scary to imagine writing a work 200 or more pages and submitting it to distinguished scholars whose opinion of your intelligence and talent will depend on what you have completed.

But remember: *The single biggest obstacle to completion is psychological.* To be sure, a dissertation involves far more research than you have ever done before. But by the time you begin your dissertation, you've already written countless essays, lab reports, and conference presentations. A dissertation is, in the end, simply a compilation of seminar papers—revised to provide conceptual unity. **Completing a dissertation, then, is mainly a matter of perseverance.**

It means, first of all, that you must **choose a topic that you are passionate about.** As Toni Morrison once said: "If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

Also **choose a do-able topic.** A good dissertation topic is clearly delimited. A topic that is overly broad, excessively ambitious, or vague is a recipe for failure. As the cliché goes: the only good dissertation is a finished dissertation.

Half a century ago, doctoral students were said to write theses, rather than dissertations. That is, they wrote manuscripts that addressed a clearly posed question and provided a compelling argument. Follow that earlier example. **Organize your dissertation, and its chapters, around questions: substantive, conceptual, and methodological.** Then look at what other scholars have said about these questions and consider the ways that you agree or disagree with them.

Take heart. One mentor said: "With almost every person whose dissertation I directed, the first draft chapters were disastrous." **Get your work on paper;** then you and your mentor can work together to get it into polished form.

Why dissertations don't get finished

1. *The task seems overwhelming.*

The solution: Break the project into small, manageable units.

2. *There are no clear deadlines.*

The solution: Work on sub-sections that you can finish in a predictable amount of time, preferably today.

3. *Being overpowered by negative thoughts.*

• *Silence your internal critic.*

Ignore or repress self-defeating thoughts.



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- **Overcome your feelings of inadequacy.**
Break your subject down into manageable subsections.
- **Refuse to submit to perfectionism.**
The solution: You must get material on paper before you can rework it.

4. Becoming isolated.

The solution: Find sounding boards.

5. Becoming overly anxious about your mentors' reactions.

The solution: Be a pro. Give each chapter to a mentor for comments.

Yes, You Can Finish Your Dissertation

1. Distill your arguments into a single sentence.

If you can explain your dissertation succinctly, you can write it.

"What I hope to show in this chapter/article/dissertation/book is _____."

Identify the basic questions or issues you are addressing and how your work relates to contemporary literature. State the overall significance of your work to your field

2 Set small goals.

Take baby steps. Don't ask yourself to "Write Chapter Two" - instead break it down into tiny do-able steps.

3. Remember the cliché: "You're not writing a book. You're writing five research papers."

Don't scare yourself. Write your dissertation in manageable segments. Dissertation chapters in the humanities are typically 40 to 60 double-spaced pages.

3. Avoid the mistakes dissertators make.

- Choosing a boring or overly broad and ambitious topic.
A good dissertation topic has clear focus and circumscribed limits.
- Failure to focus:
Every chapter should have a clear focus—an overarching question or issue that it addresses.
- Failing to keep references for every quotation or piece of evidence.

4. There are two kinds of research: research on your topic and research relevant to writing.

In addition to collecting data or quotations, look at how other scholars (or even journalists) handle your topic. How do they structure and frame their arguments? What key phrases do they use?

5. Brainstorm, then organize your ideas.

After you have identified key ideas, organize them into a structure, then work through the ideas one at a time.

6. Write when you don't want to write.

When you don't feel like writing, write SOMETHING.

Spell out a chapter's argument. Work on your introduction. Analyze some of your evidence. Work on the literature review. Write down your ideas. Whatever you do, don't stop writing.

7. Be selfish

Compartmentalize. Forget your other responsibilities and obligations. Find a time period when you can work—and protect it.

8. Find a sounding board

Find someone who you can speak to about your writing. Tell this person what you have accomplished that day, your arguments, and the challenges you encountered. A sounding board will not only help you

formulate and clarify your ideas, but will also help you make them more sophisticated, logical, and compelling.

Myths about Writing

Certain myths and misconceptions make writing problems worse and discourage you from incorporating writing into your teaching.

Myth 1: Skilled writers write effortlessly.

Every writer procrastinates, gets anxious, and loses focus. The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Richard Rhodes offers a simple, if crude, piece of advice: Keep your ass to the chair.

Model writing on weight loss: Strive for small, daily advances rather than attempting to do everything all at once. There is only way to write: write a lot.

Myth 2: Skilled writers write from carefully plotted outlines.

There is nothing wrong with brainstorming and carefully organizing your ideas. But in fact writing is messy. It is not a linear process.

Writing is thinking. It is during the writing process itself that you will come up with your best ideas.

Myth 3: There are two stages to the writing process: writing a draft and then editing it to correct grammar and delete typos and extraneous words.

There is no writing, only re-writing. And re-writing generally requires significant re-organization and rethinking.

General Advice about Writing

1. Writing is “dialogic”

Don’t write in isolation. When you write, you enter into a conversation, a debate, a controversy. Therefore, you must first understand and identify an existing debate. Then you can intervene and contribute to that debate.

In discussions of _____, controversy has swirled around _____.

2. A dissertation is not a survey. It addresses a problem or a question.

A dissertation advances an argument. It stakes out a thesis and supports it with evidence and logic.

Your argument should grab the reader’s attention. It debunks a myth, corrects a misconception, enters a debate, or challenges a popular interpretation. Be prepared to explain the significance of your topic succinctly and compellingly.

My dissertation will address the following question: _____.

It will fill the following gap in the literature: _____.

3. Writing is a social activity.

Don’t hesitate to find a “sounding board.” Talking out your arguments helps to make them more logical, concise, and persuasive.

4. Learn the “tricks of the trade”

Every writer needs to acquire the secrets of written argumentation

What are the secrets? They are a series of formulas that ensure complex thinking.

a. You must explain the significance of your topic:

I am studying _____, because I want to find out what/why/how _____ in order to help my reader understand _____

b. You must engage others who have studied the topic:

I think X is mistaken because she overlooks _____ .

X's theory of _____ is extremely useful because it sheds insight on the difficult problem of _____

Whereas X provides ample evidence that _____, Y and Z's research on _____ and _____ convinces me that _____ instead

c. You must effectively integrate quotations into your argument:

Evidence never speaks for itself. Evidence always needs to be interpreted and explained.

Signal the importance of what the author is saying: Basically, X is saying _____

Use quotations for your own purposes: I agree with X that _____, and would add _____

d. You can easily make your writing and argument more sophisticated by explaining how you agree or disagree with other peoples' ideas.

Although it is often said that _____, I claim _____.

Group X argues _____, and I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, _____.
On the other hand, _____.

I used to think _____. Now, however, after _____, I have come to see _____.

Debates over _____ tend to dominate discussions of _____. But these debates obscure the far more important issue of _____.

At this point you will probably object that _____. While it's true that _____, I still maintain _____.

"Of course the problem is far more complicated than _____,"

Dealing with Common Challenges

1. "I've got nothing to say"

Academic writing—whether this is an essay, a lab report, or a problem solving exercise-- involves taking part in an argument, conversation, and debate. Your job is to persuade a reader that your position is appropriate and sensible take on the issue.

- The first step is to identify the larger conversation surrounding an issue. Try to figure out how whatever you're writing about—an event, text, experiment, finding or whatever—fits into your larger subject or field.
- Then problematize the conversation: Look for questions, tensions, and unresolved issues. These provide openings for something new to say.
- Develop a thesis—a distinctive stance within the conversation.
Have an angle--a slant that gives your paper focus. Advance a provocative thesis that speaks to larger controversies.

How do you do this? Use the magic formula: Become part of a broader conversation or controversy.

- Refute an argument
- Refine an argument
- Reveal a gap
- Fill a gap
- Ask a new question or refine an older question

Unlike a legal brief, an academic argument must be fair-minded and balanced, based on evidence and taking account of alternate interpretations and counter-arguments.

2. Awkwardness

We'd like our writing to be original and elegant and their arguments nuanced and sophisticated, but often we'd be happy if our writing was clear. Instead of writing with concision, short active verbs, and a smooth flow of sentences, too often writing is wordy, filled with the passive voice and with arguments that are jumpy and undeveloped.

You can gain clarity by:

- Breaking sentences into easier-to-understand pieces.
Simplify. Cut out excess nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.
- Using active verbs and attaching verbs to clearly identified actors.
Minimize the use of the words "was," "were," and "is."
- Avoiding nominalizations—actions expressed as nouns.
Examples include argument instead of argue; analysis instead of analyze; performance instead of perform.
- Using transition phrases and words

Transitional phrases:

I will begin by...

Before I say what is wrong with..., I will first...

At this point, we need to consider the following objection...

Although I have shown..., I still need to...

Next, I will offer support for what is perhaps my most controversial claim, that...

Further support for this claim comes from...

Having argued that..., I need to consider rival views...

Transitional words.

To give multiple reasons: In addition, Also, In the first case

To explain: Because, Given, Since

To conclude an argument: Therefore, Hence, Consequently

To illustrate your argument: A case in point, To illustrate

To provide a specific example: Specifically, Namely

To intensify: Above all, Moreover, Furthermore, More importantly

To emphasize: Of course, Indeed, Certainly

To compare: Similarly, Likewise

To contrast: However, On the other hand, Even so

To speculate: Let's assume, Let's suppose

To concede an argument: Of course, Doubtless, While recognizing that...

- Using tenses consistently.
- Establishing an academic tone.
The student must establish a reasonable, open-minded tone that promises honest consideration of a question.
- Be careful about the beginnings and ends of paragraphs.
These are natural emphasis points.

3. So what?

An argument can be clearly written yet trivial. The question it grapples with may be insignificant and the argument can be simplistic. Here are some suggestions for making arguments more powerful and persuasive.

- Engage the reader.

The opening paragraph must grab the reader's attention.

- Crystallize the argument in a single sentence.
A paper must present a strong argument. But too often the thesis is weak, absent, or confusing.
- Remember the power of 3.
In classical rhetoric, this is the tricolon. Lists are more powerful when they contain at least three items.
- Don't sweep contrary evidence or alternate interpretations under the rug.
Engage the counter-arguments. Use words like admittedly, clearly, at first it may seem, in fairness.

4. Misusing quotations

Misuse of quotations is rampant in undergraduate papers. Sometimes, students quote too much—or too little. Sometimes, they blur their voice and those of the sources they quote. Often, they assume that quotations speak for themselves. Make sure when you use quotations that you:

- Explain the quotation's point.
- Integrate the quotation into the text.

5. Gripping introductions and strong conclusions

Journalism schools teach reporters to begin their stories with a lede: a gripping anecdote, a telling statistic, a provocative quotation, a surprising research finding. Ledes grab readers' attention and set the stage for your distinctive "take" or "angle" on a topic. A powerful introduction functions just like a lede. It captures the readers' attention and it allows you to then present your thesis or argument.

In oratory, the peroration is the conclusion of a speech or discourse. It is the place where the speaker recapitulates the argument and presses it a final time with renewed vigor. It provides an opportunity to remind, to reflect, to inspire, to leave the listener with a bit of wisdom—to sum up with panache. Mediocre essays simply recapitulate the paper's argument. Strong endings provide a larger vision or context, and broaden the implications of the paper's argument. They provide a fresh twist or a broaden the perspective. Often, they "close the circle"—connecting to the paper's introduction.