

Completing Your Dissertation: Strategies for Success

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Planning

- Select a topic area as early as possible in your doctoral program.
- As you near the proposal stage, narrow your dissertation topic so that it's doable in one year.
- Develop a clear statement of your research question and the scope of your project.
- Select a dissertation chair/mentor who fits with your temperament and work style.
- Establish a preliminary dissertation timeline, deadlines, and intermediate goals.
- Plan to clear your schedule to make time for the dissertation.
- Limit new commitments (e.g., teaching new course, projects). Learn to say no!

Structuring the Project

- Plan backwards. Make a timeline of your overall project and decide on a realistic final defense date. Then “plan backwards” to create intermediate deadlines each month to ensure you reach your destination on time.
- Create visual aides (diagrams, mind maps, timelines) to conceptualize the overall project and its smaller units (e.g., chapters). Display them prominently in your workspace.
- Arrange a work area with minimal distractions. Try to use the same workspace routinely.
- Keep important references (APA manual) handy, and organize your files in a logical way.
- Make use of software and technologies that may help you accomplish your goals more efficiently (e.g., Microsoft Word tables and table of contents, transcription machines).
- Invest time in learning to use bibliographic software (e.g. EndNote, ProCite, Citation) to help you stay organized and format your references.

Time Management

- Set up a regular work schedule and treat working on the dissertation like a FT or PT job.
- Commit to working on the dissertation at least five days a week. Momentum is magic!
- Select your “protected dissertation time.” Place strict time limits on other projects and responsibilities to honor your commitments and meet your deadlines.
- Be realistic about your timeline to avoid discouragement. Based on your timeline and goals, estimate the hours of work that will be required to achieve each goal. Then use the “Unschedule” (Fiore, 1989) to map out the hours that you actually have per day to spend on the dissertation. Note discrepancies, set priorities, and make adjustments.
- Use the “Unschedule” to evaluate whether or not you can take on new commitments – it forces you to see that new commitments take time from somewhere else in your schedule.
- Avoid activities that exacerbate procrastination and distraction during your protected writing time (e.g., e-mail, internet surfing for information).
- Establish daily goals. Cluster similar tasks together (e.g., having a library day, taking a morning to make important phone calls).
- Use “down time” and routine waiting time (e.g., doctor's office, haircut) to read and highlight articles, plan your next steps, or edit the latest version of a chapter.
- Maintain and revise your to-do list each night, and visualize exactly where you will begin the next day. Write down that task at the top of your “to do” list.

Writing

- Writing clarifies your thinking, helps you organize new information, and requires synthesis. Writing is the crank that must be turned to complete the dissertation.
- Write continuously throughout the entire process. Spend a minimum of 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week taking notes, summarizing articles, or writing paragraphs that address various topics within your dissertation.
- Write in brief 10-minute bursts when you feel stuck. Aim to complete a page every half hour.
- Separate writing from editing. Always start a work session by writing new material first, without self-criticism, and then proceed to editing.
- Start your writing sessions by writing what you already know.
- Create outlines or other maps of each chapter so that you will know where you're going.
- Save time by focusing your literature search on specific research questions based on your outline; however, be prepared to modify your outline as you learn more about your topic.
- Avoid becoming overwhelmed – don't try to synthesize too many sources at once. Approach your research in stages, working with 2-5 sources at a time. Document ideas and sources as you move along to stay organized.
- Consider breaking your literature search down into several waves, progressing from gathering general knowledge to more focused information, and finally to specific facts and statistics, building and expanding the section as you move through these waves.
- Learn when to stop. Set a goal for the number and type of sources you will seek for each variable, construct, idea, or paragraph, and stop when you have met this goal.
- Date each revision in the header to avoid confusion.
- Keep electronic versions of all your drafts until the dissertation is done; you may want to go back and capture some of the work you rejected earlier.

Staying Motivated

- Reward yourself when you reach daily, weekly, monthly milestones. Make a list of big and small rewards – anything that makes you smile. Use these often! Share your mini celebrations with others (by phone, email or in person) for extra reinforcement.
- Apply behavioral principles. Take mini breaks during work sessions, but not when you are stuck or frustrated or you will unwittingly reinforce “being stuck.” Decide to persevere at least 5 minutes (use a timer) and reward yourself with a short break after persisting. You may be surprised how persisting even 5 minutes motivates you to *want* to keep working!
- Set goals for 30-60 minute units of time during work sessions. Use a timer. Make a conscious decision to work on one task for a set number of minutes, then decide again.
- To get unstuck, try committing to “starting something” rather than “finishing something” for that hour, or moment. Repeat as needed. Remember, goals are met by repeated “starts.”
- Schedule regular guilt-free fun activities. They will keep you from feeling burned out, clear your mind, make you and your friends and family happier, and make it easier to resume focused work habits during protected dissertation time.
- Keep a personal journal and “write through” times of discouragement and frustration.
- Pay attention to what images, ideas, conversations, people, or actions help strengthen your resolve to focus and finish. Return to these sources of inspiration often.
- Don't compare yourself to other students – stay focused on your own progress.
- Use positive, encouraging self-talk about your progress, no matter how small the steps.
- Recognize that there will be disappointments and set-backs, and learn to let them go.
- Eat nutritious foods, rest well, and exercise regularly. Listen to your body and don't punish it.
- Build in personal level accountability. Make an agreement with someone else (advisor, writing group, friend) that you will keep to your short-term (daily, weekly) deadlines.

- Seek opportunities to discuss your work at a professional level, such as submitting part of your research to a conference, or presenting it at a campus forum. This provides you with a firm intermediary deadline, forces you to articulate why your work matters, gives you useful feedback, and is a powerful networking opportunity.
- Commit to finishing. Harness the power of your resolve.

Social & Academic Support

- Solicit adequate academic support (e.g., statistical assistance, editing help); emotional support (e.g., family, friends, peers); and administrative support (research assistance, office space, resources and materials needed to succeed).
- Arrange regular meetings and frequent contact with your dissertation advisor.
- Clarify and negotiate expectations with your advisor; consider a written agreement with a timeline.
- Be proactive in seeking feedback from your advisor; ask for help when you get stuck.
- Take feedback constructively. If some of the feedback you receive is anxiety-provoking, ask for clarification right away, and take a day off to consider it.
- Recognize that different people have different strengths to help you; accept all types of help.
- Stay connected to faculty/peers who can assist and support you. Be considerate of their time.
- Attend selected departmental events to stay connected, informed, and “on the radar.”
- Offer help to others when time allows, and find ways to show your friends you still care!
- Join or develop a peer dissertation support group (e.g., departmental, campus, on-line).
- Partner with a research or dissertation buddy to enhance accountability.
- Communicate regularly with others about your timeline and plans to finish.

Defense

- Attend at least two departmental defenses to get familiar with the process.
- Practice your defense by attending conferences and by scheduling “practice defenses” with classmates, colleagues, and a few faculty members.
- Remain relaxed while receiving feedback; take a moment to gather your thoughts before answering a difficult question.

Final Thoughts

- Do not quit! Convince yourself that you can succeed and learn from this experience.
- Celebrate your success with family, friends, and peers.
- Participate in the final graduation ceremony; it’s wonderful to be “hooded” and presented as a “doctor”!

Selected References

Cone, J. D., & Foster, S. L. (2006). *Dissertations and theses from start to finish: Psychology and Related Fields*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Fiore, N. (1989). *The now habit: A strategic program for overcoming procrastination and enjoying guilt-free play*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam.

Jain, R. D. (2002). *Get it done: A coach’s guide to dissertation success*. Columbia, MD: Moonswept Press.

Levine, S. J. (2005). *Writing and presenting your thesis or dissertation*. Retrieved 10-16-06 from www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes

Websites Supporting Dissertation Completion

<http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/>

All-But-Dissertation Survival Guide, a product of Mentor Coach LLC. Articles, tips, referrals to dissertation coaches in your area, and a free email newsletter with brief inspirational articles.

<http://www.gradschool.umd.edu/phdcompletion/phdcomp-faculty.htm>

Links to national programs addressing dissertation completion is issue, best practices, & resources.

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/dissertation.html>

Great tips on dissertation writing and links to resources.

http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/phd/obtaining_phd/dissertation2.html

Excellent list of links to best practices, tips, models, and support sites.

<http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/practices/topics/t04.html>

Promising practices for dissertation completion.

<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop/>

University of California, Berkeley, *Dissertation Proposal Workshop*.