

Dissertation Tips- Quit Whining and Start Writing

(in no particular order)

Some Things That Might Help...

- If you have to eat a frog... eat the frog for breakfast! In other words, do the hard parts first. Getting the unpleasant research, writing, or meetings out of the way on the front end will save you a tremendous amount of stress that would otherwise loom over your head and slow you down (while making the whole process more painful than it has to be).
- See if your university has a specific template to type the dissertation into. If it does, learn how to use the template or find someone you can hire to convert your document. Layout, margins, fonts, etc. can be extraordinarily specific in acceptability requirements... so best to get it right the first time.
- Do the process stuff (forms, approvals, meetings, etc.) as early as possible. Make extra copies of all paperwork & forms and keep them in one spot for easy retrieval. Be more organized than you usually are, unless of course you're one of those anal-retentive people that drives the rest of us crazy.
- Read (skim as appropriate) other good dissertations that use similar research methodology. A good way to find them is to ask your chair and/or a trusted committee member to recommend some.
- Find other recent graduates and pick their brains. Listen most closely to the ones who are positive and say, "You can do this... here's how..." Shy away from the whiners who are moving or moved slowly through the process. The reason they whine and move slow is that they didn't go about it very well.
- Choose a topic that you are passionate about. You will almost (or completely ☺) be sick of it by the time you are through... at least for a while.
- Remember, it is just a large writing project. Just eat the elephant one bite, or one chapter, at a time.
- Look at other dissertations and mimic the topic headings as appropriate. If you lay out the topic headings in outline form, it is easy to start filling in the blanks with your writing. If you just have a blank screen, it seems impossible.
- Just start writing! Do this for every chapter, every section, etc. You don't have to get it perfect right away. Getting your first thoughts on paper is often the hardest part. No need to be daunted, just start with some introductory thoughts each time and let it flow. You can clean it all up later with editing.
- Write the methodology chapter first. It is the most boring, so get it out of the way and the rest will be easier. Writing the methodology first also helps streamline your study and makes you stay true and focused... this will help you get it done quicker and in fewer words. The longest dissertations are not the best ones... the best ones are the ones with five signatures (or however many are required).
- Find one or two trusted editors to help you refine the writing before you present it to your chair and committee. Using too many editors will logjam your effort, and using none will slow you down and overload your chair. Ask a "busy" person to

help edit. People who are not busy will slow you down, because they are not busy for a reason (they don't like to work as much).

- Self-edit in stages. First, condense your writing by rewording unnecessary prepositional phrases. This technical writing skill will clean up your writing tremendously. For example, instead of writing ‘... members of the research group...’ use: “...research group members...” It’s just a little tweak, but they add up remarkably. Overall, this adjustment will condense your dissertation by several pages while making it easier to read and understand. Second, edit for content and form. Think, reflect, and ask yourself if someone who knows very little about this were reading it, would it flow enough to make sense? Instead of introduction, body, and conclusion think of it as:
 - Tell the reader what you are going to say
 - Say it
 - Tell the reader what you said

Pay particular attention to transition between paragraphs. The last sentence of one or the first sentence of the next should usually tie the writing together so it flows nicely. Third, edit for typos. If you edit for typos after doing the other edits you will catch more of them, because you’ll correct several along the way and then clean up the few that are remaining.

- Read several articles and/or books written by your chair. Get a sense of her/his writing/research style and preferences. You don’t need to totally mimic the writing style, but understanding it and following some good tips will move you along much quicker. The chair will naturally assume her/his own writing style is a good way to do things. You need to also do this for other committee members, but especially for the chair.
- Research and find references and bibliography online. It saves a ton of time. I know several colleagues who rarely went to a library physically or not at all.
- When you find a good reference to include in your bibliography, look at who that author referenced. You’ll get dozens of leads that will significantly pad your bibliography with quality references you can look up quickly and find quotes.
- Remember that you don’t have to read the entire book, article, etc. to get a good sense of what it says and use the references. You are reading (and skimming) for content and worthwhile quotes and references... not for pleasure or memorization. Keep it as brief as possible with each research item.
- Once a chapter or other major section is edited, get it to your chair (follow their guidance/preferences, of course). If they are okay with it, getting it to them as you go saves a lot of rewrite later. Save copies of all their corrections/suggestions if they have any... same with committee members. Your well-meaning chair and committee members will sometimes correct their own corrections as time goes by and they forget what they recommended previously (if they are nitpicky).
- Reference your chair and committee members, at least occasionally. While not usually required, this is a good political move. They like to approve dissertations that demonstrate understanding and implementation of their own ideas. You don’t have to (and probably shouldn’t) overdo this.
- Stay as organized as you are capable of. There is no magic way to go about this. Some people write at scheduled times, others work in bursts, others vary the

schedule, some go at it like killing snakes until they crash. Then they sleep a few days and tackle it again. It really doesn't matter... just do what works for you.

- Set achievable writing & research goals. Incremental goals are good with little self-rewards. Something like, when this chapter is written, edited, and off to the chair you can go shopping, go out someplace nice, take a mental and physical break, etc.
- Share and talk with other doctoral students, but make sure the conversations are about achievement and not about complaining. This is a tough process... if it wasn't then anybody could/would do it. No sense complaining-- it will just bog you down. Again, find positive people who will keep the wind in your sails and boost your positive energy with their own enthusiasm for success.
- Don't take yourself too seriously. No one else does ☺. And, don't expect family and friends who have not been through such a process to truly understand or appreciate it. If you do, you will be doomed to disappointment.
- Keep it all in perspective... some people say that completing a dissertation means that you know more and more about less and less-- until you know virtually everything about practically nothing!
- Think, think, think. Your chair and committee want to see you writing at a doctoral level and synthesizing your reading and other research. They do not care if you change the world or win a Pulitzer Prize. A dissertation is a demonstration that you can successfully do doctoral level research and write it up. Period. (Mark Milliron, personal communication, December 2001).
- Don't take corrections by your chair or committee personally. Just incorporate them and stay even-keel. They are helping you polish your writing. On the flip side, stick tactfully to your major convictions. This is a fine line dance, but one thing the chair and committee are likely to look for in your progress is the calm passion and conviction of someone who knows their stuff and has the confidence to "defend" it with an open mind for continual improvement and learning.
- Like Nike says, "Just do it!" There is nothing magic about researching and writing a dissertation. It's just a lot of work that anyone with a good mind and a lot of perseverance can do. Some are great and some are just acceptable. But they're all good when they have your committee signatures, Dr. (your name here).