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On Writing a Dissertation

Donald Chisholm

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about how to write a dissertation quickly. For that you have to ask somebody else.

*Dissertations are greedy.
They want every minute
and they won't let go of
you until you give in.*

(1) At the beginning, say to yourself, "This may be the last chance I ever get to write something substantial that I really want to write in the way I want to write it and without major distractions." It will almost certainly be the first such opportunity. And it is an opportunity, not just another hurdle. Having adopted this attitude, you will be better able to avoid such pitfalls as choosing a dissertation topic that someone else suggests because they wish that they had done it. This is your baby; you are the one who will be up walking with it in the middle of the night; so it had better be a baby you can love.

(2) Give yourself the opportunity to do it right. Give yourself time without any other major commitments for as long as you can. If, for example, you think that you can write and teach at the same time, you will be sorely disappointed. If you want to teach, don't kick yourself when you're not getting much done on the dissertation. When you're ready to write, do it singlemindedly.

(3) Expect to have periods of black despair over the whole thing. One Christmas I was home working while others were travelling and partying, and I had just hit a particularly difficult obstacle with the thesis. I was speaking to a friend long distance who had just recently finished his dissertation. "How are you?" he asked. I told him. "Terrible. I'll never do it. I thought this part was fine and now there seem to be insurmountable problems. I can't even think about it anymore. . . ." "Good," he said, "You must be almost done." He was right.

1984 in the field of political philosophy. Her dissertation, "John Locke's Liberalism," was submitted by the University of Chicago and directed by Joseph Cropsey.

When you hit the low points, give yourself a break. It will pass.

(4) Notwithstanding point #1 above, at the end, say to yourself, "This won't be the last chance I ever get to write something like this or to work on these things." At this point, you must adopt this attitude, or you will never finish. Whatever you do, it won't be perfect, and you have to let go of it sometime. So remind yourself that, while the thesis is the completion of your graduate education, it is also the basis for the work that you will be doing in the immediate future. You'll have plenty of opportunity to go back and rethink. When you're satisfied with the thesis, even recognizing that there are certain things that you might have done better, then it's probably really done. Most of us are our own worst critics.

To anyone reading this who is currently in the throes of writing a dissertation, let me add, hang in there. It's worth it. There's nothing like the feeling when it's finally done and you can say to yourself, "I really wanted to do this. I did it. And it ain't half bad."

On Writing a Dissertation

Donald Chisholm

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Writing is the most painful thing I do. I find the creative process mysterious and frequently unfathomable. Although writing a dissertation falls into the broader category of writing—also being painful and the process a mystery—it differs significantly from other sorts of writing, differences that render it more difficult yet.

I doubt there are many general rules for

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The Leonard D. White award is given to Donald Chisholm (left) by selection committee chair Earl M. Lewis of Trinity University.

writing dissertations. Dissertation writers encounter problems in common, but given variations in personality and context, need to solve them each in his own way. Departments vary considerably in the emphasis and place given the dissertation. Committees rarely behave the same way even within the same department. What remains for me to discuss are my own trial and error discoveries—applicable most directly to those finding themselves in academic surroundings similar to my own, hopefully containing some worth for others. In the end, however, one must stumble onto his own ways of facilitating the creative process.

I am convinced now that completing a dissertation depends largely on discovering that most of the premises about the process one initially holds are incorrect, and on finding some way to live with those realizations. One learns how to write even as he attempts the dissertation. Finishing also depends on the discovery or creation of practical procedures for writing. In an interwoven fashion, I wish to address both issues here.

Usually the dissertation is the largest and most complex work any of us will have attempted by that stage of our careers. Unlike earlier writing efforts of lesser magnitude, it cannot be held in our heads as a complete entity, and must be decomposed into smaller, more manageable problems, which of course are themselves never discrete or simple. I cannot overemphasize the importance of decomposition. More on this in a moment.

Neither is the dissertation something that

can be written in a single massive stream either over night or in a few days. It is a major project requiring different tactics than one may have employed successfully in earlier, less complex endeavors. It rarely springs from the mind fully formed. By its nature a dissertation requires an iterative process in which one achieves a closer approximation of what it is he means to say with each successive draft. To assume that it must come out perfectly the first time is both unrealistic and a virtual guarantor that nothing will be written at all. One must put something down on paper first, however inelegant, vague, and crudely phrased, before it can be refined into something compact and coherent.

Further, writing and editing are two distinct enterprises. Those who fail to comprehend this elemental point will probably never write a dissertation. Obviously, any device (such as a word processor) that facilitates multiple drafts is to be desired. When finally it does come time for editing and revision, one might (as I was advised to do by an inventive member of my committee) spend some time reading pleasing mellifluous prose; evenings passed with the collected essays of E. B. White surely helped reduce (though not eliminate) my own writing's turgid qualities.

At the early stages, one usually has, upon careful reflection, not one but several dissertations linked by common empirical material or theoretical foundations. The problem stems from an embarrassment of riches, not abject poverty. This difficulty is compounded by the retention for a goodly portion of the process the nearly inescapable and strong belief that one will and must write the definitive word on the subject. Both notions are patently false. One will live to write again another day on other aspects of the problem and surely whatever one may write this time (or next time) will be incomplete and at least partially incorrect. I still take comfort from Karl Popper's confession that even as he completed a work he realized the inevitable inadequacy of his effort. One learns to live with that inadequacy, paring down the dissertation to a manageable size with respect to both theoretical

issues and empirical domain, realizing more and better can be said in another effort at a later date. Therefore, usually one must be ruthless in efforts to reduce the dissertation's length, cutting tangential substance as well as extraneous language. By the last draft, my dissertation was nearly 100 pages shorter (and substantially narrower in scope) than it had been at the first.

I had also to learn to accept a concomitant inadequacy: one never masters completely the literature relevant to the problem at hand. No matter how thorough the search, some stones will be left unturned, and of the works one does read, much of value will be missed. At the end, rereading articles initially dismissed as trivial or irrelevant made me feel like the young man who at age 30 is surprised to find how much wiser his father has become since he was 21. The practical implication is that at some point one has to accept this inevitable inadequacy, stop reading and begin writing.

Another problem resides in the common perception of the dissertation as the sole crucible for one's worth as an academic. Though it is but our initial major foray into research and writing, and the ever present tendency is to compare it with the best work of mature scholars in our field, it need not be the only written work we do, nor should we be hasty to make such lopsided comparisons. To do so can be crippling. In his fine article, "On Getting Hung Up," Arthur Stinchcombe persuasively makes this and related points.

It came to me only in the midst of the dissertation that the logic of presentation in academic work rarely resembles the logic of discovery or creation. Writing turned out to be messier and more roundabout than I had ever imagined, requiring tolerance of ambiguity for longer than I ever thought possible. When my mind refused to work in the linear fashion typifying the presentation of arguments in most academic work, I initially despaired, and then surrendered, writing on the problem my mind wished to entertain at the time, rather than forcing it to focus on what I had intended to do that day. I persisted in approaching difficult problems, obliquely if necessary, sidling

up to them, gradually bringing them into focus, while learning to be patient and confident that with application on my part they would ultimately fall into place. Throughout, nothing I wrote was ever thrown away; instead I filed it so I would stumble over it when I reached a point where it might fit. I sometimes found that I had written virtually the same thought several times.

Relation of the subproblems and presentation of the larger argument were treated as issues mostly independent of laying out the arguments of individual segments. In point of fact I wrote fragments which were then grouped under sub-headings, their relations established, assembled thence into chapters, the chapter order decided upon, transitions constructed between the chapters, and ultimately the introduction and conclusion written. Despite my conscious decomposition of the dissertation, this process remained messy and conflictual: I frequently found no clearcut choice among competing ways of organizing the argument or presenting findings. This necessitated making a decision and living with the uncomfortable feeling that there must be a better way.

Much that I learned about these aspects of the writing process came from writers of prose fiction, notably Richard McKenna (author of *The Sand Pebbles*), whose "Journey With a Little Man" captures better than anything else I know the mystical aspects of writing and the necessity of accepting the creative

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process as it unfolds, and Raymond Chandler, whose notebooks showed the much larger scope of his thought than what would finally appear in his published prose. On the issue of decomposi-

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tion and reconstruction, Herbert Simon's "Structure of Ill-Structured Problems" proved instructive; his discussion of the similarities between writing a fugue and constructing a battleship (both "ill-structured" problems) shed light simultaneously on both my substantive problem and how I might write about it. Another Simon article on "Style in Design" proved illuminating on the problem of alternate organizations or designs and what criteria one might use to decide.

Finishing depends on the discovery or creation of practical procedures for writing.

Being an inordinate procrastinator, I set difficult but manageable goals for myself once I actually commenced writing, rewarding successful completion of a chapter with a vacation of a few days. This form of self-bribery seemed to work for me. For daily goals I asked no more of myself than to sit for a minimum of four hours (although it sometimes turned into eight or ten), and to write about whatever came to my mind, whether it was to the point of the present chapter or not. Often I had to bribe myself just to finish a sentence or paragraph. I also tried never quite to finish a thought as I closed the day, so that I would be provided with priming for the pump on the following day. In the later stages, when my mind refused to cooperate on substance, I worked on footnotes and bibliography.

I once entertained notions that a special location was vital to successful writing, and for several weeks isolated myself in a cabin on the furthest reaches of Long Island, much as some of my favorite novelists had done. After having cut several cords of wood and read every novel in the place, I concluded that location might help but is no substitute for being motivated and ready to write. Ultimately I did my writing amidst the confusion of a windowless room shared with 11 other graduate students. While a special place to do nothing but write can aid the process, in the final analysis

motivation counts most heavily, and makes all else seem trivial and irrelevant. The truth of this came home to me when at one point I found myself resenting the approach of Christmas (one of my favorite holidays) because it would interfere with my writing.

Though I was (and remain) confident that it runs counter to our professional norms, nonetheless at some point I decided that I wanted no more criticism of either my ideas or my writing and "put the blinders on." My confidence was yet too fragile and my argument too ill-formed to permit the introduction of dissonance and doubt by others. Well-intentioned advisors and colleagues sometimes do inestimable damage by proffering criticism at inappropriate, usually premature, junctures. On the other hand, queries of "Have you seen this article?" sometimes amount to no more than a subtle form of aggression in which inadequacies in your work are implied. Guidance is essential, so is judicious self-restraint; one is under no obligation to seek or accept criticism at all stages of the dissertation. Neither must one accept all criticism—even from the dissertation committee—as valid.

One's colleagues do remain vitally important in combating the sense of isolation and loneliness one often feels as he writes. Not infrequently one is convinced that he is the only one to experience the difficulties associated with writing a dissertation. The typical cyclic swings between euphoria and depression are but one example of this. My own casual observations indicate almost all of my colleagues went through similar such

It came to me only in the midst of the dissertation that the logic of presentation in academic work rarely resembles the logic of discovery or creation.

patterns, and at comparable points in the process. Not until he began showing symptoms of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with his work of the kind I had experienced with my own did I believe

that one of my closest friends was actually writing. It requires others in the same fix to convince one not only of the virtual inevitability and universality of the problems of writing, but of the ability in the end to deal with them, satisfactorily and sufficiently, if not optimally and completely. A group of dissertation writers (which may be composed of people at different though preferably overlapping stages of the dissertation), meeting informally, can go far to smooth the process for the individuals involved.

If the writing process remains for me at its core magical and not subject to rationalization, I did at least find some ways to make it easier and less fearful. While I firmly believe that no one can ever teach anyone else how to write, they can at least forewarn them of the dangers which lie ahead. One has to find his own path but there are ways of reducing the obstacles to that discovery. I have tried to suggest some here. And finally, lest I conclude on a somber note, I would point out that writing is also the most exhilarating thing I do.

Strategic Choices and Dangerous Traps

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Reflecting back, the most meaningful way of describing the dissertation writing experience is as a succession of strategic choices at each of which there is a dangerous trap to be avoided.

The first strategic choice is the selection of a topic. There are many obvious con-

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Bruce W. Jentleson (left) receives the Harold D. Lasswell award from James E. Anderson of the University of Houston.

siderations here. Make sure it is something in which you are sufficiently interested to spend at minimum the next 2-3 years of your life (and probably longer) fully immersed in it. Make sure it is researchable, both in terms of data being available and in terms of the topic not already being so over-researched that originality will be hard to come by. You also should by now have acquired a strong background through your coursework in the principal relevant areas of theory and history, as well as with whatever methodological tools are going to be necessary for your empirical work.

In addition, it may be particularly useful to think in terms of avoiding two potential traps in selecting a topic. On the one hand there is the trap of trying somehow to integrate every single one of those ideas which in your graduate school years you may have found truly intellectually exciting. Don't try to say everything (you have a whole career to do that!). Delimit your topic, or it will never be manageable as a research project. On the other hand, make sure your topic is not purely monographic. One of my committee members always used to ask, "what is this a case of?" A dissertation which ends up an interesting but descriptive-only single case study will not be very well regarded by faculty search committees.

The second strategic choice is the selection of a dissertation committee. All of us