

Article: “Advice to Dissertation Writers”
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Advice to Dissertation Writers

Ruth Grant

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Forum

task of all. In deciding to journey over uncharted terrain, finding my way was often bewildering. I hoped to seek comfort in the work of others only to come up empty handed. At that point, I felt a strange sensation of frustration and satisfaction. It was difficult to advance without sufficient footnotes, but ultimately quite rewarding to wrestle with new ideas and to see the theoretical framework through to completion. My suggestion to those writing a dissertation would be to avoid getting hemmed in by the literature or overwhelmed by the experts in the field. Be imaginative and autonomous in designing a theoretical framework. Experiment with different theoretical linkages until you find one that makes the most sense, given your general understanding of the problem. "Reality tests" can and will always be performed later on the basis of empirical inquiry. This is not to make a case solely for deductive logic. One can proceed deductively or inductively; I prefer a movement between the two.

The second challenge was to fit my historical narrative to the theory. It was important to immerse myself in historical detail without drowning in a sea of facts. The task was to know which facts were pertinent and which were tangential or irrelevant to the study, and to then weave a pattern which while rich in detail was mindful of the parameters set by the theory itself. This meant reading the literature with a simultaneous view toward the concrete and abstract. It meant writing the case studies while keeping the

theoretical linkages in mind at all times. I have no simple formula to follow here; it was a difficult but ultimately rewarding experience.

Another difficulty was in placing limits on my research. The temptation to read one more book or search another library shelf was always great. Investigation leads one to ask questions which demand answers. Those answers in turn breed new questions and so on until the process gets out of hand. Hence I found it necessary to place strict time limits on my work. Sometimes this meant altering objectives to comply with a timetable. This was not to shortchange myself, but rather to avoid becoming paralyzed by perpetual analysis. I never fully satisfied my desire to read on, but I did produce a final product. And as any Ph.D. student will no doubt concur, it is important to finish.

Finally, in writing a dissertation it is of course necessary to make a contribution to the literature. This often leads Ph.D. students down the narrow path of excessive specialization. They leave their mark by carving out a tiny niche in a field cluttered with other small contributions. In my mind, it is worth the extra time and effort to grapple with broad and complex theoretical issues. It is important to place one's study in a larger context. Whether micro or macro in design, the dissertation should help to shed light on a dilemma of political science, and contribute to an ongoing intellectual debate in the field. The trick is to extend one's reach while at the same time executing a manageable and scientific study.



Ruth Grant (left) accepts the Leo Strauss award from selection committee chair Amy Gutmann of Princeton University.

Advice to Dissertation Writers

Ruth Grant

University of Chicago

Before reading the advice that follows, you should be warned that it is not advice

Ruth Grant is one of two recipients of the Leo Strauss award for the best doctoral dissertation completed and accepted during 1983 or

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

University of California, San Diego

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

Donald Chisholm holds the 1985 Leonard D. White award for the best doctoral dissertation completed and accepted during 1983 or 1984 in the field of public administration. His dissertation, "Informal Organization and the Problem of Coordination," was submitted by the University of California, Berkeley. His dissertation advisor was Martin Landau.