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## Reflections on Writing a Dissertation

David Pion-Berlin

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pattern that becomes your own work routine is a necessary first step for serious writing.

4. *Blitzing*. There comes a time in every dissertation when it just has to take over your life. I resisted this for a long time, thinking I could get the dissertation done and still do normal things. But dissertations are greedy. They want every minute and they won't let go of you until you give in and give up everything, including all the social activity of the earlier phases. The phase of blitzing, diving into the dissertation and not coming out until it is done, means abandoning everyone and everything else—at least temporarily. The difficulty, as many people learn, is that much changes about both the writer and the world while the writer is hiding. At the end of the blitz, one sometimes finds one has, without realizing it at the time, broken with the past. It is this phase which most recalls Winston Smith's betrayal of Julia. The dissertation writer, like Winston Smith, betrays everyone and everything, at least temporarily, when faced with a personally constructed nightmare come to life. And after the betrayal, one becomes, like Winston Smith, deeply committed to the force which ruptured one's life. One may even receive praise for surviving the ordeal and for having emerged as a full member of a new community, sacrificing an old life as an intellectual adolescent for a new life as an academic adult.

The poet and novelist Marge Piercy, giving advice to young creative writers, in "For the Young Who Want To" (from *The Moon Is Always Female*, New York: Knopf, 1980, pp. 84-85) has obviously experienced the process of marathon writing and its stages of betrayal, commitment and the construction of a new identity. She wrote: "The real writer is one/ who really writes. Talent/ is an invention like phlogiston/ after the fact of fire./ Work is its own cure. You have to/ like it better than being loved."

## Reflections on Writing a Dissertation

**David Pion-Berlin**

Ohio State University

Writing my dissertation was an exercise in goal setting and accomplishment. It was rather easy for me to prepare a list of imaginable dissertation topics. It was much more difficult to shorten the list down to those topics which were doable. I had to make a preliminary assessment: can data sets be found or created to support a given hypothesis? I quickly realized that once a topic was chosen there were still many points along the way to completion when similar questions had to be asked. Setting goals and subgoals was an exercise in flexibility. It was frustrating to discover through research that some information was just not available. Therefore certain arguments had to be dropped or modified in light of empirical gaps.

While the research process may influence objectives it never determines them. To the contrary, I found it important to be creative in the design of a theoretical framework. This was the most difficult



David Pion-Berlin (left) receives the Gabriel A. Almond award from selection committee chair Robert H. Bates of the California Institute of Technology.

David Pion-Berlin received the Gabriel A. Almond award for the best doctoral dissertation completed and accepted during 1983 or 1984 in the field of comparative politics. His dissertation, "Ideas as Predictors: A Comparative Study of Coercion in Peru and Argentina," was directed by John F. McCamant and submitted by the University of Denver.

## 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

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