

# The Graduate Post

A Newsletter of The Graduate School

Fall 2000



<http://grad.msu.edu>

Special  
Feature

## How to Survive the Dissertation

BY DR. JIM MILLER, ENTOMOLOGY

During the 1995 - 96 academic year, Professor Jim Miller, Department of Entomology, was a professor-in-residence at The Graduate School. Dr. Miller wrote a three-part article on "How to Survive the Dissertation" that appeared in *The Graduate Post*. Part I appeared in the Fall 1995 issue; Part II appeared in the Spring 1996 issue; and Part III appeared in the Fall 1996 issue. Minor corrections for this Spring 2000 reprinting were made by Graduate School Dean Karen Klomparens. This series of synopses from the *Post* is presented for the benefit of those who were not fortunate enough to attend Dr. Dorothy Duff Brown's Thesis/Dissertation Writing Workshop. Part I of this series deals with dissertation structure and production, as well as micro-work habits. Part II deals with macro-work habits and personal adjustment. In Part III of the series, Dr. Miller summarizes Dr. Brown's suggestions on how to maintain good relations with your dissertation committee members. Dr. Brown is a professional consultant at Jaynes Street Associates in Berkeley, CA. She has a Ph.D. in English, and now provides consultation around the country on writing, managing university careers toward tenure, and crisis/clutter control. Her popular workshop is offered by The Graduate School every Fall semester.

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### *PART I* *from The Graduate Post* *Fall 1995*

The Graduate School, in its ongoing mission to serve the needs of MSU's graduate and professional students, held a Dissertation-Writing Workshop at the Kellogg Center this Fall. The response was overwhelming. More than 120 graduate students responded to the announcement, and many more placed themselves on the waiting list. Those who were fortunate enough to attend were not disappointed. Dr. Dorothy Duff Brown, a writing consultant from Jaynes Street Associates, Berkeley, gave a superb presentation entitled, "Practical Tips on Approaching and Completing a Dissertation." She was followed by Dr. Sharon Thomas, who explained how the MSU Writing Center (300 Bessey Hall) can help in dissertation writing. The workshop ended with Dr. Bill Metcalfe of the MSU Counseling Center, who explained dissertation-writing support groups could assist graduate students during their intense and often isolating work.

The content of Dr. Brown's keynote presentation was so outstanding that I would like to summarize some of her main points for the benefit of those who weren't there. Since the amount and the variety of information was large, I will present only the first part here and save subsequent parts for future issues of the *Post*. It is my hope that these tidbits will whet readers' appetites for the full workshop, which will be re-offered periodically beginning in April, 1996. Be on the alert for announcements sent to graduate secretaries in each graduate department or program!

#### ***Dissertation Structure and Production***

Do not envision your dissertation as an infinitely long and completely comprehensive document of absolute perfection which will be worthy of infinite time in preparation. Working closely with your major professor and committee members, make sure you develop a clear roadmap of both what is and is not to be a part of your dissertation. In other words, define your study. Tables of contents

work much better for organizing and communicating the contents of your dissertation than outlines, which have the quality of begging expansion and reorganization. Early on, work for clarity and logic in the interrelationships among dissertation components. A cognitive map (one picture constructed of diagrams sprinkled with words) can be very helpful in doing this. Before investing heavily in producing numerous pages of tedious and polished writing, make sure the critical core of your inquiry is sound and well-received by those truly qualified to guide and ultimately approve your dissertation. Most people find it helpful to seek the guidance of professionals highly familiar with standards likely to determine the acceptability of your work for professional journals and books, as well as for the dissertation.

Another tactic is to approach the dissertation the way publishing companies approach book preparation, e.g. make a physical representation of your dissertation— a loose-leaf notebook with blank pages equal in number to the approximate number of pages that, in consultation with your major professor and department, seems appropriate, given your research topic and research accomplishments. Following the Graduate School thesis/dissertation guidelines (available in 118 Linton Hall), divide the mock-up book into respective sections, including chapter divisions. As progress is made on any section, substitute hard copies of drafts of the real thing for the respective sections of the mock-up. Use this method to organize note-taking, filing, and converting organized notes into text.

Do not visualize and make organizational decisions for your developing dissertation on the computer screen, where you get to see only part of a page at one time. Doing so leads to reckless cutting and pasting. Computers are wonderful production and storage tools, but they are too restrictive on layout. Make printouts to check your work.

When taking notes on material content, it is better to record a personal opinion on the material than to restate the content. For most people, the content will be faithfully remembered as the context for the opinion. Ideas written as opinions are more directly importable into a dissertation than are restatements of the content of other writers, devoid of your own thoughts and analysis.

Cultivate an ability to continually make realistic decisions about what you will actually use in your dissertation. Do not clutter your work files and computer files with material that, deep down, you know are superfluous. Relegate extra materials to a safe historical file (a big box) from which it could be retrieved if needed.

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## ***PART II*** ***from The Graduate Post*** ***Spring 1996***

In pursuing your doctoral research, it is important to recognize that 20 percent of your efforts are likely to generate 80 percent of what actually ends up in your dissertation. You should therefore cultivate an ability to differentiate and attend to that most valuable 20 percent.

Examine your life situation and establish a realistic daily work schedule to which you can be faithful. Once you have drawn up this schedule, try to be faithful to it. One strategy that will help you in this is to carefully regulate what hour daily you will stop working on “the big project”. It is easier to control the stopping time each day than the starting time. As anyone soon learns who begins writing a dissertation, getting started each day requires considerable dithering, self-negotiation, and other mental gymnastics—all of which take time. The Muse, it seems, is easier going than coming. For this reason it is surprisingly true for most people that *getting a firm control over the stopping time establishes much better control over the starting time*. If you know, for instance, that you must stop at a certain hour, you are more likely to get cracking on the work in order to accomplish what must be done by quitting time. Many people make a serious mistake by viewing their quitting times as flexible, usually well into the night. In such cases, time wasted during the day comes out of other time slots, like family interactions and sleep. A steady diet of this abuse usually leads to serious problems—in self image, if nothing else. Try quantifying how you spend your time, at least by periodic samplings. Adjust your pattern according to what you discover from the data. If you are scientific about how you manage your time, you will do much better in the long run.

When you are planning your days, do so with care. Planning should be done separately from your actual work blocks, since most people are likely to plan in too much detail when they do the planning while sitting down to a new block of worktime. Effective planning can usually be done in just a few minutes, so set aside a separate time for it. As you do your planning, make sure you use good judgement in deciding which 20 percent of your effort you definitely need to accomplish. If you try to do too much, you will risk experiencing “burnout”, a devastating emotional and mental paralysis which, fortunately, is largely avoidable.

According to Dr. Duff Brown, burnout is what happens when judgement becomes so run down that all tasks, no matter how small, loom in one’s mind as having equal and overwhelming importance. The result is an irresistible desire to flee. To escape this debilitating cycle, seek more structure in your time than less. Ironically, people who have substantial, structured demands on their time (e.g., job, spouse, children, etc.) are usually more productive and less at risk of losing their way in a dissertation than are those with unlimited time. Beware of the fallacy of considering unlimited time as the most

desirable state. It isn’t. If you find yourself seriously procrastinating, it is likely that there is something significant that you need to attend to. Ask yourself specifically what this may be, then get it out of the way immediately.

### ***The Isolation Factor***

Writing a dissertation is a major solitary activity, and as such, there are certain emotional pitfalls that one should be prepared for. For instance, it is important to recognize that when you go off by yourself to write, there will be a precipitous reduction in the social context in which you have grown accustomed to doing most of your higher thinking (e.g., regular interactions with teachers, classmates, major professor, and peers). You will need to do most of the dissertation research and writing yourself, looking at things from various angles, probing and critiquing your own thought and work—even those insights which resulted from great travail and therefore have become precious. You will need to develop the ability to step back from your work and view it objectively, throwing out even cherished assumptions if your research no longer supports them. This process may be painful at times, but it is an essential part of intellectual growth and responsible scholarship.

If you begin to drown in isolation, do seek appropriate interactions with your major professor, guidance committee members, or a dissertation-writing support group. The MSU Counseling Center helps set up and run such support groups. For more information, contact Bill Metcalfe at 355-8270 or metcalc2@msu.edu. In addition to these measures, confer regularly with one or two other people at a similar stage in their dissertation work, but preferably in a slightly different field (this is so you don’t get caught up in discussing departmental politics, etc.). Don’t let this network get too large. As Montaigne once said, “Friends are thieves of time”. Whatever you do, do not wander endlessly and aimlessly in a barren land. Seek some help! It’s out there. If you cannot obtain sufficient guidance from your major professor, guidance committee, department, or college (and always try these first), the MSU Graduate School or University Ombudsman may be able to provide assistance. You should not give up on your program unless you have exhausted every possible avenue, and there are enough avenues out there to resolve most of your difficulties, so be persistent in seeking assistance.

### ***Managing Time and Guilt***

Most highly intelligent, curious, well-educated and industrious people like you will have an inordinate number of things they want to investigate, master, and do. Unfortunately, the demands of doctoral study will compel you to put these things on hold, at least until you have completed your degree. This is never an easy thing to do. During your graduate school years, and perhaps well beyond,

you will have to live with a goodly amount of guilt and frustration over all the things you can't read or do. Dr. Duff Brown, who would like to offer greater consolation, chooses instead to face hard facts. Says Brown, "You're in a doctoral program. It's time to wake up and grow up! You must sooner or later face the reality that *you just can't do it all*, so you might as well learn to manage your guilt and frustration now and get on with the program."

For graduate students and other first-rate professionals, managing your guilt may actually be more important than managing your time. This is actually "Brown's Law of Time Management". According to this law, you must develop, above all, good judgement about what you must do vs. what you can let go of, at least for now. It's a good idea to actually declare what you are letting go of. Write a contract with yourself if you have to. Do not feel, however, that you have to renounce everything. This is doctoral study, after all, not monasticism.

As a human being, you are entitled to and absolutely must take some regular time away from your profession. Dr. Duff Brown insists that, for the equivalent of one day a week, even graduate students in the throes of completing a dissertation should give themselves a mini-vacation and do something that is restful, refreshing and renewing. Good options are art, music, literature, and nature. Of course, a person analyzing and writing on science fiction should not turn to reading science fiction for diversion. Choose a form of recreation that is unrelated to your field.

Even when an intense professional is managing time and guilt appropriately, he or she is likely to feel some discomfort. Ironically, even when you are doing good work, there is no guarantee that you will feel exhilarated about it, although it is wonderful when that happens. Being stretched mentally is desirable and healthy, but feeling frantic can be downright counterproductive. If you allow yourself to become stressed out, your judgement will be adversely affected, and when judgement flies out the window, poor work is the inevitable result. If you find yourself wallowing in the "slough of despond", take time off, get some exercise (and some sleep), eat

decently, obtain some professional guidance, or seek counseling. Don't let emotional buildup adversely affect your work.

Last but not least, do take time to find even small ways to celebrate your success at meeting the goals you have set for yourself. Give yourself a reward, share your accomplishments with friends, allow yourself a favorite activity, or do something special with a loved one. The more you acknowledge your positive accomplishments, the less you will dwell on your failings, and the more likely you will be to keep on meeting your objectives. Be your own greatest friends and supporter. When you are happy with yourself, other friends will appear out of nowhere. Self-confidence and self-respect are, after all, very attractive qualities.

### ***A Final Word On Well-Meaning Friends And Family***

One of the tragedies of graduate study is that, frequently, it will make you incomprehensible to others. When addressing questions about your progress raised by people who have not done graduate work and are therefore unlikely to understand much about the long and arduous task, a good, all-purpose answer is: "Well, things are going just about as well as can be expected at this stage of the long process — at least that's what my major professors says." By getting into too many specifics with those not familiar with graduate study and those who are production-minded, you may get into the trap of sounding like you are apologizing for yourself, and this will only make you kick yourself later and cause undue alarm in the listener. The concern of well-meaning friends and family can hinder rather than help you in your work. If you have to, remind them that a major creative work, never done before by another human being, deserves a great deal of time and attention.

This, however, is already saying too much. It sounds a bit too much like an excuse or an apology, and that is what you want to avoid. As a rule, the less you say about your work, the better.

Some may regard you as standoffish or superior for refusing to reveal much, but this is eminently preferable to appearing lame. Reconcile yourself to the fact that there is no way of winning this particular battle, so avoid the situation whenever possible.

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## ***Part III from The Graduate Post Fall 1996***

### ***Transmitting Your Dissertation Work***

You have now completed your plan of research and have overcome the logistical and emotional stumbling blocks that stand between you and the production of your dissertation. You are now writing at full tilt, producing drafts of your dissertation chapters which you would like to have critiqued in order to ensure their aim, accuracy, style and effectiveness. To this purpose, you must now transmit copies of your ongoing work to a major professor, one or more dissertation committee members, or some other trusted critic for reading and commentary. However, because of the amount of material professors typically receive from undergraduates as well as graduate students, and because of the number of different dissertations they must track (in various states of completion), it is best to take some measures to identify the piece of the puzzle you are submitting so that your reader knows where it fits into the larger picture.

For this reason, Dr. Brown recommends that you always accompany transmitted material with a cover letter. This cover letter

should include the following information:

1. a reminder of the dissertation title.
2. a reminder to the reader of what material was previously forwarded.
3. an indication of what portion of the dissertation (what chapter and pages) is now being transmitted.
4. a statement of what topic is being discussed in the transmitted material, including the approach taken and the procedures used.
5. a statement of what is not being done (such clarifications are important, as most readers will tend to bend any study they are critiquing to their own inclinations).
6. a statement highlighting the changes that have been made from previous versions, and upon what previous advice and from whom (do not neglect this part or you may wind up venturing into the dreaded zone of changing things back to forms previously contradicted).

7. an explicit statement about what type of critique is now desired: e.g., main points, overall organization, methods, analysis, writing style, style of data presentation, grammar, manuscript tightening, smoothing, etc. (Do not request that people spend time on the fine points if you suspect that the gross structure is not yet in place. If the gross structure is in place after appropriate guidance and your best effort, don't invite people to needlessly and inappropriately tinker with or disrupt the overall structure. Do offer guidance as to what you consider firmly in place and what should now be in the spotlight. Help your guidance committee members or major professor focus first on the most important 20 percent and not get lost in the less important 80 percent. Finally, once you receive your critique, don't be hardheaded about accepting sound advice.)
8. Explicitly give your reader a timeframe for completion of the critique and ask to set up a specific time to meet and go over the critique.
9. Thank your reader appropriately and sincerely for the time they are giving you.

Once you have completed your cover letter, attach a table of contents for your dissertation (even if it is speculative). Put at the top of this page:

1. your dissertation title,
2. Table of Contents,
3. your name and address.

Place sequential page numbers on the right hand side of your table of contents. Annotate by handwriting in the left or right margin the status of each chapter or section, e.g., complete, revised, partially complete, etc.

When you have completed your cover and table of contents, attach a high-quality double spaced version of the work in progress to be critiqued and await the response.

### ***Follow-up on Transmitted Material***

Now that you have transmitted your material for critiquing, you are ready to meet with your reader. There are, however, some pitfalls that can develop at this phase that you must know how to deal with appropriately.

Should you show up for your meeting with your reader and the responding party has, for whatever reason, forgotten about you or failed to read and prepare for your meeting, have another complete copy of the transmitted material ready to hand over (just in case the first was misplaced). You may find it possible to show your reader this material and discuss it with them then and there, on the basis of the cover letter and table of contents. If not, summon your patience and politely insist on a meeting in the next several days. Do not be afraid to explain how further postponement of the needed meeting will pose significant problems for you. You may wish to remind the faculty member that you are working on a timetable and that your plans involve other faculty as well. Common courtesy and professionalism should ensure that your request will be met in a timely fashion. Remember that it is extremely rare that a faculty person would actually mean to thwart you. Many faculty are simply overworked and harried and could use a reminder to make your meeting a priority.

On the rare occasion that a faculty member consistently puts off meetings or fails to give you requested feedback, you are within your rights to demand the needed assistance. Under no circumstances should you let month after month go by without receiving constructive criticism from your professor. After ascertaining that you are approaching that person in a responsible and professional manner and have given them several polite reminders, it is considered reasonable to inform the faculty member that you will soon need to refer the matter to other members of your committee, the department chairperson, or eventually, the MSU Graduate School or University Ombudsman. It is advisable to put these communications in writing for the record. After some response time, do take action accordingly. For further information about your rights and responsibilities as a graduate student, you may wish to refer to MSU's guidelines for professionalism as set forth in the "Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities" document (GSRR), available at the MSU Graduate School, 118 Linton Hall. It is also on the web at: <http://www.vps.msu.edu/SpLife/gradrights.htm>

### ***Ending Dissertation Writing and Filing Your Document***

Dr. Brown reminds graduate students that writing a dissertation is a lot like getting a Boeing 757 up and flying. It takes a lot of initial and sustained effort. To end the long flight safely, however, it is necessary to know when to throttle back and land. Some students become so caught up in the experience of their first major research project that they can't seem to bring the project back down to earth. Remember, there are others who need to use the airstrip, and you and your professors have other planes to fly and other places to visit. For this reason, you want to be sure that you don't stay up so long that you run out of fuel, overshoot the runway, or crash upon landing. To avert disaster at this final stage of the dissertation, it is important to listen carefully to, and by all means follow, the instructions of your advisors. They are your navigators, and between them, they have a lot of airtime. Let them help bring your journey to a safe ending. It's what they're there for.

Finally, keep in mind that it is not enough merely to write a dissertation. It must be presented according to clearly prescribed forms, in the same way that a manuscript must adhere to the forms set by a publisher. The Graduate School has a booklet of explicit instructions about the required format of your dissertation. All graduate students Professor Jim Miller, Department of Entomology should obtain this booklet from 118 Linton Hall early in their graduate careers. Following the simple and direct instructions in this booklet will make your task more efficient and enjoyable and help get you on to even better places. Debra Conlin is in charge of communicating these guidelines and checking that they are met when you deliver your finished product to Room 118, Linton Hall, as the final step of your long journey. Dean Klomparens and Graduate School staff are important advocates for you and for campus-wide graduate education generally. You will find them in Linton Hall and, of course, in the MSU Faculty-Staff Directory. If your committee and your department cannot answer your questions in regard to graduate education, please feel free to contact us. The number for the dissertation office is 517.355.0301. Best of luck to you on your dissertation! We'll see you at dissertation submission time!

**118 Linton Hall**

**Thesis/Dissertation Office**

Monday – Friday 8 am – Noon and 1 pm – 5 pm