

# TAMING A DISSERTATION

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*Question: So you didn't have a problem procrastinating?*

*Student: Not if you don't count the first eight years.*

If your dissertation is a dragon, shaking you by its tail, it's time to take control and master the beast.

Last fall, we talked to nine graduate students engaged in this task at one stage or another—from writing a prospectus to preparing to file a dissertation. You might be surprised at how they have taken command of the biggest academic chore of their lives.

## FORGET THE RULES

Based on what students told us, you'd do well to forget what you've heard about how to write a dissertation. Three rules spring to mind: 1) write something every day, preferably in the morning; 2) write for at least three or four hours; and 3) make dissertation writing the top priority in your life.

If you can't follow these rules, forget them—or at least reinterpret them. Most students have jobs; significant others; children, perhaps; positions to apply for, and numerous other demands on their time. The students we talked to fit working on their dissertations around these demands (or vice versa). No one we talked to lives alone on a mountaintop with a computer.

## FRACTURE THE BEAST!

All the students agreed that, as a single project, a dissertation is simply too big to get a handle on. See it as one big chore, and it becomes a slippery, intimidating monster that will (trust us) forever elude mastery.

Therefore, the first step in taming a dissertation is to break it into pieces. You may have heard this before, too, but this advice is sound. Everyone we talked to found that they had to break their dissertations into pieces to gain the upper

hand. One student called it "compartmentalizing."

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-Naomi Yavneh, Comparative Literature

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"After I passed my orals, I thought I was doing a dissertation, rather than just compartmentalizing things," says Walter Wong, as student in Public Policy who plans to file this spring. "So, every day I would walk into the office and think, 'I'm doing a dissertation today.' It didn't work real well...Every day I would go home and say, 'It's not done'."

No rewards there, only discouragement and a sense that you must be doing something wrong. Thinking of your project as a dissertation or a book can only lead to trouble.

"I really panicked when I sat down and realized that I was starting to write a book," says Sharon James, a Comparative Literature student who says the room she uses as a study turned to "quicksand." "For all intents and purposes, it is a book, and I really don't have the training in that."

Most students do, however, have training in writing shorter papers for courses. Approach your dissertation this way, and it becomes familiar and therefore possible: a series of small projects (a chapter? parts of a chapter?), each made up of a number of tasks.

## THE OUTLINE AS A WEAPON

Your outline—the more detailed, the better—is an excellent place to begin breaking your dissertation into projects and sub-projects and then into a series of tasks. An outline will help you to think small, which is, paradoxically, the only way to do something big.

"The outline gave me an overall framework so that I could see where I was going with the dissertation as a whole," says Harold Baize, a Psychology student who filed in November. "When I got stuck, I'd go back to the outline at the point I was and start trying to flesh it out in greater detail."

Feel panic descending? Break off an even smaller piece of your outline to work on. All the students advised against taking the long view of what's left to be done.

"It's really scary when you look at how much you have left to do," says Naomi Yavneh, another Comparative Literature student. "But if you just see it as an outline that you're checking things off of, you'll feel better about it."

## DEFINING THE MULTITUDINOUS TASKS

It may be sneaky, but just about everyone we talked to did it; when you define a task of your dissertation, you can be as liberal as you like. Students we talked to considered reading an article or printing out part of a chapter to be one more step toward finishing.

"I make up tasks that I know I can get done," says Yavneh. "I write them in my datebook, and there's places to check them off, so I can look and say, 'I did this and this.'"

Small, do-able tasks and realistic deadlines give ample opportunity for small successes and rewards. You feel as though you're on a roll, and more important, you keep rolling.

"The thing that has helped a lot with this compartmentalizing is to say, 'I put in my time; I got this task done,'" says Wong. "I know whether or not I finished what I had in mind. I can hold myself accountable."

## STAYING ON TOP OF IT

Although working on a dissertation every day is impossible for many students, most we talked to felt that “keeping their hand in” was important. Stray too far from your work and the dissertation becomes big and slippery again.

“I think it’s always important to do something on it every day,” says Wong, who was unable to do much work on his dissertation recently because of an illness in his family. “Even if it’s just an article I carry around with me, it reminds me of the direction I’m going, what I’m trying to do.”

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If working on your dissertation is broadly defined to include such tasks as reading an article, checking a reference, and any number of other tasks that are not, strictly speaking, writing, you can maintain a fairly steady pace of work. You can find a small task for a short time, a bigger one for a longer time. We found that the students most adept at breaking their dissertations into tasks (keeping in mind the new definition of “task”) were also expert at breaking time into tiny pieces and making the most of even a half-hour that came their way.

“You can use half an hour if you set yourself a small enough task,” says Yavneh. “You could read an article in half an hour.”

Redefining tasks to fit short periods on busy days can help prevent the trap into which some dissertation writers fall: They paint themselves into a corner believing that they can work on their dissertations only if they have big blocks of time, and those blocks never seem to materialize. The result: no progress on

the dissertation and the ensuing self-blame.

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Keep in mind, though, that even with the best of intentions, a week or two can slip by without working on your dissertation. Most of the students we talked to reported this experience.

“Work fairly consistently if you can,” advises James. “But if you can’t...sometimes life will just interfere and a week goes by and you haven’t had a chance to work on your thesis. Well, so what? It doesn’t make you a bad person.”

Instead, go back to your outline, pick a task, and get on with it. And keep in mind that any task completed calls for a reward, if only a mental pat on the back. Most of the students we talked to rewarded themselves regularly, the bigger the accomplishment (an entire chapter finished, for example), the bigger the reward. Movies, clothes, jewelry, ice cream, and time off were popular.

## FINDING BLOCKS OF TIME: SETTING PRIORITIES

*Question: Were you trying to maintain a marriage or other significant relationship while you were writing your dissertation?*  
*Student: Do you mean other than with my experiment?*

You can keep your hand in your dissertation work by doing small tasks here and there, but you’ll also need blocks of time to write (although perhaps not as long as you think—many students said that two-hour stretches of writing were all they could stand at a sitting).

“It’s important to have the time cut free from your schedule, to close your study

door and tell your husband that you’re not home to phone calls,” says James, who taught two classes during the fall semester.

The key to freeing up time to write is to set some definite (and sometimes ruthlessly enforced) priorities.

“The successful candidate is going to have to rearrange his (or her) social and psychological priorities...during the dissertation course if he (or she) is to get to the top of the thesis and drive it home to completion,” says David Sternberg in *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation* (St. Martin’s Press, 1981).

Of course, dissertation writers have many priorities competing for their time: being a good spouse and/or parent, earning money to live on, looking for a professional position, to name a few. But if you intend to finish your dissertation, you will have to make it one of a few “A” level priorities in your life. To do this, many of the students we talked to had eliminated certain activities—say the “C” level, if you ranked them.

“I feel my social life is pretty restricted,” says Siggy Brauner, a student in the Department of German who expects to file in April. “I say ‘no’ to visitors; I don’t go out much; I only go to entertainments that are very easy-going, like movies, where I don’t stay out late. I don’t do a lot of normal things that other people do.”

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That is not to say that some regular time off cannot be an “A” level priority.

“I get time off all the time,” says Yavneh. “That’s something I’ve worked into my program. I realize that if I don’t give

myself time off at some point, things aren't going to go well."

Many students reported that they did not work on Saturdays or on weekend nights, for example. But their free time tended to be part of an overall schedule, planned for and therefore enjoyed without guilt.

#### SCHEDULING; EACH PRIORITY TO ITS HOUR(S)

Most students blocked out time to work on their dissertations, either in explicit, written schedules or less detailed ones that they carried around in their heads. Many students who were Teaching Assistants limited their class preparation and teaching, for example, to two or three days a week and reserved the other days for writing, usually at home.

"My schedule, since I've had to work continuously and be involved in other projects, really didn't allow me to structure my time rigidly," says Baize, a student in Psychology who worked as a Research Assistant and shared childcare of his son during the time he wrote his dissertation. He would mentally block out several hours, days ahead, to work on his dissertation.

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Other students found out that a daily written plan was helpful in fitting a dissertation, work, relationships, and other priorities into their lives. Within the blocks of time set aside for dissertation work, you can schedule specific tasks from your outline.

"In the evening, I made a precise time schedule of what I would do (on my dissertation) the next day," Says Maresi Nerad, a student in Education who filed last April. She, too, juggled dissertation writing and a research assistantship. "It helped me enormously to know exactly what I'd start out with in the morning

when I sat at my desk. I didn't need to think what to do. The decision was made for me. I knew my schedule, and I could cross things off."

Scheduling your dissertation tasks keeps you on track and makes you feel as though you have this big project under control.

Here are some other tips on time management that we gathered from students we talked to:

Part of taming the dissertation monster is being as specific as you can be about planning your time. "Break your day into pieces and smaller pieces even," advises James. "There's something really terrifying about getting up and facing a long empty day in which there's nothing but me and my books, my computer screen, and my notepad. Some means of regular scheduling and giving form to a day is really necessary."

You can set up daily, weekly, and monthly schedules. Most of the students we talked to had long-range schedules based on their anticipated filing dates.

We found that planning, organizing, and scheduling were being used by students at every phase of the research/dissertation stage to combat, as one student put it, "this feeling of being lost." It can be especially helpful to students who find themselves suffering from the lack of structure in the post-qualifying abyss.

Set realistic deadlines. Again, think small. It's common for students to think they can accomplish more than is possible.

"I always felt I could do more than I really could," says Nerad. "It was very unrealistic. Other people couldn't do it, either. Now I know I'm not the very fastest, but not the slowest."

Intermittent deadlines can keep you going on your dissertation, but unrealistic goals invite discouragement that can derail you. Planning to write more than five pages a week, for example, may not be realistic if you are working. Another advantage of do-able deadlines: You may

not be as intimidated about meeting with your adviser. We found that many students promised their advisers that they would have sections finished by a certain date and then failed to finish them on time. The result: the student was embarrassed to set up a meeting, only to find out that the adviser thought the goal was too ambitious in the first place.

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Sometimes another person can help you get a perspective on what's a reasonable deadline.

The more overwhelmed you feel by competing demands, the more a schedule can help you focus your priorities. Although many students lamented that they had to work while they were writing their dissertations (and we sympathize), some also found that they were better organized and got more done when they had competing priorities.

"I found I worked better during the semesters I was either a TA or had a part-time job," says Wong. "It forced me to schedule my time. I felt I really had to protect the time on my dissertation."

"The lesson for me was that I need to have two things going simultaneously, so one can push the other," agrees Nerad, who finds this also applies to her work as a postdoctoral researcher. While she was writing her dissertation, she set intermittent deadlines by arranging to give parts of her dissertation as talks.

Limit teaching to 20 hours a week. Being a good TA is one of the most seductive distractions available to dissertation writers. It can be a welcome counterpoint to a solitary life at the computer and a noble excuse for procrastinating.

“The most consistently upbeat part of being a graduate student has been the teaching I’ve done,” says one humanities student. “But I’ve never succeeded in getting much of my own work done while I was TAing.”

All the students we talked to made a point of limiting their teaching to twenty hours a week.

“I made a contract with myself,” says Brauner. “I’m not spending more time on teaching—teaching you can do endlessly. I think in a way it is good training to limit yourself.”

If you plan to become a faculty member, consider that you will have to find a way to schedule teaching, research, writing, and the myriad other demands that come with the job. Becoming an efficient time manager now will help you later.

Construct a schedule based on your own needs, foibles, and preferences. Consider: If you’re working, can your job duties be contained so that they take up no more than three days a week (including preparation time, if you have a teaching appointment)? Are you married, a parent, or have another significant relationship that requires time and care? Is exercise a high priority for you? Do you work better at night or in the morning? Can you use a few hours to write, or do you need to free up several hours at a time to work on your dissertation?

“I took careful notes of when I was tired so I learned what was my best time to work,” says Nerad.

Your scheduling can be a custom-fitted scaffolding, tuned to your needs and adjusted occasionally to accommodate your project as it grows. Expect to reassess your priorities as you near the filing date. You may find yourself temporarily eliminating even some “A” level priorities so that you have more time to focus on finishing your dissertation.

## A DISSERTATION TAMED

By now we may have convinced you that, surprisingly, much of the skill needed to

finish a dissertation is practical: being able to organize and plan, to manage time, to sustain effort on a big complex project. Developing these skills is part of the so-called “hidden agenda” of the second phase of doctoral work—learning to work independently. It’s no small feat, and one that most students are not prepared for by course work. If it takes you awhile to hit your stride in this phase of graduate school, don’t fault yourself. Instead, expect to spend some time devising the strategies that will work best for you.