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A NEWSLETTER FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS
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WRITING YOUR DISSERTATION

Writing a dissertation—some find it a breeze (or so they say), others find it an arduous soul-taxing chore. After all, it's your ultimate academic work, to be judged and bound and shelved for all to see.

Find yourself reading the newspaper, cleaning closets, being the best-prepared GSI ever to teach? Why not? *Anything* seems more attractive than tackling your dissertation.

In some cases, sticks and carrots prompt students to finish: the end of GSI or GSR support, classmates finishing and leaving, a job offer contingent upon having the degree. Other people have no particular motivation, no deadline, no job offer, and find that for the first time in their life, they are stalled.

THE IMMOBILIZING "SHOULD"

From talking with several graduate students and with Dr. Richard Beery, who, with Dr. Robert Mixson, led a dissertation group at the Counseling Center, we found certain assumptions to be common: the immobilizing shoulds.

- I've gone to school my entire life, and this paper should represent the culmination of my study.
- Student X finished in three years with no problems. I should, too. (Every department has a living legend who plagues mere mortals.)
- I should just sit down and write.
- I haven't read enough. I should read more. (This is the one-more-trip-to-the-library-and-I'll-know-enough loop.)
- I should hurry and finish so I can get a job, but there are no jobs. But if I wait too long, I'll be too old to get a job.
- I should be original and innovative, but if I'm too innovative my committee won't like my work.
- I should write four hours a day—any less and it's not worth sitting down to write.

- I never seem to write for four hours a day—I'm lazy.

These fears can create a mental logjam that produces anything from mild procrastination to full-blown writer's block. If you recognize yourself on this list, rest assured that you are not alone. Many students take up the shoulds as a way of prodding themselves into action. Just the opposite happens: They feel stuck.

MOBILIZING

One thing we found in talking to graduate students and to Beery was that the mechanical, practical task of writing, which translates to ACTION, can offset these fears.

In a sense, that's why the oft-heard advice of "just do it" is right. But only if you recognize that the task is a big and challenging one and that most people have some difficulty tackling it. "Just do it" is true, but it is not necessarily easy.

GETTING SOMETHING ON THE PAGE

Otherwise known as writing, a word laden with unfortunate associations.

"I pretend I'm not writing when I work on my dissertation," says one graduate student. "I tell myself I'm just putting down my thoughts."

The following strategies may help you to get your thoughts on the page:

Make an outline, as detailed as possible. Many students find that ultimately they use a fraction of the outline in their dissertation. But whether or not you use the entire outline in your dissertation, an outline provides a map to the body of knowledge you want to communicate. It gives you a handle on the topic and makes it seem manageable.

Break your dissertation into pieces and then smaller pieces. Chip off minute sections of your outline to work on.

One student advised that you can never break off too small a section. As you dismantle the task of writing, you'll help diminish the psychological burden of feeling you have to write a huge, all-encompassing paper.

"Up to now, students have been oriented toward the goal of getting the paper done, which has been possible because the end was in sight. The trouble with a dissertation is that it's too long to do that," says Beery. "We try to reorient people to short-term goals."

Small sections are familiar and doable. And the reward of finishing each section can keep you engaged in the process of writing.

Think about writing time in a new way. Think small here, too. You can never work too short a time to congratulate yourself about.

Books on dissertation writing often advise four hours a day or three pages, whichever comes first. The problem is that four hours are sometimes hard to come by and also, if you're wary of writing, four hours can seem too long. Why not settle for less?

"It's common for students to say, 'If I don't get a good four hours done today, it's worthless. I'll start tomorrow,'" says Beery. "Sometimes it's another six weeks before they get started again."

Instead, he suggests, use a half hour as the criterion. After a half hour of writing, stop and do something else. Stop in the middle of a sentence—you'll find that you can't wait to get back to it. And reward yourself, even if the reward doesn't meet the usual definition. For example, if you'd rather open your mail than write, try writing for half an hour (or however long you set) and then open your mail.

Don't edit prematurely. Graduate students are trained to be discerning and critical, and it's an ability they turn

only too willingly to their own work. Beery describes it as “pruning the seedling,” which results in the early demise of something barely formed. Give your work time to develop.

Remember that writing is a dual process: a generative outpouring of ideas and then the critical shaping and forming. One student said he edited only after he finished 60-page blocks of his dissertation. That’s a way to avoid getting stuck making one small (and probably shrinking) section of your dissertation absolutely perfect.

Keep a writing log. Beery and Mixson advise students to keep a separate sheet of paper nearby as they write so they can log any distracting thoughts that occur in the process of writing. Sometimes these are self-doubts, sometimes errands that need

doing, and often, good ideas that might be useful in some other part of the dissertation. Write down these errand visitors and forge ahead, no matter what. You can give them their due later.

Look at how much you’ve done to date, rather than at how much you have left to do. You have more done on your dissertation than you did yesterday, even if you worked only half an hour. By definition, this is progress.

Join a dissertation writing support group in your department. Students say the feedback is helpful and that they learn criticism is survivable, even useful. The group can also provide some much-needed structure to the lonely business of writing.

“The group gives you a deadline,” says one student, “and people who you are responsible to, besides yourself.”

Respect dissertation writing as your job. It may be flexible and open-ended, but it’s a job, just the same. This gives you the right to say “no” to other demands on your time.

If you are a GSI, for example, you are entitled to work only 20 hours a week, although it is very tempting (and noble!) to do more.

EACH TO HIS/HER OWN STRATEGY

Some of the techniques we’ve suggested may work for you, some may not. Everyone who finishes a dissertation finds a personal strategy to keep themselves engaged in the long process of writing, thinking, editing, and revising. What suits you may be counterproductive to a fellow student.

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BEATING THE ISOLATION BLUES

Does your dissertation research keep you in a lab where you have ample contact with people who know what you’re doing? Or do you find yourself working alone, with no one to talk to about your dissertation or the stress involved in working on it?

“All doctoral students on campus have the same problem,” says public policy student Walter Wong, “finding someone to talk with about their dissertations, someone who’s really interested.”

If you’re in the social sciences or humanities, chances are that you don’t have regular contact with people who are interested in your dissertation, and working in isolation can be discouraging. Recently we talked to some students in those fields who have teamed up to help each other through the trials of dissertation writing.

SHARING THE “WILLFUL MADNESS”

Naomi Yavneh and Sharon James are comparative literature doctoral students who have formed a two-person dissertation group. Both are just beginning to write their dissertations, and both recognized early on that they

could profit from the support and constructive criticism that another student could provide.

“We decided that it would be nice to have a supportive meeting with somebody before handing something over to our dissertation directors,” says James, “to have someone else read it and say, ‘Well, it makes sense to me.’”

The two women, who knew each other from seminars, decided to meet weekly over lunch. They usually exchange about four pages of work ahead of time and then come prepared to discuss it.

“It’s both a discuss-your-ideas and a support group,” says Yavneh. “It’s really important to feel that there’s somebody who cares what you’re doing.”

“I’m not taking classes, and that is isolating,” says James. “And that is why Naomi and I have started meeting every week. Otherwise, I am working in a vacuum.”

James feels that such groups are particularly valuable for students in the humanities where, as she puts it, “There’s a willful madness. You have to be that way because there is no

guarantee that what you’re doing will be of any use to you, practically speaking. People who don’t understand that willful madness can’t possibly be understanding of a dissertation writing project.”

“ONE STEP AHEAD OF ME”

Siggy Brauner, a student in German who plans to file this spring, meets once a week with a friend, Maresi Nerad, who last spring filed her dissertation in education.

“She is one step ahead of me,” says Brauner, who also meets with another student in German who is writing his dissertation. “I think because Maresi has been through the whole process, she has a better idea of what is really necessary and what isn’t.”

Nerad not only reads and comments on sections of the dissertation, but also helps Brauner plan her schedule and set her weekly and long-range goals.

“She always thinks she can do more than is possible, and then she gets very frustrated,” says Nerad, who has helped Brauner work out a schedule to accommodate both teaching and writing. “I tell her, ‘Next time you can

only do this section.’”

At the end of each meeting, they discuss exactly what Brauner will bring to the next one. If Brauner has trouble deciding what to do next, Nerad takes notes as her friend lists the possibilities and then presents those notes to Brauner as an outline of the next week’s work.

Nerad models her role as dissertation mentor on her own experience: She was “talked through” the last year of her dissertation writing by another friend, Anne Machung, who had just completed her own doctoral program.

“She gave me deadlines, lots of doable deadlines,” says Nerad of that experience which, like her work with Brauner, involved weekly meetings. “I think the most valuable part of our meeting was that she would schedule my time . . . we would rank priorities and she would be very rigid . . . Up to then I had not learned how long things can take.”

None of the three women is in the same department, although they have broadly related interests. Brauner, however, feels that the fact that Nerad has already finished is more important than whether or not she can provide specific comments on content.

“With Maresi, the practical part of my writing is more important,” says Brauner. “I really need to write at least five pages a week, and the more the better. My focus right now is to work with her more, because I really want to finish.”

Brauner, by the way, has already chosen the dissertation writer she plans to help after she files.

SEEING YOU THROUGH

Finding someone who will read your work, discuss your ideas, and perhaps help you plan your time can make a big difference. Whether it’s another student in your department, someone you know who has finished a Ph.D., or a group of students who are writing, regular meetings with people who will give attention to your work and provide short-term deadlines can give you much-needed structure and support as you write your dissertation.

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