



Writing & rewriting the dissertation

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It doesn't have to be like this!



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•Having found a topic, formed a committee and completed the proposal, you are now fairly far into the dissertation process. But, the act of writing still lays in front of you, which can be intimidating because it seems long, formless, and stressful. If you don't manage the process, it will be all those things. But, with discipline, structure, and appropriate technique, you can complete a good dissertation in a reasonable amount of time with manageable levels of stress. With the process under control, you may even enjoy many aspects of writing your dissertation.

•I can't really help you with inspiration, which is a key part of the process. Instead my comments are going to address two slightly overlapping issues. Because the process is, no way around it, long, I want to talk first about how you can keep your energy, interest, and sanity over that process. Second, I want to discuss how to structure your writing so the dissertation become a series of shorter tasks that you complete on a regular basis.



Keeping going: the rest of life

- Find something else consuming
 - Family, partner, rock collecting, sky diving(!)
- Exercise several times a week
 - Better if you can hit something—a tennis ball, punching bag...



Keeping going: structure your time

- Thirty minutes of *writing* first thing every day
 - *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*—Joan Bolker
- At least two hours *every* day
- Make a daily task list and leave when you are done
- End by setting up the next day



Structure: write in the correct order

- Table of contents
 - *Don't re-invent the wheel*
- Move from section to section
- Drop things in as they come to you
- Acknowledgements early and often
- Introduction close to last

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- Structure: write in the correct order
- Use a template document and create all the sections that will eventually be part of the dissertation: Acknowledgements, the various chapters, etc.
 - If you can put in some sub-sections that would be great
 - Table of contents
 - If you've use appropriate styles, it will be created automagically
 - Move from section to section as you work
 - One day methods, another day theory, etc.
 - Drop things in as they come to you
 - If you have rough notes for the "Data Description" section, just dump them into the right part of the document
 - These will get moved around over time, which is fine
- Acknowledgements write them early and revisit them often
 - Two reasons
 - Reminds you, during the lonely process of dissertating, that a lot of people are cheering for you
 - Creates "positive guilt" for you to meet those peoples' support with your effort
- Introduction close to last
 - You won't know until you are done what should go into the introduction
- An important advantage is that your document starts to look and feel like a "real dissertation" quickly



Writing: don't confuse writing with rewriting

- Writing
 - Write to think, so follow your thoughts
 - Exploratory, rapid, sloppy, poor grammar
 - Notes to the side
 - XXX Williamson 19?? XXX
- Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite
 - Slow, painstaking, perfect grammar, robust text
 - *Style*--Joseph Williams
 - *Writing With Precision*--J. Bates
 - Keep a "clippings" file
 - Keep sequential, date-labeled drafts

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- Keep a "clippings" file of all the substantial bits of text you delete
- Sometimes those will end up re-entering the dissertation
- They may be helpful in subsequent writing
- It is psychologically easier to cut text that has become irrelevant if you know it isn't going away for good
- Keep sequential, date-labeled drafts for each day
- E.g., Dissertation Sept 9; Dissertation Sept 10; Dissertation Sept 11; etc.
- Good in case a catastrophic failure renders a draft unreadable (Word has crashed and destroyed files on me). You'll only lose a day's work
- Allows you to experiment. If you try a new structure for the document on Sept 10 and discover on Sept 11 that it was a mistake, you can go back to the Sept 9 version and start fresh from that point.



Writing: don't worry about the papers

- You don't know what is interesting until you are done (or even after)
- It probably won't break the way you expected, anyway
- The publication payoff probably isn't as good

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- Writing: don't worry about the papers that will come from the dissertation
- You don't know what is interesting until you are done (or even after)
- It probably won't break the way you expected, anyway
- I was invited to present on "the modularity part of my dissertation". Until then, I'd just thought of modularity as one determinant of uncertainty. That presentation turned into my second SMJ paper
- Papers taken from dissertations where the focus was writing a great dissertation are often better than those taken from dissertations written with an eye on creating papers.