

# **Surviving Graduate School: The Dissertation and Other Doctoral Milestones**

by

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'How is your dissertation coming along?' This is a question that strikes fear (and sometimes anger) in many graduate students. If you are one of these, rest assured that you are not alone. It is common for the dissertation to be a source of great anxiety for graduate students. Fear and anxiety can arise at every stage in the process, from developing an original idea to deciding what to wear when you deposit the final manuscript in the school's library. (It never hurts to look good when you meet with the person who must grant you format approval!)

We originally intended this column to focus strictly upon the doctoral dissertation; however, we realized that many of the concerns that apply to the "pinnacle" of one's graduate career are also applicable to many other steps one must take *on the way* to a Ph.D. Thus, as indicated by the title, most of the points we address are applicable not only to the dissertation process, but also the Master's thesis and some preliminary exam formats (as well as other projects). We hope to shed some light on these milestones and perhaps alleviate some of the distress that comes along with them. While the ideas we present are in no way meant to be exhaustive, we hope that they may offer a starting point.

In preparing this column, we consulted several graduate students at various stages of the dissertation process and spoke with current faculty in the close relationships field. Furthermore, we utilized resources that can be found in most libraries. What follows is a summary of what we think are some of the more important tips for surviving graduate school.

## **Selecting a topic**

When it comes to selecting your topic for any project, be sure to choose something that excites *you*. Because of the amount of time that you will be investing, you should be passionate about whatever topic you choose. For most projects, there is little extrinsic reward, so your project should be something that satisfies you on a personal level. In many respects, you will be "married" to the topic for some time, so make sure it is the right choice: Divorce is generally not an option (at least not if you want that diploma).

In many ways, particularly for the dissertation, this project may ultimately define you as a researcher. Try to pick a topic that you and others find sexy - this will make it much easier for you to handle the rocky periods. As a social scientist, you want to find something that will have an impact at both a theoretical and a pragmatic level. A good rule of thumb is to remember you want something that has an existing theoretical foundation, while at the same time offers you a "ripe" area for your research. Essentially, you have to walk the line between not taking too much, and doing something that will have an impact.

## **Selecting an advisor/committee**

There are many viewpoints when it comes to selecting an advisor and committee. Davis and Parker (1979) offer some general tips that we believe are useful. The "ideal" advisor should:

- be interested in the topic
- know enough about it to help guide you
- have reasonable expectations
- give feedback in a reasonable amount of time
- be consistent with requirements (e.g., doesn't keep changing things)

- take his or her role seriously, and
- be interested in you (the candidate) as a person and a scholar

Consider your goals when choosing an advisor and committee members. If you are hoping to be attached to a "big name" in the field, then you may limit your options, depending upon your program. On the other hand, if you are hoping to have a lot of freedom, then you may search for someone who has a "hands-off" approach. Ask around to get an idea of who best suits your needs. For example, if you know that you tend to have difficulty with data analysis, then you may want to consider someone who has a strong background in statistics to help guide you through that portion of the project. In the end, your choice of committee members should depend on how well your personal and academic styles match, and on the goals you want to achieve.

### **Writing the proposal**

When it comes to writing the proposal, stay focused! The proposal serves as a 'contract' with your committee - do not take it lightly. Define your project ahead of time by listing specific goals and explaining how you plan to achieve those goals. The more you address in your proposal, the more your committee will be able to focus on guiding rather than challenging you. Do not be afraid to throw your ideas around with others ahead of time. This will give you insight into what aspects you need to strengthen and what kinds of questions to expect during your dissertation defense.

### **Collecting the data**

In the close relationships field, gathering data can be a difficult or relatively simple process, depending on your research design. Some people choose to use existing data sets, which allow students to obtain data that they might otherwise not be able to collect on their own. However, be sure to check with your department first because some programs prohibit the use of existing data for doctoral or master's theses.

If you find you will be collecting new data (as most of us will), develop a data-collection timetable, and be sure your plans are realistic and manageable. Also, never forget that statisticians are your friends. Many schools offer statistical consultation services, and this is a good way to find out, ahead of time, if the data you plan to collect will be appropriate for the analyses you want to conduct to test your hypotheses. We know of one student who spent a year collecting her dissertation data only to find out that the statistical techniques she required for analysis did not exist! Basically, the more you can do ahead of time to make your life easier during "number crunching" time, the better.

### **Writing the results**

The process of writing the results depends on the type of research you performed. For qualitative data, it may help to look at past dissertations to get some ideas for structure and format. Most school libraries keep copies of their students' dissertations and theses. Resources such as *Dissertation Abstracts* can also help you identify similar topics/studies.

For quantitative data, it may help to start with tables and build the text from there - this will help you to develop the flow. The more you are able to outline the results/tables to view all at once, the more likely you will be able to see any patterns.

It is also important to remember that your results should flow with the rest of the paper and should follow your predictions or research questions. Some people take the stance that you should try to present the most amount of information with the fewest amount of numbers so that the reader is neither bogged down nor left with lingering questions. Granted, this is easier said than done, but with the right approach and perseverance, it can be accomplished. Remember, prior to the results section of your paper, you have, in many ways, been telling a story that climaxes at this point. This is not the time to lose your reader!

### **Handling feedback**

The key thing to remember is that you should separate yourself from your research. Nobody likes criticism, but ultimately constructive criticism will improve your work. Do not

take it personally! Remember, your advisor and committee members got where they are for a reason. They are good at what they do, and their job is to help you conduct high quality research. If you disagree with something that is said, discuss it with the person, but don't be defensive - you never know when you'll need their help/advice again. This is not the time to start burning bridges.

### **Final defense**

When going into your final defense, remember that you know your work much better than anyone else there - you have lived and breathed it for months (and sometimes years!). You have been thinking about this for a *long* time and you *will* know the answers, so relax.

Do whatever you can to prepare ahead of time. For example, talk to others to get an idea of what types of questions to expect. Also, remember that when committee members ask you questions, this does not mean that they do not approve of your work. In many instances, they just want to make sure that you (and they) understand why you did the things you did, and that you can discuss your research in a professional and scholarly manner.

Finally, bring food! A fed professor is a happy professor.

### **Time management**

Always keep your "eye on the prize". Things will take longer than you initially expect, so carefully budget your time. When it comes to writing, set aside time and stick to it. Even if you have to sit around for two hours sharpening pencils, that is still progress!

Also, don't forget to leave time for proofing and all the little things that come up (e.g., format approval, meeting with library personnel and their deadlines, etc.). Look ahead to the entire process, and set realistic deadlines for yourself.

Finally, if you do most of your work in front of a computer, get rid of *Solitaire*, *FreeCell*, *Minesweeper*, and any other game that helps you pass (waste) time! Make sure the time you are supposed to be working is dedicated to that process. As one of our correspondents put it: "You can only circle the hill so many times before you start climbing." It may be tough to get started, but, once you do, it gets easier.

### **Stress management**

Stress management is definitely one area that entirely depends upon the individual. Do what works best for you (e.g., exercise, music, origami, etc). While setting deadlines will help you move along steadily and decrease your stress, you should also set aside time for yourself. This means budget time for whatever relaxes you. Just make sure you set aside more time for work than for relaxation! The more rested and relaxed you feel, the more productive you will be.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, remember that you *chose* to do this. Whether it be your Master's thesis, Doctoral dissertation, class project, or anything else, you should have a burning individual initiative to get the job done. In the end, your work is going to be a reflection of yourself. Be proud and confident of what you have done. It may be the hardest thing that you have ever undertaken, but in the end, after all the frustration and tears, it will have been well worth it. Particularly for the dissertation, the project is not an ending; instead it is a launching pad for the rest of your academic or professional career. At some point, particularly if you are a perfectionist, you have to "let it go" and move on with the rest of your life.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Davis, G. B., & Parker, C. A. (1979). *Writing the doctoral dissertation: A systematic approach*. Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

Sternberg, D. (1981). *How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation*. New York: St. Martin's Press.