

LESSONS LEARNED FOR PROPOSAL & DISSERTATION DEVELOPMENT

(For students who completed course work six months ago or more)

These lessons and helpful hints are based on the author's own personal experiences, unstructured interviews with other dissertation writers, and review of literature on completing dissertations. The joint purposes behind these hints and lessons is to assist you in getting back on track (if you're off track), make your dissertation journey smoother, and to help you avoid the year after year struggle of developing a topic and completing the dissertation.

Especially if you have placed the proposal and/or dissertation on a back burner, and/or are floundering on how to proceed, kindly take the time to read this paper.

GETTING (RE)STARTED:

Point Number One: Dismiss any excuses you might have conjured up as to why you can or should not work on the dissertation now, including the notion that you have earned a rest after completing all your course work. Ninety nine percent of rationale and reasons are in fact just excuses, no matter how compelling they sound. Think about why you entered the program. Was it just to take some night courses, or was it to get your degree? Until you successfully complete and defend your proposal, you have not even earned the title of ABD (which really means "all but **degree**"). If you are aware of the circumstances under which people have completed their dissertation work and earned the Ph.D., you will be unlikely to find supportable reasons for not doing it. People with full time jobs, children, ill parents, marriages, and other conditions or changes in life have succeeded in completing the degree in a timely manner. *DO NOT LET THE DISSERTATION RECEDE BY DEFAULT INTO THE BACKGROUND OF YOUR LIFE. IF YOU DO SO, YOU WILL REGRET IT.* Good dissertations do not fade away-they get finished. Don't drift-make a conscious decision about what you want to do and why, and then follow through with it.

Invest the time to read articles and/or books containing practical guidance and information about the dissertation process, such as [*Dissertation Proposal Guidebook: How to Prepare A Research Proposal and Get it Accepted*](#) by David C. Gardner and Grace Joely Beatty; [*Completing Dissertations in the Behavioral Sciences and Education*](#) by Thomas J. Long, et al.; or *Dissertation of Thesis Process* by George R. Allen. These books are intended for use during and after doctoral course work. If you were provided other sources to assist you in developing your proposal, **make use of them**. They will prove to be very helpful to you as you proceed and the dissertation process will be less of a mystery to you.

Most likely, it is not too late. Pick up the pen or the computer keyboard and sketch out your potential dissertation topic. If you have already done this, but are sort of languishing, **APPROACH THE PROPOSAL AND ACTUAL DISSERTATION AS IF IT WERE A FULL OR PART TIME JOB**. Unless you have formally decided to withdraw from the program and give up the degree, the dissertation will hang over your head until you finish, and your research skills, and perhaps your writing skills, will become rustier and rustier. The essential notion here is you can start with some small steps, but **do it now**.

If you have not yet firmly established your topic, simply go to the library and get a few articles and books to review in subject area(s) you are considering. Review existing research for ideas on research areas which are untapped.

Start to sketch out ideas on the computer and/or on paper without worrying too much about format or style. You can always edit later after you start to take notes and capture your ideas. The point here is, do not let required formats **constrain** you. Just write. For example, I had a great deal of material which I was not sure where it best fit-the introduction, literature review, or theoretical framework. So I created a phantom chapter (which I later called "chapter gone") to capture approximately 25 pages worth of information. I turned it in this way to my mentor, because I knew that talking it through with him would help clarify things for me. Working with my advisor, we found appropriate and logical locations for each piece of material. I then blocked and moved the information to alternate sections of the proposal until the extraneous chapter was obliterated.

Shifting Roles Among Household Members: Writing your dissertation will be much easier if you have the support and understanding of household members. When you are beginning the proposal, inform all your immediate family members and close friends that the dissertation will involve some sacrifices on everyone's part, and you will be generally unavailable for a year (plus or minus). Come to an agreement with immediate household members that you will need to be somewhat selfish while you are working on the dissertation, and they can help by simply taking care of household chores; sometimes just staying out of the way; and refraining from giving you grief over bizarre working hours, not contributing your share to household duties, or other practices which seem to become necessary during the process. You may also want to inform your family that it will be helpful to you if they refrain from informing you when there is an event or program coming up which might interest you. There are two main reasons for this: (1) these invitations can be too tempting at times and (2) it becomes tiresome to keep saying "no" to everything. Ensure that loved ones-including the children-understand that completing the dissertation is a valuable investment for all of you (and share the reasons for this). Talking about these household issues ahead of time can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings or resentments later on.

PSYCHOLOGY:

The beginning stages are the most uncertain and obscure, and therefore perhaps the most challenging. It becomes relatively easy once you are engrossed in the proposal/dissertation itself and know exactly what you need to do. At first, you need to manufacture your own urgency and your lists of things to do. Especially very early on, it can be quite difficult to narrow down and formulate your major research question, so you will need to be persistent, apply self discipline, and stick with it.

The way in which you think about the dissertation process is critical: you can either make it relatively easy on yourself or create your own psychological barriers. If you cringe at the thought or mention of the dissertation, break that habit. You are creating your own formidable psychological wall. It is helpful to focus on what you will **learn** through the dissertation process. Don't listen to those who only talk about how difficult, frustrating, or demanding it is. Mentally prepare yourself by deciding ahead of time that it will be a glorious learning event because,

through the challenges, difficulties, and struggles, you will learn quite a lot. Think of writing the dissertation as one year (or however long it will take) of dedicated hard work. Think about how quickly one year goes by. The stark reality is that you will need to become somewhat obsessed by the need to complete the proposal and dissertation work within a reasonable period of time. Establishing this in your own mind ahead of time sets the psychological tone for your work and the seriousness with which you will approach it, and might greatly reduce the probability that you will languish on your topic for several years.

Apply Brute Force: When constructing your research question(s) and methodology, and when working on the proposal in general, resort directly to the 5 minute approach (tell yourself you are only going to work on this for five minutes). You may figuratively need to chain yourself to the desk. Once you are fully immersed in the proposal development or doing the dissertation itself, this will be unnecessary-you will be drawn to the dissertation work. A personal example: early on I was tempted to go outside if everyone in the neighborhood was out visiting and children were out playing; later, it was not distracting to me at all. I knew what I needed to do and I wanted to work on the proposal. It really did not bother me at all if everyone was outside sledding in the snow or enjoying spring weather. I was drawn to my work on the computer.

One bit of getting started psychology is to begin your work by setting up the required format, including the title page (don't worry about the preciseness of the title; it will probably change several times). Utilize the graduate school publication "Instructions for Preparing Final Copies Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations" (use the one appropriate for your school/program) for the proper format. Doing this may seem like a minor detail, but it can really help to make the dissertation more real or concrete to you.

TIME MANAGEMENT:

The importance of effective time management cannot be overstated. Doing the dissertation will take a different sort of time management than course work required. Remember, throughout the proposal development and dissertation process, you will need to create your own deadlines. Unlike your classes all through school and college, no one will tell you when *assignments* are due. There are no mid-term or final exam dates set, nor is there an externally determined date by which a research paper is due. Although one person I know of had her mentor tell her when certain items were due, ultimately all deadlines and products are up to you. You must be self policing. There are effective practices and tools you can utilize to police yourself.

One of the first things you need to do is a **timeline** of major steps in the process with the month and year by which you plan/intend/think it's reasonable to complete each. You can revise the timeline later-just get an initial timeline down on paper. Doing this helps you stay on schedule and provides realistic timeframes for when you need to accomplish each step. It also helps you to avoid letting the project slip months or years, one week at a time. The timeline creates a useful and necessary urgency for each phase in the process. Without it, you could be working on just your proposal for two years. The timeline will also help you to identify the critical path of your process so that you will know that a delay in certain stages will delay the entire project. (A sample [timeline](#) is attached; each person's will differ.)

In your time management, know the difference between urgent/unimportant, urgent/important, non-urgent/unimportant, and non-urgent/important activities. Examine everything as a potential distraction or procrastination activity. There is no shortage of urgent (but unimportant), seemingly important, enjoyable, or necessary activities to which you can attend should you choose to. Quite often we attend to the urgent but unimportant activities first leaving no time for the important but non-urgent activities. Scrutinize your use of time at every moment and decide what is **important** for you to do.

If you have decided that the dissertation is important for you to do, closely examine your priorities and summarily give up all time draining activities. Eliminate or severely limit the myriad of little unnecessary (non-mission critical) time-takers, such as visiting, shopping, watching television, movies, letter writing, and so on. Even the daily task of preparing meals can be a waste of time. Revert to pre-prepared foods, such as frozen foods, takeout food, or pizza as much as possible (as much as your family members will tolerate). Do not waste time or tire yourself out housecleaning-hire a cleaning service or negotiate with other household members to take care of housework. During the proposal and dissertation writing, many of the routine tasks you may do now are not worth your time.

Learn to see procrastination activities for what they really are. Beware of puttering. Develop an aversion to invitations to go places or do things. Again, clearly prioritize who you will allocate time to visit with or what you will allocate time to do, other than the dissertation, ahead of time (this can be adjusted as you go along) so you do not get sidetracked one little event at a time. Time is your most valuable commodity. At a minimum, develop the habit of thinking through everything you do before you do it and weighing it against your list of things to do for the proposal dissertation. Realize that it is a collection of little items which add up to days, weeks, and years. Failure to examine and prioritize all of your activities can result in your wondering five years later why you are still working on that proposal. This is not a comfortable state in which to exist.

Explain to people that it's not that investing time with them is not valuable, you just need to get this done. It is likely that everyone will understand. I informed everyone with whom I usually communicate that I am doing the dissertation and I will not be writing/calling/visiting (which ever is applicable) for several months. After that, I figured that they were duly notified and I do not write back when they write. I have talked to several people who have done this without alienating anyone. Additionally, well-meaning relatives/friends/acquaintances/strangers are likely to advise you to "slow down!" or "take a break!" or say, "oh, it's just one little luncheon-can't you join us?" When this occurs, patiently, politely say, "I am working on this project now; I'm sorry, I just don't have the time." Make this (or a variation on the theme) your stock answer so you do not need to waste mental energy conjuring up reasons for turning down invitations and explaining yourself to the myriad of individuals concerned about how hard you are working day and night. With your closer family and friends, simply and politely request that they not press you on going here and there, taking a rest, and so on because you do not have the psychological energy to devote to resisting this or explaining yourself over and over again; you need your physical and psychological energy to complete the thesis.

Establish concrete working days and times so that you will either be working on the proposal/dissertation during these times or you will need an extremely compelling reason not to be doing so. Just being fatigued is not a sufficient reason. Select hours to work that are your most productive. Do what works best for you. Work during your prime time. For example, one person I know of works on the dissertation for two hours, starting at 5:30 a.m., before going to office. If you are not a morning person, this will not work well for you. Another person worked for two hours from 8 to 10 p.m. every night regardless of what was happening or how tired he felt. Sometimes he stared at the computer screen and wrote very little during the time block, but that was his appointed time to work on the dissertation. Here's where family members can help-if it is known that this is your work time and you are not working, you will need to justify this to household members. You might also wish to keep a log book of hours you worked on the proposal/dissertation so that household members can check it once in a while (one person's wife did this).

Work on the proposal/dissertation every day to maintain momentum. Do not let it get cold, or it is difficult to transition back into the flow and mindset. Some people believe that it is important to take one day a week off when you do not work on the dissertation at all. This will depend on your preference and work habits.

While your adviser or the full committee is reviewing drafts, take care of details such as proper form for your notes or bibliography, check factual details, obtain sources you still need, etc. Keep working rather than lose momentum. At the same time, you can and should reward yourself with a little break or rest, but don't take too much of a break because it will be painful to get back to the work and regain momentum if the research becomes cold.

Summary Method of Creating Deadlines:

Inform your advisor (and family members as well) when you will have a draft (or certain products) to him or her to review. This deadline will drive you to complete it on time because you will not want to call to say that you won't be turning it in on time (unless there is an undeniably good reason).

It is essential that you do a timeline. Use it, and if you wish, share it with others, such as committee members, colleagues/manager (if this is an office-connected project), and anyone else who might either hold you to the schedule or need to know why they won't be hearing from you in several months.

Utilize a large white write on/rub off board to write your timeline across the top and your list of priorities (critical path and non-critical path things to do).

SPECIFICS ON DEVELOPING THE PROPOSAL & WORKING WITH YOUR COMMITTEE

Understand that the proposal is the biggest hurdle in the process. It is not simply a large version of a research paper. It is a much larger undertaking. As Julia Anderson, Ph.D. said, "in the proposal, you plan the work; in the dissertation, you work the plan." Planning the work is a task to take very seriously. Be aware that your proposal will go through NUMEROUS

iterations/revisions. Work your way through the quagmire(s). Mentally preparing for this will reduce your frustration level.

Select an advisor with whom you communicate well and who is interested in your subject area and/or methodology. When you begin working with your chairman/mentor/advisor on your topic, provide this person with drafts of your proposal for comment. Resist the urge to make it perfect before sharing drafts because there is always more that you can do (and tell him or her that you consciously did this). Put a last revised date on the front of every version of your proposal.

Share drafts of the proposal with your advisor until you both agree that it is ready to be shared with the rest of the committee. Work with your advisor in selecting the rest of the committee. It will be very helpful if they all work well together and respect each other.

Formulate your committee when your topic and analysis approach (methodology) are fairly well developed. Forming the committee creates an urgency and makes the process more tangible because the committee exists and you have implied deadlines. You will need to provide the full committee your introductory and literature review chapters when they are relatively polished so that they will know what type of committee they are on. This way you will find out early in the process whether a committee member will decide to withdraw from the committee because the topic is really unrelated to their interests or work. If a committee member is going to withdraw, *it is good to find this out early on.*

Do not presume that committee members will know the reasons you have for your chosen analytical approach, for formulating the hypotheses, theoretical framework, and other aspects of the proposal. The rationale for everything must be documented and must connect throughout the chapters and sections of the proposal. Support everything you say or claim with literature citations.

Select committee members interested in your topic and/or your methodological approach. Also, select members who have high standards **and** who you sense will have respect for your time and your research. This is not straightforward to convey, but rely on your sixth sense/gut level instinct for whether the prospective committee member cares about you as a student (thanks to Julia Anderson for this insight), and is concerned about the rigor and integrity of the research as well as the importance that you learn. Check back with committee members to ensure that they do in fact wish to be on the committee. Once you have gone through an extensive proposal development process, having one or more committee members realize that they do not believe this is an appropriate committee for them to be on can be quite traumatic and could seriously set your timeframe back. I very nearly had my proposal defense derailed 48 hours prior to the scheduled defense because I may not have communicated fully enough with one of the committee members, and because I failed to act on my instinct that, given the person's temperament and subject specialty, I really should replace the committee member. Communicate early and often with committee members/prospective committee members concerning your basic mutual understanding about (1) what your topic and approach are, and (2) given this, whether the person does wish to be on your committee. These points must be explicit and clear. Ensure that they are made so.

Do not presume that all committee members are familiar with the process, their role, the procedures, the timing, etc. Find out every detail about the process and then make sure all committee members are operating from the same base of assumptions and understandings about the process.

Obtain recent articles published by your committee members and be familiar with them *prior to the proposal defense*. You'll get an idea how each thinks/writes, which can be quite helpful.

Expect very different perceptions/feedback from committee. (Example: keep your own thoughts out vs. put own thoughts in.) Obtaining these different perspectives is the value of having a committee. They can all be reconciled through discussion, reflection, and consultation with your chairman.

Do as thorough and high quality a job on the proposal as you can because this becomes part of your final dissertation. If you do an excellent introductory chapter, literature review, and methodology chapter, these chapters will essentially be written already when you write your findings. (Depending on the length of time between the proposal defense and the dissertation defense, the literature review may require updating.) Review some defended proposals for ideas and guidance on your own. While they differ from one another in terms of format, they will give you ideas on how to structure your proposal. Notice that the writing required for a dissertation is highly formal and professional. Avoid witty phrases or forms of writing used in popular journals or other literature.

Err on the side of writing too much. It is easier to move material out of the text than to do some more research to incorporate additional concepts. (When you move text out, save it in another file because other committee members may advise you to put the information back in.)

On working with your committee. A quote from the book by Thomas J. Long mentioned above nicely captures overall aspects of interactions with your committee members:

As you struggle with the difficulties and inconveniences of doing a dissertation, you will be offered plenty of opportunities to be annoyed with everybody, including your committee members. This one may not be punctual; that one may not read what you have written fast enough to suit you. Any of them can make a mistake. You will need to show patience and forgiveness in dealing with your committee, just as you may sometimes need to hope for their patience and forgiveness in dealing with you.

I have this quote pasted above my computer terminal and it has helped me think in a balanced, calm, and patient way about the dissertation process.

Balance the fact that this is *your* research and your committee with the knowledge, rights, needs, and preferences of the committee members. For example, accept their comments on your products however they wish to deliver them-by telephone, in person, in writing, by email, etc. Each will probably communicate with you in a different way; you need to respect the differences and accommodate whatever method they prefer.

When you are ready to schedule the proposal defense, PLAN AHEAD - start to schedule the defense about three weeks before your target date to defend. Have a calendar with large blocks in front of you, then call each committee member to find out what days and times he or she will NOT be available for the defense, and write these time periods in the calendar. (I color coded mine with a different color for each committee member's time commitment.) Do this in one or two days (because their schedules can change), then schedule the defense for a two hour time block that everyone has open. **Immediately** inform all committee members in writing when and where the defense will be (you might wish to phone or email them as well). When you call the committee members for their schedules, ask if there is anything they wish to discuss with you prior to the defense. This way, you will get an idea of what to expect, and can prepare for likely questions or suggestions from committee members in the defense. (Allow the committee at least two weeks to review your proposal draft before making the phone call described above.) [I am grateful to Dr. Jacqueline Corrigan for the advice on the mechanics of scheduling the defense.]

Keep in mind the approach you need to take: avoid endless rewrites and revisions being passed back and forth between you and the entire committee. If committee members have relatively minor comments or issues of concern that can be addressed during or after the proposal defense, then go forth with the proposal defense. Ask each member (both in the proposal transmittal memo and verbally) if there is anything they wish to discuss with you prior to the defense. Only if there are major, fundamental issues having to do with your methodological approach or some other aspect of the proposal, should you delay the proposal defense. If you have followed all of the proposal development and committee formation steps, a surprise in the proposal which would delay your defense can be avoided.

GENERAL MISCELLANEOUS PRACTICAL TIPS:

If you have a full time job, select a topic related to your job if possible/feasible. Doing the dissertation while at the office is an ideal way of doing it. A few points on job-related topic are worth noting. Selecting a job-related topic means you will likely need to write for two constituencies: those at the office (who are interested in how the research will benefit the organization), and your committee (who are interested in what contribution to knowledge you will make). Being aware of this ahead of time does help you prepare for writing and talking to opposing audiences. Unless you are working in a pure research-oriented organization, it might be advisable to remove the word "dissertation" from your proposal drafts, timeline, and other materials for office purposes. Resentments can sometimes ensue if it is perceived that you are being paid to work on a school project. (There are a host of other issues connected with doing the dissertation at the office which are the subject of another list of helpful hints.)

Be extremely well organized. Set up a file system with your notes and literature and label everything. Investing the time and resources to do this will be well worthwhile.

Take a little tape recorder to record all your meetings with your mentor/chairperson (with permission). This way, you can focus on what he or she is saying during your meeting rather than frantically taking notes. You then can listen to the tape at home following your meeting to ensure that you capture everything discussed.

Write your main hypothesis in big letters and put it up in your work area. This simple step helps your mind to work on your research question(s) and to refine them as you develop your proposal.

Put something that inspires you in your work area. I have a little toy plow to remind me to keep plowing, and a 434 page book on *The Pencil* on my shelf. I figure that if someone can write 434 pages solely about a pencil, I can write 200 pages (plus or minus) on just about any topic.

Communicate with someone else working on a dissertation who is ahead of you in the process (or recently graduated), and is completely willing to be a help line as you write the proposal, conduct the analysis, and write the dissertation. This kind of support and assistance is different from that which you will get from your family, friends, or committee chairperson. The fellow student dissertation writer will allow you to commiserate, vent frustrations, ask trivial and non-trivial questions about their experiences or anything else connected with completing the dissertation.

Get Kate Turabian's most recent edition of *Manual for Writers*. Avoid having to re-do all of your bibliographic and/or footnotes and/or parenthetical references by consulting this book ahead of time (I learned this the hard way because I had an old version of Turabian).

While this may seem to contradict some of the advice on time management, you should reward yourself when you accomplish certain steps, such as writing the outline for your proposal, writing the introduction, completing the literature review, or some other identifiable step depending on where you are in the process. Several people reward themselves with food items such as ice cream or cookies. One reward I use is that I only get to write in/update my journal if I have completed my goals on time for the relevant time period. I also get chocolate cookies as a reward. I have also withheld rewards until I complete certain necessary tasks. For example, to resist the urge to let it slide another day, I could not eat lunch until I got my revised survey instrument to a particular person for comment. This may sound extreme, but it is a nice little carrot-and-stick-based reward system.

Consider keeping your own journal during the process. It helps add levity to the trials and tribulations you will no doubt experience.

Spare no expense in buying items necessary to set up a dissertation-focused office environment. The dissertation is a large scale time intensive project-perhaps the largest you will ever do. To the extent that you can financially afford to do so (be honest about this), purchase any equipment, furniture, or other materials that will assist you with the dissertation process. Items such as an extra computer hard drive (for speed), ink jet or laser printer, a headset for the phone if you plan to conduct telephone interviews, file cabinets/boxes, and bookshelves can be invaluable as you proceed with your research. Set up an office in your home which is dedicated completely to your dissertation work. Get bulletin board(s) and a large write on/erase white board to place your timeline and your list of major things to accomplish. (Check them off as you do them.) Buy file folders and labels in a color that you like (one of the little psychological tricks to help you to work on the dissertation).

Create backup files of all of your work on more than one diskette, your hard drive at home (if applicable), and your hard drive at the office. Save your work often-at least every ten or fifteen minutes. Doing this will eliminate unnecessary lost work due to computer glitches that will occur.

Take vitamins.

Finally, even given everything involved in the dissertation process, do not become overwhelmed by it all. The Chinese were right - a journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step. Break everything down into manageable small steps and it will get FINISHED - which is one of the best things for a dissertation to be.