

ABD No More:

Getting the Dissertation Done

You've finished the classes; you've done the research. Now you just have to write the dissertation or thesis. The problem is, you're about to embark on the part of graduate study that many students find the most daunting. If you can organize your thoughts, organize your work, edit yourself and make use of some important resources, you can get it done, says Christopher Hayes of the Division of Academic Enhancement and Marcus Fechheimer of the Department of Cellular Biology.

Write to Clarify Your Thoughts

Approximately 90 percent of the work on a writing project occurs before you start your first draft, says Hayes. Often, writers become frustrated because they think they understand their topic, but they can't write about it because they are just bad writers. Not true, says Fechheimer; if you really understand your work, you will be able to communicate about it. But the processes of thinking and writing do not happen separately. Before you begin a draft for another audience, write for yourself. Only by forcing yourself to find the language to embody your thoughts – which we can do in conversation or when we put things down on paper – can you complete those thoughts.

Writing also creates a state of mind in which you are open to the flow of new ideas and is the only effective way to keep track of your thoughts over time. Keep a dissertation journal, a notebook in which you record your related thoughts, summaries of readings or lectures, daily interpretations of data or impressions about your topic. Try to write something in your dissertation journal every working day, even if it is only a few sentences. Don't worry about clarity, grammar or audience: the journal is for your eyes only.

Writer, Edit Yourself

Another trap many writers fall into is thinking that their first draft will be a final product. It's not. Drafts are meant to be revised, and, in graduate school, committee members are meant to help you do that.

Think about writing as a process. As the first step in the process, create a one-page outline of your thesis or dissertation, review it with your committee and revise it based on their feedback. Consider it a working outline: add ideas, references and research findings to the appropriate sections and make changes as necessary. Eventually, your outline will expand until it suggests paragraphs, then topic sentences. At that point, you are ready to write the first draft.

Once you have a draft, revise it several times. Print the draft and read it as a hard copy instead of on screen. Leave it alone for a couple of days and re-read it with fresh eyes. Give yourself some distance from what you've written so that you can accurately assess whether your writing clearly communicates what you're trying to say or it makes sense only to you because you already know what you're trying to say.

Get on a Writing Schedule

Writing may be a creative process, but it's also hard work. And, just like any other work, you need to plan, organize and schedule it. Develop a work schedule that accommodates your other responsibilities and suits your lifestyle. Plan to write at the times of day when you are most productive. Adjust your schedule until you find the plan that works for you.

Know what you are going to work on each time you sit down to write; that way, you'll be prepared to jump right in. Break the project into small tasks and schedule those tasks. Reward yourself as you complete them.

Write regardless of whether you're in the mood. If you wait for the muse to visit, you may never start. On other hand, inspiration usually shows up eventually after you start writing.

Use Your Resources

When you feel overwhelmed, remember that you have many resources at your disposal. Meet with members of your committee for help as often as you need to; ask them to help you develop a timeline and schedule.

Once you've got something down on paper, make an appointment with the English Department's Writing Center (<http://www.english.uga.edu/writingcenter>) or the Writing Lab in Milledge Hall Learning Center (<http://www.uga.edu/dae>), which has ESL specialists on staff. The writing coaches will not edit or proofread your work, but they will help you express yourself more clearly and improve your writing. Some other things to try:

- Use a reference manager program, such as EndNote, which allows you to download references from the Web and will automatically format them in the style you choose. You can also make your notes searchable by keyword.
- Element K is an online tutorial center, accessible through the MyUGA portal. It houses tutorials for many of the software programs that you may need to learn to produce your dissertation.
- Review the UGA Honesty Policy at <http://www.uga.edu/ovpi/honesty/acadhon.htm> to be sure that you're using information appropriately, accurately and honestly. Don't run the risk of failing to cite or getting help that is not legitimate.
- The academic enhancement division offers UNIV 1120 in a special session for graduate students every semester. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Writing the Dissertation: Plan, Implement and Complete" by Dr. Marcus Fechheimer, Department of Cellular Biology; Christopher Hayes, Division of Academic Enhancement; and Dr. Dan Forbes, Department of Philosophy and Division of Academic Enhancement. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Slow and Steady Wins the Race: A Dissertation Case Study

When Dan Forbes, a recent University of Georgia doctorate, formulated his dissertation strategy, his first decision was to take it slow. Some students he knew wrote in bursts, but Forbes felt that wouldn't work for him. Instead, he decided to work on his dissertation for one hour every day; that way, he would accomplish a significant amount each week without shortchanging his teaching responsibilities or getting overloaded.

Next, Forbes had to decide what he would do in that hour each day. In the beginning, he mostly wrote about ideas that he had for his dissertation, knowing that these writings would probably not go into the dissertation itself. "That gave me tremendous freedom in what I wrote," he says. At times he wrote or updated parts of his working outline. When he felt particularly uninspired, he'd edit his previous work or format pages. Count as legitimate work, counsels Forbes, anything that gets you closer to a finished product.

To motivate himself, Forbes set goals and assigned himself deadlines for accomplishing them. For each goal he accomplished, he rewarded himself, for example, by buying a CD. It's important to create reasonable goals, he says; otherwise you won't be able to achieve them, and the reward system won't work. After a few weeks of writing one hour a day, it just felt like a habit, Forbes says, and he did it without thinking about it.

Forbes, who currently teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Division of Academic Enhancement, wrote his dissertation in two years.