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THIS ISSUE'S COLUMN FOCUSES ON THE CRITICAL TASK OF WRITING YOUR DOCTORAL DISSERTATION. You will quickly learn that the entire process of writing a dissertation is unlike any other writing endeavor you will ever undertake. Paradoxically, the process of writing the dissertation is also an enlightening exercise that can prepare you for the rigor of writing journal articles, the responsiveness of responding to reviewers, and the necessity of being an ethical researcher. It is a test of your communication skills, an endurance test, and a test of character, all rolled into one. Jay has considerable experience chairing doctoral theses, as well as serving on doctoral committees, and I know you will find his insights invaluable whether you are a student or an advisor.

## Working on the Doctoral Dissertation

Jay E. Aronson, The University of Georgia

I have enjoyed the *Decision Line* articles on doctoral student advice. In most cases, I had picked the advice up along the way, but in some cases I realized that some excellent advice never came up. I have had the *joy* of completing my own dissertation, and the *joy* of chairing and serving on countless dissertation committees. Each dissertation is different; each student is different; each committee member is different; and the interactions are different. But there is much (sometimes hidden) wisdom that can be passed on to the next generation. Here are some tips and pointers about *working on the dissertation*. Always keep in mind is that if earning a doctoral degree were easy, everyone would have one. Do read Gordon B. Davis and Clyde A. Parker's excellent book, *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: A Systematic Approach* (2nd ed.), Barrons Educational Series, 1997, 154 pages. I assume that the student is writing in English. If not, substitute the appropriate language. I sincerely hope that chairs and potential chairs will discuss these tips with doctoral students in a casual setting, and that students and potential students will discuss these with each other along with past and future columns. Enjoy.



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### Getting Started

You have enrolled in a doctoral program. Congratulations! Find out about the entire *process* of doing the degree. Identify all of the steps, dot all the i's and cross all the t's. Follow it to the letter. This is espe-

cially important when it comes to the format of the dissertation.

Learn to write. Then learn to write *well*. If necessary, get professional help right away. Seriously consider hiring an editor, and/or find a technical writer to help you with grammar and spelling, especially if English is not your primary language. It is nerve-racking for the faculty and your chair to be your editors. They are there to help with research and teaching, not with writing. Save their time for more appropriate and critical tasks. If necessary, take a class (or several) of English as a Foreign Language. Do this before you start writing. Use spell and grammar checkers regardless of how well you write.

Early on, start developing good relationships with the faculty. If not assigned early, find a mentor and get started on research early. Ideally this mentor will become your chair.

This tip is for your potential chair. One approach to doctoral research that I like is:

1. Ask the potential student to read a research paper and write up a summary (to check writing skills and gauge commitment level).
2. Ask the potential student to think creatively about ways to expand the ideas and write it up.
3. Explore these ideas together.
4. If things jell, then you have created a mentor-student relationship by initiat-

ing a research project. Ideally, this becomes the dissertation.

Ideally you should attempt to do some dissertation research in every course you take. If you have to do a literature review or a project in a class, slant it toward your dissertation topic.

Develop your methods capabilities; learn and use the best tools available (statistical, word processing, etc.); read research papers in your area; read other doctoral dissertations in your area; and get on Listservs related to your research areas and methods. Start networking early.

Get some sleep. Eventually your body will reject your dissertation and force you to sleep. Eventually, an *all-nighter* will end before midnight, because that is *all the night* you can handle.

Get involved in some social activities as well as in research and coursework. Enjoy some extracurricular activities. Take a couple of classes totally independent of your program. You will need *some* diversion in your life. Exercise regularly. Eat right and regularly. Relax a bit. If you can, take one weekend day off every week. Get away sometimes. Take a vacation or two every year. Do not take along your dissertation. But, do not overindulge in unrelated activities.

If you have a family, significant other, etc., spend some quality time with them. They are a major part of your emotional health support network. Don't let them down. And, be sure to mention them appreciatively in your acknowledgement section. That's their chance to shine.

Have a look at the parable about a rabbit hard at work on his dissertation on my Web site ([www.terry.uga.edu/~jaranson/](http://www.terry.uga.edu/~jaranson/)).

## Your Dissertation

Your dissertation is always a work in progress. At one point, you and your chair will agree that it is done. Trust your chair's judgment.

Proposal styles vary from having everything but the survey mailed done to having one-third of the ideas worked out. Make sure you have a clear understanding of expectations before you write yours.

Your dissertation does not have to be perfect, only *mostly* perfect. Leave just a few typos and grammatical errors for the committee to find. It certainly does not have to be your best work, but it should be

*really, really good*. Hopefully, the papers that are written from mining the dissertation will be better, and as you move through your career, your papers and research will get better.

## Working on Your Dissertation

Work in an area that your chair finds interesting and actively works. Otherwise you will run into trouble because your topic will have a low priority.

Work with a chair you *like*. This also generally applies to selecting the rest of your committee. If you don't get along, you need to change chairs early. Note—unless your chairs keep moving or coming to untimely ends (this happened to a friend of mine), if you are playing *Musical Chairs* (working with your third or fourth chair), there may be some suitability issues you should consider. You may need to seek counseling. Do not drop people off your committee just because they want you to do more work. Do *NOT* deliberately anger your chair or committee members. Listen to what they have to say. Their collective wisdom will prove remarkably effective.

Use your committee (and other faculty) as a resource. They have volunteered to help you. Listen to their advice. If you can, select at least one person strong in the methods you intend to employ, and at least one person who will carefully read the dissertation. Use the resource, but don't abuse it. They have many other time commitments.

Working on a dissertation involves an intense one-to-one relationship. You will be working closely with your chair and it should be a very positive experience. If you are having trouble getting along with all faculty in your program, you should probably move on. It is unreasonable (and perhaps illegal) to force someone to be your chair. The program is probably under no legal obligation to provide a chair for you, especially if you intend to work in an area in which no one has an interest, or you have managed to create personal problems with all the faculty. Even if you push the issue, the whole dissertation process will be very unpleasant, and chances are you will fail major milestones.

You should be *really* interested in your dissertation research. In fact, you should be *passionate* about it. Plan to be, because you will be working on this one topic for at least a year, if not three or four. Try to have

some fun while you are working on it. If you find it boring, stifling, etc., you will find it hard to finish. Afterwards, you will want to extend it. Ideally, you want to establish a research program, and your dissertation research will be phase one.

If you are taking 17 years to finish your dissertation, it is a sign of trouble. Do not attack your chair with a hatchet. This happened in the Mathematics Department at Stanford. The professor, unfortunately, died. The student spent several years in prison and never did finish his degree (I don't believe anyone else would serve as his chair after that). If it looks like it will take more than five years, have a very frank and honest talk with your chair or another faculty member whom you trust.

*Get the dissertation done!* If you have to give up teaching or other income, *borrow* money and get it done. When you start your career, no one will ask you about those last two extra courses you taught, but if it takes you an extra year or two to finish, your Promotion and Tenure Committee members will ask why.

You don't have to do the *everything* dissertation. You don't have to work on the hottest area in your field to succeed. Select a piece of a big research area that is broad enough for several dissertations. Leave some of the work for later in your research career.

Don't leave out any references. Get your reference format exactly right. There is nothing sloppier than a reference list with inconsistent formatting or incomplete information. It makes the accuracy of the dissertation suspect.

Doing a dissertation is like tending a baby. It gets dirty. It needs to be changed — often. You clean it up and shortly afterwards it gets dirty again. You have to feed it and spend many hours with it. It may or may not grow up the way you want or expect (fortunately, it doesn't [usually] take 18 to 22 years or a lifetime to finish growing up and it probably won't move back in with you after 25 years).

In most cases, you will reach a point where you *hate* your dissertation. (One student told me this after her defense!) This is not unusual. It's like living with someone who is fairly difficult for a few years. Unfortunately, when it comes to a dissertation, you created it (like a baby)! Hopefully you will get over it.

I've always liked Hugh Watson's "So What?" test of (dissertation) research. If someone asks you "So what?", you should be able to respond with something meaningful. If you can't, then your topic is probably not worth pursuing or you had better put more thought into it.

I developed the *Three Sentence Test of Research* to see if a student really understands what he or she is doing (OK—so I gave it a name.). One of your committee members will no doubt use this at your defense. It goes like this "Explain to me in no more than three sentences what you did. Explain it as if you were talking to my mother (assuming she is not an expert in your field)." You must be able to answer this to demonstrate that you understand what you have done. This is often a job interview question. You get bonus points if you can reduce the answer to two, or better yet, one sentence. I named this test after one of my doctoral students spent 45 minutes explaining to a potential employer what he was doing and did not get his ideas across. The employer asked me what he was working on. I responded with two clear sentences. Eureka!

## Finishing Up

Contrary to popular opinion, the hardest part of the dissertation process is probably scheduling the proposal and defense. It's hard to find a date and time so that several busy people can be available. Do not plan to have a summer defense. They are painful for both the student and the faculty. Some schools do not allow these.

Do not deliver copies of your dissertation draft to your committee members until your chair has seen it. Save him or her any major embarrassment.

Show your dissertation defense presentation to your chair, get feedback and incorporate it into the presentation. Keep the presentation brief. Your committee was supposed to have read the document and your chair certainly did. Unless your institution specifically requires a long defense, you, your chair, and the rest of the committee will appreciate brevity. If you can, do a dry run with other doctoral students.

Attend every doctoral defense in your program leading up to yours. Attend yours as well.

Do *NOT* leave with an ABD (All But Dissertation) degree. When I was in gradu-

ate school, Professor Joe Bowman threatened to break our kneecaps if we did (then he left). I have seen what happens to students who leave ABD—one month of work to finish up can sometimes take three to five years to complete. In one case, the entire committee had moved on and an emergency committee handled the defense. In many cases, students never finish. No matter how pressing your new job is, or your significant other is pushing for you to end your vow of poverty to graduate school, do *NOT* leave ABD.

## The Defense

Follow the required guidelines and rules for scheduling proposals and defenses. If summer defenses are not allowed, then don't even ask for one. If the committee is supposed to have three weeks to look at your draft, then give them three weeks.

Don't change the dissertation draft once you give it to your committee. It's hard for them to evaluate a moving target. Do create an errata sheet of typos that you have found and plan to correct. Distribute it to the committee at the start of the defense. This shows that you have carefully reread it.

Think through the kinds of questions that might be asked at your defense. Then answer them beforehand.

Go to graduation (it is for your family, not for you). This is the celebration of all your hard work. Keep your cap, gown, and hood. You'll need these at any academic job.

## Publishing Your Dissertation

Plan to—and do—publish the dissertation work in academic journals with your chair and perhaps with a member or two of the committee. Publishing is important for your career, and also for your chair's career. It is good incentive to keep your chair on track.

Keep the papers in mind as you write the dissertation. Write the papers concurrently with the dissertation, possibly beforehand. If you can write up some results early, you can get reviewers' comments that may help you refine the dissertation and subsequent papers. You can jumpstart your career as the merciless tenure clock starts ticking. I believe that the publications are more important than the dissertation itself. How many people are going to read your dissertation? If you are lucky, your

entire committee will. I actually received royalties totaling \$17.92 because three copies of mine were sold.

## Final Words of Wisdom

Be completely honest with the staff involved in running the program. The quality of your relationship with the secretaries, administrative assistants, and other staff can make or break your completing the program.

Finally, be completely honest in all your dealings with your chair, your committee, the faculty in general, and the other students in the program. By the time you are done, they will have become your colleagues and friends. It is up to you to make the doctoral process pleasant and leave with pleasant memories. ■



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