

Time Management Tips for Dissertation Writing

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“To achieve great things, two things are needed; a plan, and not quite enough time.”

--Leonard Bernstein

“Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment.”

--Jim Rohn

Time. How easy it is to waste time, procrastinate, and be inefficient. Yet, one could say we make the most of life by how we make the most of time. And, particularly when it comes to dissertation writing, it is important to manage time effectively and not let it travel away. By reaching the ABD stage, you already have been successful in this regard. These time management tips are intended to help you make the most of your time as you write your dissertation. Although the tips are focused on dissertation writing, some are applicable more generally to academia. Remember that only you can decide the best way to manage your time, but it is my hope that at least a couple of the tips may be useful or point you in the right direction as you set out to conquer time and your dissertation.

Planning Ahead

- *Set a goal for completing your Ph.D. program and figure out your game plan accordingly.* Typing up your game plan and/or noting your goals on a calendar--such as when you want drafts of chapters done--will help keep you on track, and you can modify your calendar if necessary. Consult your advisor and others as you develop your plan. Ask yourself: do you have enough funding to finish without applying to outside grants or securing employment opportunities? Of course, applying for grants and being employed is time consuming so keep that in mind as you develop your game plan.
- *Start writing as early as possible.* Some people prefer to begin writing after they have completed their research whereas others decide to write and research at the same time. Both approaches have their pros and cons but research can be never-ending and at some point you must stop. A good point to stop may be when you are not uncovering any new information that will change your interpretations. Yet, be aware that you most assuredly will discover additional research that you need to do once you begin the writing process. So, leave time for doing more research when you reach the writing stage. Keep in mind that it usually takes at least a year to write your dissertation; in fact, one year is considered a short amount of time.
- *Allot enough time to submit drafts to your advisor and other readers, get feedback from them, and incorporate their feedback.* The most important person for you to work with is your advisor, and you should prioritize getting feedback from him or her above all others. You may want to set up regular meetings with your advisor where you talk through ideas or discuss drafts in person. Be aware that it is not unusual to have to wait a month or longer to get feedback on a draft. Talk with your advisor about what is realistic for him or her, and you also may want to talk to his or her other advisees to see what their experiences have been like. Consult your advisor about what sort of shape he or she wants the drafts to be in.

It can be effective to submit drafts to your advisor or others that are not completely polished. In that way, you get feedback about your ideas as you are developing them and can make sure that you are going in the right direction. In contrast, submitting well-written, polished drafts can force you to further develop your points. You also may want to see if another faculty member, ideally someone on your committee, will be a second reader. Check with her or him to see whether you should submit individual chapters or a full draft. In my case, my second reader preferred to wait to give me comments until I had completed a full draft of my dissertation. He pointed out that “too many cooks in the kitchen” can delay progress as one has to expend energy figuring out whose direction to take, and he wanted me to follow the lead of my advisor. I did, however, have an outside reader (from a different institution) read chapters as I finished them, and that was helpful. Other people find it effective to be part of a writing group. Ideally, a writing group will provide a supportive community in which you discuss each other’s work and nurture each other during the dissertation process. Plus, meeting the group's deadlines for circulating your work can spur your dissertation along.

- *Be brave enough to resist feedback.* You likely will not be able to use all the suggestions that you are offered. Some suggestions may not be feasible or could be off the mark. Remember that you know your work better than anyone else in the world and have to decide for yourself what is possible to achieve for the dissertation. Be open to challenges, however. Heeding some advice may result in your working harder than you thought possible but the end result could be worth it. In any case, develop a “tangent file” and “for the book file”: create Word documents where you type up ideas to pursue when/if you have time either for the dissertation or book. These ideas also may be useful for articles and conference papers.
- *Save enough time for proofreading/copyediting, reading your work out loud, and formatting your dissertation according to your school’s guidelines.* I had no idea that the process of finalizing my dissertation would take months: it was very time consuming to make edits, insert them, and read my work out loud, which is the best way to catch typos, awkward phrasings, and so forth. In preparing the final version of your dissertation, you may discover inconsistencies that you need to fix. For example, did you spell Washington D.C. with a comma or without one? Do your best to make your spelling and grammar consistent so that you do not have to streamline it later. It is also vital to get your footnotes in order as you go along so that you do not risk plagiarism and do not have to go digging later for the sources that you want to cite. Absolutely do not wait until the last day possible to submit your dissertation to your graduate school. Plan ahead so you get it done well before then; in that way, you have time to take care of any final details that take longer than you had anticipated.

Figuring Out a Weekly and Daily Schedule

- *Work on your dissertation for a certain number of hours and/or cover a certain amount of ground per day.* Some people plan to spend at least two hours on their dissertation each day; others make sure to write two pages each day. Figure out a plan that works for you. For at least part of the time that I wrote my dissertation, I made sure to work on the writing and research aspects for at least three to four hours per day. I allowed myself to miss one day per week but tried to make up those hours. I also found it beneficial to devote at least one full day per week solely to the dissertation. Although everyone has different peak times for writing, it is generally a good idea to work on your dissertation right away in the morning. Doing so helps you to prioritize it and fit other activities in around it instead of fitting it in

around other activities. You may discover that you work beyond the time that you have allotted or write more pages than you had anticipated whereas you would not have achieved these results if you had started the work later in the day.

- *Create a worksheet for your week.* Map out your weekly schedule on a piece of paper. Across the top, write the days of the week. Vertically, list the hours that you are awake during the day. Then, create a grid by drawing lines so that cells exist for each of these hours in each day. Mark when you will get your dissertation and non-dissertation tasks done. Be sure to allow time for leisure and social activities as well.
- *Work on your dissertation for time periods as brief as thirty minutes or less.* Do not discount how much you can accomplish during brief time periods: filing, inserting edits, and writing at shorter intervals is worth the effort. One book that I read even suggested using commercial breaks to dissertate. That advice may be farfetched but the point is that dissertation work can be squeezed in at many times. On a related note, if you are planning to work until 5 p.m., stick to that time and do not end your work at 4:55 p.m. You likely will be amazed at how much work you can get done in those remaining five minutes.
- *Stick to a disciplined schedule and get to know thyself.* Many academics like the fact that we do not inhabit a 9 to 5, Monday through Friday world, yet sticking to a disciplined schedule helps ensure that you are productive. The beauty of our work is that you can tailor your schedule according to your needs and work style more than in most other work environments. Some academics choose to work 9 to 5 days, five days per week. Most history professors and graduate students work many more hours. It likely will take a process of trial and error to come up with a feasible work schedule but you will find that it provides an important structure for ensuring that you remain disciplined and productive.

Prioritizing Tasks

- *Prioritize the dissertation work that you need to do to meet your goals.* Figure out what your most pressing dissertation tasks are and what other related work you could either eliminate or decrease. For example, for a few years, I maintained a working bibliography of new works on my dissertation topic. I would flip through journals to find these works and note them in a Word document. But, when writing my dissertation, I decided to concentrate my energies elsewhere. It became a priority to get chapter drafts done. Plus, I could do a quick library search for recent works and/or ask my advisor and other experts what new books they recommended reviewing.
- *Complete a task if it takes less than five minutes.* Although it is good to delay low-priority tasks, you do not want to spend so much time making notes to do the task that it would have been more efficient if you had gone ahead and done it in the first place. Similarly, sometimes it is most efficient to do a task when it is on your mind.
- *Strike a balance between being overly organized and not organized enough.* Being meticulously organized can be counter-productive. But, if your disorganization is costing you too much time and trouble, then you should concentrate on organizing. For example, I sometimes was lax in re-filing manila folders containing archival material. I would soon find that it was better to re-file my stack of manila folders because flipping through them to look for particular folders became too time-consuming. Be sure to maintain an organizational system for your paperwork and electronic files. For instance, I organized my paper documents by topics by chapter in file cabinets and kept a file cabinet of biographical information that was organized alphabetically. You also may want to utilize one of the

computer programs available, such as Zotero (www.zotero.org), that help you manage your dissertation files.

- *Limit activities other than dissertation writing and your most necessary obligations.* Even seemingly small obligations can take up a significant amount of time and/or energy. Learn to say no even when it hurts or makes someone else unhappy. As Henry David Thoreau said, “Simplify, simplify, simplify.” At the same time, be open to select opportunities that are manageable and do not interfere with finishing in a timely manner. Sometimes activities such as attending conferences and academic talks can help you with your dissertation in unexpected ways. These activities may provide new insights for your work, give you a nice break from writing so you come back to your dissertation work rejuvenated, or give you professional depth. It might be the only time in your life when you can pursue these opportunities. When you get a job, you will have to juggle teaching and other responsibilities.
- *Keep “tangent” and “for the book” files.* It is worth re-stating this point. You will likely find that, once you get immersed in a subject, it is easy and tempting to explore many different angles. However, at a certain point, you have to decide what your focus will be. I ended up creating Word documents of “tangent” and “for the book” files for each chapter of my dissertation as well as my introduction and conclusion.
- *Create lists to help you manage your tasks.* I kept a working “to do” list where I separated priority items from non-priority ones. In addition, I spread out non-dissertation projects over a number of weeks (like one per week) to avoid doing them all at once or too soon and thus having them take up dissertation time.

Dissertating Effectively

- *Have “filler” tasks to do when you are feeling burned out or in need of an intellectual rest.* You may want to create a list of these filler tasks to consult when these times come. For example, you could file materials, organize your files, work on developing that course you are teaching next semester, or search your library’s catalog for recent works on your topic.
- *Keep a dissertation journal.* You may choose to write in it daily, weekly, or when you feel like it. You may want to keep track of the work you have done and/or use it to write out your ideas and/or use it to vent during stressful times. I found that I was always more productive after taking the time to write in my dissertation journal. Furthermore, it is a good place to write down your goals. Research has shown that you have a better chance of achieving your goals if you write them down.
- *Pretend that you working in a more structured work world.* At times, it has been helpful for me to think about my work as if I was billing my hours for someone or as if I was still working for my boss at the 9 to 5 job that I had between my undergraduate and graduate years. There, my boss would press me to be efficient rather than overly perfectionist or detail-oriented, which is good advice for many dissertation writers.
- *Limit your usage of email and personal electronic devices.* In order to fully concentrate on your writing, shut off that cell phone and check your email less often. If you are teaching, you can make it clear to students that you will check your email only, say, once in the morning and once in the afternoon and not over the weekends. If you are on fellowship, you may want to check it once a day or less. Another efficient way to handle email is to limit how much time you allot for it when you check it.

- *Utilize and build on your past work when you write your dissertation.* Can you build on your conference papers? Can you use the reading notes that you took when studying for your comprehensive exams? Drawing on past work is not only efficient but also may help you understand your own intellectual trajectory.
- *Break large tasks into small manageable ones.* Break up your chapters into subsections, and write accordingly. Find other ways to break up your work. In this way, what can seem like the overwhelming task of writing a dissertation becomes more manageable. Set deadlines for even small-scale tasks to ensure that you are efficient.
- *Seek advice from others, and do not be afraid to ask for help.* I picked up a number of the tips in this short piece from books, online sources, and conversations with others who went through the dissertation process, including my advisor, other professors, and graduate students. Many books and articles deal with time management issues, and you may want to consult professionals such as a learning services counselor at your school or a dissertation writing coach. For instance, Dr. Gina J. Hiatt, the founder and director of the Academic Ladder organization, specializes in dissertation coaching. She offers free advice about the dissertation process, much of which pertains to time management, at her web site: <http://www.academicladder.com/>.
- *Dissertation work can be inherently slow and not have tangible results initially but that does not mean you are not accomplishing a lot.* The “groundwork” before you actually start writing takes up a lot of time: thinking, conducting archival work, processing and synthesizing your archival work, creating outlines, etc. All this work serves to better prepare you for your writing.
- *Take breaks.* Taking breaks will aid your productivity. We are not machines, after all. By taking more breaks than you really need at times, you likely will come back to your work feeling energized. Another good way to stay energized and motivated is to leave your writing in such a shape that when you start next you will know what to say.
- *Remember the finished product is what matters.* As they say, the best dissertation is a done dissertation. You can have all the great ideas in the world but what counts is what you ultimately produce. Be confident that you will be able to congratulate yourself on a job well done!

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