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*Writing Your Dissertation  
in Fifteen Minutes a Day*

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A GUIDE TO STARTING,  
REVISING, AND FINISHING  
YOUR DOCTORAL THESIS



A HOLT PAPERBACK

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and some interesting, even if incomplete, or mutually contradictory theories. These are the kernels that will develop into the central ideas of your dissertation. Now you're ready to move on to learning how to revise further the draft you hold in your hands.

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## *Getting to the Midpoint: Reviewing Your Process and Your Progress*

YOU'VE ARRIVED at the midpoint in the dissertation process: depending on how you work, you've written either a first draft of your whole dissertation, or more or less complete versions of about half of your chapters. Your support system is in place. But the clearest indication that you've gotten to this point is that your sense of what it means to write a dissertation has changed. If what worried you most at the outset was "How can I possibly write a book?" you're now asking yourself questions such as "Do I still believe the main argument I've constructed?" and "What *was* it again that made me think I wanted a doctorate?" and "How am I going to arrange my life and work so I'll survive this project?"

### *Taking Stock of Your Dissertation*

Now is the time to review and evaluate where you've come to in your writing and where you have to go, what's working well in the process you're using, and what isn't. This is a good moment to look at your timing and pace, and to think seriously

about deadlines. It's also essential to renegotiate how to keep chaos at bay, in your dissertation project and your life, and to reconsider how you can relax and restore yourself for the exciting, but strenuous work ahead.

Now that the magnitude of your project has dawned on you, you can assess whether the kinds of planning and organization that you've been using so far are still serving you well. You may feel as if the large quantity of materials and writing you've collected are getting away from you, and you may need to rethink how to keep track of them. And you've probably realized that you have to establish not only the ultimate deadline for completing your dissertation, but also many smaller ones along the way.

Some of you will decide to clean up your act, to work harder than you've been working, in order to meet important deadlines. If you panic because you're not moving along as quickly as you'd planned, and worry that you've fallen into bad habits, you'll resolve to develop a new game plan. But others of you will realize that you have to work *less* hard, that you can't keep up the pace you've been setting for yourself without expiring before you get your degree. You may decide to confront your romantic fantasies of what being a writer means (your life turns out to be nothing like those scenes from old movies about artists), as well as the necessity of taking better care of yourself so that you make it to graduation. When I've heard friends talk about working at writers' retreats like the MacDowell Colony, what I envy most is not that they had all day to work on their projects—that part seems awfully lonely to me—but that lunch was delivered to their cabins in a basket. In the real world, no one delivers your lunch, and you're going to have to make sure you get it anyway.

Soon you will begin to experience a different sort of forward momentum, but not yet. The midpoint in the writing of your dissertation is a time for evaluating your current progress and process, and for making a revised work plan for the future. The two checklists below, and the discussions of them that follow, are meant to help you get started moving again. After that, I'll talk about deadlines, and about rewards and restoring yourself. Look through these checklists and add to them any items you think I've missed. Use them periodically during this middle part of the dissertation process to see how you're doing, and to stay in charge of your life and your work. Time spent evaluating your writing process and progress will more than repay itself.

### *Your Writing Process*

Here are some useful questions to ask yourself:

- \_\_\_ How do you feel about the writing process you're using?
- \_\_\_ Do you feel that your process is doing what you need it to do?
- \_\_\_ Are you writing regularly, with reasonable ease?
- \_\_\_ Are you able to focus clearly on your writing?
- \_\_\_ Is the place you've chosen to write working well for you?
- \_\_\_ Are you reading too much? enough?
- \_\_\_ Are you using other people well?
- \_\_\_ How are you and your advisor getting along?
- \_\_\_ Are you letting too many things get in the way of your writing?
- \_\_\_ Are you well enough organized so you can get your work done without having to step over either psychological or literal obstacles?
- \_\_\_ Is the process you've set up efficient?

Very few people are so self-punishing that they can continue to engage in a process that's painful and awkward, or in a regimen that makes them feel incompetent. If you're only managing to write late at night once or twice a week and one morning on the weekend; if you don't have any place (even if it's a broom closet) to call your own for your writing; if you've set up your schedule so that you always have to justify the time you spend writing to someone else—be that your partner, your child, or your boss; or if you have to steal moments while the baby or everyone else in the house sleeps, it *might* be possible to write a dissertation, but I wouldn't lay odds on it. Even if you succeed, it will be a miserable experience. I've known people in extreme circumstances who really had no good alternatives, but most people do have some choices.

If your examination of your writing process reveals nightmare conditions like the ones described above, you need to ask yourself why you're setting yourself up to fail. Or if your circumstances are the result of just not having thought about what you were doing, start thinking now and make some changes: Find a place to write that works for you (if your house won't work, go out to the library, or to a friend's house that's empty during the day). Establish more work time, even if that means taking a part-time leave from work or hiring more babysitters. Given how much your degree has probably cost you already, the costs of making the dissertation process more workable are not substantial—particularly since they will allow you to finish. Remember that you are entitled to put your dissertation first (not for seven years, but for a while). Realize that it's time you stopped asking other people's permission to do so.

About you and your advisor: Is it time for the two of you to talk about your work together and perhaps to retool some

aspects of it (the frequency of your meetings, the kinds of comments you're receiving), or to look at difficulties either of you is having with your current arrangements?

Some thoughts on focusing, and on enjoying yourself: Some days you'll be sleepy, and no one ever said every moment of writing a dissertation was fun; but if every day is sleepy, and it's never fun to work on your dissertation, you really have to ask yourself why. If you can't answer that question, get help from friends, or your advisor, or a professional. Every once in a while someone with these symptoms is trying to tell herself that she no longer wants a doctorate. Perhaps she's been doing it for someone else; perhaps her interests have changed. But most of the time your reasons will be less earthshaking: you've neglected yourself by not sleeping, or you've been grandiose in your estimate of how many other different jobs you could do while writing your dissertation. Or you're being too generous, or too masochistic, and are letting other people distract you.

Other people: Many of us have an impossible person (or two or three) in our lives whom we fantasize about getting rid of. This is usually not possible, because we're (a) related to them closely by blood, or (b) love them, or (c) would feel too guilty about doing it. If there is a person in your life who leaves you upset and unable to think about your own stuff for hours or days after each encounter, now is the time to take a vacation from that person. You can even tell him/her so explicitly: "I'm going to be a recluse for the next several weeks while I work on my dissertation. I'll call you when I come up for air. Don't call me. I'll be unfit for human companionship."

I wouldn't advise that you give up human society. I am suggesting, though, that you become selectively antisocial: that you either have no phone in your thesis room or that you don't pick

it up when it rings. (If you are one of the last people in America without an answering machine, now is the time to buy one, so that you're not cutting yourself off permanently from other people, just postponing conversations to a time when they won't interfere with your work.) Someone has noted that as a working parent you only get to do two out of the following three things well: work, be a parent, and have a social life. Whether or not you have children, if you're going to finish your degree, you'll find that you have to be a bit ruthless about whom you make time for, and when you do so. One of the tests of a partner you want to keep for life is that he can understand that your dissertation is your top priority—not forever, but for now. This is a good time to work hard to diminish the pain in your life, particularly that which comes from acquaintances who leave you feeling drained or disturbed after you've hung out with them for a while. Learning how to stop feeding people who bite the hand that feeds them is a good lesson for life, as well as for your dissertation year.

If you don't live alone, review with your partner/kids/roommates how life is working for all of you, and hash out the difficulties. They may be tired of your piled-up papers on the dining room table. You have probably discovered that you can't party late with them and still be able to write the next morning. Babysitting hours may be insufficient. . . . Don't just suffer, *do something* about what isn't working.

Although other people are often the most potent distractors from your work, chaos around you, of whatever sort, and the failure to organize your work, both theoretically and concretely, can also be hurdles to getting to your dissertation. Each of us has a different level of tolerance for clutter and dirt—my own is not particularly high—but the important question to ask yourself is

whether the atmosphere in which you're trying to work is preventing you from working. Do you spend a lot of time hunting for papers or diskettes? Is your personal life the kind of disaster that engenders middle-of-the-night crises that leave you wiped out the next day, unable to work? Do you find yourself not sure whether you've already written a particular section? Have you missed important institutional deadlines, like filing the papers necessary for getting your degree? Even free spirits have to make themselves more organized (at least temporarily) for the sake of not getting in their own way during this complex process.

Keep chaos at bay. It's one thing to keep track of fifty pages or two computer files, but quite another to track five or even ten times that much material. Review your systems: for backing up files, for saving papers in ways that permit easy retrieval, for keeping the clutter on our desk down to a level where you can work, for keeping your surroundings clean enough so that you don't get either roaches or trench mouth. If you can't do these things for yourself, ask the most compulsive friend you have to help you—to get your papers organized, to turn off the phone, or to get you to make a careful list of what you've written and what's left to write. And if all other methods fail, hire a therapist to help you figure out why you let self-generated chaos get in the way of your succeeding in your life.

Spend some time looking at your work process: at how much time you're spending on your dissertation and when, at exactly how you're writing. (Are you trying for a final draft each time you sit down? Is it working?) Look at whether the process feels efficient. Particularly examine how much you're reading. It's more common for the students I've worked with to read too much than to read too little. They use reading as a distraction, or as a way to avoid having to think their own thoughts, or as a



magic charm: "If I read *everything* in the field, *then* I'll be able to write and be sure I haven't missed *anything*." Relax. You're sure to miss something, and it's very unlikely to matter much. It may make you feel very rigorous and virtuous to have read every article ever published on your topic, as well as related ones, but it won't help you finish your dissertation. Bite the bullet and get back to your own writing, and your own thinking.

If other parts of your writing process feel awkward, or inefficient, look at them hard and, once again, ask yourself some questions: Why is writing this section so hard? Is there something about the way I'm organizing this argument that isn't working? What would happen if, in revising, I tried *x* instead of *y*? If you can't begin to answer, once again, ask other people to help you. Your advisor and other students can be good sources of suggestions. Don't be afraid to experiment; you might be surprised to find that alternative strategies can change your angle of approach to your dissertation, allowing you to get more done and to derive more pleasure from the work.

### *Your Writing Progress*

Here are some useful questions to ask yourself about the pace and timing of your dissertation work:

- Are you moving forward? Do you sometimes feel as if you're going in circles? Do you know when? why?
- Is your pace accelerating? decelerating? If it's steady, does it feel like the right pace?
- What speeds you up? What slows you down?
- Is your pace one that you can maintain over time?
- Is it a pace that will allow you to finish on time?

- Are you undoing as much writing as you're producing? If so, why?
- Do you know roughly how much you can write in a certain period of time?
- Have you thought about, and discussed with your advisor, how large your project must be, how small it can be and still be acceptable, and how long you have? That is, have you calibrated the process?
- Have you made a tentative timetable?

Most of these questions are addressed in my discussion of deadlines later in this chapter, but there are a few I'd like to talk about now. A few years ago I had a student who worked, and worked, and worked, providing me along the way with every single draft she produced; the problem was, they were nearly identical. She was one of the casualties of the computer-assisted dissertation: at times when she really didn't have any new ideas, she'd bring the file of a chapter up on her computer and fiddle around with paragraphs, moving them up and down and so forth. You get the idea. Although she eventually finished, and wrote a good dissertation, she used a very inefficient process, and she ended up doing too much work even for the fine piece she managed to produce. (She also provided me with scrap paper sufficient for the next few years.)

I have named a more extreme version of this problem "the Penelope Syndrome." Penelope, you probably remember, spent the days of Odysseus's absence weaving and the nights unweaving in order to hold off the suitors who were harassing her. For a multitude of other reasons, some dissertation writers act like Penelope: they write a few decent paragraphs, and then a day or a week later they decide that what they have written is not

any good at all, and they toss it. They do this over, and over, and over again, so that the stack of completed pages remains exactly the same height over time. If you're doing this, you may be overly perfectionistic, or maybe you have a screwy idea of how one writes, or, on some deeper level, you may be very conflicted over finishing your degree. If you recognize yourself as a Penelope type, try forcing yourself to move forward. *Even if you think what you've written is garbage*, don't erase or throw anything out. Ask someone else to help you look it over later and make some suggestions for revision. If you can't stop undoing your work, consider your university's counselling center as your next stop.

The question of how long a dissertation is long enough is easy to answer: the shortest one your committee will accept. You might want to write the final word on your subject, but tell yourself that finishing the dissertation is only the first step toward this goal, and that not putting everything in your thesis will leave you other papers and books to write after you've gotten your degree and an academic position. One of the most common problems encountered among the students I counsel is biting off too large a topic or question for their dissertation. Don't feel like you're cheating or slacking off if you end up reducing the size of your project. Instead, take it as evidence that you are thinking hard and being selective.

### *On Deadlines*

I recently suggested to a friend who is working on his Ph.D. that he add to his vita, in the section that describes his thesis, a line that reads "Estimated date of completion . . ." and includes his best guess of what that date will be. This is the sort of act that

strikes terror in the hearts of most graduate students, and for good reason.

The word "deadline" itself can chill your blood—I braced myself before I looked up its origins. Even the more benign of the two definitions given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests why. The first definition comes from the language of fishing: "A line that does not move or run"—so much for our fantasies of moveable deadlines! The second is much worse: "A line drawn around a military prison, beyond which a prisoner is liable to be shot down." For most of us the resonance of the word "deadline" is, "Meet it or you're dead meat."

External deadlines have unfortunate associations, starting with our earliest reactions to "Hurry up and put on your shoes, or you'll be late for school." Neither kids nor adults like the feeling that someone else is controlling their lives. Some of us get anxious in the face of adult deadlines and suddenly shrink to child size, with a child's feelings of inadequacy, sure we can't possibly meet the demands. Some of us get stubborn, digging in our heels and refusing to budge, much as we did at age three, four, or five. Some of us get desolate and want to give up before we've even tried, sure that meeting deadlines is out of the question.

Because deadlines are an essential, and at times a very frightening, part of the dissertation process, much of my work consulting to graduate students is about deadlines. I often see people who are having terrible trouble meeting them, who are so frightened that they can't either face them or make them; or they are so frightened that they have, by the time they come to see me, missed one or more important ones. How can you learn to use deadlines to empower yourself, and exert control over the dissertation process, rather than to scare yourself into paralysis? Establishing your own work deadlines can be a wonderful way

of taking back ownership of time for yourself in this process. What you need to do for this to happen is to consider carefully the possible differences between external deadlines (those set by your advisor, or department, or university) and internal or personal deadlines, those you set for yourself.

Deadlines set by external authorities can seem to have nothing to do with your needs or with the way you work; you may feel like someone else is just telling you what to do. You may make the mistake of reenacting this struggle in the deadlines you set for yourself, but you don't have to. Follow B. F. Skinner's wise advice: don't set goals for yourself that you can't meet, because you will gradually wipe out ("extinguish," Skinner would say) the behavior, in this case the writing, that you thought you were trying to encourage. Setting yourself up to fall on your face, over and over again, is *not* a way to encourage yourself. Whatever your own history with deadlines, learning how to set them for yourself can permanently change the way you work, if you make such changes in a thoughtful and sensible way.

Particularly at the outset, the deadlines you set for yourself need to be very, very generous ones. If you think it will take you two weeks to finish the next chapter, give yourself three. If you finish early, you'll feel particularly fine. Most important is that you finish the chapter and give yourself cause for celebration, rather than disappointment.

Begin by experimenting with different sorts of deadlines, trying to think about times when you've met goals in the past, and what the circumstances of those projects were. Was the person who set the goals on your side? Were the projects collaborative efforts? Was the work something you were enthusiastic about? Were the goals generous and realistic ones?

Some of us begin this shift by making our own deadlines as

punitive as the external ones feel to us, and sometimes even more stringent (to prove we're really serious, in the hopes of forcing more work out of ourselves, or maybe we're driven by internal demons and want to relive our own history). This trip is not necessary. Set up deadlines so they involve rewards, not punishments. Do not set them up so that you have to be superhuman to meet them. Perhaps you can work nonstop for a few days, but no one can sustain that sort of effort over the long haul. As you begin your experiment, set very easy goals. Every one that you meet will empower you, so that you can make the next hurdle a bit more strenuous. This is the way to turn "I think I can" into "I know I can." Make the working conditions that you set up for yourself benevolent.

On chunking: Perhaps the most terrifying of all deadlines is the one for a whole project: "Your dissertation is due exactly a year from yesterday." Faced with this sort of statement, very few of us are any good at imagining how to get from here to there. What you need to do is to break up that single deadline into a series of much smaller ones, each of which you can imagine meeting. With a dissertation, these smaller goals and time frames can be stated in terms of a certain number of pages, or chapters, or sections of chapters. Your fundamental task is to divide the single project into pieces small enough so that, one by one, they don't frighten you: to get to a place where you can say, "O.K., I can do that much."

What if you miss a deadline? Follow the rule for what to do if you fall off a horse: get right back on. Make a new, easy, realistic deadline, and get back to work. Don't waste time crying over lost opportunities, take advantage of new ones.

Sprinting for short stretches is fine, and sometimes very productive, but you can't sprint for a whole marathon, and that is



what a dissertation is. Consider using close-up markers—"By the time the kids get out of school," "By Christmas vacation," "By this Friday"—and then make a determined run for them. And when you meet them, be sure to reward yourself.

*Pay close attention to who you are, not who you might like to be.* By now you've had enough life experience to know how much pressure you can stand: how much helps you produce, and how much is too much and scares you stupid or exhausts you so that you stop working. You need to create work strategies that are useful for you.

Some folks are so turned off by *any* sense of being controlled—even *by themselves*—that they rebel against even their own deadlines. If you're one of these people, you have a big problem that could keep you from finishing your degree. If it's really bad, get professional help. If it's intermittent, think hard and listen to your feelings in answer to the question, "Whose dissertation is this, anyway?" Watch out for this sort of resurgent stubbornness and stalling: remember that you were the one who set these goals, and you did so for a reason.

Perhaps it's not such a bad thing after all that my friend has to say something on his vita about his estimated date for completing his degree. Deadlines, although scary, can also be opportunities for remembering who owns your dissertation, for trying on the idea of finishing your degree, and, perhaps most important, for taking back ownership of both your writing and your time.

### R&R

No one can be totally self-denying for as long as it takes to write a dissertation. There are different sorts of rest and rewards that you need to consider. The first of these is ongoing support

for your enterprise in the form of household help (hired, bartered, or given to you out of love) with cooking, cleaning, childcare, and laundry. Absolutely essential is tech support—computer, research, editing, and secretarial. Both you and your project are worth help, and you deserve it, if you can possibly arrange it. And it needn't break the bank; if necessary you can practice the Rapunzel strategy (mortgage your firstborn child, book, or winning lottery ticket so long as it buys you help). Living in a community with other grad students or academics who are likely to understand these needs should make getting help easier. Just as you probably decided that a computer was a necessary investment in your professional future, you need to decide (particularly, but not only, if you have kids) that some outlay of money for decent take-out food, occasional cleaning help, or someone who will save you precious time by tracking down footnotes for you or installing the new software in your computer and teaching you how to use it, is an important investment in this project, and in yourself. If it makes you calmer and less stressed, you will finish sooner. If you finish sooner, you'll earn an income sooner. I rest my case.

Rewards for meeting specific deadlines, or for just plain working hard are also important: You may not like M&M's, but there's probably something else you really like, whether it's food, or Pink Panther movies, or a trip to the local aquarium, or evenings spent with friends. Make sure that you mark and celebrate the times when you meet important (and even not-so-important) goals by treating yourself to your favorite rewards. Doing so will make it even more likely that you'll meet your next goal.

Build into your workweek times when you can relax and times when you can undo the tension that comes from spending

hours each day sitting still and concentrating hard. Go for a walk or a run. Go to the gym and work out or swim. Get a massage. Do yoga or meditate. Work in the garden. Set up a weekly supper date with good friends. Make sure you have at hand a book you want to read, or a CD you want to hear, when you're ready for downtime. To brighten up my work environment I have a succession of indoor bulbs flowering next to my desk, and when my fig tree comes out of its annual hibernation I keep it in the sunny window in my study, where I can watch leaf after leaf unfurl, and be inspired to grow my writing.

This is the time for stashing in your cupboards the tea you most love, for putting in your freezer the shrimp that go into your favorite quick supper. Don't skimp on good food; what you spend on it will repay you in energy, health, and good spirits. (Do you know that greasy food will make you sleepy? Don't subject yourself to a steady diet of junk food. If cooking is one of your pleasures, spend some of your weekend time preparing foods that will sustain you during the week.) And although a glass of wine at dinner may give you pleasure and relax you, drinking too much alcohol or using other drugs can ruin your sleep and your health, and it will certainly not improve your intellectual performance (the myth of the famous writer-as-lush notwithstanding). Indulge in take-out food and a video every Tuesday night (pizza is cheap, and most libraries loan videos), a long walk several times a week, or a concert series (most universities have free or very inexpensive concerts that will fit into even a grad student's budget). You can't afford not to provide yourself with such treats.

Many of the dissertation writers I've worked with have had ongoing health problems. For some this has been the result of living with small children (who are notorious agents of conta-

gion) or of bad luck. For others, I'm pretty sure they've been sicker than they might have been had they been "selfish" enough (that's what they'd call it, not I) to take decent care of themselves by getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising, and managing to get enough help. Ongoing, unremitting stress is not good for either the soul or the immune system. So call it "selfishness" if you will, but vow to take extra good care of yourself. I call it an investment in your finishing your degree expeditiously and well—in both senses of that word.

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By the time you've worked your way through the middle passage of the dissertation process, following my suggestions thus far, you will be wiser and more experienced as a writer. If you're also tired, you'll have developed some good ways to restore yourself. And you will have a firmer, clearer knowledge that you are in charge of the progress and quality of your dissertation, and that, for better and worse, it belongs to you.

## *Interruptions from Outside and Inside*

THIS CHAPTER is about the many events, both internal and external, that can interrupt your writing. Whether or not they actually are, these occurrences often feel beyond your control. Emergencies, interruptions by others, and acts of God are external. I'll talk about how to reestablish control in some of these circumstances, while acknowledging that others are beyond your control. Then I'll move on to inside interruptions—ambivalence, static, and writing scared—those ways in which, for whatever reasons, you get in your own way.

### *Interruptions from Outside*

In a useful and funny essay called "Still Just Writing," the novelist Anne Tyler describes a variety of interruptions to her writing life that result from having children, pets, and relatives; that is, from having a life besides her writing. It turns out that even if you've taken the advice I offered in chapter 1 of this book, time and chance happen to us all: the odds are very good that you will be unexpectedly interrupted by outside

persons and occasions at some crucial moments during your dissertation.

These interruptions can range from the trivial (a cold that clogs your brain as well as your nose for a few days) to the catastrophic (a serious illness of your own, or the death of someone close to you). I've heard of every sort of event imaginable in between these extremes. Hard disks failing, for instance—and here I must offer this advice in advance of any other: **KEEP A HARD COPY OF EVERY VERSION OF YOUR THESIS.** You can make up for squandering paper by reusing all the drafts as scrap paper for the rest of your life. In addition to computer maladies, thesis writers can have recurrent sinus infections (it's really hard to write with a splitting headache), abusive spouses, and catastrophes in housing or with automobiles. Of course, the risks are increased by graduate students' tendency to live at the economic edge: new cars and attentive landlords are rare in this population.

I've worked with people who, while writing their dissertations, have suffered serious illnesses, or someone dear to them has been ill, or someone close to them has died (this particular event usually takes a lot of energy and time to recover from, and if you don't take the time when it happens, the repercussions are likely to take it from you later). I've known others who have had to change jobs in the middle of writing a dissertation, and I've worked with several women clients who were simultaneously occupied not only with their theses, but also with pregnancy and birth. (I've been in the position of telling a graduate student who was eight and a half months pregnant with her second child that this was no excuse for not finishing her dissertation. She finished, but I developed quite a reputation among her fellow students!) If you have any choice, there are changes in your external life *not* to make while you're writing a dissertation:

Don't move, unless you've just been evicted. Don't renovate. Don't get a puppy.

I've dealt with students whose advisors went away on sabbatical for the crucial year when the students were writing their dissertations (see my advice on this subject in chapter 2), and also some whose advisors got terribly ill or died. All of which is to say, life goes on in the course of the significant length of time it takes to write a dissertation, and things happen. Some of them can be awful things over which you have absolutely no control. What do you do in the face of this fact?

You wouldn't have gotten this far in your graduate study if you didn't have some resilience and some capacity to control your own life. Paradoxically, though, some major events require the opposite of control: acknowledging your helplessness and letting go of the illusion that you can have an effect on what's happening. Trying to control the uncontrollable is a terrible, and painful, waste of time and energy. Similarly, indulging in guilt ("If I'd paid more attention, John wouldn't have gotten ill"), or shame ("I *should* have been able to do something about this") wastes the energy you need to deal with dreadful events. You're probably also going to have to get through your anger at life having dealt you such a nasty blow. It's hard not to take such blows personally, particularly if this is the one time in your life when you've decided to devote yourself to your own project.

Here are some things you *can* do about events that are beyond your control:

- Make a plan that deals with the reality, with what you can and can't do about the situation.

- Ask yourself, "Is this a matter of professional life and death? Does this mean I'll *never* finish my dissertation, or only that I'll finish it later than I would have liked?"

- Consider the "act of God" explanation: this is one useful way to remind yourself that some things just happen. Some things come from a source—call it what you will—over which you have absolutely no control.

- Work to understand and explore your life priorities, and get them very clear. Under some circumstances, there are things that are even more important than finishing a dissertation.

- Know that although a few people in this world are able to find solace in writing or working during catastrophic times, they are very rare.

- Learn the difference between what's flexible and what isn't—what you can change, and what you can't—and don't waste your energy struggling with what you can't change.

- Talk to the powers that be in your department and university. They have lives, too, and most will respond to your catastrophes with flexibility and decency.

- Try not to add panic to the mess.

- Give yourself leeway, and get help. Get lots of help, whether it's with finishing the editing of your dissertation, if you're at that stage, or with formatting it, or with keeping your household running, or with taking care of the kids. And get help with your feelings if you are overwhelmed: if your body is showing signs of emotional stress, or you're having ongoing trouble sleeping, or you're feeling depressed, or scarily wired, or out of touch. Talk with your friends, talk with your doctor, talk with a therapist, but don't try to get through this time of crisis alone.



- Don't waste your time indulging in wishful thinking, in the "if onlys."

### *Ambiguous Interruptions and Events*

We need to distinguish between interruptions that are acts of God—there is no way you could have prevented them, and not much you can do about them—and those that are in some way or other the result of your own actions. For example, nearly missing my own Ph.D. qualifying exams because of a threatened miscarriage, while technically the result of my own action, would probably qualify as an act of God. But the many other roadblocks that I installed quite unconsciously—working in the wrong place, allowing myself to be distracted by friends, not getting enough sleep, and not exploring my deep, ongoing ambivalence about getting a Ph.D.—would not.

Some people operate right on the boundary between external and internal interruptions far more often than they consciously know. Sometimes awful things happen to them through absolutely no fault of their own; sometimes, though, they invite chaos into their lives. They may be overly involved with their students and their relatives; they may work on behalf of others as if they were Dorothy Day or Mother Theresa (which is fine, but not while working on a dissertation). They may, quite unconsciously, seek distractions from writing.

Cultivate ruthlessness (which is not the same as irresponsibility or cruelty) while writing a dissertation. If you're planning on finishing your degree, you have to focus on your own work, at times to the exclusion of the rest of the world. (This is often harder for women to do than for men.) Here's a useful mind

game: tell yourself that the increased credibility you will gain from having the Ph.D. after your name will make you a better helper of those who need you.

What else is in this category of not quite acts of God? Giving away your time. Not allowing for the possibility that you'll catch the flu or that your computer will break down. Pretending that life is ordinary when you schedule vacations or social obligations. This is not the year to be president of the PTA, not the year to have the family holiday party at your house, nor to be secretary of the dog training club. This is the time for saying no, *guiltlessly*, to any obligations that aren't absolutely necessary, and to anyone who thinks she has a lien on your time. If you are prone to take on such obligations, you'll do more than your share in your lifetime, so you can excuse yourself during this dissertation-writing year.

Engage those who care about you, and, thus, about your finishing this project, on the side of your being ruthless. For example, if you're already teaching, ask your chair to remind you not to take on any extra committee assignments; ask your parent (real or imagined) to give you permission to have a messy apartment, or an overgrown yard (or to come and mow the lawn). Ask your friends to remind you that when someone asks for a chunk of your time, you are free to say no immediately; if you're tempted to answer yes, though, learn to say instead, "I'll have to think about it and get back to you." And then do think about it, hard, and then think about how much you want and need to finish your dissertation. The only reason for saying yes to others' requests for your time is that there is an overwhelming reason for doing so. Don't use other people's needs as a way of acting out your ambivalence about completing your thesis.



Watch out for your unconscious, paradoxical though that may sound: learn to recognize the signs that you're postponing work, or not feeling entitled to finish your degree.

And if your dissertation has been interrupted by some major external event, read Anne Tyler's essay. It will give you a laugh and some solace, and remind you that life, and writing, go on.

### *Interruptions from Inside*

In this section I'll describe three kinds of mental tricks we play on ourselves that can interrupt progress on dissertations. The first is ambivalence, the second, mental static, and the third, anxiety—what I'll call “writing scared.”

#### **Ambivalence**

Part of you really wants to finish, and part of you may not, and the latter part is likely to be sneaky (“Wouldn't this be the perfect time, when I have no other outside obligations, to have my wisdom teeth/appendix/hernia fixed?” “While I'm home anyway, I could take care of a puppy.”). Because writing a dissertation is so often lonely work, the part of you that is social, that likes and needs companionship, will continually try to drag you out into company—or drag it in.

Ambivalence always calls up a playground image for me: a seesaw with two kids of about equal weight and force who try to keep the board level. What happens to those kids is relevant here: they just sit there, *and nothing happens*, except for a lot of tension. This is a lot like the more complex internal playground on which you play out the questions of wanting, or not wanting, to write a dissertation. “What do you mean?” you might ask. “I don't want to write my dissertation? Look at how

hard I've been working, how many sacrifices I've made in order to work on this project!”

There is no inherent contradiction between that statement and your being ambivalent. It is absolutely possible to want very much to write your dissertation, and *also* to want very much not to—and if the forces are just about equal, you will end up in the seesaw position with a lot of tension and no motion. One solution to this problem is to recognize it and then push off from the ground again; another is to consider applying force as well as weight. In the latter case that might mean engaging a friend as a cheering squad, or asking your advisor to set you frequent deadlines, or listing explicitly for yourself all the reasons it would be lovely to be finished with your degree.

Most of us are ambivalent about the important psychic events of our lives: getting married, having children, being in love, or taking the sort of major leap forward professionally that earning a doctorate constitutes. You can't banish mixed feelings by denying them, or trying to legislate them out of existence, but if you pay attention to them, they may then let you move forward. William G. Perry Jr. once wrote an essay called “Sharing in the Costs of Growth,” in which he talks about how much loss and grief is involved in any change, *even change for the better*. Believe it. Learn to recognize, feel, laugh at, your own ambivalence, and then to get on with your work.

#### **Static**

Static is my name for the unrelated thoughts, feelings, and other distractions that pass through your mind while you're writing or trying to write; it is the mental debris that seems to have little to do with what you're writing about. When you read novels and are supposedly inside a character's mind, what you usually see is

a neat, single line of thought (Joyce's *Ulysses* is one of the wonderful exceptions). If fictional characters aren't always strictly logical, their thoughts nearly always seem to be connected; you follow them with more or less ease, as you're meant to. Real thought, though, is much more complicated and chaotic: You may simultaneously consider an abstract idea, remember what you forgot to do before coming to the library, and notice that you're hungry. Even when you are writing about something that is terribly important to you, your thoughts may frequently wander down many side paths.

Struggling writers complain about getting easily distracted and note that distractions seem more often to come from the inside than from the outside. They tend to speak about this static in moralistic terms: "I shouldn't be letting my mind wander like this," or "I've got to concentrate better so I can ignore the distractions." They experience static as disruptive, disorderly, and dismaying, a sign of incipient brain rot. There is an interesting experiment you can try with your own static that may convince you otherwise: instead of trying to push it out of your mind, try writing down whatever is in your head. If you do this over time, you may be surprised to discover that there is indeed a method to your seeming madness: themes that are present in what seemed to be chaos, themes that reappear over and over again.

One very common theme of static concerns unfulfilled obligations, real or imaginary: "I need to call my elderly aunt, *right now*," or "I probably ought to be cooking tonight, since my partner has cooked for the whole week," or "This house looks like a pigsty. I should really take some time off to clean it up." Some of these thoughts may be about the real toll that writing takes on other parts of your life: you have to lower your house-

keeping standards, make fewer phone calls, do less than your share of the household upkeep for a while. But some of the static is about a much deeper part of being a writer: there is something inherently and wonderfully selfish about claiming time for one's own thoughts and words, about taking them seriously enough to dedicate a major piece of your life to them, and a smaller piece to the needs of others. I've written about this in an essay called "A Room of One's Own Is Not Enough": "The worry that the creative act of writing, or speaking out, will rupture connectedness is not a fantasy. From the inside we know that our own strong feelings may do just that. We worry that our 'selfishness' will be met with hostility from those we care about." It's easier to deal with feelings of "selfishness" if you acknowledge them to yourself.

So static can come from many different causes: it may be merely the way our minds work; it may represent internal conflict about being a writer; it may be a defensive maneuver that we employ when we're conflicted about our accomplishment or afraid that our speaking out will hurt someone else. At its worst, it may be present in order to keep us from writing at all.

There are two different ways to deal with static, and either one can work. Try them out in turn, and see which works better for you. The first is what I call the Buddhist way, and it is based on meditation techniques, what has been described as "training the mind-puppy not to wander off." There are various focusing techniques you can use to return your attention to your subject, not so much pushing the static out of your mind as pulling your thoughts back to the topic at hand. These techniques can be found in any of a number of fine books on meditation and mindfulness.

What I want to describe in greater detail is the second type of

strategy, which may sound paradoxical: it encourages you to move toward static, rather than away from it. Try keeping a separate pad next to your main work and just jotting down the static as it happens. Or actually include it in your main text, with brackets around it (or, if you're writing by hand, use a different color ink). If your head is going in several different directions at once (say you're trying to write, make a grocery shopping list, and plan a wedding), keep separate pads for each. Giving the static a little bit of your time may keep it from taking all of your time and breaking your concentration.

You can try this sneaky trick, one of my daughter's favorites from her year of dissertation writing: keep a running list of all the other things you'd like to jump up and do (wash the bathroom, practice your violin, pay the bills, clean your desk . . .), and then promise yourself that you can do any or all of them, *as soon as you've finished your set number of pages for the day*. You'll be amazed how much less attractive the items on your list look once you've finished your writing that day!

There is one particularly insidious form of static that you ought to know about, what I call "thinking about, rather than thinking in, your dissertation." Static like this often takes the form of fantasies about what other folks have said about your topic, or questions about how brilliant or foolish your finished work is going to look to others, or worry about whether or not you've really chosen the right subject. These meta-thoughts that *seem* to be about your dissertation tend to be repetitious, persistent, and preoccupying, and their ultimate effect is to keep you disengaged from, and uncommitted to, your work. If static seems to break your train of thought repeatedly in this or some other way, you might first try writing for yourself about why

you seem so unable to move your dissertation ahead. If your distractibility is constant and incapacitating, try getting professional help to deal with it; you may be struggling with unconscious forces that will not allow you to write until you have recognized and dealt with them.

### **Writing Scared**

It's a rare dissertation writer who is never really scared about his project. Writing a dissertation provides the perfect medium for anxiety, for both healthy and neurotic reasons. It's a big deal to write a book, both psychologically and realistically. Serious writing can have lots of meanings: "I have something important to say," or "I've finally found my own voice," or "I have chutzpah, and that's O.K.," or "I can finally risk going for something I really want."

There are many reasons for thesis writers to become discouraged. You may be surrounded by friends or family who don't understand what you're doing, and don't support you in it. Writing a dissertation takes a long time, despite the aberrant person everyone knows about who cranked out a thesis in a few months. It takes an enormous amount of hopefulness and a large capacity for persistence and focus, some of which you may have to develop as you go along. Difficult or unsupportive advisors are not as rare as they should be. And bad work habits tend to get magnified in a project of this size.

There are many internal reasons why thesis writers get scared. I'm not going to linger on them, because they tend to be very individual. You will either find a way to help yourself out of this place, or get friends or teachers to help you out of it or enable you to endure it. And if it's really driving you nuts and keeping

you from getting any work done, you can get professional help. Universities sometimes employ people who specialize in writing blocks, either within their health services or their academic support services. Ask whether your institution does. If it doesn't, and you are still seriously frightened, find outside help.

This story may be enlightening: Years ago, shortly after a colleague and I had begun a writing center, we put up on every Harvard University bulletin board we could find a poster advertising my workshop, called "Writing Scared." I'd never taught such a workshop before, and suddenly I was seized by waves of panic over whether I'd be able to do it. Knowing I needed help, I went to visit a man who had been my teacher in a counselling course. I told him how anxious I was that "I'd promised to unscare any writer who was blocked, anywhere in the whole university," and that I didn't know how I was going to do it. He offered me a very simple and immensely relieving answer: "You haven't offered that. You've only promised to help them write *even though they're scared.*"

If you're a scared writer, one moral of this story is that it's perfectly possible to write scared. You don't have to get "unscared" first; you just need to learn how to work despite your anxiety. In fact, writing is probably the world's best cure for a scared writer. It is unnecessary to get completely over your fright about writing before you begin; it isn't even necessary to get over it before you finish. It is useful to respect your fright (but not too much), to listen to it, to investigate it, all as part of coming to know yourself as a writer, that is, as someone who writes.

You can ask yourself what scares you so much; try writing down the answer, and pay attention to what you've written. You can pretend you're giving advice to one of the students you may

have met when you were a teaching assistant, or to your fellow students who've told you about their blocks. You can try mantras for inspiration, magic charms to keep away the evil writing spirits, and rewards for times when you write through your block. You can write a letter to your "watcher." Being scared is sometimes a defense, a wonderful way of shifting your deep concern about the meaning of what it is you're trying to accomplish to a symptom that keeps you from doing it. But there are good ways to keep the fear from getting the best of you.

### *Funky Exercises for Times When You're Stuck*

Anyone who writes seriously over any period of time is likely to experience times when writing is difficult, when you feel like you're slogging through molasses, when even you are bored by what you're writing, or, even worse, times when you just can't write at all. What do you do then? The temptation is to give it up and do something else: go to the movies, go to the beach, go on vacation, or move to the other side of the continent. Sometimes one of these strategies helps: a weekend off when you're exhausted or disheartened can begin to refill the dry well. But sometimes running away from your writing is exactly the wrong fix for the problem, and it may even be harmful; and sometimes—say when you have an absolute deadline to meet—it's just not possible, unless you want to give up your writing project altogether. (Tempting as this may seem at times, don't give in to this course of action unless you've considered it *very* carefully, looked at it over time and in different lights, and talked it over with rational people who have your best interests at heart.) So what else can you do? What you can do involves writing, but a different sort than what you're stuck on. The general rule is,



writing is writing, and if you can't write your dissertation, just continue writing—anything—to keep your muscles in shape, and to keep yourself from getting phobic. At times when you feel like you can't write, the strategy is to *keep writing*.

Try limiting your writing time drastically. This is a severe strategy appropriate to a desperate situation, but it can really work. Say to yourself, "I am only allowed to write for half an hour (or whatever seems to you much too short a time), and no more than that." Pick a length of time—it can be as little as ten minutes a day—that you are absolutely certain you can manage. The aim of this particular tactic is not to go on writing for only this short amount of time every day indefinitely, because you probably won't ever finish your dissertation if you do; the aim is to get back to a place where it's once again comfortable and, most important, possible, to write.

Write in some other form. If you've always aspired to be a poet, this is your chance: try haiku, try two-syllable lines in a syllabic poem. Write dialogue. Write E-mail or a letter to someone (real, imaginary, or yourself) about your dissertation. (And then save a copy.) Write anything, because writing is writing.

Apply the principle that says "No dessert until you finish your zucchini." Pick something you *really* want to do, the thing without which your day feels incomplete (taking a shower, unless, of course, that's the way you get your eyes open in the morning; reading the newspaper; having a cappuccino from the café downtown; taking a walk in the park . . .) and tell yourself that you can only do that thing after you've written some reasonable amount for the day. (Remember that the operative word here is "reasonable"; that is, what you can produce using some muscle, but not wearing yourself out.)

In my experience with dissertation writers, it's been rare for

me to have to tell a writer that she's not writing enough. Far more often I'm in the paradoxical position of saying, "You're trying to write too much each day, and that's part of the reason you're stuck." Unreachable goals kill motivation. You need to evaluate realistically, not fantastically, what a reachable writing goal is for yourself, and then go for it. Each day that you succeed will make it easier for you to write the next day.

Go back and reread a few days' worth of writing from the last time you did manage to write anything in your dissertation, putting check marks next to interesting, or incomplete, passages. Then head up a new page with a line or two from one of these checked paragraphs and see if you can use it as a diving board back into your subject: "As I was writing two weeks ago, the really interesting question raised by X about this topic has several different possible answers. . . ." And then, if you're lucky, you're back in.

Look again at the notes you wrote while parking on the downhill slope, and see if you've fully elaborated each of them. That is, mine some of the smaller nuggets you've left strewn in earlier writing as a way of reminding yourself that you did at least once upon a time have some interesting things to say about your subject. You can use this strategy to give yourself the heart to move forward.

Return to freewriting with a vengeance. Try freewriting five pages a day, producing total junk if necessary, but preferably writing about anything in the world that causes you to have strong feelings. It is unlikely that your resistance can hold out for five full pages; it is likely that you will begin to write something.

Take the bull by the horns, and try writing about why you think you're stuck. Ask yourself questions, look for clues: how long have you been stuck, since when, what was going on then?



If you can unearth a reason (“It’s the anniversary of my best friend’s death, and I’m too depressed to write,” “My advisor’s comments on my last chapter left me feeling discouraged and angry,” “I read that essay by Professor Z and began worrying that someone would scoop my ideas, so I got frightened”), you may find yourself able to write again. An inexplicable writing block is, for some of us, the scariest kind.

In “The Watcher at the Gates,” Gail Godwin has some wonderful thoughts about how we get in our own way, and some funny solutions, among them these: “Write too fast for [your watcher] in an unexpected place, at an unexpected time. . . . Write when very tired. Write in purple ink on the back of a Master Charge statement.”

Be a blatant behaviorist and bribe yourself shamelessly: “If I write today, I can call up my friend in Europe afterward and speak for five minutes,” “If I write three pages today, tomorrow, and the next day, I can take most of that third day off, not read in the afternoon, and go to the beach instead.”

Even more sensibly, try not to let yourself get stuck in the first place. Here are some good preventive strategies:

1. Create and care for your writing addiction. One of the most useful parts of such an addiction is that you’ll get withdrawal symptoms if you don’t write. If you’ve ever tried to break a serious addiction—smoking cigarettes, for example—you know that the threat of withdrawal symptoms is one of the most powerful deterrents to quitting. Here is one exception to the principle that negative reinforcement doesn’t work well, and you can use this threat to keep yourself writing: “I will feel terrible if I don’t write today.”

2. Always park on the downhill slope. Writing on the down-

hill slope on Monday is a wonderfully simple way to jump-start your writing on Tuesday, because you’ve already done the hardest part of the job of beginning: you’ve decided what you’re going to write about. (If you should change your mind partway through, it’s easy; just write about your new topic and make sure you park on the downhill slope at the end of Tuesday.)

3. Write first.

4. Don’t cry over spilt milk, or unwritten pages. The AA folks are onto something terribly important when they encourage each other to live “one day at a time.” Change that motto to “write one day at a time,” and then live by it. What does this mean in action? It means, don’t waste your energy on worrying either about next week’s writing or about yesterday’s, either done or not done. If you want to be self-destructive, you can make the fact that you only wrote two lines yesterday have a great effect on today’s writing—most likely to “make you” write only one line today. Negative reinforcement really doesn’t work most of the time, unless your real goal is to make yourself feel lousy.

If you try to beat yourself into writing more today because you wrote less yesterday, you’ll either end up not producing today, or producing a lot—and then you’ll get so caught up in the guilt and repentance cycle that you’ll produce nothing tomorrow, and so on. If we go back to the starting assumption that you really do want to write your dissertation, the best way to proceed is as if one day’s production has absolutely nothing to do with any other day’s. You *are* permitted, of course, to use the *positive* feelings generated by a successful day’s, or week’s, writing to encourage yourself—in fact, you should.

5. Remember one of the best rewards of all: the writing you hold in your hand. Except for those neurotic folks who can

manage instantly not to be pleased by anything they write, the most powerful rewards for screwing up your courage and writing are the process itself, the feeling that your writing is once again on track, and the lovely shuffle of finished pages in your hand.

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## *You, Your Readers, and the Dissertation Support Group*

### *Writing for Yourself and for Others*

MOST OF THE GRADUATE students I meet while they're writing their theses are doing so for the best of all possible reasons, particularly in these years of a lean academic job market: they want to be able to commit their time to thinking about, researching, and writing up a project in which they have a deep interest. God knows, in struggling through a doctoral dissertation there are relatively few external rewards along the way, except for unregenerate masochists: the hours are endless, the pay is nonexistent, and the outside recognition extremely rare. Many of us who have lived through this process successfully have been driven by a powerful need to know and investigate something, and to write down the results of our investigation. We put together words in our search for truths, and it is the process in and of itself that rewards us for the time and energy it takes to produce a dissertation. In this way, we write for ourselves.

We also write for ourselves in another way: in the early stages