

Advice on Finishing Your Dissertation

- 1) Consider being a Ph.D. student as a full-time job. You are a steward of the generous contributions of your donor and the sacrifices made by family that allow you to be here. Be at your desk from 8-5.
- 2) For those who are new in the program, if you already haven't started, spend ½ hour a day translating into English the German and French (or Latin) pieces with which you will be interacting in your dissertation. You will soon have whole files of translated articles and chapters. You are a Doctor of Philosophy candidate, i.e., an expert in the realm of *knowledge*. Interaction with the academic languages of the world is assumed of a Ph.D., just as an expertise of the *body* is assumed of an M.D.
- 2) Outline your dissertation in its entirety and its parts. You need to have a flight plan, even if you do not know exactly what awaits you at your final destination. If you encounter turbulence, you can always make adjustments. But if you don't plot your course from the beginning, you will likely not reach your destination, let alone get off the ground.
- 3) Tape to the wall an outline of the chapter you are presently working on. Include completion date goals for each part. This will force you to keep to the point and will remind you that there is a clock, and it is ticking.
- 4) Make goals and keep them—e.g., to write one–two pages a day. One page a day may not sound like much, but by the end of a year, presto! A complete draft. Most, if not all, of our Ph.D. graduates were militant in their discipline and had daily routines to which they stuck.
- 5) Good writing is re-writing. End or begin each day or week by editing the section that you just wrote. Let your thoughts marinate, percolate, and incubate. This will make for an end product that may require little or no revision.
- 6) If the sun is shining, write, write, write. In the event that a family crisis occurs and you have to take time off, you will have made good progress and will not lose ground by making a pit stop.
- 8) Make your motto: “Do it well, BUT GET IT DONE!!!”

1. Treat your doctoral work as a full-time job. By that I mean not only that you SHOULD work during regular work day times, but also that you should NOT work in evenings and for at least most of the weekends (I usually worked a bit Sat morning and then that was it till Monday). Build this rhythm into your life.

2. Keep blogs, Facebook and email time to a minimum, perhaps twice a day or so. It's amazing how much time such things can devour.

3. Whatever happens, remember the gospel. It leaks out of us, and is crucial in phd work. You are more desperately wicked than you know and more desperately loved in Jesus than you know, and this is infinitely more important than doctoral success. And, remembering God's grace to you helps you to work in a strangely relaxed way. No more internal frantic, frenetic, scurrying about trying to impress everyone: the verdict is already in.

4. Monitor your heart. Envy, pride of others, will boil up within you if you leave your heart in neutral.

5. Quit comparing yourself to other students. The only things that can result from that are pride (if you think you're doing better) or despair (if you think you're doing worse).

1) Once you are past the proposal defense, try to get something on the page every day. This might not end up in the final draft of the dissertation, but it forces you to continue to make progress on your overall argument. It can also give you a concrete sign of progress, which can help you avoid discouragement.

2) Have a plan and (as much as possible) stick to it. This means setting deadlines for your chapters, sharing those deadlines with your supervisor, and asking for accountability to stick to them.

3) Realize that everyone is different, so find a plan that works for your topic, gifts, and writing style.

4) Don't make the dissertation or the degree an idol. If you find yourself basing your identity on how much progress you are making on the dissertation rather than on Christ, repent. Then take a day off, and spend time with your family.

1) Keep plodding ahead: get words on the page every day if possible.

2) Stay humble, open, and flexible to make all changes asked of you.

3) Invest in activities and relationships that give you encouragement and cultivate vision.

1) Prioritize dissertation over classes.

2) At the ABD stage I was writing at least 4-6 hours a day, five days a week.

3) Don't get bogged down in rabbit trails. Stay focused on the topic at hand. If it has little or no direct bearing, then jettison it.

1) The student simply *must* treat their PhD work as an 8-5, Monday-Friday job. (I also worked Saturday mornings, from 8-noon). It is your job. It must be the priority and other things must not be permitted to distract, just like for any other job. This takes discipline and is a nonnegotiable.

Do you want to get out of there in 3-4 years, or no?

2) Work hard-tenaciously-at hammering out a thesis statement, a rough chapter outline, and a method at the very beginning of your program and then follow through consistently. Once you are in the trees (in detailed research forgiven chapters) you won't always be able to see the forest (the overall picture), and therefore this "map" is a must to see you through. Of course, the arrival to the desired destination is only as good as the map you are using, so craft these 'maps' carefully!

3) Do be in touch--as often as you need--with your mentor. That is what they are there for. You are not 'bothering' them (and if you are, they need to go get another job). Get as much guidance as you need from them. They've done this before (a writing project), some of them numerous times.

They are full of experience and wisdom. This is definitely one place where shyness is a detriment.

4) Sorry, but you won't pass your dissertation exam at Wheaton Graduate School without German and French works in your Bibliography and in your footnotes and, most importantly, in the body. You and I both know that your German and French are not in the best shape and that it takes time to translate important articles. Always have one in each language on your desk that you are translating and working through a little every day. Discipline is key. Plan ahead for upcoming chapters. Then interact with them in your footnotes and body and use what you've learned!

1) In consultation with your mentor, determine the macro structure of the dissertation as early as possible. It may change over time, but I found it to be much easier to remain motivated when I had a clear sense of how each piece fit into the whole.

2) In consultation with your mentor, set realistic goals for completing specific sections. This requires learning what is realistic for you in light of other commitments (family, work, ministry, courses, etc.).

3) When you hit those dry seasons when the writing is coming slow (and they will come!), find other aspects of the dissertation to work on. If you hit a wall, fiddle with the formatting to ensure that it conforms to the standards. Go back and clean up some footnotes. This way you are still making progress even when the writing feels like it is at a standstill.

4) As much as is possible, orient your papers for your coursework towards the dissertation. This will not always be possible, but the more you can do this the more efficient you will be.

5) Learn when the best times are for you to write/research, and do your best to guard them from other activities. This can be challenging, as other realities in life may not always allow this. But as much as is feasible, guard these times and maximize them.

- 1) Make it a regular job. I worked from 8-6 every day Monday-Friday and a half day on Saturday morning. I never did work at home, at night, or during the weekend (other than that Saturday morning time in Buswell). At least for me, regularity and a tight schedule made things seem to go faster and forced me to set a pace.
 - 2) Set a daily quota. I made myself write 1000 words a day when I was writing the dissertation. Whether it's 250 or 500 or 1000 words, I think some regular, normal pace is essential to finding and keeping a rhythm over the long haul.
 - 3) Keep abreast of other research in your field, that is, remember the forest while working amongst any one tree. I think this takes a couple forms: (a) reading several top journals in your field, cover to cover, every new issue. (b) writing papers and journal articles and book reviews on issues not directly related to your dissertation. I think doing these things actually helps one realize the proportion and emphases that are appropriate for your topic amidst the wider field. So, knowing the lay of the land in contemporary ST, I will know not to stress too much over one particularly thorny debate that touches an argument in my third chapter. So much time gets wasted in preparing to write, as we think about minutiae and give way too much time to single footnotes. Much of this waste might be minimized if we constantly reminded ourselves of the scope and emphases of our whole field.
 - 4) Look at successful dissertations (from Wheaton or elsewhere), that is, ones that eventually were published and well reviewed. See how the original form does (not) differ from the published form. From this, you can get a sense of what is expected of a really good dissertation, and what can be expected to happen in a later period of revision. I think this helps with keeping one's expectations high yet realistic.
 - 5) Have fellow students and other faculty (at Wheaton or elsewhere) read your material. The postgraduate systematic theology seminar served this purpose for many of us ("back in the day"), offering a chance to give a first run attempt with half a chapter.
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- 1) Working hours: Mon-Fri (8 am to 5 pm), Sat (1 pm to 5 pm), infrequently weekdays from 9-11 pm. The other times were strictly family time and church ministry (Sunday mornings). My family goes for short holidays (about 2 weeks in summer, 1 week in winter), but I'll work on my dissertation throughout the semester breaks. Dr Moo often reminds me to go home from the library, for the right priorities before God is important.
- 2) Scheduling: draw out a schedule for research, writing, and submission of draft chapters based on the dissertation outline in the proposal. Keep to it, making adjustments only when absolute necessary. Usually, it turns out fine.
- 3) German and French, Hebrew and Greek: I usually start off the day with devotions (reading the bible in Hebrew and Greek), then reading & translating the German/French articles/books which I have to use. I type out my translation (if not, I'll forget what I read), noting the start of every new page in the article (to facilitate later reference).

4) Note marginal utility returns: that is an economic term, and it refers to the level of productivity over time. We usually need a little start up time and productivity/efficiency increases, then peaks, then starts to drop. For me, reading and research efficiency peaks and drops after about 4-5 weeks. I will then have to start writing, which also peaks and drops about 3-4 weeks. I rotate among the two, so that I avoid dragging on during the down side of the curve.

5) Concentration: constant prayer and reminding myself whenever I find myself distracted. I take a short break regularly. I keep to a strict budget of time for other "work" (church ministry, working on articles, TA, etc.) to about 10-15 hours a week. Emails are only after lunch and evenings (my not so efficient hours during the day), as these take up precious time. Social networking is off-limits for me.

6) Interaction with others: my classmates and I often 'bounce ideas' and discuss our work over lunch. It really helps when they provide a different perspective of how I should look at things. I also talk with Dr Moo (first reader), Dr Bullock (2nd reader) and Dr Block (esp. my OT research) regularly, to share my research findings and ideas, so as to be on the right track and receive their "corrections" before I write. It's a pain to spend the time to write, only to find that they disagree later ... we can't make up for time that is lost.

7) Keep to word limit (at most +10%): I set the max. word limit for each chapter & section. Only write what is critical to the research topic, other side trails can be set aside for writing another article. My average rate is only about 2 pages a day. A good day sees about 5-6 pages a day, but a "bad" day sees only one footnote. Writing too much means spending many days' work, only to have to "delete" them later ... time is precious.

8) Pray and being sensitive to God's guidance: I used to start off the day praying that God will help me get my work done for the day. Then, I realized what is more important is what the Lord wants me to learn that day from studying His word. Many times I was stuck in the research, pleading and praying to understand what the text means. Breakthroughs come at times most unexpected: e.g. brushing my teeth ... It is so humbling ... to know that it is not by might, nor by power, but by His Spirit ...

9) Health: good ergonomic keyboard, mouse, and external monitor (or raise the laptop to eye-level), straight sitting posture with feet firmly on ground, regular vision breaks, stretching are a must for long hours at the computer. Prop up books and papers on book-readers. These are to avoid straining the cervical spine (neck). I wished I had done all these much earlier. The tendonitis on my wrists have not quite recovered since then. Exercise helps ... I wasn't quite good at that, but later included gym time (about 30 mins, twice a week) into my schedule. Sleep is absolutely important. Staying up late is very detrimental to health, as well as our emotions (I tend to get short-tempered easily when tired).
