

TOP 10 DISSERTATION WRITING TIPS

Writing Tips For Making
Significant Progress on Your Dissertation

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Introduction

Writing a dissertation has been one of the most difficult projects I've ever undertaken. (I suppose trying to raise three self-sufficient children in this crazy world would also qualify, but I've never shied away from the task.)

Writing a thesis, though, that is another matter on the intimidation scale.

Many times, I have felt inadequate to the task. You know, right after I've read 5 incredible dissertations from a reputable publisher and think, "How in the world will my work ever come up to this level?"

At other times, I have stared up at the mountain of sections left to write and wondered if I will ever get done.

But through it all, I have benefitted from one constant source of encouragement, one bright element in a swirl of pages and drafts and arguments, which always pushes me to keep writing...

...PROGRESS!

Progress is a beautiful thing, a strong elixir (like that girl at the convenience store that foolishly drove you to purchase several packs of gum per week just for a smile).

Progress carves away pieces of the paper mountain. Progress always makes the tunnel brighter and carries you one step closer to the other side.

Progress inspires me to keep going.

Thus, in that spirit, I give you my Top 10 dissertation writing tips that will give you one of the few things that really counts in writing a dissertation ==> PROGRESS!

These are in no particular order.

Dissertation Writing Tip #1 - When you sit down to write, turn off your wireless connection (to all of your devices)

The technological age has been a gift to humanity, but it can be an outright curse for the dissertation writer who wishes to make progress.

When you sit down to write, just unplug everything but the battery to your computer.

Being able to surf the net is a huge distraction and can suck up valuable time. So just eliminate the temptation altogether.

Nothing is so urgent that it requires you to stop writing in order to look it up. Jot down a note in your document and highlight it for later recall.

Turning off your wireless will also free you from the annoying “you've got mail” ping that leads you to spend 50 precious minutes reading your inbox.

I've got some shocking news for you. You're not that important! Your mail can wait. Your writing progress should take precedence.

I'm willing to guess this is probably a radical step for you given the modern technological age. This is old school, like in your grandpa's old-school.

So if it seems way too difficult, just unplug yourself for two straight hours the next time you write. I promise you, if progress is what you are after, you'll never go back to being wired again.

Dissertation Writing Tip #2 - Write from an outline

This is basic, but even the best of us don't use an outline.

We write from some fuzzy organizational elements swimming around in our brains. Creating an outline is pre-writing ninja style.

It forces you to think about the shape, flow and major contours of your thesis.

Spend some time on that outline. Make it detailed.

Then, when you sit down to write, just work on one small section of the outline. Try to finish off each little section that you undertake in one sitting. This will allow you to break down your thesis into manageable chunks and give you instant progress satisfaction as you complete each unit.

Dissertation Writing Tip #3 - Set a daily writing goal

A typical U.K. / European dissertation must come in at less than 100,000 words. You should probably shoot for anywhere from 65,000 to 85,000 words depending on the depth of your topic. This will give you maximum flexibility to adjust the length up or down if needed.

If your goal is 80,000 words, a modest 200 words per day (about four paragraphs of average length), will give you a rough to intermediate dissertation in 400 days of actual writing.

I don't know about you, but that seems eminently doable.

I track my progress with a small chart, the date of each day and the word count at the end of the day.

No matter how small, seeing that word count jump up each day, whether it is rough, semi-finished or polished output, is extremely inspiring.

Dissertation Writing Tip #4 - Set a weekly writing goal with rewards

Choose something you love to do, set your weekly targeted word count to reach, and then reward yourself when you accomplish your goal. No goal accomplished? No reward!

I'll share a secret with you. I am a *Lost* rerun junkie. I am fascinated by that show, its mythology and its excellent writing. The whole thing is brilliant from start to finish.

When I set my goals, I'm shooting for another few episodes of Jack, Sawyer, Kate and the smoke monster at the end of the week.

I know it sounds stupid, but it really works. Your reward has to be something you really enjoy and desire (maybe a sporting event or a night on the town). Whatever it takes.

Remember, progress is what you want.

Dissertation Writing Tip #5 - Shoot for progress, not perfection

As dissertation writers we often get hung up on finding the right word, stating our argument in a certain way or otherwise spending our time on superfluous grammatical corrections.

Listen, you're not trying to write a Hemingway novel in the early stages. Nothing you write has to be perfectly polished. Your best writing will come about through many, many revisions anyway.

So work on getting some good ideas, arguments, connections, etc. down on paper.

Besides, on many occasions, whole paragraphs of your literary masterpiece will be swallowed up in the editing process.

Why waste the time and energy to make every paragraph perfect when any number of them could be excised in the next review?

Dissertation Writing Tip #6 - Don't bother getting your footnotes perfect either

Early on, create an abbreviated reference for your footnotes right next to the sentence that needs a footnote (Michel, Abschiedsrede, 15). Just like that. You want just enough information to identify the source and page number.

If you need to explain something in a footnote, again, make it short. (Munck, Discourse, 25 – Need biblical citations for all discourses Munck uses in his article.)

Why do I say this? Because you can spend an inordinate amount of time getting your footnotes exactly right (some could be up to half a page long) and once again, they could get swallowed up by the next review.

Trust me on this. This has happened to me on a couple of occasions (Yes, I know, I'm a slow learner. But hopefully, you're not!)

Your best bet is to carefully note the bibliographic information for a resource in a good bibliographic software, and then create a mini-reference to it in your writings. (Feel free to check out my blog post on using a [bibliographic software](#)...)

Only when you are closer to your finished product do you take the time to carefully craft all of your footnotes.

Dissertation Writing Tip #7 - Every now and then, just write for 15 minutes straight

Sometimes, all you need to get uncorked or to organize your thoughts is to dump your ideas, arguments and theories down onto the screen as quickly as possible. This is writing with complete freedom.

Clock yourself, and don't stop to make corrections. An average typist will be able to get down anywhere from 500-750 words in that time period.

Next, simply go back and review what you have written. Lift the usable parts, polish them up a bit and add them to your overall dissertation word count. You will be amazed at the progress you can make using just this one technique.

Dissertation Writing Tip #8 - Record yourself saying what it is you wish to express or argue

Like the free flow writing in the previous tip, this is free-flow speaking. Sometimes, simply expressing yourself in your own voice helps you organize your thoughts and ideas.

When you speak, you don't necessarily have to slow down to find the right word. You can simply state in a straightforward manner what you are trying to accomplish in this portion of your paper.

Afterward, simply listen to yourself and write down what you have spoken making the needed modifications. The spoken word is different than the written word, but the former can unblock your thinking paths and give you a structure for what you will eventually write down.

Dissertation Writing Tip #9 - Try to always write the portion of your dissertation that will give you the biggest payoff

I define payoff as that which will have the most significant impact on your progress.

Perhaps you're a very ordered person. Thus, starting a new section before you've finished the prior one just doesn't feel right. For you then, your biggest payoff will be finishing the section of your outline that comes next on the list.

Or perhaps the biggest payoff for you is finishing that next source on the literature review, writing a section that connects two chapters together, writing an introduction or a summary to a chapter, writing a particularly technical or detailed portion, and many other examples.

Only you can judge what will have the biggest impact. Whatever THAT is, zero in on that section and try to get it done.

Dissertation Writing Tip #10 - Write to think

Research is easy. When you're filling up pages and pages of citations, you really do feel like you're making progress.

But we can easily be fooled into thinking we need more and more material. Instead, what we need is to begin fleshing out our angle, our arguments, our flow.

When you begin to write (using any number of the methods described above (15 minutes at a time, not shooting for perfection, writing from an outline, etc.)) you begin to quickly realize any number of important issues:

- 1) Your arguments have some major flaws
- 2) The way your thesis is organized or structured needs to be revised
- 3) You are not engaging enough scholars or the right ones
- 4) You have gaps in your research (primary or secondary sources are missing)

And many other factors that will arise from your writing to think.

It's never too early to start writing. Don't get caught in the research trap. Begin writing in order to flesh out your ideas.

Conclusion

Well, there you have it.

These are my Top 10 Dissertation Writing Tips.
Any one of these can easily become the catalyst to a high output.

Progress can sometimes be elusive in such a big writing project.
These writing tips are your biggest allies in helping you reach your dissertation goals and in helping you with what really counts...

...MAKING PROGRESS!

Happy researching!

Recommended Resources

The following resources have been helpful in various stages of my dissertation writing.

Please note that by purchasing books through these affiliate links you can help support the work of theological education in Latin America (www.karakey.com).

—This at no extra cost to you!

[How to Write a Thesis by Murray](#)

This book is dedicated solely to the craft of writing.

It guides you through the thought process of writing, from getting started to structuring and then revising your drafts to closure.

It's biggest contribution for me was the many exercises that are included, which prompt you to write at different stages of your dissertation.

[How to Get A PhD by Phillips and Pugh](#)

This is a must resources for anyone wishing to get a high level overview of the entire PhD process from a British / U.K. perspective.

It covers the gamut, from motivations, finding the right school and supervisor, application, the framework and timeline for a PhD and the psychological challenges you will likely face.

You can read a full review of [Pugh's "How to Get a PhD"](#) book on my [PhD Advice](#) site:

[Authoring a PhD Thesis by Dunleavy](#)

This book is to writing what the above book was to the PhD process.

The full title is: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Dissertation and it is that and much more.

The task of writing a PhD is laid out from the planning stages, to the organization of chapters, researching, drafting, writing effectively, diagrams and charts as well as publishing your dissertation.

[Writing Your Dissertation in 15 Minutes a Day by Bolker](#)

OK, I've yet to meet anyone who has actually completed a big book dissertation with only 15 minutes a day.

I include this book for the beautiful central idea that it poses. That is, it teaches you to begin writing down your PhD thoughts for 15 minutes day way before you ever enter your PhD program and during the program as well.

This one little exercise has been gold for me because it gets you into the writing mode and generates a great deal of very useful content which you can use in your thesis.

It helped me to generate my dissertation topic and has served as a helpful reference to fill out many sections of different chapters.

[The Literature Review by Machi and McEvoy](#)

The literature review forms a vital part of most dissertations (not to mention the critical need that it fills in gaining an understanding of your topic and your wider discipline).

This book breaks the task down into six more manageable steps.