

DEMYSTIFYING THE DOCTORATE

TIPS TO HELP YOU COMPLETE YOUR
DISSERTATION AND EARN YOUR DEGREE

The
Doctoral Support
Team

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Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1	5
Know What's Expected of You	
Chapter 2	6
Designing Your Dissertation	
Chapter 3	9
Improving Time Management and Productivity	
Chapter 4	12
Getting Around the Writer's Block	
Chapter 5	15
Truths to Remember and Pitfalls to Avoid	
Chapter 6	19
Words of Wisdom from the Other Side	

Introduction

The worst kept secret in the world must be that earning a doctorate is *tough*. Coursework at the highest level is hard. Research and dissertating feel isolating and impossible. Students are tasked with creating original research almost completely on their own while balancing all sorts of other academic and non-academic commitments. But if you've gotten this far – getting accepted into a doctoral program and finishing some (or all) of your coursework – it's not really a question of whether you can finish... just a question of how to make it happen as painlessly as possible. Strategically attacking the task of finishing your coursework and/or capstone project should allow you to lower your stress level, have a greater sense of mastery of the content, and give you a better sense of balance across all aspects of life. The hope is that this eBook can serve as a small start to navigating your way through some of the most common issues that all grad students face, like:

- The ripple effects of imposter's syndrome – the constant and growing fear that you don't belong here, aren't as smart as everyone else, can't keep up, etc.
- Feeling overwhelmed and disorganized with so much to balance between work, school, family, and life
- Frustration about not understanding what your program expects of you or, worse, not being on the same page as your advisor/capstone supervisor
- Panic as you stare endlessly at your computer screen fighting another bout with procrastination and/or writer's block
- Feeling discouraged as your program drags on and on – leaving you to wonder how many more years (and dollars) can you give to this process?
- Feeling like your entire life is being taken over by your academic work and school demands

These are just a few of the issues that commonly derail (or at least delay) doctoral students on their way to earning their degree. But none of these obstacles is insurmountable. A poll of successful doctoral students would show you that most of them have faced at least a few of these problems and lived to walk across the stage, shake the dean's hand, and look back triumphantly with a degree in hand. That same poll would also reveal that those students who were the most successful in their studies were also those who had the most balanced lives (meaning they lived lives that included exercise and healthy nutrition, some time spent on a fun hobby, and quality time with friends and/or family). And their success wasn't due to their being more intelligent or capable than you – it was due to them knowing how to decipher the expectations of their program, how to meet those expectations, and maintaining the drive to do so.

The skills required to survive (and thrive in) a doctoral program are skills that most people can learn – that is to say, none of this is inherent (and any struggles you may have had in the past do not necessarily have to go with you into your future). You can be just as efficient and productive as anyone else – and you may even find some lost confidence or motivation along the way.

You probably already know the statistic – but it's worth repeating (at different times, for different reasons): approximately 50% of all people who begin a doctoral program will fail to earn their degree. That is across all disciplines and is a number that hasn't changed much since the 1960s.

With the help of this eBook and the coaches at [The Doctoral Support Team](#), you'll not only finish your dissertation but also earn your degree and avoid being branded as one more ABD (All but Dissertation).

Chapter 1

Know What's Expected of You

Before you begin work on your dissertation, it is imperative to understand the expectations of your school and program. Go back and find all the handouts and handbooks that you threw to the side and read every document with the word “dissertation” or “graduation”. These documents – which probably seemed unimportant when you received them – should explain things like deadlines, requirements for proposals, ethics policies, content expectations, formatting requirements, citation format, submission and review procedures, etc.

If you’re reading this, you’ve probably reached a point in your program where these documents are no longer so unimportant. So, make sure to study these documents as best as you can – it will save you time and help ensure the plans and timelines you create are smart and worthwhile. If nothing else, it will help you make sure that you budget enough time for your submissions and deadlines. You’ll also want to make sure you know the program’s preferred style (MLA vs. APA) so that you can get it right from the very beginning. Believe me – editing citations and converting from one format to another is *painfully* tedious (emphasis on the painful part).

The bottom line is this – the first research you do for your dissertation should be on how to do the dissertation. Once you know the rules of the game, it becomes a lot easier to win.

Chapter 2

Designing Your Dissertation

Designing your dissertation – from topic selection to methodology and analysis – is an incredibly difficult task. But, thankfully, it’s a task generally done in phases. Hopefully, between your dissertation chair and the tips below, the process will prove to be just a little easier.

Selecting and Defining a Topic

After narrowing it down to 2-3 potential topics for your study, spend time reviewing the literature on your potential topics (ProQuest, Google Scholar, and your program’s online library resources are probably the best place to start). See what others have researched and written since you don’t want to duplicate an already-published study. Your goal is to contribute to the conversation in your field, not replicate what’s already been done.

But that doesn’t mean you have to create a completely new topic. To make your study original, you just need to have a unique context in which to apply your methodology. That will leave you with a unique topic and leave you with several model dissertations with examples of research tools, sources, and methods.

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Zooming In

At the onset, your topic will probably be rather broad. But the best dissertations select one small corner of a larger topic and examine it in detail (think depth, not breadth). Your job now is to identify the small corner of your topic that interests you and that has not been researched much by others.

Gaps in the Literature

The best dissertation topics often bridge gaps in the literature. This means exploring the relationship between previously-unexplored phenomena. You can find these gaps in the literature at the end of academic journal articles, when authors write “Further research should examine X, Y, Z.” So one option is to search for a dissertation topic at the end of an article related to your areas of study. This would allow you to build on the foundation of that article with your own original work.

Avoid Citation Overkill

A great literature review is a focused review of the literature that relates directly to your topic. Each source you include should contribute to your study in a meaningful way. If it's included "just because" or is redundant, then remove it from your study.

Take the Time to Design a Strong Methodology

Carefully designed research methods ensure that your data and results are sound and protect against criticism at your dissertation defense. Faulty methods undermine your study — and you do not want to have to reconstruct the methods and research study later to address fundamental problems.

Explain Your Method, Step by Step

Make sure you explain every step of your data collecting process (the tools, the timing, the population, etc.). Your goal is to spell out your data collection process as if it were a cookbook recipe. Imagine someone wanting to replicate your study — it should be clear enough for them to do so without any questions or concerns.

Explain Your Reasoning

It's not enough to simply outline the method and the details of your data collection process. You also must explain your *why* (the rationale behind your tools and methodology). This provides justification for your choices and sets the stage for your findings. You may also want to explain why you *didn't* choose other methods (readers of your study may believe another method would have produced better, more relevant data).

Determine Your Sample Size

The more data you have, the better. The size of the sample population you're analyzing will affect the reliability and validity of the data and, by extension, your findings. While not every research topic will lend itself to large-scale data collection, the larger a sample size the greater the degree of applicability to the greater population.

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Datasets and Surveys

When it comes time to write your findings, avoid including entire datasets and surveys (or any other research tool) in the body of your study (this is a **HUGE** mistake). The narrative of your chapter should be tightly focused on the key points of methodology and data but leave the actual datasets and surveys for the appendix. At some point in your chapter, you simply mention that the datasets and survey can be found in the appendix.

Incorporating Graphs and Tables

A well-designed graph or table says much more than endless numbers typed out in a paragraph of text. If you find yourself writing sentence after sentence of numbers/statistics, consider turning that data into a graph or table. Microsoft Excel has numerous options for creating graphs, charts, and tables.

Chapter 3

Improving Time Management and Productivity

Studies find that over 60% of doctoral students consider it “near impossible” to balance the responsibilities of life with the demands of their academic programs. With strong time management skills being identified as one of *the* required skillsets for success in a doctoral program, some have gone so far as to describe the byproducts of poor time management – chronic fatigue, elevated stress levels, consistently missed deadlines, failure to dedicate enough time to school work, sense of “missing out”, etc. – as the root cause for all doctoral attrition.

The following are a few strategies that should help you stay in control of your time and help you become more productive while lowering stress levels at the same time.

Taking a Proactive Approach

Whether they know it or not, the most successful grad students are proactive when it comes to dealing with time. Rather than spending most of their day addressing the issues that force their way into the schedule, the most successful grad students know what they want to accomplish and attack the day. Their mindset is not one of “let’s see what happens” but rather “let me go handle this”. They don’t have any fewer responsibilities than any other grad student – but their mindset sets them apart in that it allows them to spend more of their day focused on what needs to be done, getting it done, and optimizing the time that is left (whether it goes back into school work, time with family, or self-care). Changing your mindset and overall approach, on a day-by-day level, can result in drastic changes to not only your academic output but also your stress levels, sense of satisfaction with work and/or home life, personal relationships, and mental and physical health.

By prioritizing your time and approaching things with a proactive mindset, you’ll force yourself to eliminate a lot of the clutter and negative self-talk that slowed down your progress and left you feeling worn (emotionally and physically).

Establishing Priorities

To optimize the benefits of a proactive mindset, the most successful grad students enter the day with predetermined priorities. This allows them to enter the day with a firm understanding of what they want to do and how they want to do it. So, set yourself up for success by determining (and mentally preparing for) what you want to accomplish today. Be realistic when setting your priorities – odds are high you can’t get everything done (generally establishing three priorities for the day is a good place to start). Overestimating your abilities at the onset can end up having the opposite effect, leaving you feeling overwhelmed and underperforming.

After a few successful weeks of taking a proactive approach and setting priorities for the day, you'll be able to take the next step and apply this exercise to *the other parts* of your day (setting priorities for your time at work, your time at home, your time spent on schoolwork, etc.). By prioritizing your time and approaching things with a proactive mindset, you'll force yourself to eliminate a lot of the clutter and negative self-talk that slowed down your progress and left you feeling worn (emotionally and physically).

Setting Short- and Long-term Goals

One of the greatest time management pitfalls for grad students is the dissertation writing process being so long and timelines being so abstract. This is why it becomes important for grad students to set firm goals and (more importantly) realistic timelines for accomplishing those goals. Generally, a doctoral student's long-term goal (usually set 12 months out) is to finish their dissertation (or some major section of it). This, then, needs to be supported with a set of short-term goals (either monthly or weekly) that lead to the long-term goal's completion. In the end, the intent is to take this large, abstract target, make it concrete and quantifiable, and then break it down into smaller, manageable steps and stages.

Like all long-term goals and plans, adjustments and revisions are bound to happen. But regularly checking your plan (to see if you're on track for reaching your short-term goals) puts you in a better position to regularly evaluate (and re-evaluate) it. If you don't reach your short-term goal one month, don't worry. The point is that – even having missed a target – you know where you stand in relation to the full dissertation writing process and can ensure that you're never too far off track.

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Plans and Timelines

Having short- and long-term goals is a start – but that won't get you far if you don't develop and execute a plan to make those goals a reality. Now that you have determined and refined your short- and long-term goals, you must determine the day-to-day steps necessary to achieve those goals and a timeline for putting that plan in place. Sticking to the timeline is key!

The point here is that it's easy to fail when living in the abstract. "I'll clean later", "I'll go to the gym later", "I'll but the laundry away later" ... all of these are examples of goals and plans lacking execution. "Later" is not a defined, quantifiable factor – therefore, it cannot be part of your plan. Don't "read later" if you know you have five articles that have to be read tonight – "Read five articles, starting at 6pm tonight (with a five-minute break each hour, if necessary)".

While there may be no way to plan *every* detail in advance, you can begin planning and management of timelines for the next week (or few weeks). When you learn to effectively plan your time for school work,

you can apply those same principles to blocking off time for family, exercise, work, etc. – helping you optimize your time and accelerate your progress.

Zoom Out to Focus

If you're a list maker, then there's a fair chance you're feeling overwhelmed with the dissertation writing process (or will at some point). List-makers tend to be very linear – we want to start something, finish it, cross it off our list, and move on to the next task. But working with the mindset of “What do I need to do today?” is drastically different from “What do I want to accomplish today?”

Even if you aren't a list maker, shifting your thinking to “What do I want to accomplish today?” gives you the chance to maximize control of your time and focus. You may still make lists – but now they will be less cluttered and may finally allow you to have some time to breathe.

Nothing is worse than finding notes on an article you read long ago and not being able to decipher what you were thinking or why.

Create a Note-Taking Matrix

While we all have different organizational preferences, an effective note-taking matrix will have fields for the title, author, year of publication, key points, key quotes (with page numbers), and key tag words for quick reference later. Write notes in your own words and avoid using the exact words of the author – minus any golden quotes you may want to use later (make sure to write these *exactly* as they appear in the text, along with the page number). This will ensure you don't plagiarize, and it will force you to

understand what you're reading. This may sound like a lot but remember that you may not return to these notes for months or years. Nothing is worse than finding notes on an article you read long ago and not being able to decipher what you were thinking or why.

Chapter 4

Getting Around the Writer's Block

Nearly every academic has encountered writer's block at some point in time, and nothing can be more deflating than realizing that you've been staring at a screen for the last 30 minutes without typing a single sentence worth keeping. But writer's block can take a few different forms, and it's hard to address an issue if you don't recognize it. Besides staring blankly at a screen, writer's block can also mean:

- Taking all the steps to prepare to write (setting aside time, collecting materials, etc.) but then filling your writing time with other menial tasks (active avoidance of writing)
- Feeling physically worn or emotionally drained whenever writing time approaches (writer's anxiety)
- Being unable to map or trace the path of an argument that you can articulate without issue (true writer's block)

Typically, writer's block (in any form) comes from one root cause – fear. There are multiple triggers that may set-off writer's block (fear of imperfection, fear of failure, fear of success, etc.), but by addressing the aspect of fear, many of issues leading to writer's block can be addressed before they really become a problem.

Blocking Time and Removing Distractions

If you're like most grad students, you've likely had at least one time in your academic life where you've blocked off an entire day for research and/or writing. And, if you're like most grad students, you've likely had at least one time in your academic career where you reached the end of that day feeling burnt out and having made very little actual progress.

When you're in a groove, cruising through research is easy and the pages just flow from your fingertips. But if you're feeling worn or are not engaging with the material as well as you'd hoped, it may take a different kind of effort to produce what you need.

One strategy that works for many struggling students is to work in defined blocks of time and put extra effort into ensuring that the time is as distraction-free as possible. For example, telling yourself you're working "all day" on a paper is very vague and can leave you wondering "When do I get a break?", "Have I done enough to switch to something else yet?", or "Is it too early to be done for the day?" By setting a defined block of time (an hour or even 30 minutes, for example), you know exactly how much time you have left to complete the task at hand and how long until you can take a break or switch gears. Make sure to eliminate as many distractions as possible (phone to airplane or Do Not Disturb mode, TV off, etc.).

It is much easier to tell yourself you “only” have to work this long, or “only” have to write this much before earning a break than to convince yourself to focus and work your hardest for an undefined amount of time.

Taking Breaks

One of the most overlooked aspects of mental health and learning is the need for authentic breaks. Just like a runner training for a marathon, there must be times in which you allow yourself to rest if you expect your body and mind to recover and reap the benefits of the hard work you put in the day before. So, just like a runner cannot sprint every mile every day, we cannot keep our brains locked in hyperdrive every hour of every day if we expect it to perform at its best.

For example – when you take a break, do you actually rest or do you simply switch gears to check emails, text messages, and all of your social media accounts? While these things may not seem stressful, they are keeping you from calming your mind and regaining the focus you’ll need once the break is done. The best things to do require you to get up and leave your work

space, to leave electronics behind, and to get physically active. A 10-15-minute break is enough for a walk around the block, some simple stretching, or a body-weight workout (like squats or push-ups).

Giving your mind the breaks it needs – throughout the day proactively, not just at the end of the day when you’re feeling run-down – will help you be able to focus for longer periods of time and be more productive in the long run.

Being Ready for When Inspiration Hits

One of the blessings of modern technology is that there is a 99% chance that, when inspiration hits, you’ll be ready. Years ago (pre-smart phone), this meant making sure you always had a small notepad or scratch paper with you so that you could scribble down whatever amazing thought you had as soon as you had it (because you know if you don’t scribble it right away, the chances of you forgetting go up exponentially with each passing minute). But, with the advent of smart-phones (complete with their note pads and voice memo apps), you probably never have to worry about being caught empty-handed.

The biggest challenge may be knowing exactly which of your many resources to use when the time comes. Make the decision ahead of time so that you know what to do and where to go to save your brilliant ideas. It should be easy to access (not requiring you to go 2 or 3 subfolders deep) and easy to use (which is one reason voice memos have gained so much popularity – you can just ramble now and clean up your thoughts on paper later).

Whatever your method, just make sure you’re ready.

Just like a runner cannot sprint every mile every day, we cannot keep our brains locked in hyperdrive every hour of every day if we expect it to perform at its best.

Define Your Writing and Editing Goals

One of the most common mistakes grad students make when writing or editing is setting vague goals (like “work on Chapter 2” or “find more articles about ...”). While we know that the best set goals are SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound), we – for some reason – often fail to apply that lesson to writing. So, you would be much better off with the goal of “Finish Chapter 2”, “create all figures and tables for Chapter 3”, or “find 10 new articles for lit review” than the vague examples above.

When you’ve defined your goals clearly and have all the necessary papers and data ready, you are more likely to reach your goals and make good, measurable progress in your writing.

Start Fresh Every Day

Momentum is key to any significant progress in your writing. But a lack of momentum can also be significant.

We’re all going to have bad days – days we didn’t find any articles worth saving, days the reading was over our head, days we didn’t write a single page that we think is worth saving. That is normal and OK.

But, when that day is done, what becomes important is to leave it behind. Missing your mark (and lingering on it) can be the start of a nasty downward spiral if you let it become a root of negative self-talk or writer’s block. Do your best to hit your goals every day – but, if you don’t, it isn’t the end of the world.

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Do the best that you can each day. Set SMART goals and attack them. If you achieve those goals, build on that. If you don’t, let it go and focus on how you will do better tomorrow.

Write as you Go

One of the biggest obstacles to completing a dissertation is waiting to write until *after* the literature review and research are done. It can be unnerving to think, “OK, now I just need to write a few hundred pages and then I’m done” (especially if you don’t begin writing until 1-2 years after your last relevant coursework). Most research on effective writing processes find that students should write out full sentences and paragraphs as they go through the research process. That way, the eventual manuscript is written in bits and pieces over the years (assembled, aligned, and refined at the end), rather than as one overwhelming entity at the end.

Chapter 5

Truths to Remember and Pitfalls to Avoid

If the research teaches us nothing else, it teaches us that many doctoral students make the same mistakes and face the same challenges. The goal of this section is to outline some of the more common mistakes so that you can avoid them (or correct them, if you recognize yourself in the description).

Pitfall to Avoid: Blindly doing what your advisor/chair wants to avoid conflict

Always do all that you can to understand exactly what your supervisor and committee's expectations are for your capstone project. With that said, this is *your* project – while they can/should advise on how best to execute the research, that does not mean you should blindly make every change recommended and, essentially, become their research puppet.

I've known too many people who hit the wall when it came to the literature review of their study because they had no heart for what they were doing. Reading was painful, writing was impossible – and all because their project had been manipulated in such a way that they no longer felt the same passion and connection that they did at the start. So, know who you are dealing with, know how to give them what they want, but don't do it at the expense of your study.

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Pitfall to Avoid: Assuming EVERYTHING will be in your final manuscript

Depending on your research topic, there is a good chance that you will collect a LOT of data. But the most important aspect of a well-written dissertation is its laser focus on one specific topic. By forcing all your data into your final manuscript, your final paper may appear to lack that focus and could make it considerably more difficult to write a cohesive narrative.

Once data collection is complete, go back to your research questions and determine which portions of your data are relevant. You may end up on a slightly different path than when you started your data collection, but it should still be a clear and focused path that answers your research questions.

Pitfall to Avoid: "Making" your study turn out the way you want

For your committee to approve your study, your research needs to be valid and reliable. If you manipulate the data collection process or interpretation of your results to force a desired result, your committee will probably recognize the bias (and/or weaknesses) of your study and ask you to either re-do your data collection or to include recognition of your study's flaws.

Cherry-picking and/or massaging the data will call your ethics and methodology into question. Even if your findings contradict your original hypothesis, it's better to have a true and honest study.

Pitfall to Avoid: Jumping to conclusions before rigorous data analysis

You may not believe it now but starting your data collection is exciting. The issue with managing that level of excitement, though, is the temptation to start creating conclusions prematurely (especially if you're using surveys). It's not uncommon to send out your survey and then find yourself checking results daily (or even more frequently).

But the bottom-line is this: there is no way to come to significant findings until *all* your data is in. Your data can shift significantly with the change of just one element. So, before you get too excited or ahead of yourself, just breathe and let the data collection process run its course.

Pitfall to Avoid: Rewriting the same paragraphs over and over again

Perfectionism is the root of many evils that grad students encounter during their academic programs. It can slow your writing or prevent you from writing anything at all. But, many times, perfectionism takes hold of us because we don't want to risk presenting anything to our chair/committee without it being *perfect*.

The issue with this approach to dissertation writing is that it forgets that the dissertation-writing process is not linear. No matter what you do, there **WILL** be revisions. Major and minor edits will be needed, formatting will be checked, and you'll have the rest of your life to question your diction and syntax.

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Your goal, at this point, is just to get your thoughts on paper. Leave the editing to the end of your writing process. There are editing services available, and many universities have writing and support centers to help with the editing process. Write with your heart first, edit with your head later.

Pitfall to Avoid: Using secondary references without checking primary references

During your research, you're guaranteed to find yourself reading Article A by Author A and, somewhere in the article, you see a citation of Article B by Author B... and you *love* it because the data that Author A is citing from Author B is the same data you've been looking for – so here is the question: Do you cite Author A or Author B in your own paper??

It may be tempting to just cite Author A since that is the article you initially looked-up and where you found the data. That is called "citing a secondary reference" and is incredibly dangerous because you have no idea if Author A is interpreting Author B's data correctly.

Best practices dictate that you should look up Author B's article yourself – if only to confirm that you have the citation in the correct format. This will ensure that you know exactly what you are working with and

that your use of the data is accurate. You can still cite Author A if you refer to his/her interpretation of the data – but, for the data itself, it's always best to go to the primary source.

Pitfall to Avoid: Lifting information from other papers

After reading stacks of articles for your literature review, you may find it challenging to keep your references and notes straight. You may not realize that (after reading dozens of articles on the same subject matter) that you've internalized certain phrases or word choices – and that could leave you vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism.

To avoid accidentally lifting words or phrases from others and presenting them as your own, make sure to keep all your notes and references organized electronically (it's just the easiest way considering the volume of material you'll be organizing). You're probably already a highlighting machine, but don't forget that you can also highlight PDFs (and working in PDFs can allow you to search for keywords – saving you time and printing costs). Working with electronic copies would also let you make sub-folders organized by topic/category/key points.

By organizing your resources by category or with quick-reference methods, you should be able to quickly find whatever information you wanted to cite (and be able to quickly search for any words or phrases that you're afraid may belong to someone else). When you do find the data you want to cite, it also makes finding the reference information easier.

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Truth to Remember: Limit Distractions

It's easy to get distracted by social media notifications, phone calls, text messages, and emails. With all these distractions, you can find yourself wasting endless hours and getting very little done. If you need help staying focused, turn off your internet connection to focus on reading and writing. Consider setting a timer and set it for 25-30 minutes. Force yourself not to check email or your phone until the timer sounds.

Truth to Remember: Small Victories Build Momentum

If working on your study begins to feel overwhelming or the volume of the work begins to feel intimidating, consider breaking the major components of your dissertation into smaller, manageable tasks. Completing those smaller tasks will let you build some momentum. For example, if the next major component of your study is to write your literature review, break it down to these smaller tasks:

- **Monday:** Search for keywords in the online databases made available by your program (as well as Google Scholar). Your goal is to identify 8-12 articles related to your topic based simply on the title or keyword tagging.
- **Tuesday:** Skim the abstracts of the articles and decide which to keep for further reading. Eliminate those that don't seem to fit within the scope of your study. Fully read 1-2 articles and begin building your note-taking matrix.

- **Wednesday:** Fully read about 1/2 of the remaining articles and continue developing your note-taking matrix.
- **Thursday:** Read the rest of the articles and finish take notes.
- **Friday:** Review your notes and write 2-3 pages summarizing the central themes you found in this round of research.

This process can be repeated for a few weeks as needed, depending on your topic and goals. Subsequent weeks can continue at the first week's level or can dive deeper into specific sub-topics you discover along the way. The point here is that each one of these tasks is doable in 1-2 hours. By the end of the week, you will have started a quality list of sources, organized key themes, and written a handful of pages that could end up in the final draft of your literature review.

Chapter 6

Words of Wisdom from the Other Side

There are plenty of studies, books and forums dispensing words of wisdom from both those who have completed their doctoral programs and those who have decided to discontinue their program. Regardless of discipline, program structure, or personal circumstances, here are some universal truths that it may be good to know along the way.

Picking Your Research Topic

You're more likely to succeed at researching and writing your dissertation if you choose a topic that fits your personal and/or intellectual interests. If you have a choice (and not every doctoral student does), don't pick a topic simply because it's important to your dissertation chair or is meaningful to someone else. You're the one who will have to live with this study every day – so choose a topic that you would consider interesting and want to learn more about even if you weren't writing a dissertation.

Start Using Reference Software Immediately

Software platforms like Endnote, RefWorks, Mendeley, and others are amazing for recording reference information. If you begin building your reference list at the start of the research process, you'll have a much easier time keeping track of your citations and being able to access your materials when you need them. Most of these programs also format your citations and reference pages for you (usually through Microsoft Word plug-in). This saves you SO much time at the end of your dissertation-writing process, saving you from digging through years of notes searching for details and agonizing over formatting.

Exercise more

Exercise – whether you consider it a part of your selfcare, you're in formal training for an event, or it's just your choice for “me time” – is usually among the first sacrifices doctoral students make when searching for more time dedicated to school work. As a result, it contributes to drops in energy, increased stress/anxiety levels, changes in sleep patterns, and influx in weight.

Just about every person who has made it to the other side will recommend making time to exercise. If you exercised regularly before your program, you may have to scale back – but you should never go more than 2-3 days without some dedicated physical activity.

Spend less time on social media

Spending time on social media is really nothing more than wasting time and pretending it's relaxing. That's not to say that it's time that should be spent reading or writing – but, odds are high that means a contributing factor to your burnout/fatigue is your failing to *actually* relax when you need to. So, the next time you take a break from school work, make sure to get outside, go for a walk, or do something besides check Facebook (or your other social media platform of choice).

Travel

Travel generally requires two things – time and money. And grad students are generally short of two things – time and money. With that said, it is important for grad students to take advantage of every chance possible to travel (no matter how big or small the trip).

One easy way to log some frequent flier miles is to attend conferences and symposiums. Whether presenting or spectating, many conferences have funds to assist students with travel expenses. And, if you're presenting, they are more likely to want to earmark some of those funds for you to attend. So, what better way to capitalize on the chance to present/attend than to spend some time getting to explore a new city/state/country?

The other thing to remember is that travel doesn't have to be on a grand scale to be worthwhile. Weekend trips are an amazingly effective way to recharge your batteries and can often be done on a shoestring budget. You may not want to spend too much time on the road, but there's a good chance that you've got a few places you can drive (or fly to regionally at a price) for a change of scenery.

Spending more time with your significant other

There is no way to dance around it – if you have a significant other at the start of your doctoral program, the demands of your academic program WILL take a toll on your relationship. The time and emotional energy that you invest into earning your degree is time and energy that is no longer available to your significant other and/or children. There is research examining how relationships (regardless of stage – dating, engaged, or married) suffer – and, sometimes, end – when at least one of the partners is in a full-time academic program.

Does this mean your relationship is destined to suffer in the name of your degree? No, definitely not. The importance of this point is in knowing *beforehand* that you will need to remember to invest time in connecting with your other half during your program. Even if work and school keep you busy 12-15 hours a day, know how to show your significant other that you are still present and engaged. You'd be surprised how the little things mean so much (even more than usual) now. Eat your on-the-run-meals together, sneak in a late-night dessert, check-in with each other via text when there won't be much time to chat at home – show him/her that earning your degree is important to you, but he/she is no less important.

Making sure you and your dissertation chair are always on the same page

No one has ever reported having a dissertation chair with loads of spare time and energy. Chairs are commonly busy and overworked between teaching, committees, research, and other administrative assignments. Make things as easy as possible (for both of you) by regularly recapping discussions via email and with clear follow-up plans; get accustomed to working in bullet point notes for quick reading/skimming; and give adequate heads-up when a deadline is coming up.

Trust me – the more you can effectively communicate with your chair, the better both your lives will be.

Find Your Sweet Spot

Whichever spot you choose to make your primary workspace, make sure it *feels* right. If the peace and quiet of a library lets you turn thoughts over in your head uninterrupted – then that’s your place. If you need fresh air and sunshine to lower your stress levels before you make the magic happen, then maybe a local park or other outdoor spot is your go-to. The point is that you need to be in sync with your environment if you hope to successfully write your dissertation. Someone who needs white noise won’t do well at a library, and someone who hates the outdoors won’t get much done trying to write on the beach. Know yourself and play to your strengths.

Establish a support group

The number one issue facing doctoral students once they reach the dissertation-writing phase is dealing with isolation. Most programs won’t have you start the dissertation-writing phase until after your coursework is complete – meaning you face the challenge of creating your first authentic piece of research at the same time you lose all regular engagement with your classmates, professors, campus, etc.

The best thing you can do – *before* you finish your coursework – is to establish a group (however informal) of classmates that you can turn to for support. While you’ll probably text and chat about papers and assignments throughout your program, this group will *really* prove worthwhile when it comes to writing. You can arrange to exchange drafts, give feedback regarding formatting and structure, or just vent when things get tough. Few people will understand the challenges you’re dealing with during your program unless they are experiencing (or have experienced) the same thing – so don’t be afraid to reach out to those people you *know* will understand and be able to lend support when you need it the most.

Abstracts Are Your Friend

Most journal articles begin with an abstract (a short 200-250-word summary of the article). Many researchers read *only* the abstract of article before answering one key question: Do I read the full article, or do I move on? For many doctoral students, a “thorough” reading of an article means reading the introduction, the methodology, and the findings/conclusion. This should give you enough information for citation and determining how to best utilize the article in your study.

Choosing a Dissertation Chair

Most departments have several qualified candidates for the position of Dissertation Chair. The decision of whom to pick as your mentor/guide through the dissertation-writing process is an important one. If your program allows you to choose your Dissertation Chair (and not programs do), consider yourself “interviewing” candidates for the Dissertation Chair position. You want someone who you know you can work well with.

In addition to making sure you “click” with your Dissertation Chair, be wary of choosing a Dissertation Chair who is already supervising many graduate students/dissertations. An overloaded Dissertation Chair can lead to divided attention (and you can imagine the issues that could stem from that). Other professors may have a lighter supervision load and be just as eager and able to give your dissertation their full attention.

Create a Mutually Agreeable Schedule

With your school's deadlines in mind, work with your Dissertation Chair on a realistic and reasonable schedule for completion of each stage of your study. Factor in your Dissertation Chair's sabbaticals, vacations, and the time your Dissertation Chair requires to read chapters and provide feedback. Recognize that almost all beginning doctoral students misjudge how long it takes to research and write a dissertation. Add in some cushion time in case a stage runs long.

It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint

The dissertation is a marathon, not a sprint. Very few students research and write 40 hours a week. Working 15 to 20 hours a week on reviewing literature, writing notes, working on your research methods, and writing is more than enough. Use the rest of your time for other pursuits, teaching, and rest. You'll stay stronger for longer that way.

Become Your Committee's Time Manager

It may sound bad, but it's easy for dissertation committee members to forget about you. It's not malicious or intentional – but good committee members tend to have a litany of responsibilities to attend to and you've just added yourself to their lists. Help them by managing a schedule for reviewing your chapters, your proposal, etc. It's good practice to check-in with all your committee members every few weeks to see how things are going (even if there isn't anything pending review – just say Hi and keep the lines of communication open). If you don't become their time manager, they could easily become distracted and you may not hear back from them for months.

The Time of Day Matters

Some of us are night owls while others are early birds. Experiment with reading and writing at different times of the day/night to determine which works best for you. If you have children or work non-traditional hours, these can all affect the time of day that works best for you (and nothing says that what works in the winter will remain the best option for summer). There are probably just as many doctoral students working until 1am as there are waking at 4am to start the day – find what works best for *you*.

Sacrificing for Success

It's inevitable that you'll have to sacrifice some of your social and family time to finish your coursework and dissertation as quickly as possible. You will have to get accustomed to explaining why you make it, as most family and friends have no idea how much effort goes into earning a doctorate. You'll find your weekends filled with time at the library and in front of your laptop rather than at the bar or out – but that's par for the course and you knew that when you signed up. Just know that it won't be forever, and the sacrifices will be worth it in the end.



The Doctoral Support Team is committed to helping graduate students complete their academic programs, earn their degrees, and maintain a healthy school-work-life balance while doing so.

We help graduate students navigate the transition back to academia, manage their workload and extracurricular activities; implement effective study strategies; manage their procrastination and academic performance anxiety; identify the barriers to students' academic success and assist students in creating realistic and achievable action plans for overcoming those challenges.

We focus on the needs of the individual learner and provide honest, empathetic coaching and support services to help you earn your degree.

If you are a graduate student struggling to find your way, we can help you:



Define Your Project

(Re)gain control of your project, build your research skills, and find clarity & direction with your study



Gain Confidence & Motivation

Overcome perfectionism, impostor's syndrome, indecision, and prepare to deal with the unexpected



Develop Your Academic Writing Skills

Write your papers, study, or literature reviews clearly, quickly, and confidently



Finish What You Started

End the cycle of unfinished drafts and incomplete projects. Finish what you started and earn your degree!

Our goal is to help you stay balanced while pursuing your doctorate so that you can enjoy the process of researching and writing – and to improve your chances of earning your degree. We want you to look back on this time in your life with fondness and be proud of your accomplishments, including the ability to be focused and productive while staying balanced.

We are committed to supporting you on an emotional level while helping you to reach your goal of finishing your dissertation and attaining your doctorate. We are also committed to maintaining your confidentiality so that you have the peace of mind to express yourself freely.

Don't wait until it's too late!

The positive effects of good practices multiply over time

The earlier you seek help, the easier it is to make changes and the more effective those changes will be