The Writing Process for Sustained Projects: Understanding, Adapting, Strategizing

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Context and Purpose of this Workshop

“The Dissertation or Thesis earns you the degree, but is much more than a rite of passage. You should see it also as a way of learning. In the struggle to write it, you will learn much about yourself and about the topic you have researched.

Writing is a way of knowing and thinking: The process of systematizing knowledge and finding a form to express that knowledge becomes a means of discovering meaning....” (Joyner 2012)

A lengthy, high-stakes writing project requires an intentional and individualized approach to complete it within a specific time frame.

This interactive session is for graduate students at the earliest to middle points in the production of their thesis, dissertation, or other culminating project – but also for new graduate students looking ahead to their first graduate papers. We will focus on both examining your writing processes and developing strategies to aid in scaling your processes and sustaining your momentum for writing a thesis or dissertation. Along the way, we’ll explore resources for addressing some common questions and concerns.
If You Are Beginning or Returning to Your Program . . .

Workplace Expectations
- Workplace communications respond to a need to know or a need to act
- Readers’ first response: “What is this?” “What is this about?” “What do you want?”
- Usually produced for busy, distracted readers who read selectively in order to act
- Employers are in control and hold the copyright to your work

Academic Expectations
- Academic, Scholarly writing responds to a desire to know, often for intellectual as well as “practical” purposes
- Readers’ first response: “What, Who is this?” “What is being said?”
- Usually for readers who study, analyze, build research from
- You have authorial control and copyright, but also are judged
A Grad School Writing Sampler: Ongoing and Culminating Projects

“The journalist writes, ‘The skills and duties required of a superintendent today differ greatly from those required over 100 years ago.’” (Joyner 2012)

“According to several recent studies (Boldt, 2004; Candoli, 1995; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 1999) many practicing superintendents agree that the superintendent position has gone through fundamental changes since the first school superintendent was appointed in 1837.”

- Graduate Papers & Class Projects: Paper, Online, Video, Artifact, Performance
- Conference Papers and Presentations, Workshops, other professional work and Publications, digital/print
- The Thesis / Final Project
- Dissertation/Culminating Project
Graduate School Writing Expectations

- Strong critical thinking and analysis, strong transitions and conclusions, quotations that enhance the writing, not carry it.
- In-depth and applied subject-area knowledge.
- Knowledge of – and if you don’t know, be sure to find out – the types of discourse in your field, genres, levels of formality, detail, means of address and explicitness, and the nuts & bolts of major assignments like the Seminar Paper and Literature Review.
- Ability to conduct research in your field and manage your resources and responsibilities.
- Awareness that you are entering an ongoing conversation and a complex information network.
If you already have begun work on your final project . . . .

Clarify & revisit all expectations, including your own:

- You are expected to communicate appropriately and regularly with your Advisor throughout the entire process
- You should expect setbacks but also success
- To manage everything, devise a clear, realistic, specific, detailed – but also forgiving – schedule for yourself

Don’t shortchange any part of the process: Try to allocate about equal time to explore your subject, do research, read, track and synthesize your findings, draft, get feedback, revise – but also to “just” think!
Examining the Overall Rhetorical Situation

• The distinguishing mark of graduate research in many fields is an original contribution to the field and/or to knowledge
• Thus, the purpose of the dissertation or culminating project in many fields is to prove that you are capable and qualified to
  o conduct and publish substantive research
  o make useful contribution to knowledge
  o enter the scholarly and/or professional ranks
• Therefore, a high – and sustained – level of intellectual engagement is demanded, required, and expected

So...

• Consider your Exigence, your Audience, your Ethos, and your Purpose and Goals. Think carefully about what you are doing, and why!
• Respect the requirements and remember your readers: consider this project an important life lesson in how to organize your professional life
• Throughout all stages, take time to think about your processes, build on your strengths, and anticipate/address problems and potential setbacks
Your Project(s) and Your Process: Organizing Your Thoughts

Readers’ Expectations and Your Tasks & To-Do’s:
- identify/define problems
- generate questions and hypotheses
- review and summarize the literature
- determine the type of dissertation (Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods)
- apply appropriate methods
- collect data properly
- analyze and judge evidence
- discuss findings in a sustained piece of research or argument
- think and write critically and coherently
- produce publishable results

Project Analysis:
Audience & scope, “feeder” projects, starting points, format, length, level of explicitness, invention, development, organization

Component Parts:
Front Matter: Opening / intro, title(s), tables of content, graphs, visuals, front matter, letter of transmittal, Abstract, Appendices
Back Matter: References, bibliographies, Appendices
Final Details: Cover, binding, digital copies
No Dissertation was Built in a Day
(or an All-Nighter)

- Graduate students approaching the final project have knowledge and disciplinary expertise. The main reason why they don’t get their degree is that they don’t finish writing their thesis or dissertation.
- All the tricks you employed to pull off all those “just in time” assignments & work projects are not necessarily helpful when you write long, in depth works over time.
- Build in time to think, to reflect, and to REST.
Write & Discuss:

Examine & Write Your Process

Write about it (3-4 minutes):

- Think about your most common writing projects (typical writing project for your graduate classes)
- Your process – what you typically do to get started and to keep going
- Strengths and trouble-spots
Write/Discuss *Part 2* (4-5 min): *Compare Notes with Fellow Writers*

In groups, compare notes (4-5 minutes):

- How you get started
- Useful ideas/strategies
- What’s worked
- Working with others
- What is your favorite format for generating and organizing ideas (list, roadmap, diagram, Post-It, etc.)
- What “tools” you use (software, pen, etc.)
Basic Elements and Features of 3 common “feeder assignments” and 2 Dissertation “parts lists”

Thinking Ahead to the Culminating Project, and Drawing Connections Among Them (i.e., how one task prepares you – and even helps you – write the other)
Write & Discuss

➢ Look over the slides on the Qualifying Paper, Prospectus, Proposal, and Dissertation elements, and write 3-5 quick notes on ways they might intersect and/or build on each other.

➢ Pair up with a discussion partner sitting near you and share your impressions.

➢ Together or individually consider how this specifically applies to your own project.
Qualifying Papers in Anticipation of Advancing to Candidacy: Sample Descriptions

**Education:** The Qualifying Examination in the EdD Program at SFSU consists of a formal paper, referred to in this document as the “qualifying paper”. The Qualifying Examination will be scheduled at the end of the second semester of year one of the program. Passing this examination qualifies the student to advance to the second year of the program. In the qualifying paper, the student will review and critique scholarly literature on a chosen problem in educational leadership. The paper will contain 10-12 empirical and theoretical sources (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods) and will be a maximum of 15 pages long, double-spaced. The paper should present a clear research question that will guide a critical evaluation of the research literature and identify gaps that call for future research. (http://edd.sfsu.edu/content/program-milestones)

**East Asian Linguistics:** The qualifying paper is focused on the student’s main research area and demonstrates the ability to undertake, bring to completion, and eventually publish a research project. The comprehensive examination and qualifying paper enable students to demonstrate that they can be successful as researchers and teachers. Students will advance to ABD status after the successful completion of both (http://eall.uoregon.edu/graduate-programs/eall-phd-linguistics/)

**Psychology:** Parts I & II of the qualifying exam involve a paper written by the student that is modeled after those published in Psychological Bulletin or Psychological Review (“Advancing to Candidacy: The Qual Paper…” http://www.psychology.ucsd.edu/graduate-program/current-students/program-requirements/advancing-to-candidacy.html)
A relatively brief description of the research project being proposed. Its main purpose is to ensure that the dissertation project is “viable”: (i) it addresses interesting and well-defined question(s), (ii) the proposed methods are appropriate, and (iii) you have the background and skills to carry out the project within a reasonable time frame. Often, a plan for developing your proposal.

Elements – Another Model:
A. Statement of the Problem (including literature survey)
B. Method
C. Discussion of Data (if relevant)
D. Chapter Outline
E. Select Bibliography

Helpful Resource:
http://comparativestudies.osu.edu/dissertation-prospectus
The Dissertation Proposal

(Adapted from “Plain Talk”: http://www.ling.upenn.edu/advice/green_proposal.html)

• The purpose is to convince your committee that there is a tractable question which is worth pursuing and that you are in a position to pursue it.

• Questions your proposal should answer directly:
  1. What problem are you going to tackle?
  2. Why is it a problem, and why is it important to solve it?
  3. Where are you going to look for answers and why are you going to look there?

• You must demonstrate that you have defined and delimited an interesting research question, testable hypotheses, and a detailed plan for testing, and that you can explain its importance to a non-expert.

• Most/many proposals contain a Literature Survey or Review summarizing the history of relevant research on your topic, and you should situate your proposed dissertation within the context of what is known and/or generally believed about the phenomena you will investigate, and you should discuss both the lasting contributions and the shortcomings of previous research.
The Dissertation: Common Component Parts

Front Matter
- Title Page
- Dedication and Acknowledgments
- Table of Contents
- Lists of Tables, Figures, Schemes, Nomenclature, Abbreviations, etc.
- Abstract

Body of Text
- Main (Chapter-level) Headings
- Subheadings
- Notes

Tables and Figures
Photographs, Hand-Drawn Illustrations, Images, Audio, and Oversized Illustrative Materials

List of References

Back Matter
- Appendices
- Vita

Chapter 1: Introduction
An overview of the problem; importance; summary of extant work; your hypothesis. Readable by anyone.

Chapter 2: Definitions
New terms only.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Model
Central concept tying together all your arguments. If necessary, additional chapters on problem or solution.

Chapter 4: Experimental Measurements
Describe results of experiments that provide evidence in support of your thesis. Usually experiments either emphasize proof-of-concept or efficiency.

Chapter 5: Corollaries And Consequences
Describe variations, extensions, or other applications of the central idea.

Chapter 6: Conclusions
Summarize what was learned and how it can be applied. Possibilities for future research.

Abstract:
Dissertation summary. Emphasize the original contributions.
Planning & Organizing
Schedules & Logistics Nuts & Bolts

• **Devise a realistic** schedule that fits the reality of your life with its obligations, distractions – and *commuting*

• **Line up** your resources and support, from pencils to people (BTW, remember to be kind to the people)

• **Be honest** about your technical and rhetorical savvy and address those needs early on

• **Plan short-term as well as long-term**, and expect that the most time-consuming part of your work will be synthesizing your arguments and writing/revising

• **Ask** your friends, allies, and mentors for advice!
One Useful Method for Crafting a Preliminary Plan

Using your favorite method and format …

• **Identify & Quantify** the stages in your writing process – allocate time in %s (for example 20% generating & planning your arguments, 30% drafting, 30% revising)

• **List** your time, location, and technology needs

• **Map out** a general schedule with time allocations, needs, and goals – for getting started, for maintaining momentum, and for getting to the finish line. Take a break and then a second look. Tweak or re-do as needed, and save where you will see it every day.

• **Re-visit** often and revise as needed.
Some Execution Strategies for Organizing Your Research

- **Plan** your research and your methodology carefully – and be realistic about the logistics
- Look for **models**; read others’ works to get a sense of the ways that theses/dissertations can be done
- Select a good **program/app** to organize and manage your research, bibliography, and notes (for example, Zotero, Calibre, Evernote)
- Select a good **program/app** to **save** your work
- **Organize** your readings as well as your research (what to skim, what to study)
Quantitative Research and Dissertations
Typically attempt to build on and/or test theories, whether adopting an original approach or an approach based on some kind of replication or extension

Qualitative Research and Dissertations
Whether case studies, ethnographies, narrative research, or other method, they follow an emergent design, use theory, multiple methods, interpret, and assess
For example, Structuring the Qualitative Dissertation in Information Science: http://cci.drexel.edu/faculty/sgasson/info-diss.html

Mixed Methods Research and Dissertations
Combine qualitative and quantitative data, and then analysing or interpreting that data, separately or together, often through more than one research phase
For example, Steps in Conducting a Scholarly Mixed Methods Study: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1047&context=dberspeakers
Some Brainstorming Strategies

- **Freewrite** to unlock ideas in low-stakes way
- Try **Clustering** – map out your ideas, quotations, citations, sources, and or notes – online see [https://bubbl.us/mindmap](https://bubbl.us/mindmap)
- **Outline** – traditional or devise your own
- **Talk** with a partner – take turns:
  - Ask leading questions & take notes
  - Review notes together & look for patterns
- **Storyboard** your topics, arguments, research
- Lay out your project, argument, or narrative in **PowerPoint**
- Write your first paragraph in or as an **email**
Writing-Related Strategies

- **Find the best way to start** (or to resume): devise a comprehensive title, rewrite your proposal into dissertation sections, begin writing with the sections you know the best.

- **Develop a full, working** Table of Contents, and use it to guide and to motivate your writing.

- **Build in time** to get feedback, to rethink your research and arguments, and to revise.

- **Keep reading** – read in chunks – and keep asking questions and talking to keep up your momentum.

- **Build in accountability** outside of your dissertation or thesis committee with a writing buddy, writing center tutor, and/or writing group. Meet regularly to keep on track.
...and to stay on track, you can request a **Writing Group** at DePaul

- For a sense of solidarity and productivity
- Get some writing done
- Get feedback and important **support**
- Talk with other grad students
- Keep up your momentum
- Keep reading and giving – it will help you as much as you will help others!
- Stay motivated and on track
Some Parting Advice…

- **Build in time to change** your schedule, your research, your mind – *up to a point*
- **Write down all** ideas and back up your work in more than one place – and do so *every day*
- **Keep in touch** with your advisor!
- **Write something** in some way *every day*
- **Remember** to *rest*! Enjoy and be proud of what you are doing. Others can build on and benefit from your efforts. And, having gotten this far, know that *you can do this*
- **If you fall behind**, waste some time, or otherwise screw up, forgive yourself, dust yourself off, and get back to work
Some Recommended General Resources

• Writing Through Graduate School Resources: http://ctl.yale.edu/writing/graduate/writing-through-graduate-school

• Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods Dissertations: http://dissertation.laerd.com/getting-started-p2.php#qualitative

• Writing and Presenting Your Thesis or Dissertation: http://www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes/


• Laying the Groundwork for the Thesis and Dissertation: http://www.corwin.com/upm-data/52190_Joyner_Chapter_1_Laying_the_Groundwork.pdf
Citation Manager Comparisons

A comparison among Docear, Zotero, Mendelay:

- DePaul Library, Other Resources: [http://libguides.depaul.edu/cite/citing-other-resources](http://libguides.depaul.edu/cite/citing-other-resources)

“Organizing My Research Life”:


DePaul Library Research Consultations: [http://library.depaul.edu/get-help/ask-a-librarian/Pages/Make-an-Appointment.aspx](http://library.depaul.edu/get-help/ask-a-librarian/Pages/Make-an-Appointment.aspx)

Help Resources: [http://library.depaul.edu/get-help/Pages/default.aspx](http://library.depaul.edu/get-help/Pages/default.aspx)
Some Places to Go for Advice

Writing Centers
DePaul: http://depaul.edu/writing
Minnesota: http://writing.umn.edu/sws/quickhelp/graduate.html
Claremont: www.cgu.edu/pages/892.asp
UCLA: http://gsrc.ucla.edu/gwc/
Harvard: http://gsas.harvard.edu/writing

Your Department’s resources
Final Exercise (if time):
Write Again and Discuss Again!
(approx. 3-5 minutes)

Jot down some memory-jogging notes that you can take away from today for your project …

• What’s next? Where will you go from here?
• What strategies might continue to be useful as you move ahead with your thesis or dissertation?
• What challenges (familiar or new) do you foresee?
• What ideas do you have for addressing them?
Thank You

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