

DEMYSTIFYING DISSERTATION WRITING



A Streamlined Process from Choice of Topic to Final Text

Peg Boyle Single, Ph.D.

FOREWORD BY RICHARD M. REIS, PH.D.

Research shows that five strategies are associated with the successful completion of a dissertation:

- Establishing a consistent writing routine
- Working with a support group
- Consulting your adviser
- Understanding your committee's expectations
- Setting a realistic and timely schedule

Building on these insights, this book is for anyone who needs help in preparing for, organizing, planning, scheduling, and writing the longest sustained writing project they have encountered, particularly if he or she is not receiving sufficient guidance about the process, but also for anyone looking to boost his or her writing productivity.

The author uncovers much tacit knowledge, provides advice on working with dissertation advisers and committee members, presents proven techniques for the prewriting and writing stages of the dissertation, sets out a system for staying on schedule, and advocates enlisting peer support.

As Peg Boyle Single states, "My goal is quite simple and straightforward: for you to experience greater efficiency and enjoyment while writing. If you experience anxiety, blocking, impatience, perfectionism or procrastination when you write, then this system is for you. I want you to be able to complete your writing so that you can move on with the rest of your life."

Few scholars, let alone graduate students, have been taught habits of writing fluency and productivity. The writing skills imparted by this book will not only help the reader through the dissertation writing process, but will also serve her or him in whatever career she or he embarks on, given the paramount importance of written communication, especially in the academy.

This book presents a system of straightforward and proven techniques that are used by productive writers and applies them to the dissertation process. In particular, it promotes the concept of writing networks—whether writing partners or groups—to ensure that writing does not become an isolated and tortured process, while not masking the need for persistence and sustained effort.

This book is intended for graduate students and their advisers in the social sciences, the humanities, and professional fields. It can further serve as a textbook for either informal writing groups led by students or for formal writing seminars offered by departments or graduate colleges. The techniques described will help new faculty advise their students more effectively and even achieve greater fluency in their own writing.

Praise from the Author's Workshop Participants

"Dr. Single's book should be must reading for graduate students and researchers seeking to efficiently and strategically read and synthesize scholarly articles. Peg's methods helped me tremendously as I completed my Ph.D. in Natural Resource Planning. Her strategic technique helped me make the best use of my time. I continue today to use the writer's notes and methods I developed under Peg's guidance. This book will be invaluable to anyone pursuing a graduate degree. I highly recommend it."

—**Richard Watts**, Ph.D. in Natural Resource Planning
from the University of Vermont

“Dr. Single’s book is not only useful for those working toward completion of the dissertation, but also for individuals taking on any long-term writing project. I have used elements of this book to complete my own dissertation and continue to draw upon its wisdom currently as a tenure track faculty member.”

—**Dannielle Joy Davis**, Ph.D. in Educational Policy Studies
from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

“Dr. Single’s techniques provide the foundation that will allow you complete your research and writing. Daily writing, even for short periods of time, is the key to success.”

—**Karen F. Madden**, Ph.D. in American History
from Michigan State University

“The Single System provided me with the courage to write by giving me the skills and techniques that made the dissertation much more manageable. The interactive notes, citeable notes, and interactive reading exercises moved me from a point of fear and writer’s block towards a pattern of writing fluency. Having learned these useful techniques as a doctoral student, I now teach them to my own students, who appreciate knowing the social and cultural forces that influence their ability to write and techniques that assist them in overcoming these obstacles. Dr. Single’s System substantively contributed to my ability to narrow my focus, begin the writing process, and, most importantly, craft a dissertation of which I could be proud.”

—**Alvin Sturdivant**, Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and
Policy Studies from the University of Vermont

“I highly recommend Dr. Single’s book. She presents a writing system that helps you progress from unformed idea to finished product in a manner that suits your style and brings out the best in your scholarship and your writing.”

—**Anne Chan**, Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology
from Stanford University

“*Demystifying Dissertation Writing* provides clear and comprehensive direction for graduate students in any discipline. Dr. Single’s practical, step-by-step guidelines not only helped me finish my dissertation in sociology, but her specific techniques transformed my approach to writing. Her system truly demystifies the process and makes the dissertation writing experience manageable and even enjoyable. I highly recommend this book—it is packed with helpful tips and effective strategies designed to help doctoral students succeed.”

—**Kimberly Huisman**, Ph.D. in Sociology
from the University of Southern California

“Writing a dissertation is one of the most difficult and painful tasks of one’s academic career. Fortunately for us, Dr. Single has mastered and found a way to synthesize this process into a step-by-step guidebook that, as its title suggests, demystifies dissertation writing. I found it to be an invaluable tool during my dissertation journey, and it is a must-have for any doctoral student wishing not just to survive, but to thrive during this process.”

—**Stacey A. Miller**, Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and
Policy Studies from the University of Vermont

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Choice of Topic to Final Text*

Peg Boyle Single, Ph.D.

Foreword by Richard M. Reis, Ph.D.



STERLING, VIRGINIA



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Published by Stylus Publishing, LLC
22883 Quicksilver Drive
Sterling, Virginia 20166-2102

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication-Data

Single, Peg Boyle, 1963–

Demystifying dissertation writing : a streamlined process from choice of topic to final text / Peg Boyle Single.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-57922-312-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-57922-313-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Dissertations, Academic—Authorship. 2. Academic writing. I. Title.

LB2369.55 2010

808'.02—dc22

2009026742

13-digit ISBN: 978-1-57922-312-0 (cloth)

13-digit ISBN: 978-1-57922-313-7 (paper)

Printed in the United States of America

All first editions printed on acid free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39-48 Standard.

Bulk Purchases

Quantity discounts are available for use in workshops
and for staff development.

Call 1-800-232-0223

First Edition, 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Rich

You bring so much love, joy, happiness, and meaning to my life,
without you this book would never have been written.

And to Robert Boice,

my dissertation adviser and mentor.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface	xi
Foreword	xvii
1 The Single System for Academic Writing	1
1.1. Developing Habits of Fluent Writing	4
1.2. Using <i>Demystifying Dissertation Writing</i> as a Guide for Writing Groups and Seminars	5
1.3. Data on Ph.D. Completion Rates	6
1.4. The Single System and Prewriting	13
1.5. Keeping Perspective on Your Dissertation Project	19
2 Choosing a Topic and an Adviser	23
2.1. A Set of Constraints	23
2.2. Choosing a Dissertation Topic and an Adviser	24
2.3. Additional Constraints to Consider	31
2.4. Entering the Conversation: Subject Matter	34
2.5. Examples of Dissertation Topics	38
2.6. Entering the Conversation: Theories and Methods	40
2.7. Managing Your Adviser and Your Dissertation Committee Members	42
2.8. Group Exercises for Choosing a Topic and an Adviser	47

3	Interactive Reading and Note Taking	55
3.1.	Scholarly Reading Is the Foundation of Your Dissertation	56
3.2.	Reading Is a Privilege	58
3.3.	Collect Notes, Not Articles or Books	58
3.4.	Interactive Reading in Practice	63
3.5.	Using a Bibliographic Program to Record Interactive Notes	67
3.6.	Rules for Recording Quotations	71
3.7.	Plagiarism and Copyright Infringement	74
3.8.	Group Exercises for Interactive Reading and Note Taking	76
4	Citeable Notes	79
4.1.	Recording Citeable Notes and Building Your Literature Review	81
4.2.	Group Exercises for Creating Citeable Notes and Identifying Categories	84
5	Focusing on Focus Statements	87
5.1.	Useful Focus Statements Are Clear, Concise, and Compelling	87
5.2.	Elements of a Useful Focus Statement	89
5.3.	Providing Useful Feedback	92
5.4.	Group Exercises That Focus on Focus Statements	93
6	Transforming a Focus Statement Into a One-Page Outline	95
6.1.	The Role and Elements of the One-Page Outline	97
6.2.	Formats for the Dissertation	99
6.3.	Group Exercises That Transform Focus Statements Into One-Page Outlines	101
6.4.	Using the Table of Contents Feature as an Efficiency Tool	107
7	Long Outline With References	111
7.1.	Multiple Purposes of the Long Outline	113

7.2.	Transforming a One-Page Outline Into a Long Outline	116
7.3.	Inserting Citeable Notes Into Your Long Outline	120
7.4.	Planning and Organizing Your Scholarship and Research	121
7.5.	Getting a Format Check by Your Graduate College	123
7.6.	A Group Exercise for Sharing and Reviewing Long Outlines With References	123
8	Developing a Regular Writing Routine	127
8.1.	A Regular Writing Routine	128
8.2.	The Importance of a Designated Writing Space	133
8.3.	Developing a Writing Network	137
8.4.	What a Regular Writing Routine Looks Like in Practice	138
8.5.	Group Exercises for Establishing a Regular Writing Routine	146
9	Overcoming Writer's Block	149
9.1.	Perfectionism	150
9.2.	Procrastination	152
9.3.	Impatience	157
9.4.	Depression and Dysphoria	159
9.5.	Group Exercises for Overcoming Writer's Block	162
10	The Role of Revision	165
10.1.	Revision at the Organizational Level	166
10.2.	Revision at the Content Level	170
10.3.	Group Exercises for Revision	176
	Epilogue and Enjoying the Journey	179
	Appendix A: Elements of Humanities Research	181
	Appendix B: Elements of Social Science Research	187
	Bibliography	193



9

OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

Lower your standards until you are able to write. Create, then criticize.

—Donald Murray, *The Craft of Revision*

THE EPILOGUE for the first chapter of this book states: *Blocking occurs when writers write before they are ready.* Writers block when they try to create and criticize or write without adequate prewriting. Dissertation writers experience blocking when they try to write prose without having a clear sense of what they want to say or the organizational scheme in which they want to say it.

Grandiosity also triggers writer's block. I find that grandiosity does not refer to you but to how you view your dissertation. Is it going to be your magnum opus? Will it make a splash in your field? Perhaps, but probably not. Striving to write the great American novel is one way to ensure that you will never finish the story. Don't write the greatest (fill in your field) dissertation; write a good dissertation that moves you forward to the next stage of your career.

You also may experience blocking if you are pursuing a dissertation topic that exposes weaknesses or airs the dirty laundry of a group with which you affiliate. I have heard this concern from minority graduate students and graduate students who were raised in low-income settings. Although the information you are examining in your dissertation may be well known in certain circles, opening the information to a wider audience may cause the voices of the past, present, and future to question

your reasons for pursuing that dissertation topic and raise issues of betrayal. You may be concerned that you will expose secrets in a setting (i.e., higher education) where we are still striving to level the playing field.

The results? You postpone writing and spend your time on research activities. You agree to submit chapters of your dissertation to your adviser on certain dates and you repeatedly miss those deadlines. You spend time preparing for your courses rather than writing. Ultimately, you may be at risk for remaining ABD (All But Dissertation).

Do not let writer's block hold you back. You can overcome writer's block. In this chapter, I discuss some of the most common forms of writer's block experienced by dissertation writers. But the focus of this chapter is not on diagnosing and understanding writer's block, rather the focus is on overcoming it and transforming yourself into a fluent writer. If you do not experience writer's block, you can skip this chapter or skim through it to pick up a technique or two to support your regular writing routine.

9.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism¹ is a particularly popular cause of writer's block for doctoral students. My students have histories of excelling in school. They have had their share of A + 's on papers and transcripts. These perfectionist traits served them well as undergraduates and even as master's students. While working on their dissertations, however, these traits are working against them.

Perfectionists edit while they write their first drafts. They agonize over the introductory paragraph so that the quality of their writing diminishes as the length increases. They rarely share early drafts and get feedback only on highly polished writing. They worry about missing a particular reference and so continue reading and taking notes well after they have combed the literature.

If you tend toward perfectionism and it hinders your performance, you can employ specific techniques to transform it from a liability into an asset. Perfectionists are likely to fall into the trap of reading at the expense of writing—you can always find one more book or article to read. Your long outline with references is the tool with which you determine whether you have read enough and convince yourself that you know

the literature in your field. Review your long outline to assess whether you have plenty of citeable notes in each section. Share your long outline with your writing group and ask them if they think you need to read more in any specific area or if you are ready to write. Chances are they will determine that you are ready to write. If you don't believe me, at least believe them.

When you begin writing, never ever write your introductory paragraphs in your first draft. Of course you can write convincing and eloquent introductory paragraphs, but your dissertation committee will not sign off on a few perfect paragraphs. If you struggle with perfectionism, take some advice from the previous chapter and use a few placeholder phrases to remind yourself where to insert introductory paragraphs and transitions. As you write, do not spell check. If possible, turn off the feature that checks your spelling as you write. Finally, be ready to use *blank* as a placeholder when you cannot come up with the perfect word. Your goal is to keep on writing rather than to get bogged down on one word, sentence, or paragraph.

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott talks about the “shitty first draft.” She says “All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts.”² Have you ever seen anyone else's crummy first draft (I hope you don't mind if I use *crummy* instead)? You will be surprised at how bad it is. Have you ever shared one of yours? Does the thought of doing this make you anxious? Do it anyway. If you are a perfectionist, chances are you have not shared a crummy first draft or that you have misrepresented a third draft as a first draft. If you choose wisely, I assure you that the person with whom you share your crummy first draft will not think you are inadequate. Rather, they will be able to give you valuable content and organizational feedback before you have wasted too much time on unearthing the right word or perfecting the sentence structure.

Perfectionists in particular are susceptible to stumbling over the first draft. What can I say? Get the first draft down on paper, and then, and only then, begin crafting your eloquent introductory paragraphs. After you have written a crummy first draft, you can leverage your perfectionism and polish your crummy first draft into an exceptional, completed dissertation. But—and it is an important *but*—you may want to set an

external deadline with your dissertation adviser, writing partners, or writing group so that you have an incentive to put an end to the polishing.

9.2. Procrastination

Procrastination is another cause of writer's block that seems to ail doctoral students. If you do procrastinate, you probably have experienced your share of all-nighters. You put off writing until it is too late, and then you use the upcoming deadline to fuel a writing spree. Although this system may have gotten you through your master's program, it will not help you complete a defensible dissertation. If you procrastinate (I can sympathize because this was my most common form of writer's block), your biggest challenge is getting your bum down on the chair and your hands on the keyboard. Once you get over that initial anxiety and begin writing, you usually can make very good progress.

One of the most effective techniques you can use is to recruit a writing partner. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that I recruited a writing partner who seemed to have different writing struggles than I did. That strategy worked well for me. Think about a classmate who would be a good writing partner for you. Have two or three alternatives because your first choice may not recognize a need for contracting with a fellow writer.

After you have recruited a writing partner, contact her every scheduled writing day. Yes, *every* day. When you contact your writing partner, tell her the tasks you will be working on that day and how yesterday went. Contact her via phone or using instant messages; real-time communications seem to work better than asynchronous communications like e-mail. Depending on whether you use a task-based or a time-based approach to writing, keep track of the tasks you have accomplished and the time you have spent writing to share with your writing partner the next day. I know you may be tempted to, but do not misrepresent your progress to your writing partner. In the end, the truth prevails about your writing progress. If the thought of having to be honest with a writing partner is aversive, I can assure you that you will feel much worse when the rest of your cohort has defended their dissertations and you are still ABD.

Another very effective technique is to coordinate a writing workshop

with a few classmates. Go to a seminar room, a coffee shop, the library, someone's home, or any place where you all can work comfortably on your laptops while resisting the temptations of procrastination. Just the act of writing together can create the type of peer pressure that helps you stay glued to your chair.

Begin each day of the writing workshop just as you would with a remote writing partner. Name your goals for that day, whether task-based or time-based. At the end of the writing session, reflect on what you accomplished along with what you identified about your writing style. If you cannot do this every day, then try to meet with the group for two or three days every week. A writing workshop often cannot be sustained, but it is a good way to kick-start writing fluency.

I advise holding writing workshops in locations without Internet access. Because such places are becoming increasingly difficult to find, at least make sure one of your writing partners can see your screen to deter you from checking the weather in Dubai or looking up the fuel efficiency of the latest hybrid car. If the Internet is a time sink for you, cancel your Internet connection. If you get sucked into watching the twenty-four-hour shopping network, cancel your cable subscription. Although this may at first seem silly, after you have finished your dissertation, you will have plenty of time to find obscure web sites and shop for the latest electronics. The time you save by eliminating such temptations more than covers the added time it takes for you to travel to your university or local library to access the Internet. If you have a PDA on which you can receive your e-mail, the inconvenience will be minimal. Just have some tools on hand to make sure that you do not surf the web on your PDA after your Internet connection is disabled.

If you are pursuing a doctoral degree online and need Internet access at home, recruiting a writing group or partner who can keep you accountable is all the more important. The chance of running into your adviser in the hallway or meeting a classmate in a local coffee shop is minimal. These types of chance meetings can help to motivate writers who are tempted to procrastinate; you do not have the same luxury. You have complete control over when you check your e-mail or the cohort's online bulletin board and you can readily avoid it with impunity. Recruit one or two of your classmates to serve as online writing partners and

keep in contact via texting (for your regular updates) and e-mail (to exchange outlines and early drafts).

Because the struggle for procrastinators is to sit down and get started, it is particularly important for you to have a designated writing space that you keep relatively clear. Anything that makes sitting down even slightly aversive will make cleaning the kitchen floor all the more enticing. Any distractions on the desk provide you with a ready reason to delay writing. Find or create a designated writing space and stick to using it. This space may be in your home, in your office, or at the local coffee shop.

As I mentioned earlier, your challenge is to get started. Sometimes sitting down at your desk is not enough. Although you have your long outline with references and external supports such as writing partners and a writing group on hand, sometimes you still get stuck. An effective way to get unstuck before succumbing to the temptation of procrastination is to journal. Sit down at your desk, turn on your computer, and open the document on which you will be working. Then pull out a pad of paper and a pencil or pen and begin journaling about the work you plan to do that day. For the two years that I worked on my dissertation, I journaled almost every day. I would start by writing, “Okay, I am feeling like I am blocking and I do not know what to say . . .” and after half a page or so of that, I would write, “What I want to write about today is . . .” I almost always ended my journal entry with, “Okay, that sounds good, now let’s get started.” After I had built up some momentum by journaling free hand, I switched to journaling in a separate word processing document and added each new journal entry to the beginning of the document.

This worked for a while, and then I found that I could begin productive writing by journaling for just a few sentences in my dissertation document. I would search for my placeholder, get to the place where I needed to write, review my notes, and read through the last few paragraphs I had written the day before. I would start by writing “What do I want to say today?” or “Okay, what do I want to say here?” Then I would delete these few sentences before I began my writing. As you can see, the process of journaling evolved for me over the course of writing my dissertation. I found that as I built up momentum, confidence, and writing skill, I could rely on increasingly less intensive interventions. Try out the technique of

journaling and see how it works for you. Then, as with all techniques I suggest, alter it to suit your needs.

Sometimes, procrastination can really stall you. In these cases, a more intensive intervention is needed. Graduate students, even those who are introverted, can talk through their topics quite adequately but get tied up when they try to put their thoughts into the written word. When one of my students is really struggling with procrastination, I meet with her weekly. I ask her to bring her long outline, and we talk about the next section on the outline on which she needs to work. I pose a set of questions to her and take notes on her responses. By the end of the session, I have written phrases and sentences in the student's own words that can help her get started writing. I often write these notes in an outline format that mirrors her long outline. At the end of our meeting, I make a copy of these notes for me and hand the original notes to the student. I ask her to estimate how much she expects to write by the following week, and we both record it on our notes.

I ask students the following basic set of questions that is general enough to apply to various topics and different sections of the dissertation. These questions walk students through the process of identifying a focus statement and then expanding on that focus statement for the chapter or section:

- What is the important part of this chapter/section?
- What do you want to say about this chapter/section?
- What evidence do you have to back up your point?
- How is this chapter/section going to set up your next chapter/section?

What I find is that students can readily respond to these questions with little hesitation. They just get hung up when they have to translate their thoughts into prose. Remember, you do not have to take on an erudite voice to write your dissertation. Write in your own voice, the voice you use when you talk about your dissertation and respond to the preceding questions. So when you are writing and feel like you are beginning to get stuck, speak aloud as you type. If need be, talk into a digital tape recorder, and then type while playing back the recording. The point is to leverage

your strong verbal skills and not to let writing intimidate you to the point where you stall.

Chances are that your adviser will not be able to meet with you weekly to talk through your dissertation. If you think this technique would work for you, do whatever it takes to find someone who will help you to talk through your dissertation and take notes as you are talking. A classmate, writing partner, or a member of your writing group may be able to help you. You may want to look into these types of supports at your university's Center for Teaching and Learning or Writing Center. Although Writing Centers are traditionally for undergraduate students, if they have the resources to help, use them.

What I have found is that first-generation college students and working-class students in my class often struggle with writing. Meanwhile, they make very strong presentations. They just have not had as much experience writing down their thoughts compared with other students. I have worked with American Indian, African American, Latina, and White working-class students. They have all been the first in their families to go to college. In three distinct cases, these students were at risk for being ABD. In two cases, their advisers did not necessarily understand the struggles they were having with writing or their need to teach a few extra courses to support themselves financially. I saw that there was absolutely no reason for these students to remain ABD. They just needed the writing training that they had not received earlier in their academic careers.

I have also observed that returning students who have forged successful careers can struggle with procrastination while writing. These students are interesting because they have very irregular skill sets; some of their skills are highly developed (for example, presenting or supervising) and others are not (such as writing lengthy reports). Returning students need to learn how to leverage their more developed skills to elevate their writing skills.

The working-class, minority, and returning students in my classes respond well to a talking-out-loud protocol to overcome their writing procrastination. Employing this protocol helps them to realize that they can leverage their oral communication skills to complete their dissertations. They have to realize that writing in their own voice is not only acceptable, it is preferable.

9.3. Impatience

The various types of writer's block are not discrete categories. They tend to overlap. I mentioned earlier that I have struggled with procrastination; also, I have and still struggle with impatience. On the surface, impatience may seem contradictory to not finishing a project. How can rushing to get something done interfere with completing it? Bob Boice explains impatience this way:

Impatience helps block via a sense of urgency: not enough prewriting gets done (e.g., note taking, reflection, conceptual outlining) to permit the preparation that good writing demands; not enough rewriting or proofing is done to convey the writing in polished, error-free form; not enough writing gets done in comfortable, non-fatiguing fashion.³

If you experience impatience, you can use a few strategies to overcome it. As mentioned earlier, writers block when they write before they are ready. If you deal with impatience, it is particularly important for you to complete a long outline with references before you start to write prose. You may think that you can jump in and that you have enough to say about your project, but you will often find that you must completely rewrite what you have written. Take the time to do the necessary prewriting and your chances of overcoming impatience increase dramatically.

I can look at a CV and see whether someone struggles with impatience. If you do, you may have multiple projects started but few finished. You have lots of good ideas and the enthusiasm to work on them all, but you jump in too fast and start writing prose before you are ready. Then you get fed up with that project, have another really good idea, and get working on that idea. Although this process may be fun, it is not productive. Your impatience prevents you from engaging in the tedious prewriting that is necessary for you to fluently write the first draft. Your impatience also keeps you from taking the time to adequately revise any prose that you have managed to write.

Keep your projects under control. Place some constraints upon yourself. For instance, you cannot submit another conference presentation until your dissertation proposal is completed. While having evidence of dissemination is important on your CV, I suggest that you balance these career-progressing tasks with completing your dissertation. You are better

off if you have one or two presentations and a completed dissertation then five or six presentations and are ABD. Keep the end in mind. Completing your dissertation will open doors that having multiple conference presentations will never open.

I suggest to impatient types (such as myself) that they rely on the twenty-four-hour rule: Do not agree to any additional tasks or responsibilities, no matter how inviting, without thinking about it for twenty-four hours. For those of you who relate to the experience of being overcommitted, try saying this aloud: “That is a great opportunity; thank you. Can I think about it until tomorrow or the end of the week and get back to you?” Be prepared with this response when you are asked to do something. Change it a little, make it your own. Just be sure not to commit to anything else until you complete your dissertation.

Consider adding breaks into your regular writing routine. We impatient types can write endlessly until our hands cramp and our backs are sore. If you experience this and want to develop into an efficient writer, you must change this practice. Slow down and take regular breaks while you write. Buy yourself a timer that is easy to use; it does not need to have any fancy features. At the beginning of your writing session, set a forty-minute interval for yourself. After forty minutes, take a break to stretch or take three deep and slow breaths. Reach down and give your dog a pat on the head.

With regularly scheduled breaks, you can maintain your momentum longer. The chances of developing repetitive stress syndrome or carpal tunnel syndrome are decreased because you are more attentive to the messages your body sends you. Switch your mouse from one side to the other. Move your chair up or down a little. Use an ergonomic keyboard. These techniques can transform you from a sprinter to a marathoner. Being a sprinter worked in your earlier academic career; you could write a short paper and it was just fine—not your best, but good enough that you made it thus far in graduate school. Now, you must employ techniques that keep you going through the long haul.

If you deal with impatience, perhaps you have multiple disappointments in your past or your expectations are unrealistically high. One of my students struggled with impatience with her writing as well as the speed with which she completed her degree. This highly competent returning student entered the doctoral program at her university with the

intent of completing the program in four years. Fine, except she worked a full-time job and wanted to attend her sons' soccer games. She did not finish in four years and instead took a hiatus between the end of her coursework and defending her dissertation proposal. Quite a few times during the writing seminar, she shared her disappointment about not meeting her four-year goal.

In one class, she again expressed her dismay at not completing the program in record time. She said, "I entered this program with a four-year plan—as fast as I could. I saw others go through the program. It was hard for me to accept that I was not further along than I was supposed to be."

I looked straight at her and very gently said, "Can you forgive yourself, put that behind you, and move forward?"

These few simple words made a bigger impact on her than I realized when I said them. She mentioned to me later that she found our exchange very freeing. Unrealistic expectations about completing the doctoral program were holding her back. Similarly, unrealistic expectations about your writing can promote blocking and deter you from engaging in a regular writing routine, which is so important to completing a large and daunting project. As you address your impatience, realize that the writing process is about being mortal, realizing your limitations, forgiving yourself, and moving on.

9.4. Depression and Dysphoria

Another form of writer's block, dysphoria or mild depression, may be hindering you from completing your dissertation. In general, students seem to experience two nadir points while pursuing a doctorate. The first is toward the end of the first semester. As would be expected, graduate courses are often much more challenging than undergraduate courses are. Students who excelled as undergraduates are challenged to a new level of performance. Students who were at the top of their classes as undergraduates are now "average." Many doctoral students talk about dropping out during the finals of their first semester. I was one of them. I will always remember sitting on the couch in my parents' living room and talking with my dad. The conversation went something like this:

“Dad, I’m going to drop out of graduate school.”

He put his newspaper down and looked at me. He said, “That’s okay. Just finish out this semester and then update your résumé. You’ll be able to get a job in accounting.”

Silence. I had gone back to graduate school as a career change. I had an undergraduate degree in accounting and after a few years working in that field, I realized that I would never be happy spending my working life as an accountant or an auditor. When I conducted interviews with first-year graduate students for my dissertation, I realized that many of them considered dropping out toward the end of their first semester, too. They were studying for finals and finishing papers that challenged them far more than they had been challenged previously.

I finished my first semester and considered my options over winter break. I did not update my résumé but went back to school the following semester. I made a very good decision. Although I still use my accounting skills to create budgets for grant proposals, I am very glad to spend my time writing and teaching instead of reconciling accounts or auditing records.

The second nadir is right before the dissertation. The camaraderie of courses is minimal. The structure provided by coursework is gone. The only thing to pursue is a long-term project. Too often during this time students experience isolation. This is especially true for students who are working on a self-identified project, not a project in line with the adviser’s program of research. This is a prime time for depression to creep in and for dysphoria to impede progress on the dissertation. Social support is of great importance during these times. If you have not already recruited a writing group or a writing partner, do it now. If you have not signed up for the dissertation writing seminar offered in your department, do it now. The interpersonal connections, sharing of struggles, and mutual support combat the feelings of depression and dysphoria that you might experience at the beginning of the dissertation phase.

I initiated my own social support network when I was finishing my dissertation. I was in graduate school at a time when formal writing seminars were uncommon. So I asked three other students to join me in a weekly writing group. Each session around my breakfast table, one of us would share her work for half an hour. This person would e-mail her work to the rest of the group earlier so that we could look through it and

provide explicit feedback. Afterward, we shared our progress from the week and our graphs. All of us completed our dissertations in a timely manner.

Many times, social support can deter or pull you out of depression or dysphoria, but not all of the time. If depression or dysphoria becomes a hindrance to you, seek the professional support you need. Graduate school is stressful, as is working on a dissertation project and contemplating life after graduate school. If you want to find a therapist, you can go to the university counseling center or obtain a recommendation from your primary care physician or other advanced graduate students. If you are considered an employee of the university based on your teaching or research responsibilities, you can use the Employee Assistance Program for support. If you need professional help, please get the support that you need.

In addition, you may want to consider hiring a writing coach. Although the price for such services may seem exorbitant now, you will realize later that it was a good investment. A writing coach is different from a copy editor. A copy editor fixes your grammatical errors and typos and usually charges less than a writing coach does. A writing coach helps you set long- and short-term goals, improve your writing habits, assess your progress, and prevent writer's block. She probably will copy edit some of your work, but more important, she identifies trends that you can work on as you write. Perhaps you need to work on introductions or transitions or to improve the organization within your chapters. If you hire a writing coach, be sure that she has a track record of writing rather than just being a life coach. Although the services such professionals offer overlap, only another writer can understand the peculiar aspects of the writing process.

Since graduate school, I have managed to keep my writer's block under control. I still rate high on impatience: I have more writing ideas and more one-page outlines in my head than I could possibly write in a lifetime, but I hold myself to a strict rule of finishing one article before starting a new one. I have learned how to turn my weaknesses into strengths and to help others turn their weaknesses into strengths.

You can address writer's block by keeping your writing in perspective. Employ the necessary prewriting tasks, keep important resources

handy, rely on your writing partners, engage in a regular writing routine, and seek professional help if necessary. One of the most powerful ways to overcome writer's block is to talk about it with others. For this reason, I emphasize the importance of working on your dissertation with the support of a writing group. Be honest with your writing group. Depending on your relationship with your dissertation adviser, you may not want to expose your writing struggles to her, but you certainly should with your classmates and with the professor who facilitates the writing seminar.

My students find my writing seminar very helpful mostly because I am candid about my past and present struggles with writing. I share the creative ways I can procrastinate and rationalize not working on my writing. I tell my students that if I can overcome my writer's block, so can they. Soon, they too feel comfortable disclosing their writing struggles. We help each other by talking about our struggles and the techniques we use to overcome them so that we can meet our writing goals.

9.5. Group Exercises for Overcoming Writer's Block

If you facilitate or lead the writing seminar or group, please do not feel that you need to hold yourself up as an expert. As mentioned, my students appreciate it when I share my writing challenges with them. I am sure that your students would feel the same way. If you participate in a writing seminar, be sure that your facilitator or professor understands that you are interested in hearing her candid disclosures of her writing successes and failures and what she did to overcome her weaknesses. Let her know that your reason is not to learn about her career challenges, but to foster an open atmosphere where all the members of the writing seminar can support one another.

One semester I shared a blank graph for two months straight. I cringed every time I had to hold up my empty graph. I would say, "I know this is my second month of a blank graph," and the students would tilt their heads a little. They did not remember that I had been on a writing hiatus. They did not ruminate on my blank writing graph between class meetings. They had better things to think about, like their own dissertations and their own lives. I tell you this story to illustrate that we do not hold

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