

**Extract from**

# **Constructing a Good Dissertation**

**A Practical Guide to Finishing  
a Master's, MBA or PhD on Schedule**

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Hard times, that's all we hear 'round this way....  
Good times "Just 'round the corner", so they say  
– W. C. Handy

## FOUNDATION 10 DISSERTATION BLUES

The real reason why most people do not finish their degrees is, quite simply, because they did not hand in their dissertations. And most often the underlying reasons for lack of submission are psychological.

Ask, and people will give you many reasons why they didn't finish their dissertations, and even more justifications. Sometimes the reasons are real: New, more important life challenges, a career change, and so on. But you will hardly ever hear it honestly said that the reason someone did not complete their dissertation was because they sat back, thought about it, and decided that they didn't want the degree after all. Something else pushed them there. It's that 'something else' that this piece deals with.

Many people who have successfully completed their degrees have gone through periods of doubt, often alone, without the benefit of understanding or even being able to name what was happening to them. There's a lesson there: It is by no means impossible to work your way through difficulties on the road to getting your degree. Many have done so. In fact, it is far more unusual to have it plain sailing all the way than it is to doubt yourself from time to time. So, while this piece is not for the faint-hearted, it should be read as an affirmation. Many have been there before you and have made it through. You can too.

The feelings described below occur more often and with greater intensity in doctoral than in master's students, but that's simply in proportion to the volume and complexity of the work. Many of the points apply to both, and your individual character will play a large role in determining which, if any, apply to you.

### DEPRESSION AND PLANNING

Before we go on to discussing the psychological aspects of completing an advanced degree, it is necessary to address the basics, and that is this: *If you haven't planned your dissertation, you are perfectly justified in feeling worried and depressed about both the process and the outcome.* However, it's never too late to put that right. As long as you have the will, you can take control of and responsibility for your dissertation.

First you need to step back and name your goal. Name a goal, and you have something that can be turned into a plan of action. You need to plan everything, from determining your topic to doing your research, from structuring the work to managing your relationship with your supervisor, from creating realistic deadlines to editing the final draft, and everything in between. Presumably this will come as no surprise to you. If you haven't applied the advice in Project Management and The Postgraduate Game, please – do so. It's important. *Very* important.

There are far more people who fail to complete their dissertations than there are people who fail their completed dissertations. And the reason why most people do not complete their dissertations is that they do not plan.

Take control of the process and it won't control you. Chances are, you'll also feel a lot better while working on the dissertation because you'll be working in the assurance that you will get it done or, in the unlikely event that you don't, that it will be a conscious choice on your part. You'll also be a lot less reliant on other people's validation that you're doing the right thing.

But, even with planning, it is still likely that you will go through some tough times. The first problem is that, for many people, the dissertation seems an insurmountable hurdle. This generally breaks down to two main reasons: The first is the sheer magnitude of the task facing them, and the second is the perceived level of intellectual difficulty.

With regard to the first: Yes, it is a substantial work, but the parts that make up a dissertation are really not that substantial. So the answer is to break it down into small, manageable parts, and then to break those parts up into easily achieved tasks. The sum of completed small tasks equals a completed dissertation, in time. It is not an overnight process, but it is one that works, and one that leads to a passing dissertation more surely and quickly than any other. The flip side is also true: If you insist on looking at the dissertation as one whole work, you will be intimidated and stress yourself unnecessarily. So don't.

## INTELLECTUAL REQUIREMENTS

As for the second reason why a dissertation seems an insurmountable hurdle: Believe it or not, the intellectual level required to research and write a passing dissertation is not that high.

It's *consistent work* that leads to a dissertation that looks as though it is the product of extremely high-level intellectual work. If you doubt this, look around you: You have probably met people whom you feel are intellectually less deserving of their master's or doctoral degrees than you would be (to put it mildly). Ask yourself how they did it. It wasn't luck: Dissertations are marked by external examiners. The

answer is: They took the right steps at the right time, called in help when they needed it and, above all, they didn't give up.

If you're not buying this, another way of looking at the brightness issue is: Yes, a dissertation is probably the largest academic work that you have been required to write thus far. But, once you understand the principles of how to go about it, and you know how to edit, you'll probably find that, while it is the longest piece you have been required to write, it is almost certainly not the most difficult to grasp. You will have passed courses that were far more difficult to understand. Getting to the dissertation stage has, in effect, pre-selected you as someone who *has* the qualifications to write a passing dissertation.

So writing the dissertation becomes a matter of consistent work. And surely, if you really want the degree, you can do that? So, with renewed confidence in yourself, go ahead and do it. You have the intellectual capacities, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Be a bit arrogant. It helps, and is probably justified anyway.

An important, almost vital, component of surviving the dissertation blues is an underlying sense of confidence – confidence that, underneath it all, you understand and, at least to some degree, control the process. It's about being able to make conscious, rational choices and being able to pull in resources and help when you need it, without being overwhelmed. It means knowing what to expect, planning, being able to break the whole thing into small steps, knowing how to do them, and believing in the ultimate payoff.

It helps, every so often, to take a look back and see what you have already achieved. Knowing that you are moving forward, even though it may not be at the pace you would like, should serve as a reminder that if you got this far, there really is nothing preventing you from keeping going all the way to the end.

### LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

Writing a dissertation can be a lonely business. It's a creative undertaking, one in which you invest a lot of thought and ideas. And all too often, you will have no one to bounce your ideas off, no one to share your triumphs and insights with, and no one to validate you. You'll probably have a hard enough time explaining to anyone the point of what you are doing, let alone exactly what it *is* that you are doing. And trying to get someone to understand where you are emotionally... well, forget it.

This is not an uncommon state of affairs and, the more you work alone, the more likely it is that it will apply to you. This sense of alienation all too often leads to demotivation, self-doubt, and to questioning the worth of what you are doing. It makes the sacrifices that you have to make to get the work done seem all the harder and less worthwhile. It is a real problem and can easily lead to giving up on the dissertation. Bear in mind, though, that this is a phase, even though it may not seem like it at the time. If you stick it out, it will pass. The degree, on the other hand, you will have forever.

There are some direct ways of dealing with the loneliness of writing a dissertation. It helps to talk, to share your experiences with others who can identify with what

you're going through. But it is very easy to bore people to the brink of tears with your dissertation and your dissertation woes; most can't identify and it's not really fair to expect them to.

Your supervisor might be of some slight help in this regard, but don't count on him or her too much: Supervisors understand, but they have full lives themselves and should not be expected to be your psychologist as well as your supervisor. Depending on your relationship with your supervisor, he or she may be able to point you in the right direction to find a solution for your dissertation blues, but don't expect him (or her) to *be* that solution. So whom do you talk to?

Some people turn to academic support groups, or study groups. They rely on others who, to a greater or lesser degree, share their predicament. They draw strength from the knowledge that they are not alone, that others have experienced the same thing before them, and have developed coping strategies. ♠ Online discussion forums, incidentally, are a good place to talk about this. The advantage of using an online forum is that you can tap in whenever you need it and the answers and experiences of a broad range of people are right there. The accumulated experiences remain online as a resource for all.

Other people find it helpful to consciously schedule social time completely outside of their dissertations as an integral part of their dissertation process. It's downtime, normalcy time, which can be enjoyed without guilt. Deliberately making that time available does help to recharge the batteries for dissertation-related activities.

### TIME AND TIMING

Time can also be the basis for dissertation-related depression. This generally has to do either with over-optimistic completion dates, a feeling of not making enough progress, or over-ambition and perfectionism.

**With regard to over-optimistic completion dates:** Often people place unrealistic expectations on themselves – or worse yet, allow other people to place unrealistic expectations on them – and then feel bad about not meeting those expectations. The next step is to extrapolate that into all kinds of areas where it does not belong – 'I'm too stupid', 'Academics sucks', 'I'll never finish' and so on – and then to end up feeling inadequate to the task. This is not clever.

Individuals work at different paces, bring different skills to the task at hand, have differing amounts of time that they can devote to a dissertation, and different dissertation projects require different amounts of work. The only way to get out of this trap is to analyse your situation, plan, prioritise tasks, and give up unrealistic expectations. If you did plan and you're still feeling flooded, ask yourself whether your original plan was too optimistic. If so, redraw the plan in a way that you *now* feel comfortable with. Circumstances change, and that's okay. But you must always have a plan that meets you where you are *now*.

**With regard to feeling that you're not making sufficient progress:** There will probably be times when you will feel that, for all the work you have put in, all the

effort, the reading, the time and sacrifices, you really should be a lot closer to finishing than you are. Well, maybe so. You can't change the past, but you can change the future. So rather than beating yourself about it and demotivating yourself even further, ask yourself: What am I going to do about it? How can I pick up the pace (if that's what you really want)? Or is it simply that you've been dealing with a particularly time-consuming part of the dissertation process? Or maybe you simply need to adjust your expectations of yourself.

Again, it's about being rational and keeping your goal in mind. You shouldn't put yourself in a downward spiral of negativity; no good comes of it, certainly not a completed dissertation. If you insist on feeling bad and negative, then at least make it a conscious choice and put a time limit to it. That way you'll have a realistic perspective on it and be able to get yourself out when it seems like time to you.

**With regard to over-ambition and perfectionism:** Sometimes feeling pressed for time comes from the fact that you have let your dissertation run away from you. You may have a plan, may even have adapted it to your changing dissertation, but you still feel swamped. If this is the case, check to see whether you have, subconsciously perhaps, become over-ambitious. Have you broadened or deepened your dissertation unduly? If you have fallen into the temptation of broadening your investigation or of adding more and more detail, reconsider *very* carefully. Ask yourself: What was my original goal? Has it changed? Would it still be possible to reach that goal without adding all this new stuff to my dissertation?

If your primary goal is still to finish your dissertation, focus your dissertation back to that. There will *always* be more that it would be nice to incorporate; dissertations can *always* be made better and more significant. Go back to what is *required*, and to what was agreed to in your proposal. Think about that, and seriously consider saving the rest for later. If victory lies in getting your degree, then your goal is to finish and pass the dissertation. Chase that, not perfection.

### **BELIEVING IN YOUR WORK**

If you no longer believe in the research that you are doing, it can be crippling to your motivation. If you're there, consider this: At one stage, you *did* believe in the worth of what you're doing, otherwise you wouldn't have started. Nobody deliberately sets themselves up for failure. Your supervisor still believes in it, otherwise you would have heard about it and the two of you would have sat down to work out how to deal with the matter. So it is highly unlikely that the worth of your work has changed; it is far more likely that your expectations of yourself and your work have changed. Think about it, then check your motivations.

Did you start out to shake the foundations of the academic world with your brilliance, or did you want an academic accreditation (the degree you enrolled for)? To get the degree, you just need to finish your dissertation and get it passed. To shake the foundations, well, you need to do a lot more. If you are confusing the two, ask yourself why.

It's probably either because you really care about making that huge contribution, which your current work doesn't live up to, or else it's a symptom of something else. If it's because you really care, remember there's no hurry to write your masterpiece and it's a lot more likely to be taken seriously after you have your degree. If it's a symptom of something else, take a break, talk to others, figure out what it is, and then deal with that – usually it's just a matter of letting it go.

A variation on not believing in your work any more is having thoughts like “I'm fooling them now, but how long can I keep it up for?” or “They're going to see through this and expose it for the #\$\$!\*@ that it is,” and so on. This too, believe it or not, is pretty common. When these thoughts or variations of them come to mind, it pays to remember a few things. Your first security is that you wrote a good proposal (you did, didn't you?) and got it passed. It's highly unlikely that that good proposal will, all on its own, turn into the #\$\$!\*@ that you fear.

Your second security lies in the fact that you have had regular contact with your supervisor and that she knows pretty much where you're at and what you're doing (she does, right?). It's pretty unlikely that she would let you go ahead with a piece of #\$\$!\*@ without letting you know her concerns.

Your third security lies in your initial plan. If you're on track, then you're not going to be exposed, no more than your supervisor was, or anyone else who got the degree. You're on track, and feeling the way you do is part of being on track for a great number of people. You're simply going through a stage of self-doubt, quite possibly combined with perfectionist tendencies, and maybe even a tinge of fear of success. Keep your supervisor up to date, share your work in study groups, keep working constructively, and the odds are that you will be fine.

A near opposite of the above is the fear that some other researcher will publish work very similar to yours before you finish and render all your work and effort worthless. This is particularly common among people who are doing their degrees in order to pursue a career in academics. If you're there, forget it; it's not going to happen.

There might well be a number of people working in the same area as you, or looking at the same problem that you're looking at. But that really is no big deal. In the first place, they are probably working on quite a different facet, with a completely different perspective. In the unlikely event that this is not the case, the details of what they are doing will be substantially different from what you are doing. At the very, very worst, there will indeed be broad similarities between the work of the unknown but dreaded researcher and your own. And then your work will supplement theirs, theirs will supplement yours, and both of you will be the better off for it. In no way will any of this stop you getting your degree, or prevent you from pursuing your career and area of investigation as you had originally planned. So this is really not one to worry about.

## DETERMINATION

The bottom line is: You're not always going to be keen to work on your dissertation. You will go through times when you are going to be thoroughly sick of it and wonder whether it was a good idea in the first place. You are going to look around at your contemporaries who are getting on with their lives while you're stuck trying to get the stupid dissertation done. Try hard to see this for what it is: It is how you feel now, in the moment. Moments pass. There will also be times when you are enthusiastic and getting a lot done. Regardless of how you feel at any given moment, the cumulative total of all the work you do is what will get the dissertation done. And when it's done, the pain and frustration tend to be forgotten, but the benefits last.

Sometimes writing a dissertation is simply a matter of refusing to give up. It takes grit, determination, and doing something even though you don't feel like it, or even necessarily believe in it right then. Don't beat yourself for feeling the way you do. Recognise where you are, realise that it's not for ever and, if necessary, take a deliberate vacation from your dissertation – and then get back to it. Remember that what you are facing is one of the most common reasons why people drop out and do not finish their dissertations. This is to a large degree what separates the successes from the failures, the graduates from those who leave empty-handed. One group had the determination to push on, the other did not. One group handed in their dissertations, the other did not. So you have a choice to make.

## IF YOU'RE CONSIDERING QUITTING...

If none of the above puts what you're going through into perspective, and you are on the borderline of dropping out; if you feel completely stuck, don't see a way out and are convinced that the only light at the end of the tunnel belongs to an oncoming train, then you need to stop and reassess.

'Stop' means just that. Call or email your supervisor, tell him that you are taking a break for a while and why. Make some time for yourself in that period, and do what you like to do. *Don't* do other things that you don't like doing. Take the time that you would have spent on your dissertation and enjoy it. You're probably borderline depressed at this stage, and that's not the best time in which to take important decisions. Nor should you allow not completing your dissertation to just happen, flowing forth from doing less and less until you do nothing. At the end of your mini-vacation from your dissertation, put some time aside for the 'reassess' part.

'Reassess' does not necessarily mean reassess whether or not you still want the degree, though this can certainly be a part of the mix if it is relevant for you. The idea is to bring the whole thing back to its basics. The chapter, *Bringing It Back To Basics* in Part Four, will help you do just that.



First you need to take realistic stock of where you are. You need to look at the work you have done, find out what still needs to be done, and look at yourself and your strengths and weaknesses. What worries you? What skills do you need to address? Do an inventory of the resources that you have at your disposal too. This should include time and the possibility of creating it (or stretching it – moving your completion deadline out), the possibility of finding the people you need to help you and anything else that might be relevant to your completing your dissertation.

It helps to talk to someone at this stage – not for them to make up your mind for you, but to bounce ideas off and to get a different perspective. When you're done, revisit your plan and assess what has been done and what has not. If you don't have a plan, make one. Then step back and take a realistic look at how long it would take to do what remains.

Only when you really know where you stand can you make a well-considered decision about quitting or completing the dissertation. You will almost certainly find that you *can* complete the work if you choose to. Then all that remains is to decide whether or not you want to. If you do decide to quit after taking your mini-vacation and going through a conscious assessment, you will know and own the reason why you decided not to complete your dissertation. You can then walk away, confident that you made the right, rational decision. There is no law mandating that you must finish your dissertation. There are plenty of happy people (and rich people) who don't have postgraduate degrees. You're doing this because you want to.

Whatever decision you come to, commit to it in the knowledge that you are doing as you want, and that you have considered the matter thoroughly.

## CONCLUSION

Sooner or later you will realise that writing a dissertation is *work*. Like all kinds of work, you won't enjoy doing all parts of it equally, but you can make the doing of it much more pleasant. It's about your attitude to it, mainly; start by being nice to yourself.

Past that, realise that, as with all complex forms of work, it's a learning process and learning can be uncomfortable. Old truths or suppositions need to be discarded and replaced with new ones. New skills need to be learned that will take effort to learn. Then they need to be practised to become comfortable. Blaming yourself for not having the right skills in the first place, or for not being able to utilise newly learned skills perfectly in the beginning, is not reasonable. Nobody is perfect the first time round, so forgive yourself if you are not either.

**A final note:** Some people, particularly those working on PhD's, go through a period of mild depression when they finish their dissertations. Partly this is a reaction to the fact that they no longer have the routine and the structure that allowed them to write the dissertation. Something stable falls away in their lives, often without something else to replace it. That can be uncomfortable. It's also partly because the day after you pass your dissertation looks pretty much like the day before. People don't treat you any differently, and then you may wonder what all that work was for. For some

people, it's the opposite. Their lives will now change, and maybe fairly dramatically, but they don't know the exact direction it will take or whether they will be up to the new challenges.

In all cases, what it amounts to is that a comfort zone – that of working on a dissertation – is gone. Don't worry about it. Be content and proud – the depression will pass, and you will still have the degree that you worked for. Not too many people can say that!