

# Crack the Dissertation Code: 7 Simple Ways to Navigate Your Dissertation with Confidence

Are you on your way to earning the dreaded ABD degree? In case you don't know what that means, it stands for All But Dissertation.

If that's your designation, congratulations *aren't* in order. But you do have a lot of company. Some 51% of humanities students, 44% of social science students and 36–45% of STEM students *fail* to finish their dissertation in 10 years (!), [even though they've done the coursework and passed the comprehensive exams.](#)

Don't let this happen to you. Here are seven easy ways to dramatically increase your odds of handing in your dissertation.

## 1. Determine your word count and find a model before doing anything else



I've worked with hundreds of PhD students over the last 20 years, and I can tell you that every university, and indeed every faculty, has different expectations of its students. Some universities call a series of shortish papers a dissertation. Others expect a single paper of roughly 40,000 words. Still others demand a dissertation of somewhere between 80,000 and 150,000 words. Make sure you know the specific word count you need to achieve before you start trying to write.

Universities tend to use the language of “pages” for dissertations, which is a bit non-specific for writers. Having a word-count goal will make tracking much easier for you. MS Word even tells you exactly how many words you've written *as you're typing*, so make sure you translate your page-count goal into a specific number of words. (If you have to count the words on one printed page manually to figure out this number, so be it.)

If your supervisor doesn't want to give you a page or word count, go to the library and find three to six successful dissertations published in your department in the previous year and use them as a guide. If those people passed, their word counts can't have been wrong.

Next, ask your supervisor to recommend a dissertation she or he thought was excellent, done in your department in the last five years. Check it out from the library and spend half a day dissecting it.

What made this such a fine, successful paper? How could you approach your own dissertation in a similar fashion? If you can't figure out answers to these two questions, ask your supervisor to help you.

## 2. Write down your argument as quickly as possible

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A dissertation is *not* a summary of a topic. It's *not* "about" a certain subject. Nor is it about what *other* people think. Nor is it a question. Instead, a dissertation is a document that makes an *original* point.

Broadly speaking, there are two main dissertation types: empirical — ones that involve collecting and analyzing data — and non-empirical — ones that are based on existing data or concepts in the work of others.

But regardless of which type of dissertation you're writing, understand that you need to do more than just present information. You need to make an *argument*. Though you may be tempted to spend months researching before you dare voice an argument, understand that this will only delay your progress. Instead, develop a *working* argument (that you can change later, if necessary) as quickly as possible. This may make you feel uncomfortable because you'll fear you're wrong, but keep reminding yourself that you can always redraft later.

Having an argument is the same as having a goal. It will help keep you focused and effective. It will help you get more done in less time.

## 3. Support your research with software

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It's all too easy to fall down the research rabbit hole. Some people do this because they're genuinely interested in their topic and they love researching. Others do it because they dread writing so much, they'd rather research. In either case, it's a mistake. Like Goldilocks, you don't want porridge that's too hot or too cold. You want research that's just right.

And please don't save your research in binders you have to haul around campus or in MS Word or Google docs. You need specialized software to help keep your research organized. I recommend one of the following three: [Mendeley](#) (free), [Zotero](#) (free) or [EndNote](#) (about \$150 for students). Each of these pieces of software will allow you to save research and tag each research note with a label — meaning you *create* your own index as you go. And, best of all, they will prepare your citations for you in whatever format your university requires. In fact, that's the reason I like them so much — they combine *research management* with *citation management*.

Yes, there will be a learning curve with the software, but it will be quick, and your university library may well offer training in it. Bottom line: research software will ultimately save you dozens, maybe *hundreds* of hours.

## 4. Keep a research diary

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Did you keep a diary when you were 13 years old? Well, having [a diary for your dissertation](#) is even more important. Note that the diary should *not* contain your research per se. (The research itself should go into Mendeley, Zotero or EndNote.) The diary should be reserved for your opinions and feelings *about* your research.

While you are researching, you will likely be tempted to do nothing more than collect facts and citations. But academic writing is essentially a series of conversations. And if you want your contribution to those conversations to be both useful and compelling, you need to offer *more* than facts; you need to share your *opinions*. Questions, hunches, thoughts and plans for future actions all belong in your free-flowing diary.

Furthermore, a research diary will allow you to *maintain* your writing habit even while you are busy researching. It's always dangerous to allow your writing habit to fall by the wayside. Imagine you're an athlete who suddenly stops training. Or a musician who suddenly stops practicing. When you return to the task – whether it's athletic, musical or related to writing – you'll have to make up for all the practice you've lost, which will be time-consuming. Don't allow this to happen to you. Make a diary entry *even if you do nothing else* that day. It will help you maintain your motivation and stay connected with your project.

Clients often ask me how or where to keep such a diary. The answer to this question depends on your own tastes and habits. I always prefer using electronic records, mainly because my handwriting is so appalling. But if you have a Moleskine notebook that you especially love, or if you just prefer the printed page, then go for it. Keep your diary in the place that works best for you.

## 5. Schedule your project, setting modest goals

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Odds are high that your dissertation needs to be longer than 40,000 words. In short, it's not something that you're going to be able to write in a single day. Or a week. Or even a month.

Most people take several *years* to write their dissertation, and the people who finish have one thing in common: they know they need to work on it *a little bit at a time*. Don't give yourself humungous (and unrealistic) goals like writing for four hours a day. Instead, start small. Even as little as 15 minutes a day is a good place to begin. Why? You won't wear yourself out.

Here's what happens when you write for too long: You become *exhausted*. Let's imagine that you hunker down and write for four hours today. As a result of your efforts, you're able to accumulate 2,500 words. Boo-yah! But can you repeat that the next day? Not likely! Instead, you're going to want to give yourself the day off for having worked so hard. "I have 2,500 words," you'll say to yourself. "I can afford to take a break today."

But the day after that, you're likely to feel the same way. And before you know it, a whole week has gone by and you haven't written a single extra word.

It's worth remembering that writing 500 words a day will also give you 2,500 words in exactly five days. This is a far, far better way to get those words, because you will have created the *habit* of writing and you won't have exhausted yourself. Slow and steady always wins the race.

## 6. Leave yourself plenty of time for editing – later

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I've worked with many academics who are *tormented* by the need for excellence. "This is the most important paper of my life," they tell me. "Everyone is going to judge me for it, and my supervisor wants it to be innovative, ground-breaking and...*perfect*." They tie themselves in knots with their need for accuracy and excellence, not understanding that they're essentially creating writer's block for themselves and making the act of writing miserable.

And this problem is so unnecessary! The work of producing an excellent and accurate draft is *not* a writing job. It's an editing one. Stop asking the impossible of yourself. Professional writers know their first drafts are no good. That's why they call them their *crappy first drafts*.

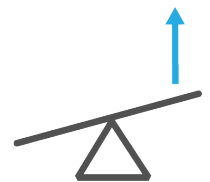
And don't edit while you're writing. Editing is a job you should do later, only after you have your first draft in hand.

In my many years as a writer, I've found that editing takes roughly twice as long as writing, so be sure to schedule enough time for this important job down the road. Whenever the thought crosses your mind that your writing isn't very good, say to yourself: "No one – not even my supervisor – is going to be able to read my draft until I *choose* to give it to them."

And don't forget that no matter how bad your first draft may be, you'll be able to edit it into excellence later.

## 7. Find an accountability lever

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Many academic writers delay and procrastinate. The job facing them is so enormous, a missed day feels like an infinitesimal drop in a very big bucket. "What does it matter?" they figure. "I'll catch up tomorrow." The trouble is, the project feels even *more* daunting the next day.

This approach – putting off what you can do today until the day *after* tomorrow – could doom you to the dreaded ABD degree.

Instead, embrace the idea of working *just a little bit* every day until your dissertation is due. But to succeed, you're going to need some help. Make a pact with a colleague that both of you are going to work on your dissertations every day for a minimum of X minutes (you get to choose X – but make it small).

And if that doesn't work, then raise the stakes a little by getting professional help. I offer an affordable program called [Get It Done](#) that, over the last eight years, has used daily accountability to help hundreds of PhD students finish their dissertations on time.

Do whatever it takes to hold yourself accountable – well ahead of the week before the dissertation is due.

## Your Next Steps

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“How do you eat an elephant?” asks an old joke. The answer? “One bite at a time.” Writing a dissertation offers much the same challenge as eating that enormous elephant with its very tough hide. A dissertation is a gigantic project, and it feels daunting.

But resolve to start early and work on it just a tiny bit every day. If your goals are clear, if you set up a framework to help support your research and if you have daily accountability, you will be able to succeed.

To get more ideas, tips and strategies for writing faster, better, visit [www.publicationcoach.com](http://www.publicationcoach.com)

Happy writing!

*Daphne*

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