

The Dissertation Journey

Fourth Edition

The Dissertation Journey

A Practical and Comprehensive Guide to Planning, Writing, and Defending Your Dissertation

Fourth Edition

Laura Hyatt | Carol Roberts



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New to This Edition

We appreciate the opportunity to write a fourth edition of *The Dissertation Journey: A Practical and Comprehensive Guide to Planning, Writing, and Defending Your Dissertation*. The fourth edition includes new information as well as updates of previous topics that we hope will help you successfully navigate the dissertation process.

The fourth edition has been reviewed and revised to offer the reader current information. The revisions provided an opportunity to restructure, amalgamate, and redistribute the material throughout the book. This resulted in greater efficacy and clarity.

The resources sections incorporated at the end of the chapters are also updated and revised. The resources include websites that are useful throughout the course of completing the dissertation. Additionally, there is a new section in Chapter 15 titled “Mountain Echos” that offers the reader an opportunity to hear from recent doctoral candidates who have been successful in the journey.

Preface

The Dissertation Journey offers both scholarly and practical guidance about planning, writing, and defending a dissertation. Doctoral students will (1) understand it as a research study as well as a psychological and human relations venture; (2) get a clear picture of what it takes to write a high-quality research study and see it as doable; (3) feel encouraged and supported in their efforts; (4) experience the process as a satisfying, rewarding, and exciting journey; and (5) finish!

It is important to note that while this book contains elements of theory, research, and methods, it is not intended to replace a theoretical research methodology book. We wrote this book to satisfy the existing need for a clear and concise guidebook focused on significant processes for completing a doctoral dissertation. *The Dissertation Journey* provides guidance on how to plan, write, and defend a dissertation. Its structure parallels the dissertation progression and presents detailed information about the content and process from conceptualizing a topic to publishing the results. It addresses the emotional barriers students confront and provides up-to-date online resources for the various stages of dissertating. The style is personal and conversational—much like a coach talking one-on-one with a student. To enhance learning and clarify concepts, we included a myriad of examples together with helpful hints, resources, checklists, and quotations. Since writing a dissertation can be a bewildering and overwhelming experience for students, we use the metaphor of climbing a mountain for inspiration and for motivation to persevere in spite of obstacles.

The techniques, insights, and knowledge we gained from years of experience teaching and guiding dissertation students serve as a valuable road map for the dissertation journey and, hopefully, make the task more understandable, more manageable, and less time-consuming. This is not intended to be a complete work on writing dissertations, nor could it be; the scope would be overwhelming. The book does not

include detailed information on certain aspects of academic research, such as design and methodology, data analysis techniques, or writing style and mechanics.

This book is geared toward the specific needs and concerns of doctoral students as they proceed through each step of the dissertation process. It focuses primarily on the social sciences; however, graduate students in most academic disciplines desiring to complete a research study will find the book's content useful and applicable. Generally, the steps for writing a dissertation or thesis are much the same, regardless of the topic or discipline; they vary primarily in scope and complexity. Graduate faculty involved with student research will also find the book's ideas and suggestions beneficial. Universities vary considerably in their dissertation requirements and procedures. In addition, there is considerable diversity among the preferences of advisors and departments within a university. Students should consult their dissertation advisor, as they are responsible for guiding this process. The suggestions offered in this book, therefore, should not be considered final nor should they preempt the judgment and opinions of dissertation advisors, chairs, and committees.

Researching and writing a dissertation or thesis should be a rewarding experience—one students can comprehend and (most of all) complete. It is our hope that this book, with its straight talk, step-by-step guidance, and practical advice will make the journey to “doctor” smoother and, in the process, help students reach their goals and successfully complete their dissertation.

Note to Doctoral Students

Congratulations for taking the steps to embark on a new and exciting journey—obtaining a doctoral degree. This journey generally requires completing a dissertation, the pinnacle of academic achievement. In many ways, the journey is similar to climbing a high mountain; it is a long and arduous trek—not for the fainthearted. It offers incomparable opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Reaching the summit of a mountain symbolizes the process you go through to complete your dissertation. The climb tests your mettle and challenges your resolve, but once you complete it and experience the magnificent view from the top, you realize the rewards far outweigh the effort. The exhilaration and pride of accomplishment, the fulfillment that results from contribution, a deeper self-awareness, and greater confidence in yourself as a scholar are only a few of the rewards that await you.

It may be that you see your own dissertation as a looming mountain—massive and awesome—with the accompanying feelings of doubt and apprehension. However, you will learn that journeying to the peak is more than an intellectual pilgrimage; it is also an emotional one. It requires commitment, perseverance, stamina, and mental toughness—more than you ever thought you had.

Completing a dissertation changes your life. You will discover that your primary reward was not so much the exhilaration of standing on top of the mountain at the journey's end but rather who you became as a result of the climb. Only by taking yourself to the limit can you know what you're made of. Sir Edmund Hillary, one of the first men to reach the summit of Mount Everest, said "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves."

We wrote this book to help make your journey to the summit a satisfying and rewarding one. In these pages, we speak to you informally as an advisor and colleague about the entire dissertation process. Plus, we speak about those critical issues related to the personal and social side of dissertating (organization, time management, human relations, etc.).

The material presented in this book represents years spent guiding dissertation students and researching the literature on this topic. Please remember that the ideas and recommendations provided should be used only as a guide. Your advisor and committee are the ultimate sources of information and instruction about your dissertation.



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It is our hope that you catch summit fever and become motivated to reach the top. Do bring a spirit of adventure to this journey and, by all means, enjoy the climb! We wish you happy writing with the warmest regards!

Acknowledgments

We didn't climb this high mountain alone. Experience, expertise, support, and encouragement were all needed. We are grateful to those who provided these necessities, which helped make this book a reality.

We want to thank those doctoral students we have had the privilege of working with—and particularly those who invited us to chair their dissertations. They continue to help us understand the unique challenges associated with doctoral students conducting high-quality dissertation research.

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We appreciate the new doctors and doctoral candidates who offered their wisdom in the new “Mountain Echos” section.

Laura is grateful to her family and friends, especially Dave and Molly, who encouraged her writing, challenged her to try new things, and provided unconditional love. She also appreciates all the teachers, mentors, and colleagues along the way who sparked her curiosity and fueled her imagination. Laura is thankful for the opportunity to collaborate on

this book with Carol. Our similar writing styles and work ethic, combined with our friendship and respect for one another, contributed to the successful completion of this project.

Carol deeply appreciates the ongoing love of her husband, Edward, whose patience and support inspired confidence to leave “base camp” for the many physical and academic climbs that resulted in an adventurous and fulfilled life. Carol is also grateful to her coauthor, Laura, a friend and colleague whose research expertise provided invaluable insights into the content and process of completing a high-quality dissertation for this book.

About the Authors

Laura Hyatt is a professor and chair at Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology—Education Division. She is also the executive director of academic affairs for the Graduate School of Education Division where she encourages scholarly research. She is an associate of a global think tank, participated as an advisor to the office of the assistant secretary for planning and evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, DC, and was appointed to a White House policy conference by the president of the United States. Prior to teaching, she was vice president of education for a production company and part of a collaborative effort that won several awards in the entertainment industry. She earned her doctorate degree from Pepperdine University. Dr. Hyatt has authored books, book chapters, and journal articles and serves on editorial boards for peer-reviewed journals. Dr. Hyatt has received recognition and grants for her research which focuses on the intersections of learning, neuroscience, change, and the powerful climates created by our convergent stories as individuals, organizations, and communities.

Carol Roberts is a professor emerita from the University of La Verne where she taught leadership in the doctoral program. She advised doctoral students, chaired dissertations, and taught a variety of leadership courses primarily in personal leadership, communication, conflict, and coaching. She has served as a consultant and seminar leader specializing in organizational and team development, strategic planning, conflict resolution, coaching, and personal mastery. Dr. Roberts has been a consultant and trainer for the administrator trainer center and effective schools program, the California School Leadership Academy, and the California School Boards Association. She received her doctoral degree in planning, policy, and administration from the University of Southern California. Carol has also served on the executive board for the Southern Counties Women in Educational Management and was awarded its Woman of the Year award.

PART I

Preparing for the Journey



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The journey of a thousand miles begins and ends with
one step.

—Lao Tse

Personal Considerations

1

Throughout the ages, people pursued the upper limits of their capabilities. They answered the call to adventure, learning, and high achievement. Completing the dissertation journey is an adventure in learning and personal growth, the outcome of which can result in extraordinary accomplishment and contribution. Unquestionably, obtaining a doctorate degree (e.g., EdD, PhD, DBA, etc.) is the summit of academia—the highest degree any university can bestow. This journey to “doctor” is difficult with obstacles and demands along the way; however, once completed, the pride and exultation are a lifelong affirmation.

A doctorate usually requires completion of a dissertation that demonstrates your ability to plan, conduct, write, and defend an original research study. In many ways, the dissertation process is a journey not unlike climbing a difficult mountain. The journey is arduous and long, usually three to five years from beginning to end, and it is easy to become frustrated, exhausted, and discouraged. It is grueling—definitely not for anyone who lacks commitment or perseverance. Those who successfully scale the peak are those willing to put in long hours and hard work.

Writing a dissertation is a personal transformative experience and can be a peak experience—one of those life-fulfilling moments. Maslow (1968) referred to them as “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment” (p. 73) and added, “A peak experience is felt as a self-validating, self-justifying moment which carries its own intrinsic value with it” (p. 79). He claimed that the worth of the experience makes the pain worthwhile. Schuller (1980) also talked about peak experiences in

People do not decide to become extraordinary. They decide to accomplish extraordinary things.

—Edmund Hillary

his book, *The Peak to Peek Principle*. He called a peak experience “an experience of success, achievement, and accomplishment which feeds your self-esteem, which then expands your self-confidence” (p. 99) and added, “It’s an experience that leaves you with an awareness that you are more than you ever thought you were” (p. 113).

These positive, uplifting, and inspiring words speak to the high accomplishment of completing a doctoral dissertation. Many high points and joys happen along the dissertation journey—some simple, some exhilarating. Moments such as realizing you really do have a researchable topic, having your proposal accepted, obtaining an acceptable questionnaire return rate, and creative moments and intellectual insights are all triumphs along the path. The instant your advisor calls you “doctor,” the ecstasy of walking to “Pomp and Circumstance” at graduation, and when your doctoral hood is placed over your head are self-fulfilling, unforgettable moments that make the hard work and sacrifice worthwhile.

Research has revealed that the attitude you have at the beginning of a task determines the outcome of that task more than any other single factor. For example, if you believe you will be able to succeed at a particular undertaking and you approach the endeavor with a sense of excitement and joyful expectation, your chances of achieving success are much higher than if you face the task with dread and apprehension.

—Abascal et al. (2001, p. 39)

Unfortunately, there is a mythology that supports a negative view that completing a dissertation is demeaning and full of drudgery, consisting only of a series of hoops to jump through and hurdles to overcome. Students who adopt this mindset spend much of their time whining and “awfulizing” their experiences. They bemoan their plight and feel tormented throughout the entire process. It is a truism that completing a dissertation is hard work, time-consuming, frustrating, and, at times, frightening—this is a given. It takes a good deal of self-discipline and courage to undertake a project of this magnitude.

What makes the difference between a peak experience and a heartbreak hill experience? Attitude. Attitude is everything! On the mountain and in life, our attitude makes or breaks us. If you think you can do it, then you can.

Approaching the dissertation journey with a spirit of adventure, optimism, and a can-do attitude helps ensure that you will succeed and achieve a peak experience in the process. Climbing a mountain peak is a powerful metaphor; it represents the path to growth and transformation. The obstacles encountered along the way embody the challenges that help expand your thinking and your boundaries. The risks are substantial, the sacrifices great. However, the view is magnificent from the top, and it is reserved for those courageous adventurers who dare to challenge their own limits. Ultimately, though, it's the journey itself that results in self-validative delight, not merely standing at the top. Once you are there, you will not be the same person or ever again look at the world in the same light.

With hard work and perseverance, we will see you at the top.

Do You Have What It Takes to Journey to the Peak?

Remember the travelers on the yellow brick road? They wanted to get to the Emerald City, yet each had to be transformed in order to get there. They needed three things to find their way: brains, heart, and courage. You will need the merging of these same three things to successfully complete your dissertation journey. Cognitive ability is necessary but not sufficient. Certainly, you must put all your intellectual powers to work in conducting your study and analyzing its results. Such powers do make for easier climbing. However, it's your heart—the spirit and passion you bring—that sustains you for the long haul. The third critical need is courage—the ability to dig deep into yourself and persevere when the going gets tough and you want to quit. You will find that when you think you cannot go another step, there is an untapped and astonishing reservoir of sustenance that can pull you through—mind over matter.

Forward thinking the following can help you better understand what it takes to climb the dissertation mountain—that final challenge to obtaining your doctorate. Just remember that you can, and probably will, accomplish more under sometimes-adverse conditions than you may believe.

Considerations for the Challenges Ahead

There is no true success in any large-scale endeavor without sacrifice. Self-discipline is the name of the game. Are you willing to give up momentary pleasures for your long-term goal? To burn some midnight

The primary reward is not the goal but what you become as a result of doing all that was necessary to reach the goal.

—David McNalley

oil? Completing the dissertation is a demanding task and takes time, money, and energy which can affect all aspects of your life. It can cause strained relationships with your spouse, partner, children, friends, and work colleagues. It can affect your work assignment, causing conflicts between time spent doing your dissertation and time spent doing your job. Be realistic about the financial costs connected with conducting a research study, such as typing, copying, library expenses, consultants, travel, postage, telephone calls, computer costs, and so on.

The path is fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Can you face them without becoming discouraged? Are you prepared for the stress that accompanies emotional setbacks and extra demands on your time? The dissertation process is often obscure and perplexing, requiring a high level of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. It means often working outside your comfort zone. Are you willing to risk the unknown and to be teachable? If not, you can wander around aimlessly in the foothills of confusion and frustration. Are you willing to learn as you go?

It is important to recognize the downsides, the consequences, and the risks of taking the dissertation journey. If you believe that you have what it takes, you can climb the mountain, stand on the top, and feel the joy of high achievement.

That which we
obtain too easily,
we esteem too
lightly.

—Thomas Paine

Avoiding the Dissertation Hazards Along the Path

Climbing real or metaphoric mountains can be hazardous to your health. It can sap your energy and weaken your resolve to endure to the top. Just as mountaineers must be mindful of potential avalanches, crevasses, high winds, falling rocks, and storms, researchers, too, must be aware of the dissertation hazards along their path. These hazards can hinder your progress in completing your dissertation.

Dissertating is not only an intellectual endeavor but also a psychological one to which most graduates will attest. It is truly a personal pilgrimage—one that tests your stamina, self-confidence, and emotional resilience. The only way you will ever become a doctor is to willingly struggle against the obstacles that get in your way and to do so without quitting. Be forewarned. You will want to quit, but *quitting* and *wanting to quit* are very different things. The inner resources you bring to the task keep you on the path. These inner resources are discussed later in this chapter.

Being aware of the hazards of dissertating helps you select suitable routes and make adjustments to overcome the risks. Make no mistake, dissertating is high-altitude climbing! Four hazards of this high-altitude climbing that you should be aware of are procrastination, emotional barriers, writer's block, and lack of concentration. The next sections describe these hazards and provide some strategies for dealing with them.

Procrastination

To *procrastinate* means to intentionally and habitually put off doing something that should be done. It is a habit that steals away some of life's greatest opportunities, yet it is a habit most of us possess. Many books deal with overcoming procrastination, yet we seem to either put off reading them or fail to heed their advice. This habit, quite common among dissertation students, can result in an ABD (all-but-dissertation) status rather than an EdD, DBA, or PhD. This amounts to aborting the climb to the peak and settling for heartbreak hill. We are acutely aware of the whole complex of dazzling excuses proffered by dissertation writers. With some doctoral students, we've found that dissertation avoidance is often elevated to an elegant art form. Certainly, there are occasionally excellent reasons for putting off working on your dissertation. Emergencies, interruptions from others, and acts of God happen to all of us from time to time. However, the students we worry about are those who keep themselves from starting or continuing because they fear the unknown, lack the self-confidence to move ahead on their own, or engage in irrational thinking, such as "awfulizing." They convince themselves the task is awful, horrible, and unbearable. But putting it off only postpones the inevitable. It is critical that you learn to recognize those signs that indicate you are putting off working.

There are two physical laws that apply equally well to people and objects with regard to the habit of procrastination. They are Newton's law of inertia and Parkinson's law.

The Law of Inertia

The law of inertia states the following: A body in motion tends to stay in motion; a body at rest tends to stay at rest. In other words, it takes greater force to get a body moving than it does to keep it moving, and when it gets moving, it takes less force to keep it moving than to stop it. Physical inertia is regulated by outside forces, but the real changes in our life's attitudes and habits come from within. As William James said,

Putting off an
easy thing makes
it hard, and
putting off a hard
one makes it
impossible.

—George H.
Lorimer

“The greatest discovery of my generation is that a person can alter his life by altering his attitude of mind.” Those who succeed do so because when they head toward a specific destination, they keep going until they reach it. It’s hard to stop them.

People who procrastinate find many excuses for not moving up the mountain. Certainly, some excuses are quite legitimate—a family or health crisis and so on. But you cannot be productive if you allow yourself to procrastinate for long periods of time. To overcome inertia, you must get started and build momentum. Decide to do it now. Once you realize that inertia is a normal part of our human experience, it is easier to deal with.

A habit develops when you take action so many times that it becomes automatic. How does one break the procrastination habit? We found that the best way is to develop the reverse habit—refuse to procrastinate. If you refuse to procrastinate often enough, then that also becomes a habitual response.

Parkinson’s Law

Dreams are what
get you started.
Discipline is what
keeps you going.

—Jim Ryun

Parkinson’s law is a ready-made excuse. It states, “Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.” This law applies especially to dissertation writers. Many doctoral students have families and hold full-time jobs. It is so easy for other work (job and family obligations) to fill all the available time, leaving no time to write the dissertation. Competing demands for your time are always problematic, and let’s face it, immediate gratification and family fun are more seductive than confronting your dissertation mountain.

So how do you overcome Parkinson’s law? Invoke the Premack principle. The Premack principle, often called *grandma’s rule*, states that a high-frequency activity can be used to reinforce low-frequency behavior. Access to the preferred activity is contingent on completing the low-frequency behavior. Grandma knew this simply as, “Before you can watch TV, you have to help with the dishes.” This is a simple behavioral principle behind the “work first, play second” maxim. What is it you most like to do? Surf the internet? Watch TV? Shop? Complete a dissertation task, then do something you really enjoy; for example, “Before I can watch TV, I have to revise my questionnaire” or “If I complete Chapter 1, I can see a movie on the weekend.” Disciplining yourself in this way keeps you on task and keeps your momentum in high gear. You will complete your dissertation in record time.

Here are some strategies to help reverse the habit of procrastination.

1. Challenge Your Excuses

Through the years, we've witnessed a variety of creative excuses offered by doctoral students to themselves and to their advisor. If you don't challenge the excuses you use, you may remain in stationary inertia, unable to make the forward progress you desire. One common excuse is "I haven't read enough to write yet." Argue with yourself that writing helps clarify your thinking, and, besides, first drafts don't have to be perfect. First drafts are first drafts; they are always improved by reviewing and rewriting. If one of your excuses is that you need deadlines to work effectively, argue with yourself that waiting until the deadline to get started results in undue stress and leaves you tired, uncreative, and irritable. It can also affect the quality of your writing. Conducting inner debates about any "logical" excuse keeps you from stalling. Following is a practice exercise developed by Hibbs (2004) to better understand and manage your excuses. He suggests that you write out every excuse you make for not working on your dissertation, then write a rebuttal for each excuse. He gives the following examples:

Excuse: "I don't have the time."

Rebuttal: "Maybe I only have a few minutes right now. Nevertheless, I can at least get started and get a few things finished."

Excuse: "I just don't feel like doing it now."

Rebuttal: "Maybe I don't feel like doing it. Nevertheless, I'll feel great once I get started and get something accomplished."

Excuse: "I'm too tired. I don't have the energy."

Rebuttal: "If someone gave me a million dollars to do this, I'd jump in with great enthusiasm. Energy is simply a matter of attitude. If I change my attitude, I'll have all the energy I need."

Excuse: "It's too hard."

Rebuttal: "Yes, it takes considerable effort. Nevertheless, if I keep at it, I can accomplish my goals."

The best way to achieve what you want is to have the courage to deny yourself any excuses! (p. 53)

Source: Hibbs (2004).

The best way to
break a habit is
to drop it.

—Leo Aikman

Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task.

—William James

2. Develop a *Do It Now!* Habit

This self-motivator was recommended by Stone (1962) in *The Success System That Never Fails*. He claimed it sparks you to action. Here's what you do: Repeat "Do it now!" to yourself 50 times or more in the morning and evening and whenever it occurs to you throughout the day. This imprints it indelibly in your subconscious. Every time you must do something you don't feel like doing and the self-starter *Do it now!* flashes in your mind, immediately *act* (p. 93).

The *Do it now!* habit also helps when you're in the dissertation gloom-and-doom state. Consider adopting Waitley's (1987) personal motto, "Stop stewing and start doing." He said, "I can't be depressed and active at the same time" (p. 147).

Another technique to acquire this self-starting habit is to post a sign that says *Do it now!* around your house and desk. It helps jog your memory.

3. Divide and Conquer

Mountains are overwhelming and, in their entirety, intimidating. They can't be conquered all at once. In technical climbs, we move up the mountain in a series of pitches—one handhold and toehold at a time until we stand, spent but elated, on the top. Looking at the entire dissertation can also be overwhelming. Think of your dissertation as a mountain with stairs—a set of small steps leading to the top. It is important to break your dissertation down into small, achievable goals and take it step by step.

One strategy is to make a contract with yourself that states specific goals, establishes completion dates, and offers rewards for attaining your goals. It is important that you write these completion dates on your appointment calendar. There's a wonderful feeling of exhilaration that goes along with accomplishment. It gives you a new burst of energy to keep moving.

4. Remove the Reward

Procrastination should not be a pleasant experience. If you procrastinate by socializing or getting a cup of coffee, stop it! Procrastinate in unpleasant conditions. For example, lock yourself in your office—no visitors, no coffee. When the enjoyment goes away, so will your procrastination.

5. Discipline Yourself

If you really don't want to write, promise yourself you'll write for 15 minutes. Set a timer, and when it rings, decide if you will work for

15 more minutes or quit. Often, the hardest part is starting. This strategy helps you build that momentum to overcome inertia.

Emotional Barriers

Students often describe their experience of writing the dissertation as a roller-coaster ride, with definite ups and downs associated with each phase of the process. They refer to the down times as the *dissertation doldrums* where they feel discouraged, depressed, frustrated, and anxious. They even doubt their ability to complete the project. These feelings are predictable for anyone trying to achieve a high goal; however, these negative emotions can easily overpower you. If you don't address them, they will immobilize you, sap your energy, and keep you from achieving your goal. When things go well, you are elated and you soar on cloud nine. These feelings of exhilaration provide the momentum to "keep on keeping on." The ups and downs of dissertating—the pains and the joys—are experienced by all writers. It's part of the dissertation process and to be expected. The following are some strategies to help you deal with the dissertation doldrums.

1. Reflect on Your Reasons for Obtaining Your Doctorate

Sometimes you question your own sanity for undertaking this massive project. You wonder why you continue to torture yourself in this way. When you have these feelings, take time to reflect on the reasons you decided to enroll in a doctoral program. More than likely, they are still valid and should serve to reinforce your commitment and motivation to stay on track. Take time to reflect on these reasons, write them down, and visualize your life after graduation and a title after your name.

2. Establish a Support Committee

When the going gets rough, you may reach an impasse in your progress. That's when you assemble a support committee of friends, mentors, and family members—those who believe in you and have your best interests at heart. You might ask your mother to chair this committee. These are your cheerleaders and confidants when you're down; they share your joys and bad days and provide regular pep talks to overcome your discouragement. They also let you know when you are indulging yourself in complaining and offer you encouragement rather than pampering.

Writer's Block

All dissertation writers experience writer's block at some point during the process. It's that longing to be anywhere but in front of the

computer. When this happens, everything else in your life takes priority over writing. Taking the dog for a walk, cleaning your closets, running errands, washing clothes, and emailing friends appear crucial. Writer's block can be caused by any number of factors: lack of confidence, fear, time constraints, no outline, personal issues, frustration with your topic, perfectionism, weariness. It is important to identify the obstacles that stifle your writing. In other words, take time to fall back and regroup. Unfortunately, there is no magic formula to keep you in the writing groove, but here are some strategies that might help you keep the words flowing.

1. Change the Mode of Putting Down Words

If you're stuck on the computer, try a dictation machine or writing by hand or change where you write—go outside, to a friendly coffee shop, or to the library.

2. Get Some Physical Exercise

Get outside and walk or mow the lawn. Physical activity of the pleasant and slightly mindless kind can precipitate creative thinking.

3. Make Two Lists

This exercise helps you get a handle on the root of your block. Whenever you are trying to write your dissertation but find yourself blank-minded and wordless, write two lists labeled as follows:

1. I ought to write *X* because . . .
2. I refuse to write *X* because . . .

The second list will be more informative than the first in that it brings to your conscious mind the refusals that may be lying at the subconscious level. You can then take steps to overcome your refusals.

4. Cluster Your Ideas

This is the old psychology game where one person says a word and the second person responds immediately with the very next word that comes to mind. First, write your subject on paper and circle it. Then, write down the very next thing you think of and circle that. Draw a line connecting these two circles. Next, write down what you thought of as you wrote the second word and draw a line connecting it to the previous word. Follow this process until you have exhausted your brain!

Write down everything that comes to your mind no matter how far out. After you complete the entire process, you will be amazed at the words that popped out.

A similar method that works for students is to cluster ideas using sticky notes. In the center of a large poster-size paper, write your subject and surround it with large circles. Then write all ideas connected with the subject on sticky notes and place them inside the circles. If desired, you can then use extra-small colored tags to add ideas to the larger notes. The beauty of this method is that you can move the sticky notes around as necessary. This mind-storming technique works well with collaborative groups. It allows individuals to build on ideas generated by others, thereby obtaining a broader perspective on the subject.

5. Write a Crummy First Draft

Perfectionists cringe at this thought. Just know that no one, however gifted, can write an acceptable first draft.

You don't have to write something *good* initially. Thinking that you do only causes self-disparagement and self-recrimination. Remember, first drafts are only *first* drafts and are for your eyes only. Let them be sketchy thoughts, rambling sentences, clumsy word patterns using poor grammar, and so on. Just get everything out of your brain and onto paper. Don't obsess and ponder ideas too long. Don't judge it, just *write it*. Getting your ideas on paper gets you moving. You now have something to work on and revise. Accept the fact that you will be writing several drafts, and take the pressure off the first one by concentrating only on your ideas. Most writers agree that it's easier to revise than to create. Writing is a complex and slow process, so don't expect it to flow effortlessly. Few writers write only when they feel inspired. If you wait for inspiration or write only when you feel like it, your chances of completion are nil.

Although all of the preceding suggestions are useful, over time, you will work out your own best ways and means for moving on.

Lack of Concentration

Completing your dissertation research in a timely, efficient manner depends on your ability to concentrate intensely without distraction. Such sustained concentration helps you maintain the focus required for the deep work of dissertation thinking, analyzing, and writing. Learning to concentrate fully is not easy and takes practice, commitment, and

To produce at your peak level, you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction.

—Newport (2016)

effort to develop. The outcomes, however, include the ability to learn more, master complicated tasks, and produce more in less time.

Two of the biggest problems that keep us from adequately concentrating—or focusing our attention—are interruptions and distractions. Tracy (2017) reminds us that “the attraction of distraction, the lure of electronic and other interruptions, leads to diffused attention, a wandering mind, a lack of focus, and, ultimately, underachievement and failure” (p. 86). While it’s not possible to eliminate interruptions and distractions completely, with effort and willpower, they can be substantially reduced.

One of the biggest challenges for dissertation writers is the temptation of the internet. While the internet offers an amazing array of resources to help make dissertation writing easier, it also poses a big problem in trying to focus attention on the task at hand; it takes a great deal of self-discipline to seek only what you need. Then there’s the constant pings and rings of your smartphone interrupting your concentration. Even if you resist the urge to respond, you still lose focus and valuable time. In researching work interruptions, Dr. Gloria Mark, professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, found that when people move from one task to another, they work faster but produce less (Mark et al., 2008). Even short interruptions delay the time required for task completion. She reported that it takes an average of 23 minutes to regain focus on a task after being distracted.

Additionally, the lure of network tools such as Twitter, Facebook, email, blogs, Instagram, and infotainment sites also disrupts our momentum, leaving little time for deep thinking and unbroken concentration. Once distracted, it’s difficult to reorient to the task.

In order to master the art of focused concentration, it will be necessary to change some of the deep-seated habits that could thwart your progress in completing your dissertation. This takes motivation and willpower. Below are some strategies that can help you develop your concentration stamina:

1. Create the Right Environment

It is important to minimize noise, as it is a big distractor and can greatly impact your ability to concentrate. Consider wearing noise-canceling headphones to blank out what might otherwise capture your attention. It’s hard to stay focused when other people interrupt you, so when it’s time for intense work, let people know you will be busy for a while and put up a “do not disturb” sign.

2. Set Aside Chunks of Time for Uninterrupted Work

Spending as little as 20 to 30 minutes of concentrated time can help you be more productive than two hours spent on a task filled with constant interruptions. One strategy to consider is to set a timer. This can help to keep you on target for a doable length of time. Work until the timer goes off, then do something else for a while. Then reset the timer and repeat. Consider using Google's timer. In the search box, type "timer 30 minutes" and hit Enter. Google sets a timer for 30 minutes and starts counting down. After 30 minutes, you will hear a beeping sound. The timer can be set for any length of time you desire.

3. Take Regular Breaks

Because our brain has a limited attention span, it is important to build in breaks during periods of intense work, as they have the power to recharge you and help you fight distractions. In the book, *Laser-Sharp Focus*, Jast (2015) shares information from researchers who recommend working in 60- to 90-minute periods. Her suggestions are to

- take a short 5- to 10-minute break every 60–90 minutes and
- take a longer 20- to 30-minute break every 2–3 hours. (p. 77)

This is an individual choice, of course; you can find your own optimum concentration/break times.

4. Avoid Multitasking

Multitasking is managing several tasks at the same time. Research findings are clear about the effect of multitasking on productivity. It has a negative effect! According to the American Psychological Association, work quality diminishes and error rate increases. In other words, when you multitask, it takes twice as long to complete a task and you make twice as many errors. Professor Earl Miller, a neuroscientist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, found similar results in his research. He discovered that multitasking affects our mental clarity and makes us less efficient. He claims that when people say they can multitask well, they are deluding themselves. In reality, multitasking is a myth; our brain can only consciously focus on one task at a time. So, when you are working on a complex task such as dissertation research, it is to your advantage to avoid multitasking.

5. Take Control of Technology

In today's world, technology seems to be the biggest distraction that takes us away from focused concentration. The simple truth about

To master the art of deep work, you must take back control of your time and attention from the many diversions that attempt to steal them.

—Newport
(2016)

technology is that it can control you rather than the opposite. If you are serious about developing the ability to focus your attention, then consider the following:

- Shut off all phones and notifications. The ring and ping of a smartphone disrupts your concentration which costs you valuable time in returning to your train of thought.
- Shut down your email program. Even though many of our emails are not particularly important, we often feel the urge to look at them immediately. You can establish specific times for checking and responding to your email.
- Limit your internet time. It's tempting to look for one more article to make your argument rather than sitting down at your computer to write about what you already researched. Because this seems to be a problem for many folks, you will find several access-blocking software options on the market.

These tools allow you to block those distracting websites that can kill your concentration. A few of these apps are included in the resources section at the end of this chapter.

Inner Resources Required for the Climb

The Backpack "Ten Essentials"

To keep any climb safe and enjoyable, preparation and good judgment are critical. Just as it's important that mountaineers recognize the awesome powers of nature for which they must be prepared, so must you understand the immenseness and complexity of the dissertation task and be prepared for it. Experienced mountaineers rely on a time-tested packing list, known as the "ten essentials," developed in the 1930s by a group of Seattle-area climbing enthusiasts. The ten essentials are what every outdoor person should carry at all times in his or her backpack to ensure survival. They include a map, compass, flashlight, extra food, extra clothing, sunglasses, first-aid kit, pocketknife, a fire starter, and water. The list is often expanded as the need arises.

These are mandatory items used in training for the Sierra Club's Basic Mountaineering Training Course certificate. When the unexpected happens on mountain trails, these items are truly essential. Climbing the dissertation mountain requires the presence of certain inner essentials to make it safely and successfully to the top. *Inner resources* are those intangible reserves that help you cope with problems and crises.

Especially in times of stress, it is the mobilization of these noteworthy attributes that helps remove or transcend the barriers you face along the path. In the words of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, “That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.”

The Dissertation Journey’s “Essentials”

The dissertation journey requires innumerable inner essentials. Some of the dissertation writer’s essentials are commitment, perseverance, stamina, positive mental attitude, courage, and the spirit of adventure. Although these six essentials are not the only ones, they are vital to your survival and ultimate success on the journey.

Commitment

Commitment is the willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve your goal. It is one thing to start something; it is quite something else to complete it. A genuine commitment is a promise you make to yourself to stick it out, regardless of the obstacles you face or how many times you are knocked down. You simply get up and press on. Becoming a doctor is only a dream until you commit the time and energy to obtain it. Imagine your name with a PhD or an EdD after it. Tom Flores, a National Football League coach, said, “A total commitment is paramount to reaching the ultimate in performance.” Making a commitment gives you that extra ounce of courage that keeps you going during the tough times. Abraham Lincoln gave this advice: “Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other thing.”

Perseverance

Perseverance is that attribute that impels you to go on resolutely, in spite of obstacles, criticism, adversity, fears, or tears, to overcome the inevitable discouragement and disappointment that accompany mountainous-type projects. It means putting in the hard work necessary to get the job done, even when you don’t want to. Having spent relentless hours of effort over a long period of time, it’s easy to lose heart and want to quit. This is when you dig deep into your inner reserves and keep going. Remember, there is a big difference between quitting and wanting to quit. The difference is between being ABD and becoming a doctor. High achievement is not reserved for those with innate talent or high IQs. It is dependent on desire and perseverance—on that extra effort. Students start their doctoral program expecting to be successful, but only those

The moment you commit and quit holding back, all sorts of unforeseen incidents, meetings, and material assistance will rise up to help you. The simple act of commitment is a powerful magnet for help.

—Napoleon Hill

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not . . . genius will not . . . education will not. . . . Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

—Calvin Coolidge

Everything can be taken from man except the last of the human freedoms, his ability to choose his own attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose his own way.

—Victor Frankl

who are willing to pay the price and do what's required finish. There's an old saying: "A big shot is only a little shot who kept shooting."

Stamina

High-altitude climbing takes a tremendous amount of energy. It involves continual exertion and makes brutal demands on your legs, lungs, and heart. Stamina is what it takes! It's not optional. Writing a dissertation requires *stamina*—the strength to sustain long hours of work and yet maintain high performance. This is especially difficult when juggling the demands of a full-time job and sustaining family obligations while completing a doctorate. However, stamina is essential to surviving the journey.

Lessons from athletes can be of great value. For example, athletes learn to focus and trigger the relaxation response through deep and steady breathing techniques. Meditation and visualization techniques are extremely valuable in managing stress. You can get a second wind by taking time to refresh and rest your brain and body. Regular exercise also rejuvenates the mind and body and reduces stress. Good nutrition and a good night's rest are also vital to maintaining stamina. Staying emotionally healthy is easier if you are in good shape physically.

Positive Mental Attitude

A significant psychological discovery in the past 20 years is that people can choose the way they think. Henry Ford put it this way, "Whether you think you can or can't, you're right." A *positive mental attitude* is at the core of any high achievement and success in life. Try to avoid negative thoughts or negative self-talk whenever possible. These include thoughts such as "I don't have time now, so it's not worth starting" or "This will be too hard." It also helps to remove words such as *can't*, *never*, or *awful* from your vocabulary. They only keep you on a downward spiral. One technique that works when you hear yourself being negative is to say, "Stop!" Stopping these negative thoughts interrupts the downward spiral.

We know many doctoral students who focus on the difficulties, the unpleasant times, and the pains associated with struggling. Thus, they create for themselves a miserable experience. The students who possess a positive mental attitude look for the good in situations, even when it's hard to find. Their optimism is like a beacon that propels them forward, thus creating a joyful experience for them.

Courage

It takes *courage* to face the fears and doubts that often accompany writing a dissertation. During the initial stages of research, we've heard doctoral students openly express some of their biggest fears and anxieties about the dissertation process.

Here are the most commonly identified fears and anxieties:

- The negative impact on work and family
- Not measuring up to the task intellectually
- Lack of the necessary research skills
- Not enough time to do everything that needs to be done
- Fear of the unknown—don't know what they don't know
- Won't find an appropriate topic or an advisor
- Being overwhelmed
- Fear of criticism and committee rejections of their work
- Fear of failure
- Being emotionally vulnerable

These fears cause considerable anxiety at times which can result in self-doubt, insecurity, worry, and procrastination that keep you from doing your best work and moving forward. Sharing these fears and anxieties with others lessens their impact and helps you realize that everyone involved in the dissertation process has at least one or more of the same vulnerabilities. Facing them openly and honestly goes a long way toward bringing out the courage that sustains the most fearful.

Spirit of Adventure

Adventure is defined as (1) an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks and (2) an exciting or remarkable experience. The *spirit of adventure* means accepting a risk and standing up to your fear of the unknown—taking the path less traveled. The central motivation for adventuring is to attempt something you're not sure can be done, to go somewhere you're not sure you can go.

If you know what you want and why you want it and are willing to sacrifice and endure many obstacles to get it, then you have the true spirit of adventure. It's all about being willing to explore your own limits. Whether it's a physical adventure or a mental one, it is always replete

Courage is the mastery of fear, not the absence of fear.

—Mark Twain

Intelligence and the spirit of adventure can be combined to create new energies and out of these energies may come exciting and rewarding new prospects.

—Norman Cousins

with excitement, hazards, and triumphs along the way. Are you comfortable with ambiguity? Climbers must risk and face uncertainty. If you believe your journey to become a doctor is an adventure filled with new learnings and discoveries about yourself, others, and your field of interest, then your life will be transformed and you will contribute significantly to your world.

SUMMARY

This first chapter helped you understand the dissertation journey as a peak experience, a transformative and fulfilling life event. Completing the journey successfully requires understanding the sacrifices, stresses, and uncertainties you face along the path. It also requires knowing strategies to deal with the major hazards facing dissertation writers: procrastination, emotional barriers, writer's block, and lack of concentration.

Climbing the dissertation mountain safely and successfully requires inner essentials, such as commitment, perseverance, stamina, a positive mental attitude, courage, and a spirit of adventure. Commitment is the promise you make to yourself to complete the dissertation, regardless of the obstacles you face along the way. Perseverance means staying the course, even when you don't want to. Stamina entails the ability to sustain long hours while juggling work and family obligations and still achieving your goal. A positive mental attitude makes the difference between experiencing misery or joy along the path. Courage overcomes fear and self-doubt. A spirit of adventure means a willingness to explore your own limits and view the dissertation journey as a quest filled with new learnings and discoveries.

The next chapter familiarizes you with the mountain's terrain—the dissertation document itself. You learn about the dissertation's structure, format, and typical components; major steps in the process; and the individual's roles and responsibilities.

RESOURCES

MindTools, "Are You a Procrastinator?" by the Mind Tools Content Team

- https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_99.htm

Insight of the Day, Motivational Quotes

- <https://www.insightoftheday.com/category/motivational-quotes>

StayFocusd

- <https://www.stayfocusd.com/>

RescueTime

- <https://www.rescuetime.com/>

SelfControl

- <https://selfcontrolapp.com/>

The New York Times, “The Scientific 7-Minute Workout” by Gretchen Reynolds

- <https://archive.nytimes.com/well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/09/the-scientific-7-minute-workout/>

