

Will I Ever Graduate!?: How to Finally Finish Up Your Thesis!

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This is a follow-up to an article I wrote for *Psynopsis* two years ago titled "Where do I start!?: Getting going on your thesis" (Volume 22, p. 24).

I recently read the following quote: "Never lost sight of the fact that the dissertation should be the crowning achievement of your graduate education and will influence the direction of your career for many years to come" (Goldsmith, Komlos, & Gold, 2001). Yikes! That's enough to instil fear in the hearts of graduate students everywhere! As if the challenge of identifying a thesis topic that you like (or at least think you can tolerate thinking about every day for several years) wasn't enough, many students often become "stuck", unable to either finish data collection, or actually write up their thesis. Having recently completed and defended my dissertation, I thought I would share some tips I learned along the way that may be of help to students currently working on their theses.

1. Choose your project wisely. I elaborate more on this point in my article from 2 years ago, but the basic gist is this: try to strike a balance between a research project that is exciting and innovative, but is actually realistic. For example, for my dissertation I wanted to examine family influences in pediatric pain. However, instead of choosing to examine a clinical sample of children with chronic pain, I decided to look at these processes in families of healthy children who did not have chronic pain, but who were exposed to an experimental pain stimulus in

the lab. Now that I have a faculty position (and funding!), I am extending my dissertation research to samples of children with chronic pain!

2. Set deadlines. As you progress through graduate school, you may have fewer courses to take, and the lines between different terms and seasons seem to blur together. Time can easily get away from you if you don't plan out specific deadlines by which you would like to have different elements of your thesis completed (e.g., date collection, data entry, write-up). Use events like conferences, award application deadlines, or even simple lab meetings, as incentives to get the work done. I've been surprised how helpful forcing myself to do data analyses for an informal presentation in my research lab has been in helping me get going on actually writing up the results of a study. In addition, sit down and make a very detailed time-line. Sure, you may need to adjust it as time goes on, but it's a good way to ensure that you don't blink and realize a whole year has gone by and that you aren't where you thought you would be with your research. Plus, funding agencies are increasingly asking investigators to include time-lines in research proposals so it can be good practice.

3. Know when to bail (or at least make compromises). If you have spent 2 years trying to get a brilliant project idea off the ground, you need to give some serious thought to whether the project is truly going to be feasible. Have a frank discussion with

your supervisor, and discuss whether it might be a good idea to switch to another project idea. If you proposed to do a 6 and 12 month follow-up of your sample and only have the 6-month follow-up completed, maybe your committee would consider you writing up only the data from the first follow-up. You could save the data from the 12-month follow-up for an additional publication, one that will not hold up your dissertation writing!

4. Enter your data as you go along. Don't wait until all the data is in before setting up your data file and entering data. Entering data as the study unfolds can help you pick up on errors your participants are making. For example, are all of your participants forgetting to complete the backside of an important questionnaire?) This type of error can be remedied along the way, but is impossible to deal with once all of your data is collected.

5. Have a specific plan for data analyses. So you have all your data collected and entered, now what do you do? What you should not do is sit aimlessly in front of your computer screen, using SPSS to run all sorts of random analyses. Before you even click on the SPSS icon, sit down and re-read your proposal. Write down all of the research questions you asked, and next to them write each statistical analysis you will need to run to answer the question. Receive input from a statistical consultant, or friend who has a knack for stats, if need be. Run those analyses. Then stop! Save the exploratory analyses that are not central to the questions you wanted to answer for after your dissertation is written up. If you don't have a data analysis plan, you can find yourself drowning in a sea of analyses you have never heard of and SPSS output sheets.

6. Block off a chunk of time for writing and JUST DO IT! Some students find that writing a little piece at a time works better for them, but I find that sitting down and just getting it done has been most effective for me. Decide where you write best (Do you prefer home or office? Listening to the radio or complete silence? etc.). Set up the environment that works best for you, plunk yourself into it, and write. This doesn't mean you shouldn't take breaks (coming back with a fresh perspective after a few days is often helpful). However, if you don't set aside large periods of time for writing, and expect to fit it in between your classes and the rest of your life, it is probably not going to happen.

7. If you are a clinical psychology student, don't go on internship without your dissertation completed (or at least nearly completed). As a former clinical student, all I can say is that working on your dissertation (even if you are very near finished) while on internship is absolutely painful! I had my data analysis completed and had only the write-up to do while on internship this past year and it was incredibly difficult. No matter how organized you are, internship is an exhausting experience, and having to work on (or even worry about) your dissertation is an additional drain you do not need. Get as much done as you can before you apply for internship – you will be more competitive for internship spots (sites are increasingly requiring students to have at the very least their data collected before applying to their program). You will also be able to better enjoy your internship experience.

8. Don't underestimate how difficult it is to get your committee together at the same time in the same place. Faculty members have very busy schedules. This is particularly the case in the spring and

summer because of conferences, vacations, etc. If it looks like you might be ready to defend your dissertation during those times, be sure to try to secure a date with your committee very far in advance – and to check in with them often to ensure that the date still works.

9. Don't forget about your thesis after it's defended. Resist the urge to never think about your thesis again after you've submitted it to the library. Chop it down and submit it for publication right away! If you wait even a few weeks or months, it will be much harder to get back to it, and you will find that you have forgotten important information (e.g., "What did the SPSS variable I created called WERZX stand for anyhow?"). The weekend after I defended my dissertation, I sat down in front of my lap top, and cut down my 100+ page

dissertation to a 15 page manuscript. The only reason I did it so quickly was because of a deadline for an award I wanted to submit the manuscript for (again, deadlines help). It was actually easier than I thought – all the writing was already completed, and, interestingly enough, there was something very cathartic about highlighting and deleting pages and pages of the dissertation. I felt free!

These are just a few tips – talk to your supervisor, other more senior level graduate students – find out what worked for them. Every student is different, but developing an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses, and learning strategies to address them, will be helpful not only in completing your thesis, but also more generally in life. Good luck!