



Persistent Myths About Dissertation Writing and One Proven Way of Breaking Free of Their Spell

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INTRODUCTION

Writing a dissertation is the single most important—in fact, the culminating—activity of one’s graduate career. Yet it is routinely conducted under immense pressure, with much effort wasted, and with little chance to excel in the genre by getting a second shot at it. Because the route of trial and error is closed, the path to a “done” dissertation has grown an extended mythology around itself. Tips from books, blogs and conversations abound, and are often contradictory: “Outline, outline, outline” and “Write first, then outline the written”; “Assign yourself a daily norm and stick to it” and “Do not interrupt the flow”. Having puzzled over these writing aporia myself, I concluded that all of them present honest and reasonable advice worthy of adopting, albeit not at the same time. In what

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follows, I specifically address outlining and daily writing, and I tease out the rationale for each seemingly conflicting tip so that readers can make an informed decision selecting an approach that best fits their circumstances and their work habits.

TO OUTLINE OR NOT TO OUTLINE

Outlines are my pet peeve on the subject of writing, largely because prior to working on a dissertation, I did not take a formal writing class, nor had I contemplated writing as my regular activity. Everything that I wrote before my dissertation year came as a struggle, from an introduction to what I hoped could pass for a conclusion. I couldn't fail to notice though that my instructors and peers subscribed to relentless outlining. "Do not start writing before you are crystal clear on the roadmap that you are going to follow" was their recommendation to me. I diligently complied, but I could not quite make the utility of an outline work for me. As I sat down to write, I often discovered new angles not available at the planning stage, I moved paragraphs for effect and I deviated from the initial plan. To complicate the matter, my dissertation advisor was a great believer in outlines and required to see one of each chapter. I obliged and produced a mandatory two-pager. None of the chapters that followed matched what I had proposed since for each, I would read more, write along and fine-tune my argument. Moreover, my dissertation grew in patches. I first completed my "data chapters", which eventually became Chapters Four through Six. Next to be written was a literature review, significantly revised from the dissertation proposal. Then I wrote a conclusion and an introduction (in that order), aligning the early promises with the deliverables, and, finally, I detailed my methods, describing how the study had actually proceeded.

Because I never considered myself a good writer, I accepted that I was entering the writing process through the backdoor, so to speak: putting things on paper first to shape them up through multiple revisions. Naturally, the suggestion to outline first did not resonate with me. Yet I was not against outlining. I was—and still am—against treating an outline as a contract for what the final piece should look like. I was also—and still am—against treating writing as a uniform process with definitive steps taken in a particular order. Additionally, I felt that the insistence on a detailed outline wants a table of contents before the very content is created, and turns writing into a contractual obligation to fill up

predetermined slots. Raised in the humanities, I would surely rebel against such an approach. Writing to learn and discover, I often do not know what I think on a topic until I jot down a few ideas and organise them into a coherent whole. Outlining first wanted me to have all my points identified before my text could emerge. I disagreed profoundly, and I continued producing text first. More experienced writers would have by now recognised that I resorted to reverse outlining, a process quite legitimate and practised by many academics but still not widely embraced in the classroom. Because both approaches to outlining work, there is merit in looking at the assumptions built around them and at the advantages attributed to creating outlines by different means.

WHY WE OUTLINE

Since I write first and outline later, I am particularly attuned to enthusiastic pronouncements of the merits of the outline-first approach. While outlines discipline the writing process and minimise deviations and tangents, they serve multiple goals beyond focusing one's writing.

Two pages that I wrote for my doctoral dissertation advisor worked as excellent tools of communication demonstrating my compliance with his requests. After all, he was to sign off on the finished product, and being stubborn was an unwise strategy on my part. Moreover, he patiently worked with me as I changed my topic three times before settling for the one with which I could live long enough to graduate, and he read my drafts submitted in a most peculiar order. Putting a plausible outline as a projection of a chapter was too small of a request to decline. So I created them diligently. Beyond facilitating approval to proceed with writing, outlines have proven to make wonderful taming devices for various complexities of the writing process. As cumulative wisdom has it:

- An outline restrains wandering off on tangents and chasing exciting new ideas. When the latter happens, it helps with finding one's way back.
- An outline reduces the stress about the material to cover and presents in some order the points to elaborate, ensuring that, if that order is followed, all relevant points will be addressed (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 146).
- An outline helps to create a balanced presentation of ideas (Allen, 2019, pp. 34-35) and to evaluate the overall organisation for logic

and depth. This function can further be strengthened by listing a word count for each section, instantly sizing up the volume—and depth—of the proposed sections.

- Relatedly, an outline warns against randomly throwing in “just one more point”.
- Consequently, it helps to reorganise the material, filling in the gaps and cutting the unnecessary passages. In other words, it comes in handy when editing (Allen, 2019; Foss & Waters, 2007).
- Finally, it helps to project the reader’s reaction to the text. No matter the nuanced wording, readers crave a scannable overview of an argument, and, in this regard, some structure is always better than no structure (Booth et al., 2008; Germano, 2014). Although dissertation writers are typically concerned with one reader only—their advisor—and write for his or her eyes first, adopting the reader’s perspective comes to the foreground when revising dissertations into books for broader, more general audiences.

This roster of purposes casts doubts on the existence of a single outline that can guide an entire dissertation project. In fact, any writing project of a considerable size likely uses several of them, each tailored for a specific stage of work. When an outline stops being a useful tool and becomes self-sufficient or, worse, turns into a roadblock keeping one from putting words on paper, it is imperative to reconsider its guidance, to regroup and to do what it takes to keep writing. In other words, if perfecting an outline consumes all the time allocated to the project, day in and day out, it makes more sense to sketch in broadest strokes a few major ideas and then to start writing. Perfecting the tool in anticipation of its magical performance afterwards can develop into a sophisticated form of procrastination already widespread among graduate students in the dissertation writing stage. With the goal to complete (and defend) a dissertation, you should be watching your progress towards that goal and eliminate the barriers even if they come disguised as writing-related tasks. An outline that does not set you in a writing mode is not doing its job and has to be put aside until the first full draft is produced.

THE MANY FACES OF AN OUTLINE

To prevent an outline from becoming “a nuisance” (Booth et al., 2008, p. 187), some scholars of writing recommend deploying *topic-based* and *point-based* outlines at different stages in the process. A topic-based outline (really a rough sketch of ideas) guides the first draft, while a point-based outline presents the overall organisation and the sequence of ideas. The latter may come after a full draft is spelt out, but it is necessary nonetheless for testing an argument and subsequent editing.

Some writing scholars differentiate among outlines by *length* and *detail*. For instance, Peggy Boyle Single (2009) discussed a one-page document and a long outline. The former works well as an evaluation and communication device; the latter (with references) guides the text creation. Booth et al. (2008) also mentioned a third type of outline that complemented their topic and point-based versions and called it an *argument* outline. Ultimately, though, the number and types of outlines that a writer uses are less important than the fact that an outline itself is a work in progress and transforms as the writing advances, reflecting a writer’s current thinking on the topic. So it is appropriate not only to edit your draft but also to edit your outline, capturing your most recent envisioning of the project.

Note that no writing manual recommends postponing writing until an extended/long/point-based outline is worked out. If we posit that an extended outline alone sanctions the start of the process, we face a serious danger of investing too much time and effort in it and of eventually overdoing it. Of course, it is always possible to under-organise and to start working off a sketch that offers little assistance in producing the text, but the pervasive mantra of “outlining first” is more likely than not to lead to over-organising and to create a false belief that writing cannot start until a blueprint is completed.

So how detailed should an outline be? In the light of the aforementioned discussion, this very legitimate question has no definitive answer. I have always admired technical manuals with seven or eight levels of organisation in their tables of contents. Yet, that admiration notwithstanding, the scholarship of persuasion teaches us that long lists look impressive only when we have no time to engage with the subject matter. On a closer inspection, garlands of subheadings may come across as trappings covering up trivial distinctions or as merely padding the presentation. Fragmenting an argument into a “fruit cocktail” of minuscule points risks losing readers in the hierarchy of subheadings, and may interfere with

their perceptions of the whole and of the writer's integrity (Dunleavy, 2003, pp. 70-82).

To underscore one more time, there is no ideal outline for a given topic, and one should not attempt it. One's treatment of a topic captured by an outline is subject to change, so it is bound to be different at different times. Moreover, even a seemingly flawless outline is not a text but its anticipation. So make peace with it and keep writing.

FROM AN OUTLINE TO A TEXT

Once we come to terms with the fact that outlines are living documents, fluid and prone to transformations, it inevitably follows that the order of writing is flexible as well, and that writing can start with any section or any chapter, for that matter. Because we tend to read in a linear fashion, we imagine that writing follows a linear trajectory as well, but it does not necessarily do so, so the first thing written for a dissertation project may not be the introduction. You may start with data analysis and discuss the results before moving to other chapters. What is crucial is to be writing all the time, making a step towards the final goal of a "done" dissertation. There is, however, one person with whom it is important to come to an agreement about the order in which you will be submitting individual chapters, and that is your advisor. While some prefer reading chapters in the conventional order, there is always room for an argument as to why you would like them to see a draft of Chapter X before they could see your Introduction or a Literature Review.

What definitely could be completed any time independently of the main body of the dissertation are the accessory sections: acknowledgements; your vita; tables, figures and other graphic materials; bibliography; and such. These writing tasks are perfect for working on when you are having a bad day and feel tired or stuck.

To summarise, outlines are the tools to organise your writing; they are flexible and develop along with your project. If you write better only with a detailed roadmap in front of you, by all means, create one; however, if and when outlining stops you in the tracks, it is appropriate to put it aside for later and to start writing guided by general themes. Outlining and organisation will then resume when the first "shitty" draft—to borrow a phrase from Anne Lamott (1995)—has been spelt out. For those readers who have already started worrying about the (extra) time it takes to

produce a polished piece of writing without a detailed outline, the next section offers a few words of wisdom.

DISSERTATION MATHEMATICS

In college, students typically learn to master term papers. Many can estimate pretty accurately how long it will take them to produce a paper and can schedule work accordingly without pulling an all-nighter at the end of the semester. Many develop a good sense for 6000–7000 word-long manuscripts, a size common for submission to academic journals. Significantly less clarity exists about the parameters of dissertations as writing projects: how long they need to be, how long they take, how different a chapter is from a term paper. Uncertainty about such formalities adds to the general anxiety of graduate school. While writing and research skills that support the production of a dissertation are practised before and after it, one's performance in the genre of a dissertation is a singular occurrence. This makes every doctoral candidate a trailblazer who collects communal wisdom for the journey. In the following section, I revisit several how-tos about daily writing and scheduling, paying particular attention to the bits of quantification that are reiterated in the dissertation writing folklore. Dissertation self-help books with marketable titles such as *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (Bolker, 1998) make good sales pitches, but dissertation talk on campus usually shies away from numeric terms, even though analytics on dissertation writing exist and offer a valuable perspective on the task and the process.

Having considered the dissertation mathematics—the size of the final document, the number of hours/days/months to completion, daily quotas for writing and so forth—we stand a good chance of dispelling a dense mythology around dissertation writing and understanding whether our own projects follow central tendencies or already call for rescue operations. Shedding quantitative light on dissertation projects, I aim solely at reducing anxiety and at inserting some degree of confidence in one's capacity to finish successfully.

But there is a more practical consideration to it as well. A realistic projection of how long a dissertation might take is an important factor to consider when making decisions about housing, spousal employment, childcare, medical insurance and similar matters that need covering while you are writing and might not be able to work full-time. The numbers cited further in the chapter are offered as a guarding rail to hold onto,

keeping in mind that your individual circumstances and your own rhythms will necessarily introduce adjustments to them.

I have used my own progress through the doctoral programme as an example of where “dissertation mathematics” is handy. I graduated in 11 long semesters (not counting summers), having completed the coursework in four semesters and passing comprehensive exams in the fifth semester. My departmental financial support lasted eight semesters and for the last three semesters in the doctoral program I went unfunded. My work as a resident assistant in a dorm ten hours a week secured my housing, but did not bring additional money. I worked there to live for free. My personal savings covered all other expenses: food, books, occasional doctor’s appointments, mailing job applications (in those days, one had to mail packages) and so forth. Between my last pay cheque from graduate school and my first pay cheque on a new job, there were 28 months of no income. Had I had a better idea about the time and money that I would need to finish writing, my overall planning would have been radically different. Unfortunately, my department (like many) did not quantify dissertation writing, probably out of fear of instilling deterministic thinking, and I discovered the “dissertation mathematics” too late to be able to make realistic plans. I am offering a compilation of it here, hoping that it will help others to make more informed decisions and to emerge out of graduate school with fewer losses.

QUANTIFYING A LARGER PICTURE

The only book on dissertation writing in my field of communication studies, *Destination Dissertation* by Foss and Waters (2007), came out when I was in the midst of it. Still, it clarified a lot for me in terms of workload, time commitment, steps in the process and so forth. It also quoted 1440 hours as the time to completion—that is, from conceptualisation and prospectus writing to defence. To me, this estimate was not generous enough and imagined accomplished writers with an established writing routine making steady progress. I did not fit that image a single bit.

Other sources that I consulted estimated from 11 to 22 months for a dissertation project, with 15 months being the average. In my graduate cohort, a chapter was written in four to six weeks; the work on literature reviews took about 10 hours per book and close to three hours per article; and dissertations were five to seven chapters long. Fifth-year defences were not rare, but leaving ABD to start an academic position had all but

disappeared. Still, it was a better record than that of the neighbouring Department of English which quoted seven years as becoming a typical time to completion for doctoral dissertations. Granted, many factors contribute to one's progress through the programme, and many reflect the "culture" of the place—that is, the way that things are done in your department and the university. Your case might turn exceptional, but it will unfold in the already-existing environment with its established practices, protocols, some cemented norms and (occasionally) rigid attitudes, so it pays to be aware of the hoops, hurdles and support resources that others have encountered. They will factor in your progress as well.

Another numeric that I found useful was the length of dissertation manuscripts. On average, dissertations stand at about 240 pages long. The smallest text that I came across was 110 pages long—a mere master's thesis in my field. The largest exceeded 600 pages. Unlike European universities where master's and PhD theses have a word count attached to them, American universities do not have either word count or page number requirements. The decision about whether a dissertation is "there" rests with the dissertation committee. To be on the safe side, I would recommend that dissertation writers check what has been defended *under their advisor*. Looking at other people's dissertations is instructive in itself and will inevitably enrich one's rhetorical repertoire. However, it is your advisor who is going to give you the green light on the project, so learn what he or she has approved previously and pay attention to the organisation, the methodology, the treatment of the results, the direction taken by the conclusions and the size of individual chapters and of the text overall of the dissertations that he or she directed. Those are likely to reveal the patterns and features that they recognise as formative of the genre and as signals that a dissertation is "there". My advisor had passed dissertations organised in seven chapters: an introduction, a literature review, four "data" chapters, and a conclusion. Variations were welcome only in the categorization criteria for the data chapters (geographical regions, or styles, or time periods, or persons, etc.).

Planning your dissertation journey, it is also important to figure out whether your advisor will be willing to accept your schedule (and therefore to be sympathetic to your outside commitments), or whether she could guide your project only at her own pace. On my first day in the graduate programme, I learned that my advisor "does dissertations" in five years, and that that had been the case for the past 40 years. He could not be rushed. He would not speed up because, in his view, dissertations do

not gestate in a shorter period of time. And he would not approve of a half-baked product. I made it in five and a half years, producing a dissertation seven chapters long.

Relatedly, it helps to know your dissertation advisor's turnaround time for feedback on your work. Most faculty maintain a two-week cycle. Some work in longer instalments. Find out what they are comfortable with and construct your schedule accordingly, being mindful of crunch times such as grading periods, conference submission deadlines, days away at national conventions and work on any major grants that could crowd your advisor's calendar. Under no circumstances, though, should you consider the time that you are waiting for feedback as an opportunity to take a break. Instead, shift your attention to the next chapter, or do other dissertation-related work such as writing an acknowledgement. You will be able to look at your work with a new eye once it is returned, and you will already have made inroads into the next section.

THE DAILY NORM

Discussing outlines, I mentioned that a word count attached to subsections helps planning daily writing. This, of course, assumes that you know your writing pace—that is, how many words/pages of relatively clean prose you can produce in a day without exhausting yourself. By trial and error, I discovered that my ultimate length for a writing session is 90 minutes, so I would schedule two-hour blocks in the early morning (usually before 7 am) to accommodate settling down with my coffee, bathroom breaks and an occasional cup refill. I edited later in the day, spending on it three times longer than composing *per se*, and sometimes completing as few as four pages a day, literally chiselling at the text.

Estimating how much (approximately) you will need to write, it is possible to figure out your “daily norm”—that is, the volume that you will be producing every day during your writing sessions. Daily norms are expressed in several ways: some use the word count and do not get off the chair until exactly that many words have been typed up; others go with pages and hold themselves accountable to produce, say, two pages a day. Still others, like myself, are guided by their energy and the span of their attention, and list their “daily norm” in minutes or hours. Establishing the daily norm creates a benchmark that allows you to celebrate small accomplishments and to feel good about the progress that you make. But the volume of our daily output is apparently person- and project-specific.

Some severe cases of procrastination have reported setting the daily norm as low as 250 words, which is slightly more than half a page. If you notice that you look for an excuse to be doing other things when you should be writing (such as cleaning your bathroom or organising your desk/closet or searching for the exact time of your dog's next appointment at the vet's), setting the daily norm low will help you to tame your procrastination monster. And to ensure your success, remember to turn off the electronics, disconnect from the internet (strongly recommended), and do not leave your desk/chair until your daily norm is completed.

CHASING THE FLOW

A point of much confusion around the daily norm is whether or not you should stop after you have achieved it if you could write more. All things being equal, stopping after 500 words (or two pages or 45 minutes) have been completed creates an equivalent of a tiny pat on your back but does little more. Notably, frequent tips on the best ways to get back into the writing mode the next day (e.g., leaving a reminder to yourself about what you wanted to cover next; stopping at an intriguing point of your narrative) imply that stopping is a forced interruption—hence the provisions for re-inserting yourself into the flow. Recommendations for establishing a writing routine (scheduling writing sessions at the same time and in the same place, and minimising outside disruptions) aim at the very same effect: to get you in the best of your productive mood as soon as possible. So why not capture it while it lasts, disregarding (and exceeding) the daily norm?

Several considerations, not necessarily in agreement with one another, buttress the daily norm. First, keeping it creates a barrier to binge-writing—that is, writing in long stretches of time, completing, say, an article in two or three days. There are various reasons why some academics resort to binge-writing; none of those I heard of was happy. Productive writers work regularly and do not rely on binge-writing so, for a dissertation writer, keeping it at bay equals picking up good habits that can sustain a future academic career. Second, interruptions take a toll on the writing process, so it seems only natural to continue working once you are “in the zone” and everything seems to be falling in its place. However, that could be a straight path to exhaustion with a long recovery path. Establishing a daily writing routine disciplines your writing and shortens the time needed to engage fully with your topic after the break. Finally, the daily norm

manages not only your text but also your energy and motivation, thereby ensuring that you can continue the dissertation marathon the next day.

Making all these arrangements, what we actually chase here is the flow. Many accomplished writers testify that waiting for inspiration to descend on you and trigger your writing is a misguided strategy; instead, it is your job as a writer to show up at your desk regularly, and to make sure that you are inspired once the clock has started. Conversely, if you are a writer for whom it is hard to get back “in the zone”, it makes total sense not to force yourself to stop after the daily norm is achieved as long as inspiration carries you. Keep working and play by the ear.

Scheduling writing sessions, it is important to remember that in addition to frequent interruptions other enemies that affect the flow drastically are unclear tasks, a mismatch between the challenge and skills, overthinking and trying too hard. But to identify your particular stumbling block, you should first eliminate interruptions. For these reasons, writers who do not have the privilege of working in quiet spaces schedule their writing sessions in the early hours when a chance of receiving a telephone call, an urgent email or a visitor is minimal. Some university libraries provide carrels for graduate students in their final semesters, so it is definitely worth investigating where and when you can write regularly and interruption-free.

“NO FLOW” DAYS

Somehow, I emerged out of graduate school not knowing about writer’s block. It was my students who introduced me to the concept. I am not sure that I have experienced it in a severe form myself, but I most certainly had bad days. I was probably saved from developing writer’s block by my own admission that I am not “PhD material”, which protected me from the pressure of high expectations for top performance. I was also lucky to discover Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* (1995) pretty early, and I was grateful for the stories that she shared, particularly her dad’s advice to her little brother on writing a school report on birds. “Take them bird by bird” became my strategy for dealing with large projects as well: completing a small portion every day, religiously, without skipping a day, making no excuses and not fantasising about the consequences of my completing it or failing to do so. Later, I discovered that very approach recommended for dealing with writer’s block. On particularly bad days, I opened a jar of a special blend of coffee and I brought to the desk my extra special snack

(dried mango strips in lime and chilli pepper) to help me to stay at it. I also took several showers to energise myself. All these trappings cumulatively got me over the finish line, but I would emphasise small, manageable tasks as essential for moving forward. On any given day, I worked on a specific paragraph from Chapter X or Y, cleaned my bibliography, beautified my figures and tables, and I did not allow myself to worry about any other part of the dissertation.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to bring the science of writing to bear on dissolving some calcified beliefs about how dissertations are written, and my concluding paragraph reiterates the opening line: tips, suggestions, recommendations and related dissertation writing folklore stem from someone's real experience. They are shared because they have worked, either for one or for many. So, picking one tip over the next, consider what work habits it supports and why, and which one it attempts to keep at bay, factor in your specific circumstances and go with the recommendations that ensure that all your insights are captured, and that new writing appears regularly.

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