

A Guide to Completing Your Dissertation

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When I was asked to write about strategies towards finishing a dissertation, my first thought was that it had taken me nearly eight years to finish mine and that I'm not quite sure what I could possibly say to encourage someone who recently completed that Hell we call "comps" to embark on the final journey towards attaining a Ph.D. I took off six months after comps and simply taught. I needed a break from reading, reading, reading and wanted to clear my mind before I began serious research and writing. Of course, I knew of others who had jumped right in when comps were over and finished their dissertations in no time flat. What I can say is this: Speaking from fairly recent experience, a done dissertation is the best dissertation! What I offer here is culled from my own experience and the experience of my peers, so feel free to take from it what you deem helpful and ignore what you don't.

- Start your research early! While not taking formal classes, spend summers researching in archives and libraries and reading secondary sources pertaining to your topic. It will make all the time you spend in classes, reading, writing papers, studying for comps, etc., seem more meaningful and keep you goal-oriented.
- Learn to be organized! Make sure that you file everything you find in a way that YOU will be able to remember, and BACK EVERYTHING UP!
- Apply for all the money you can! Coming from someone who wrote on the Louisiana Civil Rights Movement, yet got her PhD in New Hampshire, any financial help is imperative to making all of those necessary research trips. There is a lot of money out there to be had. And don't be afraid to take advantage of departmental funds – many history departments often have money left over at the end of the year; ask around if there is money available to help with research expenses.
- Go to conferences, make contacts, and talk to anyone and everyone about your topic. The best ideas are shared ideas, so take advantage of the knowledge of others. That said, do not be afraid to contact other historians in your field, even if they are "eminent," to ask questions about their work and research. Most of the time they are happy to be asked about their work; think about how you feel when someone asks you about your own work. Present on your work at conferences as much as you can; the feedback will help you solidify your ideas.
- Keep your goals achievable! Don't think that you are going to write a chapter a day. And don't be discouraged if your progress is not going as you planned. Everyone gets writer's block now and then. Take a walk, go away from the subject at hand for a day or even a week, and come back to it with a fresh mind later.
- Your committee is essential to a successful and well-written dissertation. Choose them wisely and keep them informed on your progress. You can

be assured that they will not be calling you and asking you when they can read your next chapter. They have lives!

- Finally, as I tell my students, the key to good writing is rewriting. Do not be discouraged if a chapter comes back to you from your advisor with red ink all over it (which happened to me often). Your readers are there to help you succeed and, ultimately, translate that dissertation into a book. Take advantage of their comments and keep on moving along.

Included below is a list of books and articles that may help you on your way to completing your dissertation. Good luck!

Joel Sternberg, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Thesis in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Thesis* (New York: H. Holt, 1998)

Robert Peters, *Getting What you Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D.* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997).

Thomas Benton, "So You Want to Go to Grad School," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 3, 2003).

Thomas Benton, "The 5 'Virtues' of Successful Graduate Students," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 2, 2003).

Also, check out <http://crookedtimber.org/2005/11/18/strategies-for-successful-dissertation-completion/> – a Web site dedicated to dissertation completion.

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