



Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis

By Joan Bolker

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Expert writing advice from the editor of the Boston Globe best-seller, The Writer's Home Companion

Dissertation writers need strong, practical advice, as well as someone to assure them that their struggles aren't unique. Joan Bolker, midwife to more than one hundred dissertations and co-founder of the Harvard Writing Center, offers invaluable suggestions for the graduate-student writer. Using positive reinforcement, she begins by reminding thesis writers that being able to devote themselves to a project that truly interests them can be a pleasurable adventure. She encourages them to pay close attention to their writing method in order to discover their individual work strategies that promote productivity; to stop feeling fearful that they may disappoint their advisors or family members; and to tailor their theses to their own writing style and personality needs. Using field-tested strategies she assists the student through the entire thesis-writing process, offering advice on choosing a topic and an advisor, on disciplining one's self to work at least fifteen minutes each day; setting short-term deadlines, on revising and defing the thesis, and on life and publication after the dissertation. Bolker makes writing the dissertation an enjoyable challenge.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"Fifteen minutes!" you say. "That's too good to be true!" Okay, author Joan Bolker admits she gave her book the title *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* to get the reader's attention. And she admits that it's unlikely you'll actually finish a dissertation at that speed. As she tells her clients, however, a mere 15 minutes is much better than no writing at all when they're stuck. As a clinical psychologist who cofounded the Harvard Writing Center, Bolker has helped hundreds of writers complete their dissertations. She offers suggestions on how to create a writing addiction so that you feel incomplete if you don't write every day and stresses the need to set reasonable goals and deadlines for yourself to keep from getting discouraged. She also offers strategies for dealing with both internal and external distractions and for fending off writer's block. Even more important is the advice on some of the more awkward issues related to dissertation writing, such as how to choose your adviser carefully. (For example, when faced with the tradeoff between a famous advisor who is inaccessible and a less famous advisor who is willing to make time for you, Bolker advises, "If choosing a politically advantageous, famous advisor makes it unlikely that you'll complete your degree, it's clearly not worth it.") The book even includes a helpful appendix for advisers that could become the basis for an honest discussion of what student and adviser can expect from each other. Throughout this excellent book, Bolker acts as a therapist, cheerleader, and drill sergeant, all rolled into one.

While some of the book's advice is of interest only to dissertation writers, much of the information--on battling writer's block, for instance--is valuable to anybody engaged in writing. Rather than being filled with rules defining how to become a great writer, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* is about finding the process by which you can be the most productive--it's a set of exercises that you can use to find out more about you and the way you write. Along the way, you'll do a bit of writing. And that's what matters, especially when you experience writer's block--as Bolker says, "Write anything, because writing is writing." With its helpful advice and supportive tone, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* should be required reading for anyone considering writing a dissertation. --C.B. Delaney

About the Author

Editor of the best-selling *The Writers Home Companion*, **Joan Bolker, Ed.D.**, has taught writing at Harvard, Wellesley, Brandeis, and Bard colleges. She is currently a psychotherapist whose speciality is working with struggling writers. She lives in Newton, Massachusetts.

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Beginning

IF YOU ENJOY RESEARCH and writing, some of the greatest gifts life can offer you are time, space, and a good rationalization for devoting yourself to a project that truly interests you. But there are many other stances from which to approach writing a doctoral dissertation. Most of the students I meet in my work don't often think of their dissertation projects with joyful anticipation. Instead, they're overwhelmed by the size of the task, or they don't consider themselves scholars, or they are scared that they're not up to it, or they don't even know how to begin. But even if you're not a true scholar yet (whatever that is) or are feeling frightened, you can still write a good dissertation, using a process that minimizes pain and increases your chances of

feeling engaged and satisfied with your work. And the first step is to imagine your dissertation.

The best way to begin a dissertation is not by positioning yourself in a library and writing “Chapter 1” on the top of a blank piece of paper. The best way to begin is by approaching your dissertation in your imagination, preparing to write in and about this thesis at every stage, and to become the researcher of your own work process. Imagining your dissertation allows you to develop passion, curiosity, and questions about your topic, as well as to think of yourself as someone who can make a commitment to scholarship. You may be given a topic. You may be so terrified you can’t imagine “passion” or “pleasure” as words with any relevance to your undertaking. You may be writing a thesis for strictly instrumental reasons. Nevertheless, it’s still worth imagining—choosing and playing with different topics and different types of theses, giving yourself some leeway to explore before you commit to a particular topic in a specific format. You can take time at this point to speculate about how it will feel to have done this work, to own a doctorate. Or you can think about the process by which you hope to research and write, and where you’ll try to do your writing. You can imagine how much company you’d like or will need—friends, coworkers, the active presence of your committee—during this project, and whom you’ll ask to be your advisor and your committee members. You may even want to consider seriously how you would feel, what might happen, if you were to choose not to write a dissertation.

People write dissertations for many different reasons. For some of you the goal is to meet a professional necessity, to accomplish an instrumental task: you want to spend your professional life teaching at a college or university, and you know that a doctorate is a prerequisite. Others want to learn the process of producing a major scholarly work, to begin a life of serious research and writing. Still others, before they go on to the next phase of life, want to finish a process they began some time back when they entered graduate school. And then there are the lucky ones who have a burning question that they want to spend time answering. One of the ways to begin, no matter which of these agendas is yours, is by learning to write your way in.

Writing Your Way In

Writing is at the center of producing a dissertation. This book will teach you how not to talk away your ideas or lose them in mental gymnastics. You will learn to write in order to think, to encourage thought, to tease thought out of chaos or out of fright. You will write constantly, and continuously, at every stage, to name your topic and to find your way into it. You will learn to write past certainty, past prejudice, through contradiction, and into complexity. You will come to write out of your own self, and, eventually, even though you may be afraid of what your reader will say, you will learn to write in a way that will allow you to be heard. If you’re to do all of this, you need to write every day, even if it’s only for fifteen minutes a day.

If you commit yourself to writing at every stage, the process will look something like this: Early on, even before you’ve chosen a topic, you might make daily, dated journal entries, all of them in a thesis book (which might be separate pages on a pad that then go into a folder, or a bound notebook, or a computer file) about your thoughts, worries, interest in various topics. For example,

12/16/95: Today I’m thinking about how intrigued I’ve always been by the question of the use of model systems in studying biological development. I’ve always been aware that there are real disadvantages that come along with the advantages of this method—I wonder if I could do something with this for my dissertation. . . .

When you first choose a topic, you’ll spell out your preliminary hunches, ideas, questions:

1/15/96: What difference might it make if we were to use not rats, but elephants, as the model? What are the qualities of model system animals that have made us choose them so readily for much of our developmental research?

As you start to accumulate data you’ll not only take notes, but also begin to work with the data—talk back to it in writing, ask it questions, let the material suggest questions to you, and then you’ll try to summarize your current understanding of it:

2/18/96: Organisms that share the desirable characteristic of having rapid embryonic development may share embryonic adaptations and constraints related to this trait—what difference does this make?

As you go through, you’ll take some trial runs at writing some bits of the dissertation:

4/2/96: The model systems approach, clearly an extraordinarily powerful way to analyze animal development, is based on certain assumptions. One is that we can extrapolate what we learn from a few model species to many other organisms. . . .

You'll keep track of the flashes of insight you have that are spurred by your reading, as well as any serious misgivings you have:

2/3/96: What am I really trying to say here, and does it make sense?

At first you'll write in short stretches, and a bit farther on you may produce up to five pages a day (I'll teach you how to do this in chapter 3).

Developing Your Own Work Process

Each of you reading this book is unique, and no single prescription is going to be useful for all of you. I want to help you figure out how to devise the strategies that best suit who you are and how you work. The only rules there are in the dissertation-writing process are the useful ones you make up for yourself. You own this dissertation, and you are the one responsible for getting it from conception to birth; you can get there by whatever process works for you.

You begin by learning to pay attention to yourself as a writer, by writing at every possible stage of your work process. You'll note each day how your work has gone: how it felt, what you did and didn't accomplish; you'll ask yourself, in an internal dialogue that you record, what you think might have gotten in your way, what nagging question you've been trying to ignore, what you need to work on next, how you might have to change your work space, whether you like or hate your topic on this particular day. You will take your own work habits as seriously as you take the material you're working on, and you will scrutinize them frequently to see if they need revamping. If you get stuck (you discover you don't like composing on the computer, but you don't know what to do instead; or you are having trouble making time to work; or your writing is coming very, very slowly—too slowly to make your deadline), you'll seek consultation, first with yourself, in writing:

1/14/96 What is going on with my work? I'm having a terrible time clearing out my schedule. I'm doing favors for all my friends, and if I don't stop giving myself these excuses for not working, I'm never going to finish my dissertation! How can I make sure that I write before I talk on the phone, before I meet Harry for tea, before I comb the dogs?

After that, you'll consult with your advisor, or with a friend who has lived through the process successfully, or perhaps with a counselor whom your university provides for such times. But first you'll confront the stuck place you're in by writing about it, researching it, asking yourself when it began (was it after you had a disappointing meeting with your advisor, or after you drank too much, or after you heard about that article that you're terrified will scoop your idea but haven't gotten up the courage to read yet?). You'll try varying your routine to see if another time, another place, another mode of writing works better. You'll think about whether it's time to make yourself a detailed outline or to play with another chapter for a while and give this one some time to rest. You may decide to consider the worrisome thought that you're barking up the wrong tree with a particular idea. All of these issues are food not only for thought, but for writing. And writing about them, as well as about whatever static you are experiencing in your head, will serve to resolve most of the issues that are bothering you. Writing will also be an essential tool in choosing the topic of your dissertation.

Choosing a Topic

What do you want from a thesis topic? Writing a dissertation is very much like being in a long-term relationship: there are likely to be some very good times and some perfectly dreadful ones, and it's a big help if you like what you've chosen. This particular relationship asks you to give up a lot of the other pieces of your life, to work like a dog, and to postpone gratification. There are people out there who seem to be able to make such sacrifices for a subject they're not particularly thrilled by, people for whom dissertation writing is the means to an end, to getting a degree. I admire your grit, if you're among them. If you choose y...

Users Review

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Leticia Hodges:

The ability that you get from Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis may be the more deep you excavating the information that hide inside the words the more you get serious about reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to be aware of but Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis giving you enjoyment feeling of reading. The article writer conveys their point in specific way that can be understood by simply anyone who read the idea because the author of this guide is well-known enough. This specific book also makes your current vocabulary increase well. That makes it easy to understand then can go with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We advise you for having this particular Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis instantly.

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