

The Master Plan

A Guide to Completing your Dissertation



Disclaimer

This guide was written for students completing an Ed.D. dissertation at Teachers College, Columbia University. If you've happened to stumble across this guide and do not come from this institution, you are well advised to check with guidelines in your own school (provided that they have them). Even if you are from Teachers College, you are advised to check with your advisors and program to make sure that the steps are the same.

So you've decided to take the plunge and go for a doctorate degree. Congratulations. That's a gutsy move and it takes a lot of effort making that decision. Hopefully this guide will be of some use to you in the many many years to come (oh yeah, it'll be years). But it's not all bad news. Without sounding like a cliché, this is a worthy step towards adding value to society. This isn't easy work and it takes real commitment on your part to not just start the program, but see it to its completion.

One thing few people would tell you is that you're not getting your dissertation on your own. By that, I mean that your entire family is part of this journey. That would include your significant others, your parents, your siblings, your friends, your children, your pets, that creepy neighbor, that stranger across the street.

And so on. All these people are part of your entourage. While some might disagree with me, getting a dissertation does require some sacrifice. It'll be hours you'd rather be spending with your family, or in the sun, or on holiday in Tuscany, or wherever your dream vacation happens to be. If you aren't able to make these sacrifices, you should seriously reconsider.

The next few pages are the master plan, which is intended to guide you through each of the steps you need to take in order to finish your dissertation. It also covers what you should be thinking at each step as well as how you can plan ahead. A lot of the work has to do with knowing what steps are coming up and what you need to do. If you pay attention and keep up with the schedule, you can save yourself a lot of unnecessary frustration.

Stage	Should Be Doing	Should Be Thinking About
Completing course work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to know professors – their strengths, biases, working preferences • Explore different points of view • <u>Take classes on research methodologies</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What professors do you feel comfortable working with? • What professor's area of interest matches with yours?
Departmental certification exam (aka your comprehensive exams)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form study group • Share syllabi from previous classes • Work on mock questions • Get exam notes from previous students • Ask previous exam-takers about their experiences • Get a lot of rest the week of the exam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What theoretical approaches interest you? • Which of them make the most sense to you? • Which of them fit with your worldview?
Specialization certification exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form an exam question that is closely related to your topic of study • Find a second reader whom you can work in the long-term with • Make sure both your readers have a good working relationship • Attend academic conferences to see what they look like. Present if possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific areas with your discipline interest you the most? • What questions do you have about your area of interest? • What are the historical developments and debates related to your area of interest?
Proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form a study group (if you haven't already done so). Form two if necessary • Take the IRB workshop (get this out of the way earlier, if possible) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are your research questions framed correctly? • What methodologies do you like? What are you comfortable and competent with?

Stage	Should Be Doing	Should Be Thinking About
Proposal (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find out what grants are available to you • Think about what you need to complete your research, including finances, time constraints, equipment, etc. • Conduct a pilot study if possible • Submit proposals to conferences for presentation (you should start doing this starting now until the end of your academic career!) <p><i>Note on grants and conferences:</i> Because they have to be submitted many months ahead of time, and because they have their own deadline and schedules, it is often difficult to plan ahead to know what stage you're at in your dissertation with regards to grant and conferences. Remember that if you miss the deadline for a year, you have to wait till the next year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your methodology answer your research questions? • How does your research contribute to the field? • Are there concerns regarding the IRB? • What are the IRB guidelines? • Do you need IRB for an institution other than Teachers College (e.g. Board of Education)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow the IRB guidelines exactly as they are stated. This will save you grief later on • Communicate your needs and concerns to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the IRB reshape your study? • Is it still the same study?
Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow the procedures you outlined in your methodology. Note that it's okay if you decide to do less than you said you would 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are your research questions framed correctly? • Am I finding new things?

Stage	Should Be Doing	Should Be Thinking About
Data Collection (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize and label EVERYTHING in a way that would make sense to you. It's nearly impossible to revisit old data months later without some context. • Save and backup as much as you can. • If you're using any equipment, check to make sure that you got what you need. You might decide you need to move the camera/recorder to a new location, or change equipment. You want to know the integrity of your data now instead of finding out afterwards that your data was faulty. • Start looking at your data as you are collecting it. • Check with your advisor on any changes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I fit these new things into my study or are they part of another study? • Am I following the procedures I outlined in my methodology? • Am I being objective? • What is my role as the researcher in the data collection?
Analysis and Write-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Word can automatically format things for you (e.g. Table of Contents, etc.) You should know how to do that. • You should follow ODS dissertation guidelines as you write them up. It will save you time later on (see below). • After your data collection, the hardest part of your dissertation is over (yes, really!) Writing up is mostly just discipline. Find a method that works for you and set goals for yourself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I sticking to my proposal? • Am I presenting my data in a comprehensible and coherent manner? • What is the best way to organize my findings and analysis? • If you are going for an academic career, you should keep an eye out for job postings now, just so you know the type of stuff they're asking for.

Stage	Should Be Doing	Should Be Thinking About
Analysis and Write-up (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Go back to your research questions and make sure you are answering them. It is tempting to get carried away with new data and be tempted to do a completely different dissertation. Unused data can be used for other things, such as future publications, conferences, etc. 	
Defense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work closely with your committee (especially your first and second reader), get their opinions and follow their advice. They are there to back you up during your defense. Distill your dissertation into key points that you can use to guide your defense. Anticipate questions and try to answer them. There might be some curve ball questions but don't be fazed. Make sure you get all the paperwork and scheduling out of the way. It's hard to get four professors in the same room at the same time, especially at the end of the semester. If you know one or more of your professors will be on sabbatical for some time, try to plan around it. Some professors might be willing to do a defense over a phone conference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you answered your research questions? What are some educational implications of your research? (This is a school of education, after all.) How would each of the professors on your committee respond to your dissertation?

Stage	Should Be Doing	Should Be Thinking About
<p>Office of Doctoral Studies (ODS)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sure to get the updated ODS dissertation style guide (they have an older one that's written in the 19th century or something). • ODS wants you to be consistent with your references. They will fuss over the details (spacing, capitalization, punctuation, etc.) If this is not your strongest suit, consider visiting the Writing Center, or have a trusted friend read your dissertation. • After you pass your defense and do your edits, you have to submit four copies of your dissertation to ODS. It has to be printed on special paper, which you can get it at the Duplicating Center. DO NOT print all four copies at once. Instead, print one copy on regular paper and have them look at it. They will most likely ask you to change a few things. Wait for their final edits before printing out the four copies that you will deposit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have the ODS style guide? • Are you following exactly what the style guide says (in terms of headings, pagination, order of your dissertation sections, etc.)

F.A.Q.

OMG! OMG! OMG! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO READ! I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN!

Sometimes you'll come across many ideas that all sound cool and interesting but you can't use them all. You'll have to eliminate them, even if it means you've spent a whole semester on it. You shouldn't think that you've wasted your time, just that you learned something on the side. If you try to fit two concepts that don't really fit, then you'll really be wasting your time.

I KNOW WHAT I'M INTERESTED IN, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT ABOUT IT I'M REALLY INTERESTED IN!

People like you annoy me. If you really have this problem, then maybe you just haven't read enough. Read more, and read across disciplines/theoretical approaches so that you can get a diverse understanding of your interest. When you get the broader conversation, then you can ask yourself what's missing in that conversation that you want to contribute to, or what part of the conversation do you disagree with.

I DON'T KNOW WHICH PROFESSORS TO HAVE ON MY COMMITTEE.

Find professors that you can 1) work with; 2) agree with; 3) are not overwhelmed; and 4) can work together as a happy family. Talk to them, audit or sign up for their classes, attend their talks, read their publications, buy them lunch.

These are all ways for you to get to know your professors.

I DON'T KNOW IF I HAVE THE SKILLS TO PULL OFF MY STUDY!

You should have thought of that earlier, dummy. By the time you write your proposal... nay, by the time you're done with your specialization exam, you should have taken some methodology classes. Pay attention to those! Keep in mind that most methods courses, at least the good ones, will require you

do some actual research. Take this seriously because it gives you a chance to practice. If you're lazy and use data gathered from the past, you miss a real opportunity to try it out yourself.

DO THEORIES MATTER?

Yes and no. My opinion is that theories, especially social theories such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, etc. are good when you genuinely believe the world works the way they describe. They should not become conspiracy theories, though. These days, it is hard to tell the difference.

HOW CAN I MAKE MY SPECIALIZATION EXAM MORE RELEVANT TO MY DISSERTATION?

You should communicate often with your advisor. The specialization exam question is usually broad and it meant to make you know about the relevant studies in your field of interest. This can all go into your literature



review. If you drag your feet on your specialization exam and/or proposal, your interest may begin to shift (which happened to me).

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FIT APPROACH X WITH APPROACH Y. WHAT SHOULD I DO? I'VE SPENT SO MUCH TIME READING ON THEM BOTH!

Sometimes you'll come across many ideas that all sound cool and interesting but you can't use them all. You'll have to eliminate them, even if it means you've spent a whole semester on it. You shouldn't think that you've wasted your time, just that you learned something on the side. If you try to fit two concepts that don't really fit, then you'll really be wasting your time.

I WANT TO STUDY X BECAUSE I'M PASSIONATE ABOUT IT.

Good for you! Passion is good because you need to stick with this topic for longer than you care to. Make sure that you're not so passionate that you lose "objectivity", though. Only you can tell the difference so you have to be honest with yourself. In general, I would suggest avoiding topics where you feel like you need to prove you're right about something. Chances are, you'll miraculously discover that you're right! That's not to say you can't be objective, but research has shown the power of expectations. If it's a topic you're interested in and have a question that you genuinely don't know the answer to, then go for it.

FINAL WORDS OF ADVICE

Take advantage of the presentations you have to make in your doctoral seminars or classes. They are good practice for doing presentations in public. Find out what other students are working on a similar topic and get to know them. Sometimes they are in other departments. Find out what student groups exist. Sometimes they can be good networking

opportunities. Get a second opinion on all advice you get, including this one. Make sure you have all the technical and linguistic skills you need to do your research.

Finally, I found Jay Lemke's website A Guide to the Perplexed to contain some helpful advice. Lemke is a genius who did his dissertation on Theoretical Physics entitled "Proton-Antiproton Scattering Near Threshold" before becoming a preeminent scholar in discourse, linguistics, and media studies. Be forewarned though, for some of his advice can sound bitter. As with all advice, take it with a grain of salt and always get a second opinion.



I hope this guide has been of some use to you. If not, perhaps it was at least mildly entertaining to read. Good luck with your studies and don't stress out too much.

Additional Tips

For some brutally honest advice from Jay Lemke, check out:

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jaylemke/guide.htm>.

If you are easily discouraged, go to <http://www.ilovebeinghappy.com>.