

Writing a Dissertation:
An Informal, Irreverent, Pragmatic Guide
to Getting It Done

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Preface

There are hundreds of books about writing a dissertation. This one's different. It's not comprehensive and doesn't cover every single detail with exhaustive research and appendices. Why should it? The world doesn't need the 501st 300-page manual on dissertation writing.

This book is personal and unique. It has real advice about sensitive subjects that the other books won't touch.

Everything you need to know about writing a dissertation is definitely not in this book. But there are lots of takeaways and essential info. We hope our anecdotes will make you shake your head and laugh, perhaps sardonically.

We don't treat the process as seriously as perhaps it should be treated. This book addresses both the lighter and darker side of doctoral studies. It can be fun, and it can be down and dirty.

So, get yourself one of those 300-page manuals. They're good to have sitting on your desk.

But this little book's got some secrets, some hidden gems, some *eureka* moments you'll find just as valuable as the 50-page chapters on documentation in the other books.

We hope you like it. We liked writing it. It was cathartic.

Now we can finally put that wonderful, awful, invigorating, exhausting, uplifting, degrading, rewarding, and costly experience of writing a dissertation behind us.

Here's hoping you can too. Just get it done—whatever it takes—and get on with your life.

Enough said.

--Doug & Marc

*Note on composition: Doug wrote most of this book while Marc served as concept director and tough-guy editor. Doug had lots more incredible stories to tell. Maybe he'll write a sequel or expanded version. Marc wanted the book lean and mean. Doug has a more expansive and fun-loving writing style. Marc had a vision for the book; Doug has lots of visions. The collaboration seems to have worked. Tell us what you think by dropping us an e-mail at info@edit911.com.

Chapter One: Taking the Plunge: Writing a Dissertation

Writing a dissertation, no matter what comes before or after, is an intellectual adventure that very few people have the good fortune to embark upon and complete.

Will it be tough? Stupid question.

Will there be moments when you want to tear your hair out and throttle your best friend? Uh-huh. But despite the pitfalls, you can have a really good time writing your dissertation. Think of it like an *extended, once-in-a-lifetime adventure*.

For a year or two (probably two), you get to roam in an area of interest. It's yours.

You own it. It's your turf. Work it and work it good!

When should you start thinking about your dissertation?

Ideally, after you pass fourth grade. Or at least when you apply to grad school.

When you arrive that first week on your Ph.D. campus, you can listen to the bells tolling on Old Main for about ten minutes. Then, after you've had your hotdog at the new-student orientation, it's time to get to work.

And I do mean work, man. A lot of it. But you're going to love it.

Chapter Two: Getting Continuity Between Your Pre- and Post-Prelim Grad School Experience

Take some steps in the years before your qualifying exams to set yourself up for a very smooth transition to dissertating once you pass your exams.

Here's a secret about graduate school: Unlike law school or med school, *academic grad school is really two programs*. The first is composed of coursework, perhaps teaching, and conference participation. The second consists of your dissertation.

So many students hit prelims and realize that what comes next is very different from what they've already experienced. It doesn't have to be like that. Use the first part of your Ph.D. program experience to prepare the groundwork for the second part.

One: Teaching

In your first year or two of graduate school, you should try to be a teaching assistant. You'll love it! People you don't know will think you're smart.

You're establishing authority and making the rules.

Welcome to the other side of the podium!

For a semester or two, you may be a teaching assistant and not have much control over course content. But after that, most research universities (where you're getting your Ph.D.) will have you teaching stand-alone classes. A lot of them.

If that is the case, ***design your courses (if possible) featuring some area of interest that could be a possible dissertation topic***, such as, in my case, a writing course asking students to consider *Brave New World*. Although it sounds weird, you can bounce ideas off of nineteen-year-olds, who will be only too willing to tell you what they really think.

If your ideas are full of it, you'll know quickly. Trust me! Nonspecialists often can tell you when the emperor wears no clothes.

Two: Coursework

While most seminars do have agendas, generally, you can ***sneak your ideas into your papers while nobody's looking***. Do it!

On the coursework front, try to make every seminar paper you write directly related to your dissertation topic.

Take classes in other fields. What's really cool about graduate school these days is a little concept called *interdisciplinarity*. All this word really means is that you take classes in fields outside of your own.

Taking classes in other fields gets you out of your own intellectual ghetto. Thinking can get quite blinkered in any one intellectual discipline or academic department. Take a vacation. If you're a historian, take a class in the history of science. Or, heck, take one in psychology or physics. (You've read C.P. Snow. The two cultures aren't as far apart as you think.)

Then, with the instructor's permission, ***write about a portion of what you think your dissertation will be about from the perspective of that discipline***. Your

mind will be blown, and you'll come back to your own field with a new head on your shoulders.

Three: Conferences

Get the heck out of Dodge. There will come a point when you will want to get away from campus and from your annoying (I mean "wonderful," of course) classmates and instructors. What do you do? *Go to a conference and present!* One of the very cool things about the academic world is that there is a group somewhere doing exactly what you want to do.

***Find them. Join them. Go to them.
They'll love you.***

Imagine thirty or forty or five hundred people who all share your intellectual interest. If they have a society, pay the membership dues, submit a proposal, hop on an airplane, share a hotel room with someone (preferably someone you like a whole lot because grad school doesn't have to be boring), and present on that topic that you taught so well or that you did a crackerjack job on in a seminar paper.

Your conference work will give you several benefits:

- **First**, you'll get *feedback from big names in the field*.
- **Second**, (if you're friendly), you'll party in the hotel lounge with big names in the field. This is key because some of these people (when snookered) may well agree to sit on your committee. And, of course, if they really like you . . . well, let's just say, lots of fun things happen at those conferences "Oh, Dr. Jones, your articles are so attractive."

- **Third**, you'll get glowing letters from the big names in your field. *This may be key to getting a job.*

Chapter Three: You're Now an Entrepreneur

OK, it's your third or fourth year.

You've taught like a god. You've written seminar papers that have made your professors weep (in a good way). You've passed prelims or comps. And you've logged more time on airplanes and in hotels than in seminar rooms. The world is starting to know you and your ideas. What do you do now?

Become an Entrepreneur

From here on out (and you've already been doing it in coursework, teaching, and conference presentations), everything is about pitching and selling ideas. Everything.

Does the thought of selling really make you queasy? Get over yourself!

***Ideas mean nothing
if no one wants to read them.***

The dissertation phase is about pitching your ideas to your advisor, your committee, and, if you get lucky, fellowship committees. So, get ready to sell!

Let me tell you: Selling your ideas is really fun. I write professionally. But do people show up at my apartment, saying, "Doug, do you want to write something world shattering for us?" Of course not. Unless I knock on their door, they don't know I exist.

So, I pitch constantly. I've published about 40 pieces in the last decade, some of them in a magazine you

probably read, and the last thirty of them in the last five years.

Do I get rejected? *Heck, yes.* All the freaking time.

But, you have to be willing to go through a lot of nos to get to yes. Dissertation writing is not for the weak of heart, but I know you have a strong soul.

Chapter Four: Writing the Proposal and Setting Goals for the Dissertation

The proposal presents one of those chicken-or-egg kinds of situations. You have to know enough to write the proposal. But you won't know enough to write the whole dissertation because you haven't done all of your research yet.

Generally, what you want to do in the dissertation proposal is to **frame a question**. You need to be very bold here.

Make arguments and assertions, the bolder the better.

Don't hesitate or exhibit false modesty. In selling as in writing arguments, if you hesitate, your prospects or your readers will eat you alive for dinner and spit you out.

So . . . **Don't EVER say things like, "In this dissertation, I will attempt to . . ."**

You are *NOT* going to attempt anything. You're going to argue.

You're going to develop ideas. You're going to shatter paradigms.

You will not TRY to do anything.

As Yoda said, "There is no try. There is only do and not do." You will do. You will succeed.

Outline what you intend to do in the dissertation itself

Obviously, you're in a weird situation here. You don't know everything. But you do know something. Or you should. It's best to err on the side of audacity. ***Make your arguments as bold as possible and as clear as possible.***

You need to know the current state of your discipline quite well so that you don't make a naïve argument, one that has been standard thought for thirty years. You also have to announce to the world what you want to do. How are you going to make a new intervention in the world of scholarship that you know well?

That's what inquiring minds are going to want to know:

What's new and or exciting about what you want to write?

Start off with a one-paragraph argument

This first paragraph should state what your argument is and probably what you're basing this argument on.

- Who are the major players in the field?
- How is what you're writing addressing gaps or problems in their work?

Each paragraph that follows (and these can be huge) can list your subarguments. Then you have to propose a conclusion to what you're writing.

Deal with the *so-what* question

The so-what question is really about presenting your *interpretive stakes*. For example, let's say that I buy

your argument and go, “Yeah, that sounds about right to me.” I nod my head. But then I say, “So, what? Your argument seems true or at least true enough. *But who cares?* What difference does the truth of your argument make?” That’s the so-what question.

Let’s make the concept a little more concrete. Let’s say I’m writing about George Orwell’s *1984*. And I absolutely convince you beyond a shadow of a reasonable doubt that Winston Smith is actually the bad guy in the novel. So what? How does this new understanding of Winston change our view of *1984*, dystopian literature, or even the nature of political resistance? So what?

A secret about the proposal: *It’s generally pure fiction.*

What you really write about in your dissertation may or may not conform to what you discuss in your proposal. But you absolutely do have to write this proposal.

You’ll submit it to your advisor and your committee members, and everyone will sign off on it and leave you alone for a very long time.

Now, you may or may not get full buy-in from your committee. Generally, though, what I’ve found is that most of your committee members really won’t care one way or another about what you write. They’re too busy writing their own stuff.

So, you can probably sneak your own writing in under their radar. Do a very good job on the proposal because it can serve as the basis for *fellowship proposals*.

Get a fellowship

Why? Because if you get one of those puppies—anywhere between about twenty thousand dollars and fifty thousand dollars—you can have a very nice year. You can go wherever you want to write the dissertation. For example, imagine writing on a Mexican beach. That is possible with a fellowship.

Fellowships are your friend. Having one means that you don't have to take time out to teach those pesky undergraduates unless you really want to. I had a fellowship at one institution and taught at another to make money during my dissertating year. (I won't tell if you won't.)

Dissertation fellowships can also set you up for being published, and they make you look like a good candidate for a job. So, do everything that you can to win yourself a dissertation fellowship.

What's next?

Okay, let's say you've written a killer proposal. Your committee says, "My god, this is the next big thing." Congratulations. And, of course, I knew you could do it. You edit the proposal slightly and win yourself a fellowship. You're in like Flynn.

What do you do next?

Ask yourself some questions:

- What do you want to accomplish with the dissertation?
- What kind of mileage do you want to get out of it?
- Will this be a first book if you choose to go in

that direction?

- Or will it be something else?
- Will it be a series of journal articles?

My dissertation became a series of articles. Be very clear about what you want from this experience in terms of a writing end product. If you're writing a book, begin with that end in mind.

But even if you go in this direction, remember: most first scholarly books in the humanities are no more than 200 pages in length. Paper, print, and binding are expensive for university presses. So, books are short. Very short. Gone are the days when a scholarly press would acquire some 500-page monster of a book.

If you're writing journal articles, then a good plan might be to turn each 40-page chapter into an article.

Whatever you end up doing in and with your dissertation, you'll do it more easily if you set goals at the very beginning of the process. As Steven Covey says, "***Begin with the end in mind.***"

Chapter Five: Picking Your Committee

Now, we need to talk about a key question. Who is going to read your dissertation?

Well, your mother, of course. But she can't be the only one because she can't award you the Ph.D. (She would if she could!). So, since Mom isn't going to be the only one looking over your stuff, you will have to pick a committee, generally four professors.

Some things to consider when picking a committee:

- Can you work with them? This is almost more important than any other consideration, including content expertise, which is all well and good. But the brightest expert in your field will be a disaster if he or she is an interpersonal fiasco.
- Do you think that the professor in question can put up with all of you? Now, this may seem like it doesn't have to be said. But it does. Does the person have a reputation for hating people who have some of your characteristics? For example, if somebody hates LGBT folks and you're gay, then you certainly don't want that person to sit on your committee. You probably don't want them anywhere near you.

Finding out about the potential members

Now, how do you find out about this stuff? You could take a class with the person, or, if you are savvy, *you could ask around*. Also, one of the best ways to find out

about people is to *take them out to lunch and just chat with*. Doing so will tell you whether you want to work with them.

Are they vicious? That's close to the concern I expressed above. You don't want to have to deal with really nasty people. God knows, the academy seems to encourage the development of personality disorders.

Now, let's stop for a second. You might have an image of committee members being like Professor Kingsfield from the *Paper Chase*. Actually, he's not a very good model for the kind of person you want to sit on your committee. And you really don't want your defense to be like a session of Kingsfield's Contracts course.

Of course, you want intellectual rigor. But you don't want somebody who is genuinely antagonistic for the sake of being so.

More things to think about when looking for committee members

- Are they fairly punctual? A dissertation is a long-term project. So, it's unreasonable to hand somebody fifty pages and expect them to be done with it in twenty minutes.
 - But it's not unreasonable to give them those pages and expect them to be done in a couple of weeks.
 - It's not unreasonable to expect e-mails returned within 24-to-48 hours.
- Are they mentally present? People can physically be around campus, but not really present mentally. You don't want this kind of person anywhere near you. Their negligence (except in one case, which I'll talk about below)

might not be so benign as you lose years during your graduate school career.

- Do you think that they can work with each other? If they can't, you could end up in a nightmare. Let me give you an example.

At the University of Minnesota, where I earned my Ph.D., I had a Nazi on my committee. Yes, really. The son of a German officer and Party member. No kidding. I also had a radical feminist on board. The Nazi had tried to deny the feminist tenure many years before. The feminist had once told me that the Nazi had “loomed” over her. They hated each other.

These kinds of antagonistic relationships may make for a good David Lodge novel. Lodge wrote *Small World*, a very funny satire of academia. But the reality is rather unpleasant. ***You don't want to accidentally step into a department's Hatfield and McCoy feud, one that started before you arrived, possibly before you were born.***

- Have any of your potential committee members *slept together*? If they have, you don't want the couple or either member of it on your team. If two people on your committee are madly in love and then become just mad, oh, lord. Couples are nice. Be in one if you want. *But don't have one on your committee.*
- *Old age.* Generally, you want people from about 40 to 60 years old. My committee was composed of decomposing geezer baby boomers. You want to avoid that at all costs. *They tend to get sick and die.*

While the death of anybody is sad, the demise of a committee member is also *a pain in the butt.*

Remember, too, that in the academic world, people work well into their seventies. That means that, one day, they can be at the word processor, and the next, they are being carried out feet first. You don't want that. *Pick young.*

Two other things to look for in a committee member are *rank* and *job security*. You don't want somebody getting denied tenure and running off with your chapters.

It's really important to make sure that the people that you choose for your committee will actually be there when you need them.

Okay, I've told you what to avoid.

Here's what you DO want:

Committee members who are

- Sharp
- Reasonable
- Fairly kind
- Tolerant
- Intellectually curious

Remember also that anybody on your committee who is a big gun will be travelling, writing, and possibly giving lectures at other institutions. Do you want to have to compete for attention with the professor's drive for fame? When you're picking names or people on their way to being names, think long and hard.

Also remember that, in the world of academic promotion and tenure, serving on somebody's dissertation committee sits right above bottle washing in terms of credit given to the professor from the

institution. So, don't expect a lot. But you do have a right to expect what I've outlined above.

What about people from outside your institution on your committee?

Here are the pros and cons of having one of the big guns in your field or subfield on your committee.

Pros:

- The person knows the topic.
- The person can help to steer you toward a publisher or journals.
- The person can steer you away from people whose work isn't very good. Why reinvent the wheel if you don't have to?

Cons:

- Often, the big guns possess very strong opinions on matters related to their field. If you happen to disagree with a pet theory, you could land yourself in some very hot water.
- If they really are famous, they may be very busy doing other things, like going on lecture tours and writing books. And because they are in a remote location to begin with, you can't run down to their office to announce your presence.
- You might be very, very low on their totem pole of priorities. Even if you do get a big gun on your committee, you might not have very much face time with him or her.

The dream, of course, is that one of these people will "discover" you.

Generally, you're not going to become anybody's protégé and be whisked off to academic utopia (even if you write about Utopia). More than likely, the big gun that you or your advisor recruited will say a few things about your dissertation, get angry with you if you happen to disagree with him or her, and then disappear, never to be seen again.

Now that you know what to look for and what to avoid, you can pick your committee wisely. If you do, you just might have some very good relationships and enjoy yourself immensely.

Chapter Six: The Art of Composing

In this chapter and the ones that follow, I'll talk about actually writing the dissertation. And we're going to focus on *higher level concerns* here than dissertation books usually do. By this point in your academic career, if you can't make a basic intellectual argument in your subfield, you're in trouble. And no amount of help from me is going to fix that problem.

The differences between what you've done before and what you're doing now are in length and quality. Seminar papers are usually no longer than thirty pages or so, and while we might hate to admit it, they're not meant to be published.

At best, seminar papers are very first drafts of something that **could** end up in a journal or a book. At worst, they're documents baldly written to get an A, to please Teacher. Dissertations, of course, are much, much longer, almost eight times the length of a paper you wrote for class, and they should be **very close to being publishable**.

Three qualities of a publishable paper

- It *contributes to the field* in some unique way.
- It's very well written.

What I'm not referring to is the number of technical errors. As someone who has worked with professional authors, I know that first drafts (and often second ones as well) of the best writing often contain errors. Errors can be fixed.

When I say *well-written*, what I mean is the following.

- The paper is sophisticated. The best writing is like a piece of music: it weaves different arguments together.
- It synthesizes as well as analyzes.
- It sign-posts arguments. It pulls through its points to a satisfying conclusion.
- And this kind of writing, either explicitly or implicitly, takes into account everything germane to the topic. Everything. This writing displays industry, not laziness.
- It's bold and nonsycophantic. Generally (although certainly not always), papers written in graduate school are sycophantic. They reference class discussions and points made by the professor. In these papers, students often hedge and qualify their arguments. Boldness runs out of the paper and hides under the covers.

By contrast, **professional papers and dissertations reveal the author's own voice and proudly proclaim his or her biases and point of view.**

This kind of writing isn't produced to please anybody. It does seek to serve, though. It serves readers by staking out new territory, reseeing old arguments in the field, and making fresh interventions.

It's written by a professional for an audience of professionals, some of whom will strongly disagree with the points made.

That's good academic writing. Quality has nothing to do with typos, one's preference for contractions (or

not), or the way in which one uses first person.

Good writing has everything to do with freshness, boldness, and, as I'll discuss a little later, voice.

Since your dissertation represents a kind of stepping out as a professional, you should approach writing the dissertation as a professional act right from the beginning.

Begin work with the end in mind

Often, faculty members tell their students to plan on spending time revising each dissertation chapter into a chapter of a book or into a journal article *after the defense*.

That's utter balderdash.

Write for publication as you're writing each chapter.

Make your work important.

Nothing will make your writing worse than thinking it's just an academic exercise. But if you think you're writing for an audience (even the relatively small readership of a journal), then you might well ***write more compellingly and more convincingly.***

Write chapters as potential journal articles

What I did and what I recommend that you do is to have a journal in mind for every chapter that you write and that you produce said chapter as a stand-alone article. Following this advice will help you do a couple of things.

- You'll be submitting each chapter to the particular journal as you're sending it to your

committee. God knows, committee members can take forever to return things. *You want to keep your writing momentum going.*

- And you might actually get an acceptance from the journal before you get feedback from your committee. If this occurs, you'll actually be sitting in the catbird seat.
- *If your committee members call for revisions that you don't think you should make, you'll have feedback from the journal to back you up.*

With all that having been said, you might ask . . .

Well, how do I get started?

Just start in, once you've done your research for a particular chapter or the whole dissertation, if you choose to work that way. Somewhere. Anywhere. ***Just start making an argument.***

About the only useful piece of writing advice I ever received from my dissertation advisor was ***you have to give yourself permission to put "shit on the page."*** That is so true. I don't know about you, but I can't compose and edit at the same time. ***I have to allow myself the freedom to make mistakes when I write.***

Often, mistakes are productive.

Just start writing and keep going. Set a goal. A thousand words in an hour. That's entirely doable.

Remember, ***this doesn't have to be keeper copy.*** And it probably won't be. But just keep plowing through until you hit your word goal. You're working from your prospectus or your outline (if you choose to have one).

What if you get stuck?

Horror of horrors.

Do you know why you can't seem to think of anything?

Because you don't know enough. That's generally the only reason why people suffer from writer's block: They don't know what they're talking about. Go do more research.

If that doesn't help, start memorizing your notes so that you can get an internal dialogue going. If you know your stuff so well that it becomes a part of your own stream of consciousness, even when you're not writing, you'll have plenty to write about.

Now, you've pumped out a chapter.

You've got, say, 10,000 words or so. What do you do now? Do you really want to know? ***Put it away for a few days or even a couple of weeks.*** Start working on the next chapter.

After you've been away from your writing for a couple of weeks, it will become "cold" to you.

It's almost impossible to revise a piece of writing well when it's still hot, when what's on the page is still in your head. Once you've walked away for a little while, your writing will cool off. *And you'll be able to look at the page in editor mode and start revising.*

Let's talk a little bit about voice

Generally, people think that "voice" is not relevant to academic writing. *Au contraire, mon frère. Voice is just as important in scholarly writing as it is in any other kind of prose.*

You need to throw out everything you think you know about scholarly voice. But doing so will be difficult.

Here's what you might think you know:

- Scholarly voice requires passivity and third person.
- Scholarly voice requires the use of lots and lots of jargon.
- Scholarly voice requires you to make grand generalizations about all sorts of things.
- Scholarly voice eschews contractions all the time.
- Ultimately, scholarly voice is boring and staid.

Everything you think you know is absolutely wrong.

Toss it, even if doing so means pissing off a few committee members. Welcome to postmodernity, my friend. I know that this book is about writing, not philosophy. The two are linked, though.

Let me give you Dr. Doug's primer on scholarly writing in the postmodern age.

Postmodernity and scholarship

In the twentieth century, U.S. scholarship tended to mirror U.S. military and political power. We were a big and very powerful country. In the middle of the century, the U.S. dominated the world. **Meta-narratives** (theories purporting to study everything) were all the rage: Freud, Marx, Capitalism, Socialism.

These were big hairy monsters. Scholarship itself tended to be big and hairy, trying to mimic the power of these dogmas.

We live in different times. Writing is different. Scholarship in many areas tends to make fewer big claims than it used to.

For example, imagine going to your advisor and saying, “I’m going to redefine all of literature in my dissertation.” After they get through laughing and perhaps recommending that you visit the campus psychologist about your delusions of grandeur, they might seriously tell you that *the best dissertations make limited interventions.*

Generally, except maybe in the bio sciences, genetics, physics, neurosciences, and space science, where the real work is just getting started, many disciplines are **old and mature.** *Nuance and examination of smaller areas and themes are the order of the day.*

If we’re no longer as scholars making huge interventions, then our language needs to change.

What does this mean?

- **In general no use of the royal “we.”** This usage was common in the 1940s and 1950s. Don’t do it today.
- **No false modesty.** In my work for Edit911, I sometimes come across dissertations and theses in which the writer goes to great pains to tell readers what he is NOT doing. Don’t do this. It’s extremely pretentious, and distracting. People make this move, I think, to differentiate themselves from other scholars. There are other, more elegant, ways of doing this.
- **No grand statements about the state of the discipline.** The only people who can get away

with these are late-career, senior scholars. They can make these statements because they really do know all of the scholarship, much of which is theirs. Unless you are writing about a very, very small subfield, you just don't know it all yet. And there's nothing wrong with not knowing.

- **No weird third-person substitutes for the author.** For example, I've seen people do the following: "This author thinks..." You can say "I." The only scholarly domain where this kind of obsessive avoidance of first person occurs is in the hardest of hard sciences. Even there, the top thinkers will use an *I* from time to time, especially if they're speculating.

On that note: **This is the age of identity politics.** *Feminism* and *ethnic studies* have changed the face of the academy and academic writing almost beyond recognition. One might convincingly argue that some of the changes since the movement politics of the 1960s have eroded the academy.

But—and this is a huge *but*—, one of the great things that has happened in the last forty years or so is that you don't have to pretend any longer that when you write you are some disembodied brain without a life and a history.

Stating your *own stakes* in your scholarly arguments and judiciously using the first person are permissible.

For example, in my dissertation on utopian and dystopian literature as a critique of educational systems, I used the first person, and I also related my work to my own experience as a student.

Is this self-centered? **Perhaps, but it's also honest.**

When I write, I have a history that affects everything I say, the topics I find interesting, and even what I see as things that can be written about. *You have that history, too. Don't deny it; use it.*

We also live in an age of the highbrow and lowbrow coming together.

Quentin Tarantino, that genius who is also a garbage can of popular culture, is emblematic of our times. **The boundaries between high and low and popular and scholarly are blurring.** Think of *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, and the *New Yorker*.

Who writes for these periodicals? Largely, professors. The best academic writers are also those who write for the high end of popular culture.

So, what does all this really mean?

- Well, it means that your artistic license gives you the right to use the *first person*.
- Your writing can reflect *your personal experience* (intelligently, of course).
- Your writing can be *good to read*. And it should be.

Now, if you're a good writer and you've read a lot, you see your dissertation as an opportunity to strut your writerly stuff.

There's another reason to write your dissertation as a writer would compose a book. *Because you can. And because bad writing dishonors your discipline, your readers, and yourself.*

What else can you do with your writerly license?

Use metaphor. God knows, the best writing (except in the hardest of the sciences and the tech fields) is *highly metaphorical*.

Study rhetoric. Study the tropes. A couple of months plowing through a rhetoric book will sharpen your argumentation style.

Copy somebody else's essay word for word before you write. We live in an age in which writing, unlike every other art form, eschews copying exercises. That's a crying shame.

One of the very best ways you can improve your scholarly writing is to find your favorite nonfiction piece and copy it word for word. Three times. I've done this exercise myself, and it has improved my writing immensely. You should do it, too. You'll get the rhythms of the writer under consideration into your head.

And once that happens, these rhythms will mix with your own and produce a style as unique as your metabolism and your breathing.

If you're going to write forty-thousand words, you might as well take the time to **write well**, especially if you're writing for publication. And you should be.

While we're on the subject, I'm going to *tell you a secret*.

A great big secret about your academic writing

Shh!!!

Up until this point in your writing life in the education system, *you've been writing to please Teacher*. And if you're good, you know exactly what I mean. It all started around second or third grade, when Miss Jones complimented you on your handwriting.

You beamed as she patted you on the head.

It continued through high school when you got into AP classes and started using the royal "we." Freshman comp and the rest of college? Same gig. *What do I have to do to get that A?* I remember getting a *B-plus* on a paper in political science at the University of Pennsylvania.

I was **outraged**. Shocked. Mortified. I was also completely full of myself. But that's another matter. Instead of decking my teacher, I did something more constructive.

I studied him, closely. For a few weeks, I listened to him quite intently in class. During my intelligence-gathering mission, I noticed that he used the words *litmus test* and *fungibility*.

In my next paper, I used these words, repeatedly.

The result? Not only did he give me an *A* on the paper, he circled *litmus test* and *fungibility* each time they appeared and wrote "*Great Word Choice*." I fell on the floor laughing.

Oh, you know darn well (if you were sharp) that you discovered Professor Smith's biases and spewed them

back to get those As.

The Old Man's School of Writing

Whether you know it or not, you subscribed to the **Old Man's School of Writing**.

If you've read the book *Catch-22*, by Joseph Heller, you'll remember a conversation between one of the pilots, Kid Sampson, and an Old Man in Rome. The pilot asks the Old Man if he is pro-American.

The Old Man answers: "Absolutely." As long as the Americans are in town.

When the Germans occupied the city, he was pro-German.

When the British marched through the Eternal City, he was pro-British.

He tells Kid Sampson that it is *better to live on your knees than to die on your feet*. There is wisdom for student writers in the Old Man's pronouncement. This school of writing helped you to survive all the way from the primary grades to prelims.

But when you write your dissertation,
you're not writing to please Teacher any longer.

You're clearing your own professional scholarly throat.

Now, I'm not naïve, and you shouldn't be either. From time to time, you may have to do a little bowing and scraping. This sucking up should be no more than one percent of your writing. You might use a favorite source of one of your advisors or throw in one of their

pet turns of phrase.

But that's where you need to stop.

As Emerson, the American Scholar himself, said, "*Imitation is suicide.*"

- **Make your own arguments.**
- **Use your own voice.**
- **Reflect your own biases.**

Be real. As a writer myself, I will tell you that, of the stuff I pitch, I generally sell bold and blunt things. That includes the chapters of my dissertation that I published: four out of five of them.

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received about writing came from one of my instructors at the Clarion Science Fiction Writers' Workshop. During a discussion of the horror writer Stephen King, this instructor, Howard, said, "Do you know why he's so good?"

We all said, "No."

Howard smiled and said, "*It's because he doesn't flinch.*" Howard went on to say that, when King renders a horrifying scene, *he doesn't hold back.* Arms fly into the air. Heads land in baskets. Blood splatters the page. *King doesn't care what anybody thinks of him when he's rendering a scene. He's not out to please anybody. Instead, he's going to show you something and take you somewhere. And he doesn't care if you think he's weird.*

He doesn't flinch. You shouldn't either.

While it's obvious that you're not writing a horror

scene (that could come during the defense), you need to say what you think and not worry about looking bad. If you're going to make an argument, make it. This is what professional writers, ones who publish, do. And you, my friend, are a new professional.

Act like it in your writing. You may read this and think, "But, God, I have to please those four people who have the power to determine whether I get those three letters after my name: *P.H.D.*"

That is true. But, if you've picked your committee at all carefully, you've got at least two or three people who understand what you're doing. They did it themselves, and they'll back you if you make some gutsy moves.

So, in short, it's time to **stop being an academic sheep** and **transform yourself into a wolf**, one running on the high plains of the intellectual world.

Howl at the moon a little: *Arooh!*

Yes, you do have to get buy-in from your professors. But you shouldn't be writing to them any longer. You're writing for posterity and professionals in your field. Sycophancy can only take you so far in the world of ideas. If you're serious about writing scholarship or anything else that you think should be published, then ***be bold.***

Be honest. Be yourself. ***Don't flinch.***

You won't regret it.

Chapter Seven: Getting Feedback and Writing Groups

What do you do when you've finished a chapter? After you've let it sit and you've made any revisions you want to make on your own, you could show it to your advisor right away. Whether you do so depends on what you and your advisor have set up beforehand.

Who else could you go to?

What about writing groups?

I have really mixed feelings about the whole concept of writing groups. In my experience, **the efficacy of writing groups varies tremendously depending on who is in them.**

I've been in a lot of them, and I've run them as a writing instructor. I'll be honest.

Of all the writing groups I've been a participant in, the very best was not academic. The speculative-fiction writing group in Minneapolis, which I belonged to for about three years, was made up of five guys. I was the only one with advanced degrees, although all of us had been to college.

This was a great group because *we were all writing and working to sell our stuff*. Indeed, I had to audition to get into the group.

The week before we met, we e-mailed each other our stories. Then we got together, usually at a member's house, but sometimes at a bar. Each one of us would say exactly what we thought about the particular story under consideration.

The feedback was honest and trenchant.

Now, nobody ever attacked anybody's personality, but we did go after each others' writing. *With a vengeance.* And you know what? I published my first professional-level story because of the feedback I received in that group.

My experience with academic-writing groups has been lackluster at best. During my first year in graduate school, I enrolled in a writing-for-publication seminar. The rest of the course members were fifth- and sixth-year members.

Not much got done in the group, *and very little got written.* The feedback was mediocre. *One of the problems with a group specializing in academic writing is that most people don't know the specifics of your topic.* And that includes professors as well.

If you really want good feedback, where do you go?

Feedback for the brave: Peer review

Do it now. Do it often. Get ready to suffer.

But get ready to learn. **As you finish each chapter, send it out to a journal.** You do need to be prepared for a fair amount of blasting. Remember, the people who will be reading your stuff are the experts. The pros. They have agendas: professional and ideological.

You've been writing academic stuff for a year or two at a professional level. They've been doing it for decades.

These people may well be your sources, and you *might recognize their voices* when you get the blinded peer-review sheets back. If the journal editor is doing his or

her job properly, none of your reviewers will be an expert who happens to be on your committee.

Why peer review as you're writing?

Let's have a *Matrix* moment.

Red pill or blue pill? Do you want to know or do you not want to know?

Peer review allows you to discover whether your ideas are basically intellectually sound. And people who peer review you don't give a crap about you as a person one way or the other. They won't hold back.

You're also discovering other things.

- You're learning what *kinds of arguments* are currently being bought in the marketplace of ideas.
- You're learning how the *players in the field* think and what their biases are.
- You're learning how to be intellectually punched hard without crumbling or going postal.
- *And the pros hit very hard!*

Peer review will either kill you or toughen you. *Survival of the fittest*. Academic Darwinism. Finally, one other thing might happen if you submit to peer review at a journal. You might get published. And let me tell you: Publication rocks.

Okay, you've obtained feedback from your writing group, the peer reviewers, and your dissertation committee. What do you do now? Call it a day and go get a beer. *Just kidding.*

Chapter Eight: The Art of Revision

Now that you've gotten some feedback from other people, you really revise. How do you do that? Well, first of all, *you have to be open to revision.*

What do you call a writer of any kind
who is not open to revision?

Unpublished.

Does that mean that you have to destroy your own best efforts on the altar of other people's ideas?

Of course not! The best way to deal with feedback (in a nonexistent world free of power differentials and egos) is as follows: Get as much feedback as you can. Ideally, on any piece of writing, ***about ten reviews of your work would be good.***

Look for trends.

A former writing teacher of mine once said, "Let me tell you how to interpret reviews. If one person tells you you're drunk, ignore him. If two people tell you you're drunk, ignore them. If three people tell you you're drunk, lie down."

In other words, all **reviewers have political, aesthetic, and intellectual hobbyhorses that they ride as they gallop through your work.** So, take what any one reviewer says with a grain of salt (unless you see that person as your ideal reader).

Plan on revising what several people comment on.

Now that I've laid out the commonsensical approach to

interpreting peer review, let's talk about . . .

The realities of dissertation committees

You may get a hand-grenade thrower on your committee, somebody who decides a year into the work that . . .

- Your approach is wrong.
- You're wrong.
- Your mother wears combat boots, and your parentage is in question anyway.
- You will never amount to anything as a writer or a human being.
- You have no reason to exist, and the world would be better off without you.

This person obviously presents a challenge. How do you deal with it?

Generally, your advisor will run defense for you. You'll make some changes, but you won't gut your stuff. If your advisor's help isn't useful, then there is one thing, and one thing only, to do.

Drop him or her like a hot potato! Generally, Ph.D. programs will let you swap out people on your committee. Make the move. You won't regret it.

Here's the real truth about your dissertation committee.

Ready?

With perhaps the exception of your advisor and maybe your subject-matter expert (if you have one), ***your committee doesn't give a crap what you do.*** They're

concentrating on their own research and writing. Or they're not doing anything at all.

And that's actually exactly what you want: benign negligence. Yes men. Your real feedback will come from professional-level peer review, not your committee.

What you really don't want is somebody who thinks they're helping you by being a jerk. You know what? They're not helping you. They're just being a jerk.

Get rid of them. Quickly, before they do you some real damage.

Now, on the other hand, here's what you do want. Two of my four committee members were simply outstanding. Why? *Because they didn't even really read the dissertation.*

They gave generic comments and said that my work was interesting. Not helping me and not hurting me, they rubber-stamped my work. Bravo! *That's exactly what you want.*

Your day-to-day existence

Now, you've had all your chapters reviewed by your committee. You've revised. You've edited. You've proofed.

The ritual bloodlettings are over, and everyone is more or less convinced that you can move on. The last step you face is the defense.

Before we get to that, let me, in the next two chapters, give you some advice about your day-to-day existence as a dissertator, stuff that other dissertation advice givers often pass over, but that is really key.

Chapter Nine: On Writing Schedules

A big part of writing your dissertation is learning project-management skills.

As was not the case during your coursework, you're pretty much on your own, doing what you want, when you want (and, if you win a fellowship), where you want.

You need to learn how to manage your time and your work environment in a way you probably never had to before.

For example, you need to figure out whether you want to do all of your research for the entire dissertation in one fell swoop or whether you want to do one chapter at a time.

I used ***the one-chapter-at-a-time approach***. Research, take notes, and then write. The research will be fresh in your mind as you produce writing. Otherwise, it may well be six months or so between when you read the material and when you write.

So, what do you do?

Here's what I did:

First, I composed my reading list.

Second, I read my books. Now, today, you can use Endnote or another program that will format notes for you, but I typed all of my notes into Word files, so I could search for key terms when I needed to find something. Then I wrote.

Third, I wrote a draft.

Then, I rinsed and repeated.

Let's talk about *writing schedules*.

You should have one.

Of course, your writing schedule depends on your body cycles and your personal tastes. I'm a morning person. I'm also big on routine. You probably should be as well. Here's what I do in my writing routine.

I get up around five or so and greet the day. I'm Catholic, so I say a rosary. Then, I do crunches, lift weights, and go down to the bike in my building and ride for thirty-to-sixty minutes. While I ride, I generally read financial-success literature or other self-help material.

My favorite? *The World's Greatest Salesman*, by Og Mandino.

You might be thinking, hey, wait a minute. I'm writing a dissertation, not selling carpets.

Good point. That's quite true. It might also be true that the two activities aren't really unrelated. Og Mandino's book gives you ten scrolls that you need to read every day.

The Importance of Routine

Scrolls that, as a writer, I find incredibly useful are about persistence and mood control. The persistence scroll tells you that no matter what happens *you need to keep going*.

Mandino tells salesmen never to go to bed with a

failure on the plate. If you didn't make that last sale, *you'll make the next one.*

For dissertators, this means that, if you've had a crappy day of writing, try to get out *one more sentence* or one more paragraph before you wrap up.

Keep going and keep writing. If you've had an extremely crappy day—for example, one of your committee members in his or her wisdom has told you that he or she thinks your ideas are stupid—*just keep writing.*

Mandino argues that you need to control your emotions. That may seem odd. I'm writing a dissertation, you say. True enough. But your emotions can affect your output, in terms of both quality and quantity. Getting into a routine helps you to even out emotions and focus on what you need to do.

You can't control what your limbic system decides to deliver to you, but having a routine allows your actions to control and modulate your feelings.

And, trust me, there will be days when you want to go home and stab your teddy bear (or possibly your advisor) in sheer frustration or anger.

Don't do it. Let your routine soothe you.

After I get off the bike and finish up with Og Mandino, the next thing I do is to head to the shower and get dressed.

Now, when I'm really with it, I have all of my clothes laid out the night before. And I just get dressed. It may seem weird to talk about this, but you should actually be savvy about what you wear.

If I put on, say, a pair of dress pants, a good button-down shirt, and a pair of black shoes, *I'm ready for writing business.*

Everybody's different, but you should wear whatever it takes to put you in the writing zone. Before I sit down for business, I have my morning cereal, usually two packets of Quaker Oats oatmeal. I drink some coffee and OJ, and then I head to work.

I work for about an hour on each portion of work that I have to do. I'd recommend the same for you. It's difficult for most people to concentrate for more than fifty minutes.

Chapter Ten: Writing and Your Environment

What about your writing environment?

One of the best sales self-help people, Geoffrey Gitomer, says that one way to be more productive is to have a good environment. I agree completely.

I keep my apartment as *positive and upbeat as possible*. For example, I've always loved bright, vibrant colors, so my dining room and kitchen are a bright yellow. My living room is a deep dreamy purple, with a red couch. And my bedroom walls are brown and red. *These colors make me feel alive and vibrant.*

In addition, I'm a big believer in **celebrating my victories** and **framing things important to me**. So, my walls and shelves are lined with my wins.

- For example, as is the case for most people who teach, I've been very lucky to receive some nice written feedback from my students. I took all of the pieces of positive feedback, about forty or so pieces from students, and *put them in a collage*.
- I've framed all of my diplomas and certificates. I'm fortunate enough to have attended a couple of Ivy League schools along my educational path.
- My diploma and certificate are also framed. The covers of my publications are framed and hang on my walls. My debate trophies sit on a shelf.
- **I like to travel, so every time I go somewhere, I make sure I bring a poster or a picture back.** My walls currently have framed

mementos from Puerto Rico, Key West, Scotland (where I lived for a while), Nova Scotia, and San Francisco.

- And, of course, I have framed pictures of my family members. *People I love.*

All of this stuff puts me in a *positive* and *productive mode*. If I'm feeling down or not confident about my work, I do a brief tour of my apartment, look at my past victories, and say, "**Well, you've done it before. You can do it again.**"

Some people may say, "God, this sounds hokey and corny."

True, it does. But it also works.

And as many self-help gurus say, "**What you focus on grows.**" If you focus on the feedback of some nincompoop on your committee who has said that you'll never amount to anything, you might start to agree with this paragon of positive thought and go, "Gee, maybe he's right. I'll never amount to anything."

Don't let that happen. You're much better than that.

A word of caution:

Don't use a rightful celebration of your victories to become cocky.

As they say in the stock market, past performance is no guarantee of future success. Having said that, I do think that you need to keep your surroundings positive and upbeat. *They should bring out your best.*

Chapter Eleven: The Defense: A Mouse Masquerading as a Lion

You've written, revised, and proofed. Your committee has signed off on everything. What's that last step?

The Defense. And then in the words of the Indigo Girls, you can get your paper and then you're free.

Fearsome? No, boring.

Nothing seems to strike more fear into the hearts of dissertators than the thought of the defense. "My god, they'll grill me. They'll expose me as an intellectual charlatan. They'll humiliate me."

No, they won't. In my experience, the defense, if you've done your job correctly, is actually pretty boring. Here's what will happen.

Four people who don't usually hang out together (and who may not even like each other) will meet with you for about an hour or two. If one of them is not at your university, he or she will be on a speaker phone.

Mostly, they'll have a conversation with each other. If they get around to it, they'll ask you some questions about your work. They may ask you to focus on the next step: articles or a book. They'll push you on points about which you've pushed their ideological hot buttons.

Use the Kid Sampson/Old Man Strategy

"You think that I'm not Marxist enough in my approach? You're absolutely right. Why didn't I think

of that? Thank you so much for pointing this out.”

Perfect response. Then, when they get bored, they will ask you to step out of the room for a bit.

This is when they vote.

And if all goes well, in about fifteen minutes, the door opens, and your advisor steps out with a smile on his or her face and says,

“Congratulations, Dr. X”

And you are done.

Congratulations, indeed.

You did it. You’ve successfully written, revised, and defended your dissertation. Give yourself a pat on the back. *The journey is over.*

In my experience, writing and publishing the dissertation were very rewarding both intellectually and as an exercise in project management. I don’t write scholarship any longer because I’m not at an institution that requires me to do so. I’ve moved on to write other things, but dissertating was a time in my life when I worked very hard and obtained some fun results.

You can do the same thing. I wish you well!