

The **DISSERTATION** *Journey*

A Practical and Comprehensive Guide to
Planning, Writing, and Defending Your Dissertation



CAROL M. ROBERTS

**SECOND
EDITION**

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Foreword

When I completed reading *The Dissertation Journey* by Carol Roberts, my first reaction was, "Where was this book 20 years ago when I started directing dissertations?" My second reaction was, "Heck, where was this book even before then when I wrote my own dissertation?" My third reaction was, "Every doctoral student in our department needs to read this book." And my fourth reaction was, "So does every faculty member."

Dr. Roberts's book provides insight into every aspect of developing and writing a dissertation. From selecting a topic, to choosing a committee, to deciding what research approach to use, to the actual writing and defense of the dissertation, Dr. Roberts provides clear and comprehensive directions for any student faced with the challenge of writing a dissertation. I particularly appreciate how she methodically takes students through each chapter that will comprise the dissertation, not only providing an overview of what each should contain but also offering helpful suggestions and checklists to reinforce what constitutes a good dissertation.

A really appealing component of *The Dissertation Journey* is the information provided to doctoral students on how to use technology to support development of a dissertation. Not only does Dr. Roberts offer good suggestions on how to use the computer in writing a dissertation, she provides a listing of electronic and Internet sources students can use to access research materials and articles.

Furthermore, the section that Dr. Roberts provides on the ethics of writing a dissertation is a must read for any doctoral student. She reminds the reader of copyright laws, clearly defines plagiarism and how to avoid it, and highlights the importance of understanding and observing the rules governing research on human subjects.

Finally, Dr. Roberts provides a great concluding section that focuses on students' responsibilities once the dissertation is done and they have

graduated. She not only encourages them to share their research findings broadly but also challenges the students to use their experience to mentor others undertaking the rigors of a doctoral degree.

Returning to my initial comments, I found *The Dissertation Journey* to be a wonderfully useful tool to assist both doctoral students and graduate faculty through the dissertation development process. The work is very clearly written and addresses every aspect of dissertation writing. It is so good that I plan to have all of my doctoral students purchase and read the work. It will save them, as well as me, a lot of lost time, gnashing of teeth, and heartache.

Dr. Roberts is to be congratulated for adding this important work to the field. There is no doubt that, if doctoral students and their advisors will use this composition as a guide in developing dissertations, the quality of research in higher education across the country will be immensely enhanced.

Kenneth R. Stevenson

Professor, Department of
Educational Leadership and Policies
University of South Carolina

New to This Edition

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to write a second edition of my book, *The Dissertation Journey: A Practical and Comprehensive Guide to Planning, Writing, and Defending Your Dissertation*. This updated and expanded edition includes not only new information that is vital to navigating the dissertation process, it also includes an expansion of previous topics for greater clarity and utility.

New features added to this second edition include the following:

1. **A new chapter titled “What Are the Ethical Considerations in Research?”** In this chapter, I discuss the central ethical issues involved in conducting research relative to human rights, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, respect for the research site, writing, and disseminating the research.
2. **New information about the process, importance, and purpose of developing a theoretical or conceptual framework.** It includes responses to questions such as, “What is a conceptual or theoretical framework?” “How does a conceptual framework differ from a theoretical framework?” “Why do you need a conceptual or theoretical framework?” and “How do you find a conceptual or theoretical framework?” Also provided are examples from dissertations for greater understanding.
3. **A completely revised and updated chapter titled “Using the Internet and Technology to Conduct Research.”** Since more and more researchers use the Internet and technology for all phases of dissertation writing, I incorporated in this second edition new web-based technologies. New information about search engines, evaluating websites, and social networking on the web is also included.
4. **A completely revised and expanded chapter on reviewing the literature.** I expanded the steps in conducting a literature review

from four to eight and added considerably more detail to the process. An updated list of secondary sources and style manuals widely used in the social sciences is incorporated.

5. **A thorough update of all websites and references, including new editions of works.**

Preface

Today, colleges and universities offer master's and doctoral degrees in increasing numbers. Many students enroll in these programs, and in many cases, they do not receive appropriate guidance and support in conceptualizing, conducting, and writing an original research study. This is evidenced by an estimated 40% to 50% of doctoral students nationwide who complete their course work but not the final act of writing their dissertation. They become ABDs (all-but-dissertation). This represents a tremendous waste of time, money, and energy.

In reviewing the literature, I discovered very few useful, comprehensive books that guide master's or doctoral students through the formidable and demanding process of crafting a high-quality research study. This book offers the practical guidance often lacking in doctoral programs and in the literature about planning, writing, and defending a dissertation. Doctoral students need to (1) get a clear picture of what it takes to write a high-quality research study and see it as doable; (2) understand it as a psychological and human relations venture as much as a research exercise; (3) feel encouraged and supported in their efforts; (4) experience the process as a satisfying, rewarding, and exciting journey; and (5) finish!

I wrote this book to satisfy the existing need for a clear, concise, cut-to-the-chase guidebook for completing a doctoral dissertation. *The Dissertation Journey* provides a step-by-step guide on how to plan, write, and defend a dissertation. Its structure parallels the dissertation process and presents detailed information about the content and process from conceptualizing a topic to publishing the results. It addresses the psychological and emotional barriers students confront and provides up-to-date information on using the computer and the Internet in the various stages of dissertating. The style is personal, informal, and conversational—much like a coach talking one-on-one with a student. To enhance learning and clarify concepts, I included a myriad of examples together with helpful hints, checklists, and quotations. Since writing a dissertation can be a bewildering and overwhelming experience for students, I use the metaphor of climbing a mountain for inspiration and to maintain interest and motivation to persevere in spite of obstacles.

For the past 22 years, I have had the opportunity to teach doctoral students at the University of La Verne—a premier doctoral program in California known for its innovative approach to educating leaders. The faculty provides a relevant, practical, and high-quality program focused on helping students succeed in completing their dissertation. The one-to-one coaching, group tutorials, videos, online discussions, webinars, and research seminars are exemplary techniques for teaching the dissertation process. As a result, our students' graduation rate is 81%—almost twice that of the national average.

The Dissertation Journey: A Practical and Comprehensive Guide to Planning, Writing, and Defending Your Dissertation incorporates many approaches and techniques taught in the University of La Verne's doctoral program. These techniques, plus the insights and knowledge I gained from years of experience teaching and guiding dissertation students, serve as a valuable road map for the dissertation journey and, hopefully, make the task more understandable, easier, more enjoyable, and less time-consuming. This is not a complete work on writing dissertations, nor could it be; the scope would be overwhelming. The book does not include detailed information on certain aspects of academic research, such as design and methodology, data analysis techniques, or writing style and mechanics. I reference appropriate books that concentrate on these technical areas.

This book is geared toward the specific needs and concerns of doctoral students as they proceed through each step of the dissertation process. It focuses primarily on the social sciences; however, graduate students in most academic disciplines desiring to complete a research study should find the book's content useful and applicable. Generally, the steps for writing a thesis and a dissertation are much the same regardless of the topic or discipline; they vary primarily in scope and complexity. Graduate faculty involved with student research should also find the book's ideas and suggestions beneficial. It eliminates the need to answer over and over again those questions that students routinely ask. Universities vary considerably in their dissertation requirements and procedures. In addition, there is considerable diversity among the preferences of advisors and departments within a university. The suggestions offered in this book should not be considered final, nor should they preempt the judgment and opinions of research advisors and committees.

Researching and writing a thesis or dissertation should be an enjoyable and rewarding experience—one students can comprehend and most of all complete. There is a better way than letting half or more of our nation's doctoral students become ABDs. It is my hope that this book, with its straight talk, step-by-step guidance, and practical advice, will make the journey to "doctor" smoother and, in the process, help beat the overwhelming odds of ABDism.

A Note to Doctoral Candidates

Greetings! You are embarking on a new and exciting journey—obtaining a doctoral degree. This journey requires completing a dissertation, the pinnacle of academic achievement. In many ways, the journey is like climbing a high mountain; it is a long and arduous trek—not for the fainthearted. It is fraught with hazards and obstacles along the path that can dampen your spirit. However, it also offers incomparable opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Reaching the summit of a mountain symbolizes the process you go through to complete your dissertation. The climb tests your mettle and challenges your resolve, but once you complete it and experience the magnificent view from the top, you realize the rewards far outweigh the effort. The exhilaration and pride of accomplishment, the fulfillment that results from contribution, a deeper self-awareness, and greater confidence in yourself as a scholar are just a few of the rewards that await you.

I remember well the experience of seeing my own dissertation as a looming mountain before me—massive and awesome—with the accompanying feelings of doubt and apprehension. I learned, as you will, that journeying to the peak is more than an intellectual pilgrimage, it is also an emotional and psychological one. It requires commitment, perseverance, stamina, and mental toughness—more than you ever thought you had.

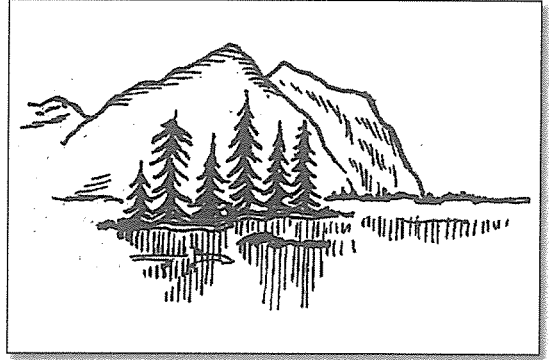
Completing a dissertation changes your life. I discovered that my primary reward was not so much the exhilaration of standing on top of the mountain at journey's end, but rather who I became as a result of the climb. Only by taking yourself to the limit can you know what you're made of. "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves" (Sir Edmund Hillary, one of the first men to reach the summit of Mount Everest).

I wrote this book to help make your journey to the summit a satisfying and rewarding one. In these pages, I speak to you informally as an

advisor and friend about the entire dissertation process. Plus, I speak about those critical issues related to the personal and social side of dissertating (organization, time management, human relations, etc.).

The material presented in this book represents years spent guiding dissertation students, dialoguing with faculty colleagues, and researching the literature on this topic. Please remember that the ideas and recommendations provided should be used only as a guide. Your advisor and committee are the ultimate sources of information and opinion about your dissertation.

It is my hope that you catch summit fever and become utterly motivated to reach the top. Do bring a spirit of adventure to this journey, and by all means, enjoy the climb! Warmest regards and good luck!



Acknowledgments

No one climbs a high mountain alone. Experience and expertise, support and encouragement are all needed. I am indebted to many people who provided these necessities, which helped make this book a reality. I am most appreciative of the assistance and contributions of my professional colleagues in the University of La Verne's Doctoral Program in Organizational Leadership, with whom I have worked for the past 22 years. They freely share their wisdom and knowledge, from which I learn so much.

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I also give special thanks to Mary Townsend, Donna Bentley, Clive Houston Brown, Donald Hays, and Larry Kemper, who provided feedback and constructive suggestions for improving this work. For the second edition, I wish to thank Donna Bentley, Librarian at the University of La Verne, for her valuable help in revising and updating the Internet and technology resources. I also appreciate the support and encouragement to pursue this project given by Drs. Barbara Poling, Department Chair, and Leonard Pellicer, Dean of the College of Education and Organizational Leadership at the University of La Verne.

I also want to thank those doctoral students whom I have had the privilege of instructing—and particularly those who invited me to chair their dissertations and serve on their committees. They helped me understand the unique challenges associated with conducting high-quality

research and provided many helpful comments and suggestions that are incorporated in this book.

My greatest debt is to my husband, Edward, who gives me the love and confidence to leave “base camp” for the many physical and inward climbs I choose to make.

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PART I

Quests and Questions

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

1

Do You Have What It Takes?

Why Take This Journey?

Throughout the ages, people have pursued the upper limits of their capabilities. They have answered the call to adventure, learning, and high achievement. Completing the dissertation journey is an adventure in learning and personal growth, the outcome of which can result in extraordinary accomplishment and contribution. Unquestionably, obtaining an EdD or a PhD is the summit of academia—the highest degree any uni-

The heights by great men reached
and kept were not obtained by
sudden flight, but they, while their
companions slept, were toiling upward
in the night.

—Longfellow

versity can bestow. This journey to “doctor” is difficult, with obstacles and demands along the way; however, once completed, the pride and exultation are a life-long affirmation.

A doctorate usually requires completion of a dissertation that demonstrates your ability to plan, conduct, write, and defend an original research study. In many ways, the dissertation process is a journey not unlike climbing a difficult mountain. The journey is arduous and long, usually three to five years from beginning to end, and it is easy to become frustrated, exhausted, and discouraged. It is grueling—definitely not for anyone who lacks commitment or perseverance. Those who successfully scale the peak are those willing to put in long hours and hard work.

Writing a dissertation is a personal transformative experience and can be a peak experience—one of those life-fulfilling moments. Abraham Maslow (1968) referred to them as “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment” (p. 73) and added, “A peak experience is felt as a self-validating, self-justifying moment which carries its own intrinsic value with it” (p. 79). He claimed that the worth of the experience makes the pain worthwhile. Robert Schuller (1980) also talked about peak experiences in his book *The Peak to Peak Principle*. He called a peak experience “an experience of success, achievement, and accomplishment which feeds your self-esteem, which then expands your self-confidence” (p. 99) and added, “It’s an experience that leaves you with an awareness that you are more than you ever thought you were” (p. 113).

These positive, uplifting, and inspiring words speak to the high accomplishment of completing a doctoral dissertation. Many high points and joys happen along the dissertation journey—some simple, some exhilarating. Moments such as realizing you really do have a researchable topic, having your proposal accepted, obtaining an acceptable questionnaire return rate, and creative moments and intellectual insights are all triumphs along the path. The instant your advisor calls you “doctor,” the ecstasy of walking to “Pomp and Circumstance” at graduation, and when your doctoral hood is placed over your head are self-fulfilling, unforgettable moments that make the hard work and sacrifice worthwhile.

Unfortunately, there is a mythology that supports a negative view that completing a dissertation is drudgery and demeaning, consisting only of a series of hoops to jump through and hurdles to overcome. Students who adopt this mindset spend much of their time whining and “awfulizing” their experiences. They bemoan their plight and feel tormented throughout the entire process. It is a truism that completing a dissertation is hard work, time-consuming, frustrating, and, at times, frightening—this is a given. It takes a good deal of self-discipline and courage to undertake a project of this magnitude.

What makes the difference between a peak experience and a “heart-break hill” experience? Attitude. Attitude is everything! On the mountain and in life, our attitude makes or breaks us. If you think you can do it, then you can.

Research has revealed that the attitude you have at the beginning of a task determines the outcome of that task more than any other single factor. For example, if you believe you will be able to succeed at a particular undertaking and you approach the endeavor with a sense of excitement and joyful expectation, your chances of achieving success are much higher than if you face the task with dread and apprehension.

—Abascal, Brucato, and
Brucato (2001, p. 39)

Approaching the dissertation journey with a spirit of adventure, optimism, and a can-do attitude helps ensure that you will succeed and achieve a peak experience in the process. Climbing a mountain peak is a powerful metaphor; it represents the path to growth and transformation. The obstacles encountered along the way embody

The primary reward is not the goal but what you become as a result of doing all that was necessary to reach the goal.

—David McNalley

the challenges that help expand your thinking and your boundaries. The risks are substantial, the sacrifices great. However, the view is magnificent from the top, and it is reserved for those courageous adventurers who dare to challenge their own limits. Ultimately,

though, it's the journey itself that results in "self-validative delight," not just standing at the top. Once you are there, you will not be the same person or ever again look at the world in the same light.

With hard work and perseverance, "I'll see you at the top."

Do You Have What It Takes to Journey to the Peak?

Remember the travelers on the yellow brick road? They wanted to get to the Emerald City, yet each had to be transformed in order to get there. They needed three things to find their way: brains, heart, and courage. You will need the merging of these same three things to successfully complete your dissertation journey. Cognitive ability is necessary but not sufficient. Certainly, you must put all your intellectual powers to work in conducting your study and analyzing its results. Such powers do make for easier climbing. However, it's your heart—the spirit and passion you bring—that sustains you for the long haul. The third critical need is courage—the ability to dig deep into yourself and persevere when the going gets tough and you want to quit. You will find that when you think you cannot go another step, there is an untapped and astonishing reservoir of sustenance that can pull you through—mind over matter.

Answering the following questions honestly can help you better understand what it takes to climb the dissertation mountain—that final challenge to obtaining your doctorate. Just remember that you can, and probably will, accomplish more under sometimes adverse conditions than you may believe.

1. What Are You Willing to Sacrifice?

There is no true success in any large-scale endeavor without sacrifice. Self-denial is the name of the game. Are you willing to give up

momentary pleasures for your long-term goal? To burn some midnight oil? Completing the dissertation is a demanding task and takes time, money, and energy, which can affect all aspects of your life. It can cause strained relationships with your spouse, partner, children, friends, and work colleagues. It can affect your work assignment, causing conflicts between time spent doing your dissertation and time spent doing your job. Be realistic about the financial costs connected with conducting a research study, such as typing, copying, library expenses, consultants, travel, postage, telephone calls, computer costs, and so on.

2. How Much Are You Willing to Endure?

The path is fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Can you face them without becoming discouraged? Are you prepared for the stress that accompanies emotional setbacks and extra demands on your time? The dissertation process is often obscure and perplexing, requiring a high level of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. It means often working outside your comfort zone. Are you willing to risk the unknown and to be teachable? If not, you can wander around aimlessly in the foothills of confusion and frustration. Are you willing to learn as you go?

That which we obtain too easily, we esteem too lightly.

—Thomas Paine

It is important to recognize the downsides, the consequences, and the risks of taking the dissertation journey. If you believe that you have what it takes, you can climb the mountain, stand on the top, and feel the joy of high achievement.

Avoiding the Hazards of High-Altitude Climbing

Climbing real or metaphoric mountains can be hazardous to your health. It can sap your energy and weaken your resolve to endure to the top. As mountaineers must be mindful of potential avalanches, crevasses, high winds, falling rocks, and storms, researchers, too, must be aware of the dissertation hazards along their path. These hazards can hinder progress in completing your dissertation.

Dissertating is not just an intellectual endeavor but also a psychological one, to which most graduates will attest. It is truly a personal pilgrimage—one that tests your stamina, self-confidence, and emotional resilience. The only way you will ever become a doctor is to willingly struggle against the obstacles that get in your way and to do so without quitting. Be forewarned. You will want to quit, but quitting and wanting to quit are very different things. The inner resources you bring to the task keep you on the path. These inner resources are discussed later in this chapter.

Being aware of the hazards of dissertating helps you select suitable routes and make adjustments to overcome the risks. Make no mistake, dissertating is high-altitude climbing! Three hazards of this high-altitude climbing that you should be aware of are procrastination, emotional barriers, and writer's block. The next sections describe these hazards and provide some strategies for dealing with them.

Procrastination

To *procrastinate* means to put off intentionally and habitually doing something that should be done. It is a habit that steals away some of life's greatest opportunities, yet it is a habit most of us possess. Many books deal with overcoming procrastination, yet we seem to either put off reading them or fail to heed their advice. This habit, quite common among dissertation students, can result in an ABD (all-but-dissertation) status rather than an EdD or PhD. This amounts to aborting the climb to the peak and settling for heartbreak hill. I am acutely aware of the whole complex of dazzling excuses proffered by dissertation writers. With my doctoral students, I found that dissertation avoidance is often elevated to an elegant art form. Certainly, there are occasionally excellent reasons for putting off working on your dissertation. Emergencies, interruptions

Putting off an easy thing makes it hard, and putting off a hard one makes it impossible.

—George H. Lonmer

from others, and acts of God happen to all of us from time to time. However, the students I worry about are those who keep themselves from starting or continuing because they fear the unknown, lack the self-confidence to move ahead on their own, or engage in

irrational thinking, such as awfulizing. They convince themselves the task is awful, horrible, and unbearable. But putting it off only postpones the inevitable. It is critical that you learn to recognize those signs that indicate you are putting off working.

There are two physical laws that apply equally well to people and objects with regard to the habit of procrastination. They are Newton's law of inertia and Parkinson's Law.

You and the Law of Inertia

The law of inertia states the following: A body in motion tends to stay in motion; a body at rest tends to stay at rest. In other words, it takes greater force to get a body moving than it does to keep it moving, and when it gets moving, it takes less force to keep it moving than to stop it. Physical inertia is regulated by outside forces, but the real

changes in our life's attitudes and habits come from within. As William James said, "The greatest discovery of my generation is that a person can alter his life by altering his attitude of mind." Those who succeed do so because when they head toward a specific destination, they keep going until they reach it. It's hard to stop them.

People who procrastinate find many excuses for not moving up the mountain. Certainly, some excuses are quite legitimate—a family or health crisis, and so on. But you cannot be productive if you allow yourself to procrastinate for long periods of time. To overcome inertia, you must get started and build momentum. Decide to do it now. Once you realize that inertia is a normal part of our human experience, it is easier to deal with.

A habit develops when you take action so many times that it becomes automatic. How does one break the procrastination habit? I found that the best way is to develop the reverse habit—refuse to procrastinate. If you refuse to procrastinate often enough, then that also becomes a habitual response. Here are some strategies to help reverse the habit of procrastination.

1. Challenge Your Excuses

Through the years, I witnessed a variety of creative excuses offered by doctoral students to themselves and to me, their advisor. If you don't challenge the excuses you use, you may remain in stationary inertia, unable to make the forward progress you desire. One common excuse is that "I haven't read enough to write yet." Argue with yourself that writing helps clarify your thinking, and besides, first drafts don't have to be perfect. First drafts are first drafts; they are always improved with rereading. If one of your excuses is that you "need deadlines to work effectively," argue with yourself that waiting until the deadline to get started results in undue stress and leaves you tired, uncreative, and irritable. It can also affect the quality of your writing. Conducting inner debates about any "logical" excuse keeps you from stalling.

EXERCISE

Here is an excellent exercise to help you learn about your excuses. It was developed by Stan Hibbs (drhibbs@drhibbs.com) and reprinted in the All-But-Dissertation Survival Guide located at www.ecoach.com. He asks that you write out every excuse you make for not working on your dissertation. Then write a rebuttal for each excuse. He gives the following examples:

(Continued)

(Continued)

Excuse: I don't have time.

Rebuttal: My time is limited, but I can always get started and get something done. I'll feel so much better if I do.

Excuse: I'm just not up to it today.

Rebuttal: I don't feel very excited about working on it today, but I'll feel great if I make some progress.

Excuse: I've got a lot of errands to run.

Rebuttal: Yes, there are some things I could do, but that's not going to get me my doctorate. I'll go on the errands after I make some progress today.

Once the rebuttal list is complete, write each one down on a separate 3" × 5" index card. Carry these cards with you to use as flash cards to memorize your rebuttals. It's much harder to procrastinate when your excuses don't work anymore.

2. Develop a *Do It Now!* Habit

This self-motivator was recommended by W. Clement Stone (1962) in *The Success System That Never Fails*. He claimed it sparks you to action. Here's what you do: Repeat *Do it now!* to yourself 50 times or more in the morning and evening, and whenever it occurs to you throughout the day. This imprints it indelibly in your subconscious. Every time you must do something you don't feel like doing and the self-starter *Do it now!* flashes in your mind—immediately *act* (p. 93).

The *Do it now!* habit also helps when you're in the dissertation gloom-and-doom state. Consider adopting Denis Waitley's (1987) personal motto, "Stop Stewing and Start Doing." He said, "I can't be depressed and active at the same time" (p. 147).

Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task.

—William James

Another technique to acquire this self-starting habit is to post a sign that says *Do it now!* around your house and desk. It helps jog your memory.

3. Divide and Conquer

Mountains are overwhelming and, in their entirety, intimidating. They can't be conquered all at once. In technical climbs, we move up the mountain in a series of pitches—one hand and toe hold at a time until we stand spent but elated on the top. Looking at the entire dissertation can also be overwhelming. Think of your

dissertation as a mountain with stairs—a set of small steps leading to the top. It is important to break it down into small, achievable goals and take it step by step.

The journey of a thousand miles
begins and ends with one step.

—Lao Tse

One strategy is to make a contract with yourself that states specific goals, establishes completion dates, and offers rewards for attaining your goals. It is important that you write these completion dates on your appointment calendar. There's a wonderful feeling of exhilaration that goes along with accomplishment. It gives you a new burst of energy to keep moving.

4. Remove the Reward

Procrastination should not be a pleasant experience. If you procrastinate by socializing or getting a cup of coffee, stop it! Procrastinate in unpleasant conditions. For example, lock yourself in your office—no visitors, no coffee. When the enjoyment goes away, so will your procrastination.

5. Discipline Yourself

If you really don't want to write, promise yourself you'll write for 15 minutes. Set a timer, and when it rings, decide if you will work for 15 more minutes or quit. Often the hardest part is starting. This strategy helps you build that momentum to overcome inertia.

Dreams are what get you started.
Discipline is what keeps you going.

—Jim Ryan, Sportsman

You and Parkinson's Law

Parkinson's Law is a ready-made excuse. It states, "Work expands to fill the time available for its completion." This law applies especially to dissertation writers. Most doctoral candidates have families and hold full-time jobs. It is so easy for other work (job and family obligations) to fill all the available time, leaving no time to write the dissertation. Competing demands for your time are always problematic, and let's face it, immediate gratification and family fun are more seductive than confronting your dissertation mountain.

So how do you overcome Parkinson's Law? Invoke the Premack principle. The Premack principle, often called *grandma's rule*, states that a high-frequency activity can be used to reinforce low-frequency behavior. Access to the preferred activity is contingent on completing the

low-frequency behavior. Grandma knew this simply as, “Before you can watch TV, you have to help with the dishes.” This is a simple behavioral principle behind the “work first, play second” maxim. What is it you most like to do? Surf the Internet? Watch TV? Shop? Complete a dissertation task, then do something you really enjoy. For example, “Before I can watch TV, I have to revise my questionnaire.” Or “If I complete

The best way to break a habit is to drop it.

—Leo Aikman

Chapter 1, I can see a movie on the weekend.” Disciplining yourself in this way keeps you on task and keeps your momentum in high gear. You will complete your dissertation in record time.

Emotional Barriers

Students often describe their experience of writing the dissertation as a roller-coaster ride, with definite ups and downs associated with each phase of the process. They refer to the down times as the *dissertation doldrums*, where they feel discouraged, depressed, frustrated, and anxious. They even doubt their ability to complete the project. These feelings are predictable for anyone trying to achieve a high goal; however, these negative emotions can easily overpower you. If you don’t address them, they will immobilize you, sap your energy, and keep you from achieving your goal. When things go well, you are elated and you soar on cloud nine. These feelings of exhilaration provide the momentum to “keep on keeping on.” The ups and downs of dissertating—the pains and the joys—are experienced by all writers. It’s part of the dissertation process and to be expected. Here are some strategies to help you deal with the dissertation doldrums:

1. Reflect on Your Reasons for Obtaining Your Doctorate

Sometimes you question your own sanity for undertaking this massive project. You wonder why you continue to torture yourself in this way. When you have these feelings, take time to reflect on the reasons you decided to enroll in a doctoral program. More than likely, they are still valid and should serve to reinforce your commitment and motivation to stay on track. Take time to reflect on these reasons, write them down, and visualize your life after graduation and a title after your name.

2. Establish a Support Committee

When the going gets rough, you may reach an impasse in your progress. That’s when you assemble a support committee—those who

believe in you and have your best interests at heart—friends, mentors, and family members. You might ask your mother to chair this committee. These are your cheerleaders and confidants when you're down; they share your joys and bad days and provide regular pep talks to overcome your discouragement. They also let you know when you are indulging yourself in complaining and offer you encouragement rather than pampering.

Writer's Block

All dissertation writers experience writer's block at some point during the process. It's that longing to be anywhere but in front of the computer. When this happens, everything else in your life takes priority over writing. Taking the dog for a walk, cleaning your closets, running errands, washing clothes, and e-mailing friends appear crucial. Writer's block can be caused by any number of factors: lack of confidence, fear, time constraints, no outline, personal issues, frustration with your topic, perfectionism, weariness. It is important to identify the obstacles that stifle your writing. In other words, take time to fall back and regroup. Unfortunately, there is no magic formula to keep you in the writing groove, but here are some strategies that might help you keep the words flowing.

1. Change the Mode of Putting Down Words

If you're stuck on the computer, try a dictation machine or writing by hand, or change where you write—go outside, to a friendly coffee shop, or to the library.

2. Get Some Physical Exercise

Get outside and walk; mow the lawn. Physical activity of the pleasant and slightly mindless kind can precipitate creative thinking.

3. Make Two Lists

This exercise helps you get a handle on the root of your block. Whenever you are trying to write your dissertation but find yourself blank-minded and wordless, write two lists labeled as follows:

1. I ought to write X because . . .
2. I refuse to write X because . . .

The second list will be more informative than the first in that it brings to your conscious mind the refusals that may be lying at the sub-conscious level. You can then take steps to overcome your refusals.

4. Cluster Your Ideas

This is the old psychology game where one person says a word and the second person responds immediately with the very next word that comes to mind. First, write your subject on paper and circle it. Then, write down the very next thing you think of and circle that. Draw a line connecting these two circles. Next, write down what you thought of as you wrote the second word and draw a line connecting it to the previous word. Follow this process until you have exhausted your brain! Write down everything that comes to your mind no matter how far out. After you complete the entire process, you will be amazed at the words that popped out.

A similar method that works for my students is to cluster ideas using sticky notes. In the center of a large poster-size paper, write your subject and surround it with large circles. Then write all ideas connected with the subject on sticky notes and place them inside the circles. If desired, you can then use extra-small colored tags to add ideas to the larger notes. The beauty of this method is that you can move the sticky notes around as necessary. This mind-storming technique works well with groups working together. It allows individuals to build on ideas generated by others, thereby obtaining a broader perspective on the subject.

5. Write a Crummy First Draft

Perfectionists cringe at this thought. Just know that no one, however gifted, can write an acceptable first draft.

You don't have to write something *good* initially. Thinking that you do only causes self-disparagement and self-recrimination. Remember, first drafts are only *first* drafts and are for your eyes only. Let them be sketchy thoughts, rambling sentences, clumsy word patterns using poor grammar, and so on. Just get everything out of your brain and onto paper. Don't obsess and ponder ideas too long. Don't judge it, just *write it*. Getting your ideas on paper gets you moving. You now have something to work on and revise. Accept the fact that you will be writing several drafts, and take the pressure off the first one by concentrating only on your ideas. Most writers agree that it's easier to revise than to create. Writing is a complex and slow process, so don't expect it to flow effortlessly. Few writers write only when they feel inspired. If you wait for inspiration, or write only when you feel like it, your chances of completion are nil.

Although all of the preceding suggestions are useful, over time you will work out your own best ways and means for moving on.

What Are the Inner Essentials?

The Backpack “Ten Essentials”

To keep any climb safe and enjoyable, preparation and good judgment are critical. Just as it's important that mountaineers recognize the awesome powers of nature for which they must be prepared, so must you understand the immenseness and complexity of the dissertation task and be prepared for it. Experienced mountaineers rely on a time-tested packing list, known as the “Ten Essentials,” developed in the 1930s by a group of Seattle-area climbing enthusiasts. The Ten Essentials are what every outdoor person should carry at all times in his or her backpack to ensure survival. They include a map, compass, flashlight, extra food, extra clothing, sunglasses, first-aid kit, pocketknife, a fire starter, and water. The list is often expanded as the need arises.

These were mandatory items in my backpack when I trained for my Basic Mountaineering Training Course certificate from the Sierra Club. When the unexpected happened on mountain trails, I realized how truly essential they are. Climbing the dissertation mountain requires the presence of certain inner essentials to make it safely and successfully to the top. Inner resources are those intangible reserves that help you cope with problems and crises. Especially in times of stress, it is the mobilization of these noteworthy attributes that helps remove or transcend the barriers you face along the path. In the words of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, “That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.”

The Dissertation Journey's “Essentials”

The dissertation journey requires innumerable inner essentials. Some of the dissertation writer's essentials are commitment, perseverance, stamina, positive mental attitude, courage, and the spirit of adventure. Although these six essentials are not the only ones, they are vital to your survival and ultimate success on the journey.

Commitment

Commitment is the willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve your goal. It is one thing to start something; it is quite something else to complete it. A genuine commitment is a promise you make to yourself to stick it out regardless of the obstacles you face or how many times you are knocked down. You simply get up and press on.

The moment you commit and quit holding back, all sorts of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance will rise up to help you. The simple act of commitment is a powerful magnet for help.

—Napoleon Hill

Becoming a doctor is only a dream until you commit the time and energy to obtain it. Imagine your name with a PhD or an EdD after it. Tom Flores, an NFL coach, said, “A total commitment is paramount to reaching the ultimate in performance.” Making a commitment gives you that extra ounce of courage that keeps you going during

the tough times. Abraham Lincoln gave this advice: “Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other thing.”

Perseverance

Perseverance is that attribute that impels you to go on resolutely, in spite of obstacles, criticism, adversity, fears, or tears, to overcome the inevitable discouragement and disappointment that accompanies mountainous-type projects. It means putting in the hard work necessary to get the job done, even when you don’t want to. Having

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not . . . genius will not . . . education will not . . . Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

—Calvin Coolidge

spent long, relentless hours of effort over a long period of time, it’s easy to lose heart and want to quit. This is when you dig deep into your inner reserves and keep going. Remember there is a big difference between quitting and wanting to quit. The difference is between being ABD (all-but-dissertation) and becoming a

doctor. High achievement is not reserved for those with innate talent or high IQs. It is dependent on desire and perseverance—on that extra effort. Students start their doctoral program expecting to be successful, but only those who are willing to pay the price and do what’s required finish. There’s an old saying, “A big shot is only a little shot who kept shooting.”

Stamina

High-altitude climbing takes a tremendous amount of energy. It involves continual exertion and makes brutal demands on your legs, lungs, and heart. *Stamina* is what it takes! It’s not optional. Writing a dissertation requires stamina—the strength to sustain long hours of work and yet maintain high performance. This is especially difficult when

juggling the demands of a full-time job and sustaining family obligations while completing a doctorate. However, stamina is essential to surviving the journey.

Lessons from athletes can be of great value. For example, athletes learn to focus and trigger the relaxation response through deep and steady breathing techniques. Meditation and visualization techniques are extremely valuable in managing stress. You can get a second wind by taking time to refresh and rest your brain and body. Regular exercise also rejuvenates the mind and body and reduces stress. Good nutrition and a good night's rest are also vital to maintaining stamina. Staying emotionally healthy is easier if you are in good shape physically.

Positive Mental Attitude

A significant psychological discovery in the past 20 years is that people can choose the way they think. Henry Ford put it this way, "Whether you think you can or can't, you're right." A *positive mental attitude* is at the core of any high achievement and success in life. Try to avoid negative thoughts or negative self-talk whenever possible. These include thoughts such as "I don't have time now so it's not worth starting" or "This will be too hard." It also helps to remove from your vocabulary words like *can't*, *never*, or *awful*. They only keep you on a downward spiral. One technique that works when you hear yourself being negative is to say *Stop!* Stopping these negative thoughts interrupts the downward spiral.

I know many doctoral students who focus on the difficulties, the unpleasant times, and the pains associated with struggling. Thus, they create for themselves a miserable experience. The students I know who possess a positive mental attitude look for the good in situations, even when it's hard to find. Their optimism is like a beacon that propels them forward, thus creating a joyful experience for them.

Everything can be taken from man except the last of the human freedoms, his ability to choose his own attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose his own way.

—Victor Frankl

Courage

It takes *courage* to face the fears and doubts that often accompany writing a dissertation. During the first class of the research sequence at the university where I teach, I ask my students to describe the greatest fears and anxieties they have about the dissertation process.

Their responses run the gamut from reasonable to unreasonable. Here are the most commonly identified fears and anxieties:

- The negative impact on work and family
- Not measuring up to the task intellectually
- Lack of the necessary research skills
- Not enough time to do everything that needs to be done
- Fear of the unknown—don't know what they don't know
- Won't find an appropriate topic or an advisor
- Being overwhelmed
- Fear of criticism and committee rejections of their work
- Fear of failure
- Being emotionally vulnerable

These fears cause considerable anxiety at times, which can result in self-doubt, insecurity, worry, and procrastination that keep you from

Courage is the mastery of fear, not the absence of fear.

—Mark Twain

doing your best work and moving forward. I found that sharing these fears and anxieties with others lessens their impact and helps you realize that everyone involved in the dissertation process has at least one or more of the

same vulnerabilities. Facing them openly and honestly goes a long way toward bringing out the courage that sustains the most fearful.

Spirit of Adventure

Adventure is defined as (1) an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks and (2) an exciting or remarkable experience. The spirit of adventure means accepting a risk and standing up to your fear of the unknown—taking the path less traveled. The central motivation for adventuring is to attempt something you're not sure can be done, to go somewhere you're not sure you can go.

If you know what you want, why you want it, and are willing to sacrifice and endure many obstacles to get it, then you have the true

Whatever you dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic.

—Goethe

spirit of adventure. It's all about being willing to explore your own limits. Whether it's a physical adventure or a mental one, it is always replete with excitement, hazards, and triumphs along the way. Are you comfortable with ambiguity? Climbers must risk

and face uncertainty. If you believe your journey to become a doctor is an adventure filled with new learnings and discoveries about yourself,

others, and your field of interest, your life will be transformed, and you will contribute significantly to your world.

Summary

This first chapter helped you understand the dissertation journey as a peak experience, a transformative and fulfilling life event. Completing the journey successfully requires understanding the sacrifices, stresses, and uncertainties you face along the path. It also requires knowing strategies to deal with the major hazards facing dissertation writers: procrastination, emotional barriers, and writer's block.

Climbing the dissertation mountain safely and successfully requires inner essentials such as commitment, perseverance, stamina, a positive mental attitude, courage, and a spirit of adventure. Commitment is the promise you make to yourself to complete the dissertation regardless of the obstacles you face along the way. Perseverance means staying the course even when you don't want to. Stamina requires the ability to sustain long hours of work while juggling work and family obligations and still achieving your goal. A positive mental attitude makes the difference between experiencing misery or joy along the path. Courage overcomes fear and self-doubt. A spirit of adventure means a willingness to explore your own limits and view the dissertation journey as a quest filled with new learnings and discoveries.

The next chapter familiarizes you with the mountain's terrain—the dissertation document itself. You learn about the dissertation's structure, format, typical components, major steps in the process, and individual's roles and responsibilities.