



From the **Issues in Graduate Education** column of the December 2006 **Perspectives**

Practical Advice for Writing Your Dissertation, Book, or Article

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You have a stack of research materials, a nebulous yet promising topic, and a looming deadline. Now, how do you actually write?

In my work as a dissertation coach and academic writing consultant, I am often asked for concrete strategies for writing. How to transform ideas into writing? How to finish that dissertation, book, or article? And how to stay motivated and sane during the writing process?

I have found that the best recipe for sustained intellectual productivity is a mix of structured writing practices, time management strategies, and holistic lifestyle support.

Here are eight practical strategies for focused, sustained writing—ways to create the space and structure to shepherd unarticulated ideas into a cogently written argument. While targeted at the dissertation writer, this advice can be used by graduate students drafting their proposal, junior faculty members rewriting the dissertation into a book, and scholars working on articles. Regardless of the type of project, healthy writing strategies—as opposed to staying-up-all-night marathons—are crucial. My hope is that these strategies also help advisers to support their PhD students through the nuts and bolts of the writing process.

1. Set up a writing schedule. Use a paper or electronic calendar to block out the times you will reserve specifically for this writing project. Treat each writing timeslot as an appointment with yourself. It is helpful to enforce strict start-and-stop times. Use a timer to break down your allocated two hours, for example, into three 40-minute writing sessions. Such short intense bursts of writing will be more productive than spreading your work over long unplanned days. (You write more in less time because you have allocated less time to work and thus must prioritize tasks and distill information. Think standardized test essay—you have 20 minutes: write!) If you are afflicted by writer's block, the problem could be trying to write at the wrong time for you—in the afternoon, for instance, when the body's biorhythms make energy wane. Try an hour first thing in the morning. The operative strategy here is shorter writing times coupled with commitment to a regular writing schedule. Over days and weeks, you will achieve momentum and a healthy addiction to the writing process.

2. Create a dedicated workspace. This space can be a library carrel, your department office, home office, café, or dining room table—wherever you find you write best. Call it your dissertation hut, article area, or book completion zone. If your current setup has too many distractions (TV, noise, unplanned visits from students) or is leading you to procrastination (opening mail, surfing the internet), radically change your workspace. Disable the internet. Leave the house. Clear out a fresh space in your office. Find a quieter café. Go to a corner of the library no one uses. My suggestion is to put in your workspace only the materials you need for this particular project. For some, this will mean a major cleaning up! Stash anything not related to the project at hand—such as teaching materials—in another area allocated for that purpose. You don't need stacks of ungraded papers on the same surface as your dissertation research. In effect, drawing on ritual theory, I suggest you consecrate a sacred space for the act of writing. The space and its function became inextricably entwined, focusing your attention.

3. Write daily in a dissertation journal. Keeping a daily (or regular) journal about your thoughts, questions, leads, frustrations, and challenges is invaluable. Generate ideas, try out organization methods, and process the writing experience in a text separate from the draft you are working on. Your journal can be a computer document, so that you can mine it for gems later, copying and pasting rough draft ideas in new documents to develop into drafts. Write in your journal for 20 minutes at the start of each allocated writing time. Do this even if you don't feel like it or think you don't have anything to say on that day. Allow yourself to type (or handwrite) uncensored, not caring about grammar, punctuation, and so on. This is zero draft writing, a way to dump your ideas to sift and shape later. Articulate inklings of ideas and explore ambivalence or fears about the dissertation process itself. Slowly, you can channel these journal writing sessions into focused freewriting on an aspect of your topic. Nobody simply sits down and writes an article or a chapter from start to finish. Brainstorming comes first, and daily journaling about your project is the structure you use to generate ideas you will organize later.

4. Distill your argument into a single sentence. What is your central thesis? Write it out in one sentence. This simple yet challenging writing assignment forces you to distill your many complex ideas into a single thesis statement. It may take you a minute or weeks, depending on where you are in the writing process.

