

Advice for Writing -- and Finishing -- Your Dissertation

Bertin M. Louis offers five tips for moving past intimidation all the way to completion.

By Bertin M. Louis Jr. January 24, 2020

When I came back from the field as a graduate student, I was confident that I could write up my dissertation in no time. But when it came to actually working on the dissertation, I had difficulty getting started. I remember reading an article related to my research right before I sat down to write and how I suddenly froze up. What scared me was that I felt that I needed to write my dissertation in a manner like the article that I read. The process of writing a dissertation then became very intimidating to me.

I eventually figured out what worked for me when I was dissertating, and I offer you here the following tips. They may or may not work for you or apply to you, but at least you can think about them as you continue along the journey of writing your dissertation -- and finally walk across the stage as you are granted your doctorate.

Think “Bird by Bird” or “small bites.” When I was stuck trying to figure out what to do with all the data I amassed while I was in the field in 2005 [conducting dissertation research](#), one of my dear friends who was part of my anthropology cohort gave me a wonderful book about writing by Anne Lamont called *Bird by Bird*. It offered funny stories about the writing process and strategies for writing that I still use today -- one of which is to break work into smaller pieces in order to not feel defeated by the enormity of it. I remember reading chapters from this book in public places and laughing out loud. It is important to do reading outside the dissertation, as that will help generate ideas and strategies that will help achieve the ultimate tasking of getting it done.

I also remember the advice my father would give me when I felt overwhelmed with a task laid before me. He would just say, “Small bites,” as a reminder of how to approach a large task. “Small bites” toward completing your dissertation could include writing your acknowledgments, adding to your bibliography or writing and revising a section of your chapter.

An important point that gets obfuscated when a person is intimidated by writing is that the well-written articles, book chapters and books we admire take numerous drafts and revisions to get to a finished stage. Your work will, too. Don't let someone else's finished product or the enormity of the project deter you from creating and finishing your own.

Find a motivation for writing. Going into the second year of dissertation writing, I had a job talk in an Africana studies department at a highly ranked liberal arts college in the Northeast. Even though it was apparent that the department had a preferred candidate in mind, I soldiered through the campus visit, controlling what I could (my answers to their questions, my job talk, my pitch for proposed courses). I received a rejection letter not too long after my return home.

At the time, I convinced myself that the interviewers did not hire me because my dissertation was not finished. I only had about the equivalent of two chapters at that point. Between November 2007 and April 2008, I proceeded to write seven more chapters, and I defended my dissertation in May 2008. I worked on revisions that June, and the following month, I was offered a full-time lecturer position in the Africana studies program at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. In August 2008, I submitted my revisions and began teaching four classes per semester.

The point of this story is that sometimes you simply need motivation to get the dissertation written. Getting a full-time job and making myself more marketable for the following year on the job market helped me eventually land a tenure-track position, as well as build valuable social capital at my first institution.

Write a story. For those of you who do ethnographic fieldwork, a good way to start (or restart) the writing process is to write about a story from the field. I cite this example because I found it to be one of the least intimidating aspects of writing my dissertation, and it allows you to loosen up. Since the stories are embedded in a larger socio-cultural context, writing a story will also allow you to raise larger issues, which you can then connect to pertinent literature and topics such as race, gender, class and other forms of social inequality.

Recognize that writing is writing. To paraphrase the sagacious Erykah Badu, “Keep in mind that you are an academic, and you are sensitive about your [stuff].” Be nice and gentle with yourself instead of beating yourself up about your work so that you can get in front of a computer and write.

Do not put any restrictions on yourself. Don’t worry about grammar. Don’t worry about misspelled words or inappropriate punctuation. Don’t worry about the quality of your writing at this stage. All that can be refined at a later time. Just write.

And don’t diminish what you’ve written. If all you’ve written are acknowledgments or bibliographic entries, that’s fine. **It counts as writing!** It has to go in the dissertation anyway.

When you’ve written all the stories you can and you have trouble thinking of anything else to write, it may be time to go back to reading. Reading the pertinent literature, reading fiction and reading poetry informs your own thinking about your work. The thinking will help you generate more writing.

Take breaks. The stress of writing and sitting in front of a computer for long stretches of time can have **adverse effects on your health**. One of the breaks I like to take when writing involves exercise. As I wrote my dissertation, I took walks and rode my mountain bike. You can’t write all the time. Plus, the act of exercise -- either during it or afterward -- has helped me work through ideas for my dissertation, my book and various articles I have written between 2008 and now.

Since we have chosen self-flagellating vocations, it is perfectly fine to remind yourself that you do not need to be chained to your desk in order to produce solid written work. Repeat after me: “It is OK to take a break.” “It is OK to take a break.”

I hope these tips help. If you found any of them useful, please share this essay with other academics in the midst of writing their dissertations with hopes more of them can finish the work they started.

Bio

Bertin M. Louis Jr. is an associate professor of anthropology and African American and Africana studies (AAAS) and the inaugural director of undergraduate studies for AAAS at the University of Kentucky. His research and teaching interests include religion, race and racism. He also studies human rights and statelessness among Haitians in the Bahamas and antiracist social movements in the U.S. South. In addition to [My Soul Is in Haiti: Protestantism in the Haitian Diaspora of the Bahamas](#) and other academic publications, he has written for Inside Higher Ed, [The Conversation](#), [The North Star](#), the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#) and the Social Science Research Council's "[The Immanent Frame](#)" blog. He also served as a guest on the third season of [Blackacademics TV](#). You can follow him on Twitter [@MySoulsInHaiti](#).



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