Overcoming Procrastination: Getting Organized to Complete the Dissertation

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The doctoral dissertation is often viewed as an ominous black cloud, looming over the All-But-Dissertation-Student's head. The dissertation is often the most difficult academic requirement a doctoral student faces; many students exhibit delay in completing it (Frank, 1984; Rudestam & Newton, 1992). Procrastination is common among college students and has been found to increase over the college years (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). It therefore should be surprising that, after several years of education beyond the bachelors degree, procrastination predicts dissertation among ABDs (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991).

Why do ABDs procrastinate? Possibly because of a combination of fear and perfectionist tendencies. Those who procrastinate tend to be perfectionistic, have low frustration tolerance, high needs for autonomy and approval, and fears of failure (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991). With regard to the dissertation, perhaps the most common reason for procrastinating entails perceiving it as an overwhelming task. Motivation may be the biggest problem that writers of the dissertation face.

From the start, it is important to recognize that the dissertation is a time consuming, lonely process, that usually takes about two years. The dissertation may serve as a major blow to a graduate student's self esteem; it is not uncommon to feel as if it is an insurmountable task that will never be completed. The key to completing the dissertation promptly is organization and time management; the dissertation stage is often the first time in which a student must provide his or her own structure towards completing a research task. Throughout graduate school, structure is provided to the student through courses and formal assignments as a research assistant. The dissertation is unstructured, it is now the student's turn to apply the structure, and structure must be applied in order to complete it.

One way of providing structure is to view the dissertation as a series of steps, rather than as one mammoth task; motivation may be maintained and even enhanced as each small step is completed. Remember how good it feels to cross an item off a list? Organization provides a sense of control, holds procrastination at minimal levels, and is key to completing the dissertation. How does one get organized?
1. Outline the small steps needed to complete this large project.

All too often, students may feel that their only goal is to "finish the thesis. A goal this large may feel indomitable; break it down into the component tasks. For example, at the proposal stage, the tasks may be organized as follows: thesis statement, literature review, method, plan for analyses. Each of these tasks entails many smaller tasks. The list for the literature review may consist of an outline of the topics you wish to discuss, with each outlined as detailed as possible. You may even wish to list relevant articles in the appropriate places within the outline. The method will consist of the participants, including items on locating them, rewards, drafting informed consent forms, locating measures, describing psychometric properties of the measures, piloting measures, drafting the procedure, etc.

In terms of completing tasks, it is not necessary to start at the beginning of the list, in fact, believing that one starts the dissertation proposal by writing his or her introduction and thesis and ends with the plan for analyses will detain progress. Begin where you feel comfortable and fill in the gaps. You will find that you gain momentum with the completion of each small task. Feeling overwhelmed by any particular task is a sign that you have not broken it down into small enough pieces.

2. Make consistent progress writing every day, even if only for a short period.

Set aside periods of time to write on a regular basis; establish a firm schedule. Train yourself to write in short blocks, for at least an hour a day. All too often we insist that we need large blocks of time to write. Blocks of time certainly help the writing process, but the ABD often lacks such resources. For example, when I was writing the dissertation, I taught 5 classes as an adjunct at 4 different schools; blocks of time were difficult to find, other than over the weekend. Aside from pragmatics, writing at least a little every day keeps the thesis topic fresh in your mind, leaving you open to new ideas and interpretations. You may even find yourself thinking about it and making conceptual progress as you complete mundane tasks such as driving to and from school and work.

3. Use incentives to assist you in overcoming procrastination.

Writing requires consistent, well-organized effort and a system of self-imposed incentives to overcome procrastination. What kind of incentives work? Although it depends on the individual, a safe bet is time off from working. I found "vegetation time such as time spent playing computer games to be helpful as an incentive to reinforce progress.
4. Methodically break through writer's block.

When it is difficult to write, talk through your ideas to anyone who will listen, or just talk out loud to yourself. Write out your thoughts without criticizing them. Take time to warm up, intellectually speaking, by writing to clear your thoughts. Get the ideas out without scrutinizing each sentence; it is often easier to edit than it is to write. Work through your ideas by writing, THEN edit extensively. You will write many drafts of each section of the dissertation; a first (second, or even third) draft need not approach perfection. In addition, it is acceptable to use dashes to mark when you cannot find the appropriate word to express your idea, but want to go on; just remember to fill in the dashes later. The important thing is that you develop a pattern of producing some output regularly that output can be edited or even thrown out, but it is important to produce something.

5. Recognize and accept the fact that writing is a time consuming process; do not rush yourself.

No draft will be perfect that first time around. Expect to go through several drafts of each section of your dissertation. Once you feel comfortable with a particular section, take time away from it. Ask others to read your writing and consider their comments and criticisms with an open mind. After a few days or a week, reread the section and edit again; you may be quite surprised by the impact of a fresh perspective.

Writing the dissertation is much like running a marathon. The seemingly insurmountable may be attained through a series of small goals and deadlines; accomplishing each small goal may provide additional momentum. Make consistent progress each day, use incentives to assist you in attaining your goals, and acknowledge that the dissertation will require time, hard work, and patience. Finally, consider the words of Dag Hammarskjold: "Never measure the height of a mountain, until you have reached the top. Then you will see how low it was."

For a complete list of references, please contact APAGS.