

The Not-So-Secret Guide to Dissertating

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By Jenny J. Lee

As a professor for nearly 15 years, I have advised more doctoral students than I care to count. I've had my fair share of national award winners, those who gave up and vanished, and countless students in between. I have referred them to books, manuals, articles, and advice columns that provide no shortage of step-by-step guidance on how to embark upon the pinnacle of their studies — the doctoral dissertation.

Published advice can be helpful. But it often portrays the research-and-writing process as neutral and predictable, and it hardly takes into account the pitfalls and mishaps that can affect whether, and how soon, you finish. Yet it's also a mistake to view the dissertation — as many students do — as a challenge so cryptic and clouded in ambiguous idealism that it seems insurmountable.

In fact, the dissertation process should not be a mystery at all, given that the most common problems can be easily avoided. That it *is* mysterious for so many means that faculty members need to better communicate those problems.

As advisers who probably wrote our own dissertations decades ago, we may too easily forget what it was like to be a student to offer the clearest advice. Or, to avoid seeming too autocratic, we may see a professional value in not directing our students' ideas too firmly. And sometimes we may simply forget what we told which student, mistakenly assuming that the advice will somehow inevitably spread from one advisee to the next.

Here, then, are maxims that some of us may neglect to spell out clearly enough — and that students may be too afraid to ask about.

Some dissertation topics are pretty good and others are really, really bad. The onus here is on you, the student, but a successful proposal is most often a collaboration between student and adviser. We aim to nurture your ideas, but the reality is: Some are better than others. The really, really bad topics are those that fail to establish relevance to the field, do not appear to be genuine inquiries, or are unconvincingly masked as a shortcut to your educational credentials.

We have our research biases, but please don't believe you can make a career as our clone (however much we may privately wish it). To make your dissertation worthwhile, think about an ideal — yet realistic — job you might apply for upon obtaining your Ph.D.

If you are considering a faculty job, how will your dissertation make you stand out from 100-plus other applicants seeking the same position? What are some conferences where you can start sharing your results and expanding your academic connections? If you are seeking a nonacademic career, how might your research findings inform your day-to-day work? What will you say about your dissertation during a job interview?

In this tough job market, don't be afraid to tell us your career plans, whether or not they are in academe. If we know what you want to do, we can better advise on a career strategy. Also, keep in mind that, while you might be limited to one dissertation adviser, you are not limited in the number of mentors you can approach for job advice. So if you're interested in nonacademic careers but your dissertation adviser doesn't have any such expertise, find someone who does.

We do not expect you to change the world with a single study. In an ideal world, a student's thesis would revolutionize the field and forever change how we think about a topic. But I have witnessed many students' repeatedly extending their timeline because they are stuck on coming up with the "perfect" proposal idea.

People who pursue a Ph.D. do not, by nature, lack ambition. As an adviser, I spend far more time helping overly ambitious students scale down their research designs to make them more feasible than I do revving up the aspirations of laid-back students whose research goals are underwhelming. The bottom line: A dissertation that you can actually finish — with good-enough scholarship — can still offer something meaningful to the field.

What we perhaps don't emphasize enough in our advising is that the dissertation is not just an end product. It's also a process of learning how to become an independent scholar. Your dissertation probably won't change the world, but with the skills you gain in writing it, you will be better equipped to do that down the road, or at least to make a bigger splash in your field.

We will probably come up with ideas when you have none. That's not necessarily a good thing. Too many students sit silently, feverishly taking notes on ideas that I offer — whether on the topic, the methodological approach, or something else — without telling me what *they* want

to do or what *their* ideas are.

There are pitfalls in relying on your adviser's ideas alone. Just remember: Your adviser has a strong say here but not above your own. The dissertation is not a passive process, and so it is important that you speak up if there is something you want to do instead of what we are advising.

Otherwise we may assume you don't care or are not thinking at all. We have no shortage of ideas, but they should not be taken as commands. And occasionally we might forget the details of our last conversation unless you remind us. Worst case, we might suggest a different topic or approach every time we meet. Idea generation is a two-way process and should come mostly from you.

We do not know everything. In rare cases, the scholarly interests of both student and adviser may align. Most of the time, however, they don't. Your adviser may have only peripheral knowledge to guide your specific research project. Your dissertation committee then supplements the knowledge and methodological bases. That's important to keep in mind in assembling your committee.

Dissertations are supposed to be specialized and, despite your attempts to find the right experts to guide you, you may find that you still know more about your topic than your adviser and committee members do. However, knowledge alone does not guarantee a Ph.D. As mentioned, the finished product exhibits your ability to do independent scholarly work. A reasonable expectation is that your adviser will suggest where to locate the relevant literature, recommend how best to design the study, offer feedback on your drafts, and provide some professional advice along the way.

Face-to-face meetings can give a false sense of progress. It's vital to communicate with your adviser, especially in formulating the research proposal and making critical decisions along the way. But your dissertation is not "real" unless it is in writing. I have wasted many hours with students who wish to meet regularly to discuss their ideas — with different ideas in each meeting — but have not committed so much as a sentence to text.

Meetings between you and your adviser are not intended to be academic confessions to absolve your guilt for not writing. And we can't provide feedback on written work that doesn't exist.

Make writing a regular habit. Consider drafting as early as possible while still fleshing out your ideas. Then go back to your document as you continue to rethink and refine your topic.

On a related note, don't be a writing hoarder. I mean, be prepared to toss pages of what you have already written. There is no prestige in a long dissertation if the organization is confusing and the writing unclear. Be willing to let go of your own words and use the delete key as needed to make your arguments coherent.

The finished manuscript is typically not a biographical narrative of your research journey, with unexpected twists and turns (except on those rare occasions when your personal

narrative *is* the dissertation). In most cases, the dissertation should offer a logical stream of thinking rather than a torrent of internal consciousness.

We are not sitting by our computers waiting for your next draft. Unless, of course, the two of us have agreed to a specific timeline, in which case we expect to hear from you on certain dates.

The lack of a time-oriented structure in the dissertation process means that weeks, or even months, can go by before I hear from most of my students. And then I get an email that begins, "I am sorry I took so long." Some have even admitted to postponing their correspondence out of fear that I would be upset with them for taking too long to update me on their progress.

Most professors are not staying up at night thinking about your dissertation or why we have not heard from you. Rather, we are juggling many other dissertations in addition to grading papers, managing our own research projects, meeting writing deadlines, and drowning in email.

More often than not, your email updates remind us that you are our student. The takeaway here is that much of your timeline and progress depends on you. Come up with a writing schedule and stick to it. And keep your adviser informed every now and then, but do not hide with guilt if it has been a while.

We sometimes forget to write back. If we do not respond to your email or latest draft after a couple of weeks, it is OK to remind us. Rather than stewing in anxiety because you have not received any response, simply email us again.

But please do not give us immediate deadlines. If you take months to write your latest version, you shouldn't expect us to turn your draft back to you in two days. Timelines vary and should be discussed upfront, but our taking a couple of weeks to provide you with feedback is reasonable.

Your dissertation will probably never be read once it is filed. Too much anxiety has gone into perfectionistic writing that might never be seen by more than the few people on your dissertation committee. A professor of mine once said: "Put \$1 in your dissertation on file at the library and check back 10 years later, and the \$1 will still be there." Dissertations are digitized nowadays, but it is still quite likely that your work may never be downloaded, except by your family members.

With that in mind, have concrete plans to publish from your dissertation, so that your hard work will have more than a few readers. Consider it a goal, not an option, to publish at least one scholarly article or book based on your dissertation research. By the time you finish, most of your work has already been done. It's well worth the added effort, both professionally and personally, to make your work accessible to a wide pool of readers.

We work for you. It is our job to get you to graduate. We do not enjoy making your lives difficult (most of us, anyway). We challenge you because we have high standards. Regardless of rank or reputation, helping you succeed is what we are paid to do.

Too many students are afraid to ask for help when they need it. No, we will probably not offer to edit your manuscript line-by-line to fix your grammar. But we can refer you to resources if you ask. We cannot read your minds, but we can respond when you ask for clarification or request more support.

Be mindful of your own expectation biases. Some students unfairly expect more — or less — based on a faculty member's gender, race, or other personal factors. Also, be consistent in how you address your professors. Men are not the only "Dr.s" on the faculty. I have worked with some students who decided to call me by my first name while referring to my male colleagues as "Dr." It's fine to ask us our preference about that.

Producing a dissertation is a process of discovery, but not only an academic one. The journey involves discovering yourself as a scholar. It helps to know the difference as you encounter obstacles along the way. Your path may not be easy, but I hope these suggestions will make it a little more clear. Just tell yourself every day: I got this.

Jenny J. Lee is a professor of educational policy studies and practice at the University of Arizona's Center for the Study of Higher Education.