

The Completion Agenda, Part 3: Revising Your Dissertation

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[Advice](#)

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You've successfully defended — but you're not done yet



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By David D. Perlmutter July 06, 2015

If you had to pick a cliché that best describes completing a dissertation, "it ain't over till it's over" would work well. So far in this series we have discussed [finishing a submittable draft](#) and [successfully defending](#) the dissertation. But as every doctoral candidate knows, no matter how well the defense goes you are very likely not quite free and clear yet.

In my case, while I waited outside the meeting room, my committee discussed my dissertation for either 10 minutes or two hours; I honestly can't recall through the fog of tension and time. I do remember encountering a friend in the hallway to whom I described my situation. She asked, "What's the best possible outcome?" I had no doubt: "Ideally, they pass me without asking for any revisions." She arched an eyebrow and asked in Spock-like tones: "Has that happened with any dissertation defense, ever?"

As a matter of unverified but likely fact, I think not. Globally and historically, I believe no doctoral committee in academic history has ever addressed the candidate, "Hail the new Mozart! It's perfect and flawless. Don't change a thing!"

Obviously, every field is different, with varying requirements for the dissertation. Based on the many hundreds of conversations I have had with Ph.D. students in all sorts of disciplines, I have put together a to-do list that may help you successfully make the revisions sought by your committee.

Confirm the details in writing. The dissertation defense, no matter how smooth, can be a harrowing mental endurance test, more so when committee members are tossing out both big ("you need to rethink your conclusions") and small ("there is a typo midway down Page 615") instructions for alterations.

The Completion Agenda

In any academic career, the first supreme hurdle you face is finishing your dissertation. This series explores how to get it done.

So don't trust your memory. Take copious notes and, after a good night's sleep, read them over. Then reread and straighten out; there will be gibberish you need to translate now and not later. More than a few doctoral candidates have been granted the "approved with revisions" go-ahead, then rested for a week and reviewed their notes only to find some cryptic comments akin to Seinfeld's "flaming globes of Sigmund."



Also, make sure your notations are precise and clear as to who wants what where. For example: Include exact page numbers and, if possible source them — e.g., "Cut out Hypotheses C; merge into Hypotheses B: Dr. Frank."

Seek agreement on the changes. No dissertation is immaculate in the eyes of committee members, but a good outcome is that: (a) they achieve consensus on the (with any luck) few changes they want you to make and (b) they delegate final supervision over those changes to your adviser so you only need to deal with one person.

Even if everyone concurs at the actual meeting, play it safe and circulate a checklist of changes to the entire committee. Be polite, but ask for their blessing, as in, "Hi: I wanted to make sure I fully understood what I need to do. Please let me know if I left anything out." If someone does not reply, follow up with a "Just checking" email.

Once you have replies from your committee members, meet with your adviser once more to review all of those comments in detail. Your adviser is the main point person you have to please at this point, and should also be the adjudicator of any controversies or crossed memories.

Agree on a schedule of completion. A few days after my defense I started a new job on the tenure track. While immediate employment was definitely a lucky break, I was swamped and delayed making necessary changes to my dissertation. I was also physically out of touch with my adviser and committee. (This was during the early days of the Internet when you couldn't even send large attachments, much less "Dropbox" them.) In retrospect, what I should have done was agree with my adviser on a definite schedule to complete revisions.

Try to be as realistic as possible in drafting that schedule, especially if you are starting a heavy time commitment to something — like, hopefully, a full-time job. You will always have less time than you think you will. On the other hand, it is remarkably easy to let the months drift if you don't feel the tick-tock pressure to finish.

Don't go radio silent. Another common post-defense mistake is failure to keep in contact with your dissertation committee. Physical separation may be a factor, but that is less of a problem in our always-on, always-connected culture. On the other hand, don't do what a colleague described his advisee doing recently, which was texting him hourly on every minor change.

Do stay in touch, at least for major mileposts as you make the changes. Don't be afraid to ask questions or seek clarification. Generally make sure that committee members know you are on schedule to complete. That impression is all the more important if you are on the job market because potential employers really want to be reassured by your adviser that you will be 100-percent done by the time you start your tenure-track or postdoc position.

Keep administrators apprised of your progress. This is important if you are on the job market, and especially if you have met with success. Many departments hiring assistant professors and postdocs expect that you will have [completed your degree](#) by the time you start the job. Failure to finish may result in your not being allowed to start "at rank" — for example, as an instructor rather than as an assistant professor.

So consider your prospective department chair and/or dean to be an honorary member of your dissertation committee. In our college we certainly like it when an incoming new faculty member lets us know, "Good news: I filed my revised draft with my adviser and am just waiting to hear back." Or better yet, "Woo hoo! Whole committee signed off. No more changes; moving to deposit official copy."

In all, there are as many perfect dissertations out there as unicorns. The "accepted but with revisions" outcome — whether stated officially on the university's defense form or agreed upon informally among the committee members — is the practical best-case scenario. Try to approach the final march toward completion with rigor, planning, and organization.

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