Dissertation by Design®

How to Overcome the Challenges of Earning a Doctorate Degree & Graduate Sooner

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About

Dissertation by Design began as a passion project that grew into a full-service dissertation coaching and editing service that serves graduate students all over the world. I started Dissertation by Design after working in higher education for six years as a research program director and lecturer at two R1 institutions. I had just closed out a three-year research study at a prominent university in Boston and moved home to North Carolina with my partner.

At the time, I was helping several close friends and colleagues with their dissertation writing. As we talked, they shared their struggles with me. My friends and colleagues were confused and discouraged. They were in dire need of guidance and support. Some, to no avail, had been revising their dissertation proposals for months. I was concerned that they might quit their programs. So, I read their manuscripts, and we talked about their process and what they needed to accomplish. I offered them practical dissertation writing suggestions.

I helped them tighten up the logic of their proposals and clarify their writing. I paired writing support with encouragement: “You can do this.” Time after time, their manuscripts passed muster, even for students whose proposals had been repeatedly rejected. As a result of these successes, I began to wonder should I transition into dissertation coaching full time?

Out of these musings, Dissertation by Design was born.

The business began as a labor of love with an employee of one — me. But so many doctoral students knocked on my door, echoing the concerns of my friends and colleagues, I knew I needed to expand the business to meet the burgeoning need. I handpicked a team of dissertation coaches, each who is uniquely gifted, each who is just as passionate and qualified as I am, to offer doctoral students individualized dissertation coaching and workshop supports.

My team wants to help every scholar whom we work with to graduate, and we want to help doctoral students own their work and to produce original research, research of which they are truly proud. Because we want our clients to embrace excellence, we embed it into our work at every turn. We provide more than quick turnarounds and a checklist of action steps. We listen to our clients, coaching with kindness into their areas of greatest need. We are also constantly reflecting on our practice, asking ourselves how to help our clients produce top-notch scholarship that contributes to their fields. We meld doctoral-level critical analysis and writing feedback with heart. This is why we can truthfully say, “Navigate your dissertation journey with confidence. We can help.”

Because we really can.

Cheering you on,
Jessica L. Parker

A NOTE ABOUT ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

As an academic coach, I often encounter students who express concerns about academic integrity, particularly when it comes to dissertation coaching. I understand that academic integrity is essential in maintaining the reputation and credibility of the academic community, and I want to assure you that dissertation coaching does not violate academic integrity principles.

Academic integrity involves upholding ethical standards, honesty, and fairness in all academic pursuits. Academic integrity means that students must take responsibility for their own work and ensure that they properly attribute sources, report data truthfully, and avoid plagiarism.

Dissertation coaching, on the other hand, is a valuable resource that can help students navigate the complexities of the dissertation process. Coaching is not a violation of academic integrity because it does not involve doing the work for the student or providing them with answers. Instead, coaching involves providing guidance and support to help students develop their research skills, clarify their ideas, and overcome any obstacles they may encounter during the dissertation process.

Coaches can provide feedback and suggestions to help students refine their work, but ultimately, it is the student who must take responsibility for the final product. Dissertation coaches can help students to maintain academic integrity by ensuring that they properly attribute sources, avoid plagiarism, and adhere to ethical standards.

Dissertation by Design is committed to maintaining academic integrity and will work to ensure that all of our clients produce original scholarship.

Top 10 Challenges

Did you know that only about 50% of Ph.D. students complete their degree and graduate?

Graduating with a doctoral degree is a significant achievement, and it requires years of hard work, dedication, and perseverance. However, the journey toward earning a Ph.D. can be a daunting and challenging experience. Doctoral candidates face numerous obstacles that can prevent them from completing their studies and graduating on time. However, with the right support, guidance, and resources, you can overcome these obstacles and successfully complete your studies. Below is a list of the top 10 most common challenges faced by doctoral candidates.

TIME MANAGEMENT	Doctoral candidates often struggle with time management, balancing coursework, research, teaching, and personal life. The workload can be overwhelming, and the pressure to meet deadlines can be stressful.
ISOLATION	Research can be a solitary experience, and doctoral candidates can feel isolated and disconnected from their peers. The lack of social support can lead to feelings of loneliness and mental health issues.
FINANCIAL BURDEN	Pursuing a doctoral degree can be expensive, and funding opportunities can be limited. Doctoral candidates may need to work multiple jobs to cover their expenses, which can be time-consuming and affect their academic progress.
PERFECTIONISM	Doctoral candidates are often perfectionists who strive for excellence. While this trait can be beneficial, it can also lead to unrealistic expectations and self-doubt.

Top 10 Challenges

WRITER'S BLOCK	Writing a dissertation can be a daunting task, and doctoral candidates may experience writer's block. The pressure to produce high-quality work can be overwhelming, leading to procrastination and delays.
SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP	The relationship between a doctoral candidate and their supervisor is crucial to success. However, some doctoral candidates struggle to build a positive relationship with their supervisor, leading to delays and frustration.
WRITING	Writing a doctoral thesis is a daunting task. Many doctoral candidates struggle with structuring their thesis, organizing their ideas, and writing in a clear and concise manner.
PUBLISHING	Doctoral candidates are expected to publish their research in academic journals. This can be a challenging task as they may face rejection or struggle to find suitable journals.
MENTAL HEALTH	Doctoral studies can take a toll on mental health. Many doctoral candidates struggle with anxiety, depression, and burnout, which can affect their ability to complete their studies.
WORK-LIFE BALANCE	Doctoral studies can be all-consuming, leaving little time for personal and social activities. Balancing work and life can be challenging, leading to stress and burnout.

Keep reading to learn how to overcome these challenges and finish your dissertation faster with less stress...

TIME MANAGEMENT

Doctoral programs are notorious for being challenging and time-consuming, with students often struggling to balance coursework, research, and personal commitments. However, with effective time management strategies, you can maximize your productivity, reduce stress, and graduate sooner.

Create a schedule: The first step in managing your time effectively is to create a schedule and stick to it. Break your day into chunks of time, allocating specific times for research, coursework, and personal commitments. A schedule will help you stay on track and avoid procrastination.

Task batching: Task batching is a productivity strategy that involves grouping similar tasks together to complete in one time period. The main purpose of this strategy is to avoid context switching— or mentally jumping back and forth between tasks. Task batching helps reduce the amount of context switching you have to do during the day and encourages you to group like tasks so you can complete all of the tasks for a similar project or work stream at once.

Be proactive: Resist the urge to check your email when you wake up. Instead start your day by immediately working on a high-priority task for at least 1 hour. This strategy will teach you to become proactive instead of reactive.

Manage distractions: Social media, email, and other distractions can be a significant time drain. To manage these distractions, consider turning off notifications, scheduling specific times to check email and social media, and using apps to block distracting websites.

Set goals: Setting achievable goals is essential for staying motivated and making progress. Break down larger goals into smaller, more manageable tasks, and track your progress regularly.

Use productivity tools: There are numerous productivity tools available that can help you manage your time more effectively. Consider using a task management app, time-tracking software, or a note-taking app to stay organized and on track.

ISOLATION

Research demonstrates a variety of advantages to collaborative writing including more motivation, better writing quality, as well as higher student success and completion rates.[1][2][3]

Writing a dissertation can be an isolating experience, but it doesn't have to be. Candidates often spend long hours working alone, reading, researching, and writing. This can lead to feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and isolation, which can have a negative impact on mental health and academic progress. However, there are several strategies that you can use to avoid feelings of isolation and create a sense of belonging and community.

Join a research group or seminar: Doctoral candidates can join research groups or seminars to meet other students and share their research interests. This is an excellent way to build connections with others and receive feedback on your work.

Attend conferences and workshops: Conferences and workshops are an excellent opportunity to network, meet other researchers in your field, and learn about new developments and trends. These events also offer opportunities to present your research and receive feedback from others.

Build relationships with colleagues and supervisors: Building positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors can help you feel connected to a research community. This can also provide opportunities to collaborate on research projects and receive mentorship.

1. Ferguson, T. (2009). The “write” skills and more: A thesis writing group for doctoral students. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 33*, 285-297.
2. Cotterall, S. (2011). Doctoral students writing: where’s the pedagogy?. *Teaching in Higher Education, 16,* 413-425
3. Maher, M., Fallucca, A., & Halasz, H. M. (2013). Write on! through to the Ph.D.: Using writing groups to facilitate doctoral degree progress. *Studies in Continuing Education, 35,* 193-208.

FINANCIAL BURDEN

The average cost of a doctorate in the U.S. is $103,700[4]

Doctoral studies can be expensive, and many candidates struggle to secure funding to support their studies. However, there are various funding opportunities available, including grants and fellowships, that can help ease the financial burden of pursuing a doctorate degree.

Apply for grants and fellowships: Grants and fellowships are some of the most popular sources of funding for doctoral candidates. There are various organizations, foundations, and government agencies that offer these opportunities, so it's worth researching and applying for them.

Seek out university funding: Universities often offer funding opportunities for doctoral candidates, including scholarships, research assistantships, and teaching assistantships. Candidates should check with their department or university's financial aid office to learn about available opportunities.

Network with professionals in the field: Networking can help doctoral candidates learn about funding opportunities that may not be widely advertised. Candidates should attend conferences, join professional organizations, and connect with experts in their field to learn about potential funding opportunities.

Apply for travel grants: Doctoral candidates may need to travel to conferences or conduct fieldwork for their research. Many organizations offer travel grants to support these activities, and candidates should research and apply for them.

4. Hanson, Melanie. “Average Cost of a Doctorate Degree” EducationData.org, December 10, 2022, https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-a-doctorate-degree

PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism can be both a blessing and a curse for doctoral candidates. On one hand, it can drive candidates to produce high-quality work and pursue excellence. On the other hand, perfectionism can also lead to excessive self-criticism, anxiety, and procrastination, which can hinder progress and even lead to burnout.

Recognize the negative effects of perfectionism: The first step in overcoming perfectionism is to recognize its negative effects. Candidates should acknowledge that perfectionism can lead to anxiety, procrastination, and self-doubt, which can interfere with their progress.

Set realistic goals: Perfectionism can be fueled by unrealistic goals and expectations. Set realistic and achievable goals for your research and writing, breaking down larger tasks into smaller, more manageable ones.

Practice self-compassion: Self-compassion is an essential tool for overcoming perfectionism. Candidates should treat themselves with kindness and understanding, acknowledging that making mistakes and experiencing setbacks is a natural part of the learning process.

Embrace imperfection: Perfectionism can be a barrier to progress, as candidates may feel paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes or producing imperfect work. Candidates should learn to embrace imperfection and recognize that mistakes and failures are opportunities for growth and learning.

Practice self-care: Perfectionism can lead to burnout, so it's crucial for candidates to prioritize self-care. This can include getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising regularly, and taking breaks when needed.

> Procrastination is a symptom of perfectionism.

WRITER'S BLOCK

Writer's block can be frustrating and lead to a lack of progress on research and writing. Writer's block can be caused by various factors, including anxiety, fatigue, and a lack of motivation. Try to identify the underlying cause of their writer's block to develop targeted strategies to overcome it.

Set a writing schedule: Setting a regular writing schedule can help you establish a routine and avoid procrastination.Try blocking out specific times for writing when you are most productive, such as early mornings, and commit to this schedule.

Break down tasks into smaller chunks: Writer's block can be overwhelming, especially when working on a large project like a dissertation. Break down tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks, such as writing a paragraph or section at a time.

Use prompts or freewriting exercises: Prompts or freewriting exercises can help stimulate ideas and overcome writer's block. Use prompts, such as "What do I want to say in this section?" or "What evidence do I have to support this argument?" to jumpstart their writing.

Take breaks: Taking regular breaks can help prevent burnout and reduce stress, which can contribute to writer's block. Take breaks every 60-90 minutes to stretch, walk, or engage in other activities to refresh your mind.

Practice mindfulness: Mindfulness techniques, such as deep breathing or meditation, can help calm the mind and reduce anxiety, which can contribute to writer's block. Take a few minutes to practice mindfulness techniques before starting writing.

Seek support: Writer's block can be challenging to overcome alone, and candidates may benefit from seeking support from a writing group, writing coach, or advisor. These resources can provide guidance and support to help you overcome writer's block.

SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between a doctoral candidate and their supervisor is critical to the success of your research. According to researchers, supervision is the most influential factor that impacts doctoral students' experiences.[5] However, managing this relationship can be challenging, especially if the candidate and supervisor have different communication styles, expectations, or working styles.

Establish clear expectations: From the beginning of the relationship, it's essential to establish clear expectations for the project, communication, and work style. Have an open and honest conversation with your supervisor about expectations for the project, including the scope, timeline, and milestones.

Schedule regular meetings: Regular meetings with your supervisor are crucial to keep the project on track and ensure that both parties are on the same page. Should schedule regular meetings with your supervisor, either in person or virtually, to discuss progress, challenges, and next steps.

Communicate effectively: Communication is essential to any successful relationship, and the relationship between a doctoral candidate and supervisor is no exception. Communicate clearly and effectively with your supervisor, asking questions when needed and providing regular updates on your progress.

Manage conflicts effectively: Conflicts may arise between you and your supervisor, and it's essential to manage these conflicts effectively. Address conflicts directly, honestly, and professionally, seeking to find a solution that meets both parties' needs.

Need help managing conflict? Try using the C.A.L.M Approach:

- Clarify the issue
- Address the problem
- Listen to the other side
- Manage your way to resolution

5. Sverdlik, A., Hall, N.C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completing, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 13*, 361–388.

WRITING

Academic writing is a critical component of doctoral research and dissertation writing. However, many doctoral candidates struggle with academic writing, whether it's due to a lack of experience or difficulty in organizing their thoughts and ideas.

Read widely: One of the best ways to improve academic writing is to read widely in your field. Reading widely allows you to gain a better understanding of the conventions and expectations of academic writing, as well as to learn new vocabulary and ideas to integrate into your own writing.

Develop an outline: Before starting to write, develop an outline of your paper or dissertation. An outline helps to organize your thoughts and ideas and to create a logical flow of information. With an outline, you can better understand the structure of your paper and ensure that you're not missing any critical information.

Write regularly: Writing regularly is essential to improving your writing skills. Set aside time each day or week to write, even if it's just for a short period. This will help you to develop a writing habit and to become more comfortable with the writing process.

Get feedback: Getting feedback on your writing is critical to improving your writing skills. Seek feedback from your supervisor, peers, or writing groups to gain perspective on your writing and to identify areas for improvement.

Edit and revise: Editing and revising are crucial components of the writing process. Once you've completed a draft, take time to review and revise your work. This will help you to improve the clarity, organization, and coherence of your writing.

Use writing resources: There are many resources available to help improve academic writing skills, such as writing workshops, online courses, and writing manuals. Take advantage of these resources to learn new writing techniques and strategies.

PUBLISHING

Doctoral candidates often face significant challenges when it comes to publishing their research. Whether it's due to a lack of experience, limited resources, or difficulty navigating the publishing process, publishing can be a daunting task.

Develop a publishing strategy: Before you begin publishing your research, develop a publishing strategy. Determine the types of publications that are most appropriate for your research, and identify the journals, publishers, and conferences that are relevant to your field.

Follow submission guidelines: To increase your chances of success, it's essential to follow the submission guidelines of the journals, publishers, or conferences that you're targeting. Ensure that your manuscript adheres to the formatting, length, and style guidelines, and that you include all necessary components, such as a cover letter, abstract, and references.

Address reviewer comments: Once you've submitted your manuscript, you may receive feedback from reviewers. Address these comments carefully, taking into account the reviewers' perspectives and feedback. Use their feedback to improve the quality of your research and to increase your chances of acceptance.

Promote your research: Once your research has been published, promote it through social media, professional networks, and other channels. Share your research with colleagues, collaborators, and mentors, and use the publication as a springboard for future research.

Seek mentorship: Seeking mentorship from senior researchers in your field can help you to navigate the publishing process and to develop your publishing skills. Identify potential mentors by attending conferences, networking with colleagues, and joining professional organizations.

MENTAL HEALTH

Doctoral programs are highly demanding and can be mentally and emotionally taxing. Doctoral candidates must balance coursework, research, and personal life, which can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Seek support: The first step in managing mental health challenges is to seek support. Reach out to friends, family, or a therapist to talk about your feelings and experiences. Universities also offer mental health services to students, so consider what options might be available at your university before paying for outside support.

Manage time effectively: Time management is crucial in a doctoral program, but it can also be a powerful tool in managing mental health. Plan your schedule in advance, set clear goals, and prioritize tasks. Make sure to take breaks and give yourself time for relaxation and self-care.

Stay active: Exercise is an excellent way to manage stress and anxiety. Regular physical activity can improve mood and increase energy levels. Consider integrating physical activity into your daily routine, whether it's going for a walk or practicing yoga.

Practice mindfulness: Mindfulness practices, such as meditation or deep breathing, can help manage stress and anxiety. Take a few minutes each day to practice mindfulness and focus on the present moment.

Connect with peers: Connecting with peers can be a great way to feel supported and reduce feelings of isolation. Consider joining a student group, attending conferences, or participating in other networking opportunities.

Take a break: Doctoral programs can be all-consuming, but taking a break can be beneficial for mental health. Plan a vacation or weekend getaway to disconnect from academic work and recharge.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Enrolling in a PhD program is a significant investment of time and energy. Doctoral candidates often find themselves working long hours, attending classes, conducting research, and fulfilling other responsibilities, making it challenging to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Create a schedule: Creating a schedule is critical to achieving work-life balance. Allocate specific times for work and leisure activities, and stick to your schedule as much as possible. This will help you to prioritize your time and ensure that you're not overworking yourself.

Take breaks: Taking breaks is essential for maintaining focus and productivity. Plan regular breaks throughout the day to recharge and refresh your mind. Go for a walk, exercise, or spend time with friends and family to help you relax and maintain a positive mindset.

Set boundaries: Set clear boundaries between your work and personal life. Avoid working during your leisure time and resist the temptation to check your emails or respond to work-related tasks outside of work hours. Setting boundaries will help you to maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life.

Learn to say no: It's essential to learn to say no to additional responsibilities that might interfere with your work-life balance. Be mindful of your priorities and don't take on too much work that could lead to burnout.

Practice self-care: Practicing self-care is essential to maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Take care of your physical and mental health by exercising regularly, eating a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, and seeking mental health support when necessary.

Find joy in your work: Pursuing a PhD is a significant achievement, and it's essential to enjoy the journey. Celebrate your accomplishments, take pride in your work, and remember that your hard work and dedication will pay off in the end.

HOW WE CAN HELP

Proposal Development

Our coaches can help you conceptualize your research, write your literature review, design your study, and develop your IRB application.

Qualitative Data Analysis & Statistical Consulting

Our qualitative methodologists and statisticians will guide you through the process of managing and analyzing data, reporting and interpreting results/findings, and developing conclusions.

Professional Editing

Our editors are APA experts and highly skilled in academic writing. Our team will answer questions and help you through those last tedious hurdles of writing your dissertation so you can finish on time.

Dissertation by Design®

We are defined by what we desire, not what we know.
- James K.A. Smith

Thank you for taking the time to download and read this guide! I hope you are able to implement these strategies and, ultimately, graduate.