

Introduction

Welcome to *Writing Your Doctoral Dissertation or Thesis Faster: A Proven Map to Success*. This book has developed over the last five years as we have worked with doctoral candidates, helping them through defense of proposal and on through their research to defending their final dissertation or thesis. Throughout those long journeys, we have blundered, watched some students fail, and ended up asking ourselves, how do we make this process better? How can we make it shorter? What can we do to make defense easier? What causes unnecessary delays? How could we have avoided that disaster? This book is our current best thinking on the subject, interwoven with research from others on the topic. We are also grateful to those professionals who helped us as we wrote through the peer-review process. Together, we believe this book will help all doctoral candidates move a little easier through the dissertation or, as they say in Europe, thesis, and on to graduation.

This book is written with voices from two points of view, Alana, who has mentored doctoral students, and Tracesea, who has a professional research background and who helps students on our website at DoctoralNet.com, but who has not yet begun a dissertation or thesis of her own. Throughout the book, we speak from time to time in our own voices so that our reader has an increased sense of the humanity involved in the dissertation process. We start off now with personal notes.



E. Alana James

I regularly tell students that writing your dissertation is a rite of passage, something I realized as a result of reading R. R. Clark's 1983 article "The Dissertation as a Rite of Passage" in The American Journal of Evaluation when I was in your shoes. Doing doctoral level dissertation research is unlike anything most of you have faced before. I tell the students I work with that you have to take off your professional hat and put on the hat of a researcher. It is a treat to work in our own minds and see our critical analysis of the topic beloved to us develop. It also changes the way we see the world. I remember, and my recent graduates remind me, that you are also much more aware of what claims you have made and whether or not these are backed by data. This process will give you an assuredness in the world of how to approach difficult decisions and master strategic challenges in a way no other process can.

A dissertation or thesis (depending on where you live in the world and what your university calls it) requires discipline as well as endurance and will test you in ways you cannot yet imagine. Yet, without having run that gauntlet and having finished my doctorate, I could not live the life I live nor write the book,

or be the professional that I am. Therefore, I start off by wishing you all the best. May you find the communities you need to support your process, and whenever it is so difficult that you cannot believe you have the strength to go forward, may you find the inner resilience you need to do so. We write this book, and we support students through our business at doctoralnet.com because we personally believe that while extremely difficult, a doctoral level degree should be available to anyone who is willing to undergo the personal and professional transformation it requires. Keep at it. Perseverance and forthright dedication to the goal of finishing is required.

*Cheers,
Alana*



Tracesea H. Slater

At the time of this writing, I have my master's degree in sociology but have not started my doctoral degree. As second author of this book, I will be keeping tabs on how well we are writing for those who may not be familiar with or are just starting the doctoral journey. I hope that my lack of experience will help me to ensure that the information presented here is accessible to all, no matter what your doctoral experience may be so far. I anticipate that my questions and confusion will also be yours, so I'll do my best to make sure those questions are answered and your path is clear.

I have been working as a technical assistant and editor at doctoralnet.com for several years with Alana, and my favorite part of this job has been seeing the transformation that doctoral students go through. I have lived vicariously through their struggles and frustrations and watched them come out victorious on the other side. It is wonderful to hear stories of success and triumph from students as they earn their PhDs. One of the most exciting and inspiring things has been hearing about the new doors that have been opened for our students as they become doctors. As Alana said, getting your doctorate is a rite of passage, and I would add that it is also a pathway to new beginnings and increased opportunities. While completing your dissertation, you get a chance to really explore yourself and your capabilities. When you finish, you see a world of external experiences is now available for you to delve into.

I sincerely wish you the best of journeys, and may endless exciting possibilities await you on the other side. I'll see you there!

*Cheers,
Tracesea*

Questions Answered in This Section

1. I have friends that have been at this for years, what is the best way to ensure I finish faster?
2. How is this book laid out?
3. What is the easiest way to use it?

Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small. A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

– Lao Tzu

Speed Versus Quality: Efficiency or Sacrifice?

One of our reviewer's on this book asked whether finishing faster was the goal? We think that you, like the doctoral students we work with, would answer, yes! That being said, your professors might not agree but would challenge that the quality of work is the more important goal. This tension is understandable, and fortunately we have designed with both in mind.

You are likely a mature individual juggling a full life of responsibilities: work, children, taking care of aging parents, and other complexities. It is natural that you may feel stress and will be happy when no more of your time goes to studying. Professors likely graduated in the time when it was expected for their dissertation work to proceed over the course of many years. With that experience comes the belief that some of the maturity in thinking and understanding cannot be rushed. It is your responsibility to manage this process. To this end, you will see that in Chapter 1, we have included a section about time management. Hints and steps are presented to help your work be more efficient. Additional aid is included in pullouts throughout the book that are cross-referenced in the index.

On the other hand, we assume that most of you also would like to complete outstanding work. To this end, in Parts II and III we regularly discuss the qualities we have found in our mini meta-analysis comparing typical dissertations from the universities where we work to outstanding ones that have won awards all over the world.

Do You Want to Finish Faster?



How fast can I finish?

Alana says: *Perhaps when you entered graduate school you were told by your university that it is possible to earn your doctoral degree in three years. The wise student would ask, "What percentage of your students actually graduate in three years?" From my own experience and that of my students, graduating in three years is possible but difficult.*

We believe that you can finish your dissertation faster without sacrificing quality, but it's not likely to be easy. You will be up against several challenges. In our experience, some of the biggest obstacles include maintaining focus and persistence to reach your ultimate goal, finishing your research. Here are some ideas on how you can work through these challenges and achieve success.

Book Layout and Use

The purpose of this book is to give you, the doctoral candidate anywhere in the world, a comprehensive yet easy-to-follow map through the dissertation process. The authors' goal is to help you finish your degree. Because this is a large task, this book will lay out a map with three basic sections. These give you the basics and then suggest other sources to consider for the depth you will need in order to complete the work. The first section—designing your work prior to writing—is the longest.

Pragmatic in its intent and writing, the treatment for the book is practical, building on years of expertise as to what causes the dissertation process to stall or fail; not taking enough time, energy, and thought to the design is large on that list. While a restatement of existing knowledge, the fact that we have developed a map format helps illustrate the information in a new way.

Why does the planning, coupled with the proposal writing, take the majority of the book? We have found that the process is easier start to finish with this quality of care up front. Think of it in terms of inertia: You may not have done any research prior to this. Therefore, the start will feel like pushing a large ball up a mountain. By the time you have your research designed and proposal written, inertia works for you rather than against you, and the rest usually goes more easily. Nevertheless, there is one more push needed as you analyze the data you have collected and finish writing it all up. Therefore, unlike many texts, we spend some time in the last few chapters with those topics as well.

We have found that the ways in which universities approach the student's dissertation or thesis process generally follow variations on one of two themes. In the United States, as an example, students are usually required to do quite a bit of design work prior to asking for permission to do research. The proposal in this case is tight, methodologically correct, and no one can proceed without passing rigorous tests of that logic. On the other end of the continuum are countries (such as the United Kingdom) where students only need a general idea of their topic, some substantial amount of understanding of the context in literature, and an idea of how they will proceed. As a document from Cambridge University described it, "A research proposal is not a PhD." In this model you do not need to have all your ideas worked out or even enough concrete ideas to make a thesis, "just be able to give an indication that you know how to take the first steps" (Koprowski, 1972, p. 10). We have spoken with students in China, Nigeria, and Mexico, and all are working on some variation of these strategies. Nevertheless, the topics and logics that underlie the strategy of this book have been proven to be helpful to all. Following are two variations as to how to proceed, based upon these differences.

Please note: For the sake of ease of language, we adhere to U.S. spelling, language about research, and grammatical styles. When we have found tensions between these ideas and the successful completion of students on other continents, we describe the range of options dependent on our readers' context.

Design for the United States and the Countries Who Use That Model



Figure 1 The United States and many other countries require significant design work prior to asking for permission to do research.

Source: Brand X Pictures/Brand X Pictures/Thinkstock

There are three main sections in this book: **Part I: Designing Your Dissertation or Doctoral Thesis** deals with the concepts, ideas, and issues you must face before you do too much writing. Chapters 2 through 4 cover the three basic topics for consideration as you start: topic, literature, and methodology. Chapter 2 focuses on topic but introduces the considerations in tying it together with literature and methodology. Chapter 3 focuses on literature and helps you address what you have learned, musing about the logic of the proposal you will write and writing your research questions. Chapter 4 focuses on all the considerations of research design, including how these affect your thoughts on literature and topic. By the time you have finished the first section (and all the literature you will need to read) you will have a solid proposal in mind and will be ready to write. **Part II: Writing and Defending Your Proposal** covers standards of academic writing and what are generally the first three chapters of a finished dissertation or thesis. Each is covered in some depth with checklists, probable headings, and the types of material you will be responsible to know. Finally, **Part III: Finding/Conclusions and Writing Your Final Dissertation or Thesis** lightly covers data collection and analysis issues while focusing on the troubles you face when writing your last two chapters and preparing final defense prior to graduation.

If you are just starting your dissertation process, then follow the map from the beginning. If you have collected literature, have a methodology in mind, and are writing a proposal, skim over all of Part I just to make sure there are no basic concepts you have missed and start with Part II. You will find the headings and subheadings in the table of contents useful to you as you catch up on the subtleties of the dissertation/thesis process that may still cause confusion or difficulty. If you have your data collected and you live in the United States, then we assume you have also your first three chapters in draft form from your proposal and you start with Part III. In all cases, since topic, literature, and methodology are covered throughout the book, as you delve into them again and again throughout the development of your dissertation/thesis, we expect that the index will be of great use in finding what you are looking for. Finally, if you are in a university working on the European model, then you may have your data collected but still be very unsure of methodology and a formal lit review, and we would suggest you read through Part I and II prior to moving to Part III.

This book will give you a solid map to follow through the spiral process following the most usual dissertation or thesis format. We assume you will write five chapters in total. An introduction to your study, a review of literature, and a methodology comprise what we usually call the proposal. After you gain permission and collect and analyze your data, you write the fourth chapter that is a neutral overview of your findings and then the fifth that is your conclusion. While this book includes some explanation of research methodology, it is not to be relied on as a research text. We will, however, refer you onward through the Where to Go to Dig Deeper? sections in each chapter. Other thesis and dissertation forms and styles are discussed in Chapter 1, and we believe that most of the map can still be followed with some restructuring required when you superimpose the guidelines from your university.

Finally, we have come to believe that the sooner you write your methodology chapter the better in terms of long-term efficiency and success. This flies in the face of much of what is written and is based upon the assumption that you will do all the prep work in Part I before you start to write. Should your advisor or university insist you do your review of literature first, we do not disagree but suggest you read our chapter on the methodological choices you need to make, set a firm logic (see Chapter 4), and then proceed in the way that suits you best and also meets the requirements under which you work.

Design for the United Kingdom and the Countries Who Use That Model



Figure 2 Students in the United Kingdom or other countries following this model may need less concrete design work prior to starting.

Source: George Doyle/Stockbyte/Thinkstock

If you proceeded to collect data and to work with your advisor to advance your study prior to pinning down some of these concepts you may be in a position of retrofitting your reality to some of the logics described in this book. A good place to start may be a discussion with your advisor as to where your university and committee stand on the continuum from requiring a positivist versus a postmodern structure (see Chapter 5 for a definition of these terms and an outline of their parameters). Part I outlines all the basic sections of any research design, regardless of the methodological requirements of your particular study, and has proven to be helpful to students everywhere in understanding how the parts go together. Likewise, Part III is a discussion of data analysis, findings, and conclusions, and we find that students find it helpful as it sets standards that they can use as a measure of their own work. Part II is written with a standard of rigor in mind, and while not all students will need to have

their work mirror this level of detail, they find that it is easier to consciously know what might be required and be allowed to leave it out rather than to not have an idea of the road map for writing. Finally, students who need to write a 10 to 20 page proposal early on may enjoy the detail in Part II as guidance for the ideas they might consider.



Figure 3 This book is designed to be useful for students going for all types of doctorate degrees.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/zhudifeng

Designed for Multiple Types of Doctorate

This book is not just for PhDs! We have found that online and in social networks all doctoral students will converse under the heading of PhD, even when their degree may be an EdD for education majors, a DM for doctors of management, and so forth. We work with all types and requirements for doctoral work, from architects to social scientists, from educators to business people, for students who will be doctors working in all branches of business, from the public sector, the nonprofit or nongovernmental sectors, and into business. If and to the extent that research is required prior to graduation, you should find this book helpful to your process through to graduation.

Your First Challenge: Focusing on the Real Goal

These three tips should help.

Tip 1: Be Clear on the Reason You Are Starting and Why You Want to Finish

You may have entered the doctoral world for many reasons. You may want increased status in your community, you might see it as a terminal degree on a path you have traveling for a long time, or you might have concrete goals (frequently for some kind of advancement in your career). The reason you start and the reason you need to finish are often two separate things.



Alana says: In my case, the place in which I was employed clearly valued people with that degree. You could say I started because of a desire to be valued more in my work. By the time I was moving towards the defense of my proposal two years later, I had a very different goal. I was on the path to moving to Ireland and that mattered more than anything I had ever wanted. I wanted it so badly that NOTHING was going to stand in my way. That turned out to be very helpful, because, although Columbia tells students they can graduate in three years, no one in my program ever had. To say I was pushing a boat upstream to get it done is an understatement.

So why do you want to finish your degree? All of my students now agree that they want to finish, but those who take complete ownership of their own process have the greatest likelihood of getting it done. Why? Because it is the center of their focus, and they put constant and consistent effort towards completing the tasks at hand while looking ahead and sorting through roadblocks before they occur.

Tip 2: Be Aware of the Journey and Plan Ahead

You wouldn't go on a long journey without plotting your route ahead of time or programming your GPS. Also, while driving you would begin to look for the next gas station once you noticed your tank was below a quarter full. In a similar fashion, as a doctoral student you are responsible for your own path through the university, the defense of your proposal, your research, and then your final defense. Too many of my students put the responsibility on the university and never look ahead; this only slows them down and frustrates them.

What kind of roadblocks should you be aware of? Universities are conservative organizations. They do things in a certain way over and over and over again. Therefore, every step that involves permissions or requires other people to read your work ends up creating somewhere between two weeks and a month time lag. This is not an environment where, just because you are ready, they will help you to move on. From the university's point of view, too much is at stake. Research that is

done under their auspices and is not well carried out could lead to liability issues. Researchers are ethically bound to proceed only after careful review. These roadblocks are put in place to protect others. Other times, you may rely on professors who are very busy and their time is not organized around the reading of dissertations, and so your work gets put on the back burner, and you wait for a while for feedback.

Be clear on the reason you are starting and why you want to finish

Speaking of feedback, assume that your work will be torn apart and you will have to practically start over. If this is your assumption, when it happens you will not be dismayed and will not suffer from extended lack of motivation because of harsh criticism. If it doesn't happen, feel lucky.

Too many go into a dissertation as though it was merely another assignment, and since you are generally good at school, you may assume your assignment will deserve good feedback. A dissertation is held to high outside standards and is nothing like any work you have done before. Sometimes your initial guidance about what to expect is weak, but even when it is strong, you still will not know what you are doing and may face serious rewrites.

Tip 3: Start Working on Your Dissertation as Soon as You Start at Your University



Alana says: When I started a good friend of mine suggested that I had been in school a month and was therefore a month behind on my dissertation already. It was so shocking I still remember it, and she was right; it's a long process and you can't start too soon.

It seems ludicrous, but in order to finish in three years you really must think about what your personal research will be from the time you get started. The work that makes a graduate a doctor, the task that is the rite of passage is the dissertation, and it demonstrates the ability to do personal research. This requires that you understand research methodology, you know how to phrase a question so it is researchable, you know how to collect and analyze data, and you can build a study that is valid and reliable. No matter what you are taught in your coursework, it is those skills that get you through to graduation. Don't lose sight of this fact.

Realize that no matter how good your university is in helping you define and work through your research practice, they cannot possibly tell you everything. In a nutshell, your advisor does not know what you don't know until you deliver a document that clearly shows your misunderstandings. Therefore, additional work on what goes into a dissertation, how they are written, how others describe each part of the process, and so forth will be well worth your time. I highly recommend you start early and read books on writing dissertations. In a similar fashion, find outside help. For instance, we run a website that offers guidance on all of the steps; other websites offer editing, statistical help, and support groups. All are good resources. Go look now for the help you need so that it will be there for you throughout the process.

Your Second Challenge: Endurance

A large percentage of doctoral students drop out or stall completely on the way to their defense of the proposal. This generally happens after they have stopped taking courses but before they are allowed to collect data. And on the other side of the same coin, several challenges cause people to fail the final hurdle once data are collected.

Unlike the other degrees you have finished, your doctoral thesis or dissertation requires a long body of independent work. It may be 100 or more pages when done, fully equal to a short book on your research. Along the journey many will offer, often without mincing words or being particularly nice, strong criticism and feedback. We recommend that from the very beginning you take on this challenge as though you were beginning to take on an endurance challenge for which you need to prepare at every juncture.

To avoid these traps keep the following tips in mind.

Tip 1: Your Relationship With Your Advisor Is Important

Prepare from the first and develop a great working relationship with your advisor, where you lead the conversations and keep the ball moving, but be prepared that you will get signals that cause you to stop and reconsider. Remember that the timeline you have in your head is not made of stone. Being persistent and flexible will help you to manage this important relationship.

Tip 2: Keep Emotions Out of Dissertation Relationships

Many people will say many critical things about your work as you go. You have to trust that they are doing so out of a concern that you can improve your work. Have a failsafe group in your home environment or personal life to whom you cry out your disappointment. Practice taking hard criticism without becoming defensive. As mentioned before, online support groups can be a great way to vent your frustrations and find a sympathetic shoulder to cry on.

Remember, when you have your degree it means that your university believes you to be a peer with all the doctors that have come before you. Think of those in your field whom you admire most—in education, John Dewey; in business, Chris Argyris or whoever is most frequently quoted in your particular field of interest. What does it take to be a peer with that person? This is the road you are on.



Figure 4 Developing a great working relationship with your advisor from the very beginning will be beneficial to your success.

Source: Photos.com/Thinkstock

Graduation Statistics

Across all the disciplines, on average and in most parts of the world, about 50% who complete all or most of their coursework or begin their thesis do not complete and graduate (Cyranoski, Gilbert, & Ledford, 2011; Kildea, Barclay, Wardaguga, & Dawumal, 2009). This is called “all but dissertation” or ABD. These are mentioned here, not to discourage but rather to toughen resolve. Maybe you have experienced some of this attrition. At the dissertation/thesis level, it is much more dramatic. The longer people take, the more likely they won’t finish. The statistics vary on how long it takes on average for doctoral candidates to graduate, but we do know that business majors tend to be the group that finish fastest, with education majors lagging to as much as nine years before they graduate.

Of course, “life gets in the way,” and many who are slower to graduate do so because of divorce, death in the family, raising children, changing jobs, and so forth. Every life transition brings with it a huge potential for dropping out of the race to finish. Life challenges cannot be underestimated as a reason many do not finish. One resource presents a very convincing set of data outlining percentages of students who continue, opt out, or graduate. The norm is that, while as little as 3% graduate in three years, 12% have made it by five, and as the time lengthens to ten years in the humanities fields 49% graduate, 32% opt out, and 19% continue (Single, 2009).

Quick Note to Professors (Our Delimiters)

We realize that as this book goes to press, most universities in the United States still teach the sequence of writing a doctoral dissertation or thesis in a linear fashion. We feel strongly that this sequence leads to consistent challenges, the two most egregious being a review of literature that does not adequately support methodology and an introductory chapter that is hard to read and does not set the study (or the professor reader) up for success. We have seen, as have the professors in Europe and around the world who teach a focus on methodology as the core of the work, once the topic is defined and understood and the student knows “where they are going” and have their methodological design in place, their work and writing tighten accordingly.

Nevertheless, this book can easily be used by professors who teach the sequence in any order, as all approaches work when aided by a relationship that helps make the total logic clear. We have taken care that no matter in what order you teach the development of the chapters, your students will be able to start with that chapter and move through the sequence as you order the exercises.

What all readers and committees are concerned with and what we have tried to stress as we have written this text is that the doctoral candidate has developed a “golden thread” or cohesive argument throughout the design, implementation, and completion of their work. Where those threads develop, how they are laid out, and so forth is as obvious to those of us who have been doing this a long time as it is mysterious to our students. This book developed as we found ways to shine light on those dark places, and while for us that includes the focus on the development of methodology earlier in the sequence than some find comfortable, we understand it is not the only way to move forward that works and have tried to adequately accommodate both points of view.

Also please note that we do not advocate the use of any particular style manual, as we are writing for an international audience. While APA is common in the United States, the United Kingdom uses Harvard, and so forth; as well, many universities override all styles with their own considerations for publication. We have tried to suggest a middle ground between the common characteristics of style requirements in the writing and sending the doctoral candidate back to the specific rules of their university.

Features and Benefits

Distinct approaches to each chapter in this book include

- Use of an underlying map structure to guide you step-by-step through the dissertation process. A feature of this map is that you progress through the design phase in a nonlinear fashion, taking topic, literature, and research design into account together. The benefit of this “spiral” pattern of growth is that you develop an innate sense of how these elements are related—allowing you to build defensible logic early in the process.
- Chapter headings in the form of questions guide your understanding. The benefit is to help you find things easily once you have moved on from that section.
- Pages designed to enhance content for the visual learner.
- Pullouts and quotations that highlight important and interesting material, telling you stories of other student experiences and giving you tips to consider.
- Chapters that start with a list of the questions to be addressed from your point of view as a student. They help you prepare for the information you will learn about in that chapter and to quickly find topics of interest as you review.
- Checklists at the end of each chapter that help you check to make sure that you absorbed all the material presented and also allow you to bypass what you already know.
- Photographs and short paragraph stories that illuminate processes and let you see that the difficulties you are facing are within the norm. You are not alone!
- Illustrations used to demonstrate content and help explain concepts and processes.
- Additional resources that send you off to other locations to dig deeper into content areas while exercises and reflective questions give you personal experiences to test your understanding.

Taken together we intend that this book can be followed step-by-step in order but is also easy to leaf through to find “just the part you are looking for.”

Ancillaries

As with previous books, ancillary materials including but not limited to PowerPoint slides developed for each chapter will be made publicly available through the author’s websites and at www.sagepub.com/jamesdiss.

Questions and Checklists

Questions that will be answered in each chapter are listed at the beginning of that chapter. Checklists that you can use as a self-assessment will be found at the end. These are intended to help you move quickly to the exact information you need and to monitor your growth and understanding as you move through the process. Completing the checklists at the end of each chapter will not only keep you on track toward your goal, but can give you a sense of accomplishment as you make progress!

On your way now—it's time to begin!

All the best for a smooth yet exhilarating dissertation or thesis process,

Alana and Tracesea