

PREPARING FOR THE DISSERTATION & THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

*Your dissertation is the last work of your graduate apprenticeship
and the first step of your scholarly career.*

The best dissertation is a finished dissertation.

Make it “good enough.”

I. Identify Your Topic-Subject-Question.

The time to identify your dissertation topic is well before your comprehensive examinations. The best students identify a general area of research interest by the time they complete their MA coursework and use their choices during PhD coursework to build a research base that will be useful for the dissertation. During the first two years of graduate school (MA work), while students focus on *developing a core body of knowledge* in the field and *understanding methodological approaches*, students in Russian literature should think about what period they want to work in, which writer or work interests them the most, which themes or genres or aesthetic theories they find most appealing, which methodologies are appropriate to their interests. Students in linguistics should determine whether they find diachronic or synchronic questions more appealing, whether they are interested in a single Slavic language or a range of Slavic languages for comparative and contrastive studies, and which specific schools of thought they wish to pursue.

During the first two semesters of PhD course work, students *must* actively seek a dissertation topic in collaboration with their advisor. It is the advisor's obligation not to provide you with a topic, but to assist you in refining and focussing a topic of interest to you. Students must explore beyond the texts required for courses, investigate works cited in interesting footnotes, browse the library stacks (whether physically or virtually), search databases, and *read, read, read*. That way, students are prepared to direct their Ph.D. course work to enhance future dissertation work. Professors are more likely to offer specific courses or to approve tutorials and special readings for students with focussed academic agendas.

Advance planning is appropriate for a second reason as well: writing the best dissertation will probably entail going outside the department and developing an important minor field or doing additional theoretical study. This takes time and planning, and is best done before the comprehensive examinations, not after. Students who know their probable topic or area can use the courses they choose for their minor field to explore potential dissertation research topics or even to do preliminary dissertation research, cutting down on the time it will take to complete the dissertation itself. Given current emphasis on interdisciplinarity, additional capacity in religious studies, philosophy, history, cinema studies, a second Slavic literature and culture, or other relevant fields round out your profile and make you more attractive as a job search candidate. If you are in the linguistics track, the ability to teach culture, folklore, or general literary surveys is a bonus if you

look for a position in a Slavic department; a minor (or more) in general linguistics is useful if your job goals are broader.

The dissertation topic you finally select should be one of great interest to you. If you are planning an academic career that will involve a serious research agenda, do not choose a topic because you think that it is a) fashionable, or b) what potential employers will want, or c) easy, so that you can finish it quickly and get on with your career. Your dissertation represents your first *really* major investment in time, research, hard thought, and hard writing; it is the first lengthy piece of serious research you will undertake (seminar papers pale in comparison with the dissertation). You will amass a huge amount of information on your topic, and you will spend a great deal of time thinking about it. Because of the enormous investment in information collection and effort that the dissertation represents, it has traditionally become the fountainhead of the larger, lifetime research plan of most scholars. So: choose a subject you can live with for a very long time, a subject that has many permutations and directions for future development. You will not have the time during your assistant professor years to develop and research a whole new field of inquiry, so do it right the first time. This does not mean you are locked into this topic forever; you will naturally develop other research directions later in your career, but they will build on the interests and data base you develop now.

Once you have a general topic for your dissertation, you are by no means finished: in fact, you are just beginning. Inside your general topic is a particular subject waiting to escape, and inside that subject is a specific research question to which you really want an answer. Demonstrating the importance of that question and providing a reasonable answer is, in fact, the purpose of your dissertation. Here is an example from the literary field:

Select the Topic: 19th Century Russian realism and its philosophical/religious underpinnings.

During the MA course work you have discovered that you prefer the realists of the second half of the 19th century to the medieval writers, the neo-classicists, the romantics, the symbolists, the avant-garde, or the social realists; you feel comfortable in the period; you like the style; realism suits your sense of what literature should do; you prefer prose genres to poetic or other genres; you have an interest in the history of ideas.

Extract a Specific Subject: Tolstoi and his interest in Buddhism

You conclude that Tolstoi is your man; he fascinates you because of some unusual aspects of his development as a realist writer, specifically his selective but on-going interest in Buddhism. Usually it is Romantics who are interested in Buddhism, not realists. So what is going on here? Is there a particular work that will help you to “measure” and document the impact of Buddhist thought on Tolstoi?

Ask a Particular Question: And so you arrive at your question/s: How did Tolstoi become interested in Buddhism and what did he take from it, and why? How is his interest in Buddhist thought reflected in Tolstoi's later work, specifically *Confession* and/or *Resurrection*?

Strategy Leading up to the Process: Focus post-MA course work on the great realists (while taking other courses that add to your breadth):

- Take courses in European realism outside the department; get a context;
- Read theoretical and critical literature to help you really understand what realism is;
- Read all the great Russian realists (courses on some, tutorials and independent work on others);

- Develop a minor in religion/philosophy, take survey and specialty courses; learn about Buddhism;
- Work on developing your specific subject: which realists, which works are particularly interesting? Why are they interesting? What kind of philosophy is attractive?
- Start running some ideas past your peers and past appropriate faculty members;
- Start “auditioning” faculty for the role of your dissertation director;
- Learn what has already been done on your topic. Investigate the secondary literature on Russian realism; what appeals? what questions arise in the secondary literature? What is unanswered, but intriguing?
- Start compiling a detailed bibliography on the subject;
- Where possible, write course papers on realism, realist genres, realist writers, impact of philosophy on literature; investigate specific works in detail.

You are not alone in this strategizing process. Select an appropriate faculty advisor as soon as you have some idea of your general topic. Then you should regularly discuss your interests, possible topics, and subjects for further exploration with that advisor. You may need to discuss your thinking with more than one faculty member (this is encouraged); you may also get good input from student colleagues senior to you. Get as many “takes” on your thinking as you can. You should have a conversation about where you are going with your advisor at least once a semester, as you refine your own ideas of what you want to do. By the way, it is up to *you* to initiate contact: make an appointment with your advisor or another faculty member (outside the department, if appropriate) and talk about what interests you and how you can get a dissertation topic out of it. Feedback is important at every step of your thinking.

Do not be surprised or distressed if you change your mind about your topic and question more than once. Many factors may play a role in the final decision: your interests may change and grow; previous researchers may have beat you to the Big Idea; you may find something new and very exciting and decide to pursue it instead of your first idea; you may come to understand that you posited your initial question incorrectly; you may find a more interesting question inside your original question. This process of ideation is one of the more exciting aspects of scholarship, and you should be open to the growth of your ideas. Do not strait-jacket yourself. When you look back on the process, you will discover that it was, after all, *organic*. Your goal is to find a research topic you will enjoy working on for a very long time.

If you approach course planning, completing the minor, and regular consultation with your faculty mentor casually; if you have not discussed your career track with your advisor and your student colleagues from the very beginning of your graduate work, then you have not actively participated in your education and should perhaps think about other career options. This process is hard work.

II. Check the Secondary Literature and *ProQuest*.

As you and your advisor/dissertation director work toward a clear statement of your dissertation question, you need to make sure someone else has not already answered it. Presumably you have been compiling a bibliography on the larger subject area all along and know what sources have already addressed some aspect of your question. You also need to scan the *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* database to make sure that someone else has not already written an unpublished dissertation on your question. Scanning *ProQuest (Dissertation Abstracts)* can be useful; you will run across some titles that could become important source

materials for your own study (the Slavic Librarian can obtain these and other works for you;¹ more recent ones can be read on or downloaded from the database). If a book or dissertation on your question has already been written, you need to read it, rethink your question, and develop another angle.

III. Choose a Dissertation Director and Set up the Dissertation Committee.

After you receive preliminary approval of your topic-subject-question from your advisor/dissertation director, you may go ahead and establish a dissertation committee. You will need three additional graduate faculty and one faculty member from outside the department, representing the graduate school. If you did a minor outside the department and the content of that minor contributes to your dissertation, then your minor advisor should also be added to your committee. All members of your committee should be members in good standing of the KU Graduate Faculty as defined by the Graduate School. Go to see each one individually, tell them about your project, and invite them to serve on your committee.

Each dissertation director, like each dissertation writer, will have his or her own areas of expertise, methodological preferences, and approach to your project. The fact that faculty members have a variety of working styles, specializations, academic philosophies, preferred methodologies, strengths, weaknesses, and eccentricities makes it imperative that you identify the mentor with whom you can work most effectively. That is why it is important to get to know all of the faculty members in your department and to interact with them from the start of your graduate career. Your mentor should not only have significant expertise in your area of interest, but should also have a compatible working style.

At a minimum, you need to determine the following in consultation with your dissertation director:

- Who should be on your committee and why? how can their expertise help you write a better dissertation? Your dissertation will be improved if every member of your committee has something to contribute to its success.
- How would your dissertation advisor like you to approach the proposal, or prospectus?
- How often will you meet with your advisor, and for what purposes (tracking, prodding, feedback, sympathy, whining, handholding)?
- Should everyone see chapters as you write, or should you work exclusively with your director or with the director (first reader) and the second reader until you have a penultimate draft, and then share that with the whole committee preparatory to defense?
- Will your dissertation director allow you to defend the penultimate draft, or must you have the entire project completed in order to defend?
- When are institutional submission deadlines for award of degree?
- What rules and regulations of the KU Graduate Studies Office must you meet prior to deposit?

Clearing these issues up at the start of your project will make your dissertation project move more quickly and effectively.

¹ The Slavic Librarians are your colleagues. As you embark on your dissertation (or any other) research, visit the Slavic Department in the library and make sure that the Slavic librarians know your topic and interest areas. That way they will acquire new materials of interest to you and bring important items you may have missed to your attention. They are pros at tracking down information and resources and can help with research strategies and database control. They are employed to help you achieve your research goals.

IV. Get a Grip on KU Research and Graduate School Studies Instructions.

Go to <<http://www.graduate.ku.edu/~etd/>> and bookmark it on your computer. This is the official dissertation instruction site for KU. Read all of the information. Plan to attend one of the RGS workshops for dissertators (usually held in the spring semester). The final act of the dissertation drama is to submit your dissertation electronically, and this site gives you detailed instructions on how to do this. Know what these requirements are before you begin the writing process. Writing will be easier if you know what the final product should look like when you prepare it for submission. Deal with the details from the very beginning, instead of adding editing to your list of things to do at the end. Jot down any questions you may have for your dissertation director and ask him or her at the first opportunity.

V. Prepare an Abstract/Prospectus of the Dissertation for Approval by the Department's Graduate Committee.

After you have consulted with your dissertation director, established the lines of responsibility, had your research question deemed acceptable and had it provisionally approved by your director, checked it against existing literature and *ProQuest*, tentatively selected a dissertation committee, and familiarized yourself with the process of submission, you must prepare an abstract, or **prospectus**, for approval by the SLL Department's Graduate Committee (which consists of all departmental graduate faculty, tenured and tenure-track). This step is important, since the Graduate School will approve your topic and committee **only upon recommendation of the Department**, and the Department will recommend you only after reading and approving your prospectus.

The abstract should do the following things, not necessarily in the order given:

- Be no less than 20 pages in length (*sans* bibliography; the exact length and format is negotiable with your dissertation advisor and depends on your research question);
- State your question, describe its context, and explain why it is important;
- Show how you developed your question, how and why you moved from topic to subject to question;
- State what your hypothesis is (what you think might be the answer or answers to your question);
- State what your methodology is going to be;
- State what has already been done on this topic (survey of literature);
- Explain how your work will move knowledge of the field forward;
- Provide a preliminary outline of chapters and content (be reasonable -- you should probably not have more than five chapters);
- Develop a core bibliography;
- Discuss need and time frame for research abroad (if necessary), and how you plan to fund that research abroad;
- Give a time line for completion in a timely manner: In your time line, explain what needs to be done (how much research is necessary and where, do you need to consult with specialists, what special factors are involved; must you travel abroad to do research); lay out the time frame you envision for research and writing (when you plan to stop researching and start writing; how long you expect each chapter to take, etc.).

The abstract is not a waste of time; on the contrary, it focuses your mind, gives you writing practice, forces you to clarify your question for yourself and explain it clearly to your committee, makes you identify the specific parts that will then grow into chapters, and compels you to set a realistic time line and to develop a research strategy for your work. An acceptable abstract should not take you more than two to three months if you have been preparing yourself properly for the dissertation all along (see Section I of this document); it will take you longer if you begin the search for a dissertation topic only after the comprehensive examinations. If the latter is the case, you cannot begin the process of developing your research question too soon or work on it too hard. You want to be aware of and to shorten the period of let-down that follows the tension of preparing for comprehensive examinations and the release of tension after passing the comps.

Here are three important reasons to write a strong abstract:

1. A well-conceived and well-written abstract will be your primary source document for grant proposals to funding agencies as you apply, sooner or later, for dissertation research support abroad or for dissertation writing support at home.² Preparing a strong proposal now will save you time in preparing grant applications later;
2. A professional proposal earns you the respect of the faculty and your director up front, and it eases the process of writing and defense; and
3. A well-conceived abstract breaks your dissertation down into “do-able” pieces, helping you to overcome your natural fear of the “200 Page Terror.” You have already written 25-35 page research papers (or close); now you just have to write six of them. You can do this.

VI. Select a Documentation System.

Decide which documentation system you plan to use. The University allows some flexibility. If you have no particular preference at this point, consider *The Chicago Manual of Style; The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, most recent edition). Chicago or a Chicago variant is used by the majority of large academic presses in America. While Chicago initially appears more complicated than other systems, it is also more precise and codified (making it easier to look things up). Your mastery of it now will make it easier for you to: a) prepare your manuscript for eventual publication, or b) switch to the press's modified or simplified system. You may prefer to use Walter S. Achtert's and Joseph Gibaldi's *The MLA Style Manual* (New York: MLA, various eds.). Make this decision in consultation with your dissertation advisor, then adhere to it religiously. This is not a small, picky issue. You will be documenting for the rest of your academic life. You should have learned to do it during your MA studies; if you haven't, learn now to do it right.

If you are consistent in your note-taking and drafting, and if you use the documentation system you have selected in all your research notes and drafts from the very beginning, it will become second nature. You will make fewer errors and reduce time spent on the most boring aspect of dissertation writing: final editing and

² I cannot overemphasize the role that grant activity has assumed in the contemporary academic culture, even in the humanities, where money is tight. Your demonstrated ability to generate external funding will be important for both hiring and for tenure. Grants allow graduate students to fund extended time for research abroad and dissertation writing time; grants allow junior faculty to stop the tenure clock and finish “the book.” Your ability to compete for grants (and complete grant projects in a timely manner) will get you tenure. Grant proposals are a specific genre, and grant writing is a skill you can develop. Think about grant-writing sooner rather than later. The rule: always apply for funding, and if you do not get it, then apply again.

manuscript preparation. Negotiate the aspects of documentation with your director as soon as may be.

Discuss the process of information gathering, creating a bibliography, and indexing (strategies for taking notes, keeping files, accessing data, etc.) with your advisor early in the process. How are you going to manage the information you collect about your topic? Are you going to use note cards? What indexing systems are available for the computer? How do you develop a subject index for your topic? how do you get back to material from a year or two ago? You should also talk to students senior to you who are in or have been through the dissertation writing process: what were their most effective strategies? what do they wish they had done differently about information management if they were starting their dissertations now? (This is the meat and potatoes of research -- have a plan.)

Transliteration and translation: Some faculty prefer Library of Congress transliteration, since it is easier to type; others prefer that you use American Scholarly. The most important thing is that you are consistent in your use of the transliteration system upon which you and your director agree. You and your director should also agree up front about whether or not you will translate cited passages and how translations are to be handled.

VII. Psych Up.

Here are nine ways to psych up for writing your dissertation.

1. Meditate alone in a cave in the desert, preferably on your back. Make sure you give yourself enough “just thinking” time, and thinking on your back ensures that enough blood flows to the brain for you to be productive. This is useful, up to a point. Some of your best thinking will come of this, but not all of it.

2. Start a dissertation support group with other students in various stages of dissertation writing, preferably from other departments. Meet regularly; have beer afterward (or even during). Comparing gripes is a liberating and even cathartic experience (such things should not be internalized). Knowing that others share your misery is consoling. Getting intelligent feedback from fellow-sufferers on your ideas and your drafts is exhilarating and ego-building; if you are annihilated, hey, it's just the gang (not someone you fear may hold your career, like the egg with Koshchei's soul, in their hands). Knowing that a friendly graduate student colleague will find the really bad bloopers before you give text to your dissertation director helps you to sleep well at night. Having someone to talk to during this, the loneliest activity you will ever undertake in your professional career, keeps you alive and involved.

Be creative and proactive in your group. Invite a respected faculty member to come and discuss certain aspects of dissertation-writing with the group informally on occasion. Go with other group members to hear visiting lecturers in different disciplines and then critique their performance. Read and discuss some of the books listed in the bibliography (*infra*). Offer to give a presentation in the departmental colloquium or for a professor's class. Stay involved with departmental life. Save some money (if you can), apply for the graduate student conference fund, and plan to give a paper derived from your work at a national conference. Your dissertation director can help you here. Move from being a passive student to being an active scholar and colleague. You must actively want to be on the other side of the desk.

3. Take the time to interview other graduate students who are completing the dissertation process or

who have recently defended (whether in our department or in a related department). Everyone has second thoughts about how they would have done it if they could do it over again, or what they know now that they wish they had known then. Learn from these people. They have (hopefully) gained wisdom from their experience, and they often long cathartically to share it with someone. Let them share it with you.

4. Visit with your dissertation director regularly. Agree at the beginning that you will meet at a set time, during which you will make a progress report. (You can adjust the frequency of the meetings depending on the stage you are in.) There is nothing like deadlines and fear to keep you psyched up.

5. Attend the dissertation defenses of other students, especially those in your own discipline (but not necessarily). Dissertation defenses are public affairs and must be advertised publicly (they are announced in the local newspaper and other publications, posted outside the Graduate Studies Office and College offices, and advertised in departments). In some departments, defenses attract a large audience of faculty, students, friends, and relatives of the defender.

By attending dissertation defenses, you learn the ritual format; you overcome your fear of the event; you see how faculty and students behave at a defense; you participate vicariously in the defense and become comfortable with it; you begin to anticipate the excitement and success of your own defense. Most importantly, you generate the desire to make progress toward your own defense. By attending defenses, you participate in one of the most important ritual moments in our profession: the moment that marks the transition from student to scholar.

6. Visit one of the several websites dedicated to dissertators and read about other people's problems and other people's solutions. Often you'll pick a great idea or three. Two good sites are *Phinished* <<http://www.phinished.org/>> and the dissertators support thread at the on-line *Chronicle of Higher Education*: go to <<http://chronicle.com/jobs/>> and scroll down the forums to "Grad School Life." Know that, even virtually, you are not alone.

7. Read. READ. READ! Scholars read. Even film, art, and music scholars read. The ability to **read critically and carefully** and the ability to **write clearly and precisely** are your two most important intellectual skills. You need them to be a good researcher, you need them to be a good teacher. You are certainly going to need them to be a good committee person or administrator down the line. You should have been practicing sophisticated reading and writing skills in graduate school. Alas, many key academic habits (reading quickly in Russian, reading with concentration for long periods of time, extracting the most important material, structuring arguments, really knowing the literature, etc.) are developed only during the dissertation. So bite the bullet.

Reading may be out of fashion for many of today's students, but not for scholars. Get in the habit of constant reading, especially of the best work in your field. If you've hit the wall with your dissertation reading, stop and read instead in related fields. Read travel books, read philosophy, read poetry, read Zane Grey in German, reread (or read) *Master and Margarita* in Russian. But read. The material you pick up in the best "peripheral" reading may turn out to be terribly important for your thinking.³ Peripheral reading also sharpens your thinking and gives you a sense of perspective (it takes you out of your narrowly defined topic and its particular vocabulary). The bottom line remains: you will never be a good writer if you are not a reader of good writing.

3 Sometimes you just have to read trash. That's OK; just pace yourself. But think like an academic: Is there any way to read trash in your target language and get an article on popular culture out of it?

8. Make use of self-improvement books; no one is above them. Why would top people in our profession write them and why would Cambridge and Oxford and other prestigious presses publish them if they were not useful? If you fear, deep down, that you may not know how to do real research or how to write elegantly, turn to a specialist.

A number of excellent books on the market will help you conceptualize and deal with the dissertation process in all its stages, from refining your topic, to going to the library, to making notes, to filing data, to polishing your prose. Read them as you prepare to start the process of research and writing; read them while you are doing research; read them while you are writing the chapters. Most students are not sufficiently disciplined to conceptualize, focus, and write on cue. Professors tend to forgive a certain amount of sloppiness in course research projects, since they also judge you on exams, class discussion, and other evidence of intelligence. The dissertation, however, is unique in your academic career in that this work is judged exclusively in its form as a written document; your identity as a scholar is judged solely on that written document (and not on exams, discussion, notes, good will, etc.).

You should acquire for your personal library as many of the following as you need. These are recommended; many other such books are available. Whether they are “good” or “bad” depends on their ability to communicate the basics of good writing to you. Feel free to explore the full range of such texts and use what works for you. Note that almost all of them are regularly published in multiple, updated editions (hence no dates of publication are given in the list of good books, below).

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Barzun, Jacques. *Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Barzun, Jacques, and Henry F. Graff. *The Modern Researcher*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Beasley, David. *How to Use a Research Library*. New York: Oxford University Press. **(Good, but Mann is better)**

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. **Own this book. Read it frequently and often. This is one of the most useful books you can read as a graduate student.**

Dunleavy, Patrick. *Authoring a PhD. How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*. New York: Macmillan-Palgrave, 2003.

Ebbitt, Wilma, and David Ebbitt. *Index to English*. 8th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. **This is an updated version of the superlative handbook by Porter G. Perrin, *Reference Handbook of Grammar and Usage* (1972). You cannot own a more useful reference book for writing.**

Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. **Good, good, good. Not written for academics, but every academic should read it.**

Fowler, H.W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. 2nd edition. Revised by Ernest Gowers. Oxford: Clarendon Press. **Also pretty good, but a second choice to Ebbitt/Perrin.**

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: Norton, 2005. **Having trouble developing an intellectual argument? Want help? An excellent aid.**

van Leunen, Mary-Claire. *A Handbook for Scholars*. Revised edition. New York: Oxford University Press. **Process is everything.**

Luey, Beth. *Handbook for Academic Authors*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press.

Mann, Thomas. *A Guide to Library Research Methods*. New York: Oxford University Press. **[not that Thomas Mann!] Excellent, excellent.**

Peters, Robert L. *Getting What You Came For. The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or a Ph.D.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. **This book really stands outside this list, but every graduate student should read it, preferably sooner, but better later than never. A handbook for surviving graduate school, it provides good information on everything from the politics of picking exam and dissertation committees and asking for references to getting into your dissertation and getting it done. It also has good advice on job-seeking.**

Sternberg, David. *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*. New York: St. Martin's Press. **David will hold your hand.**

Strunk, William, and E.B. White. *Elements of Style*. New York: Macmillan. **Less than 100 pages and inexpensive, this little paperback lists all of the elementary rules of usage that students perpetually get wrong and gives good examples. Own it. Reread it every three months while working on the dissertation and every year thereafter for the rest of your professional life.**

van Wageningen, R. K. *Writing a Thesis: Substance and Style*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: Harper and Row.

The time you spend reading books is not equivalent to the time you spend with your dissertation advisor; depending on the sophistication of your research and writing skills, reading will probably be more valuable. You will find your time with your advisor much more useful if you are already in control of the basics and can focus on content and ideas. It is not your advisor's job to explain comma rules, clauses, or paragraph construction to you at this point in your education. If you still need to work on your writing techniques, **do it now**. Many graduate students *really* learn to think critically, to read effectively, and write compellingly during their dissertation research. The best students have learned long before that, so that they can concentrate on substance in the dissertation writing process. Be serious and pro-active about developing excellent writing skills, starting with your first semester in grad school. Good writing skills will remain your single most important tool for the rest of your career, whether you remain in the academy or pursue a career beyond its walls, whether you write with a fountain pen or on a laptop.

9. Last but not least, remember that you do have another life and you should live it. You are somebody's friend, somebody's son or daughter, perhaps you are also a husband or wife, even a parent. Dissertations are hard on those who share that other life. The inhabitants of your other life don't always understand that you really *are* working as you lie on your back, gazing at the ceiling, or that you need to leave the country for nine months, or that you can't go to the movies tonight because the writing is going very well. Be sure to negotiate with those who inhabit your other life. Help them understand where you are in your work and why, and what's in it for them. Ask for their understanding, and be an engaged part of their life. It's OK to take some time off to be a human being.

VIII. Checking Your Progress.

You should meet with your director regularly as you get started; as your project develops, you and your advisor will find a meeting pattern appropriate to your working styles. Before each meeting, you can undertake a deceptively simple exercise: *prepare a one-paragraph statement of your research question and hypothesis*. Do not write more than five sentences. Bring it to the meeting, if you like. This exercise helps to keep you on track and to remind you of your precise research question (in the research process, it is easy to get distracted and lose sight of it). This exercise will also remind you to put information and ideas that you do *not* need for the dissertation aside, for use in later papers and articles. It keeps you focussed.

You should strive to have the topic of your dissertation constantly in mind. As you do research, you will collect a wide variety of information. As you write, you will need to winnow that information. A concise statement of your topic will help. Ask yourself as you write: "Does this fact, this paragraph, this conclusion, this digression support my thesis?" If the answer is "NO," then set aside the facts or the information and return to the straight and narrow.

By the way, **не день без строчки**. Write something, if only a long e-mail, a dissertation diary entry, one dissertation-worthy paragraph -- every day.⁴ Talk to your director if you experience a serious case of "blank page/blank screen horror," "fear of the written word," "fried brain," "loopy brain," fear of failure, fear of having people find out you really don't know what you are doing, and other "writer's block" afflictions (or use your superior research skills to find one of the scores of works on "outwitting" writer's block, then read it). There are antibiotics for the above-mentioned diseases, and your advisor has tested most of them at one time or another. Your advisor has probably also succumbed at some point to the contagious passion of writing, and might inoculate you with it.

And one more important point about writing: Do not plan to **start** writing after you **finish** your research. Writing should begin as soon as you develop an understanding of any portion of your topic. Writing is, in fact, a form of thinking. Writing helps you to clarify your own thinking and to arrange your ideas in logical

4 Keeping a **dissertation diary**, by the way, is a useful idea. Dedicate a notebook and use it to write down ideas of pure genius, capture great turns of phrase that you might forget later, record your progress, list what you have read or achieved that day, put down ideas for future articles or questions for further research, keep notes on where you think you might want to go next. You can also use it to pat yourself on the back, scold yourself, or whine -- anything to save yourself from internalizing the dissertation process. You will never show this diary to anyone. When you are 50, you will have a blast reading it in the privacy of your office (or basement). You will find some really fine thinking there ("Did I really come up with that? I am goood!") -- as well as some hoots ("Oh, no! I could *not* have written *that* . . . could I?"). You will wonder whether or not to include it in your archive.

order. When you feel you understand something, write it up. Reading, researching, and writing should be interwoven, complementary activities. When you write in this choppy way, you will not produce seamless chapters; instead, you will produce paragraphs and pieces of sections. File them in folders (real or virtual) that correspond to what might become your chapters. Reread them occasionally and edit at will.

When the time comes to produce the greater text, you will find that you have done more work than you know. If you have been writing as you read, then you will now find yourself piecing a quilt, not spinning thread. Writing as you research also allows you to check back immediately with your source material if you have additional questions or took down a citation incorrectly. Finally, writing as you read and research helps you to hold on to your ideas. Ideas are slippery things that disappear if you do not write them down as soon as you have them, and you will have many as you work on your dissertation. In the final stages of dissertation writing, you will find it easier to discard less interesting or trite ideas that you have already written up than to generate ideas from distant memory or cryptic notes on a card. By the way, keep notepads around the house and under the bed. Write down **every** good idea as soon as it occurs to you. It will be gone in five minutes if you do not, and you might never have it again.

No rules exist mandating the order of writing; however, writing the introduction first is generally a very bad idea. Only when you have completed your dissertation will you know enough about your topic to introduce it to anyone else. Begin by writing the portions you are ready to write because you have researched them and understand them. This could be the second part of chapter three or the introduction to chapter five. Dissertations are rarely linear constructs. Do not fight the chaos of the process, but use it to energize and free your work.

There are as many styles of researching and writing as there are researchers and writers. The above comments serve only as a suggestion. Read about the different styles and find your own style as soon as you can, then make it work for you. But be aware that you are setting habits and learning practices that you will carry into your professional life on the other side of the Ph.D. If you plan to have a successful career, you *must* develop these good work habits (reading, writing) and creative approaches *now*, if you have not yet done so. During your coursework, you had a lot of room to slide; you worked with a safety net and friendly professors. But a dissertation requires far more discipline than course work, and professional publications (no safety net there) require still more. The process will be hard work, and you must be ready.

IX. Going the Extra 4,000 Miles.

Often researchers in our field discover that the question they selected cannot be successfully researched in this country: they need sources in Russian or European archives and libraries. You should take this dimension of the dissertation writing process into consideration when determining your research question, since research abroad extends your time line significantly. On the other hand, lack of in-country or on-site research experience can affect both your “marketability” and your level of control of appropriate languages. Both are expected of scholars today. If you need language work (as well as access to archives and libraries), research abroad can move you forward on both fronts and be time well spent, professionally speaking.

The time to think about the funding to do research abroad was yesterday. There are a number of grants available to young scholars in this field for research abroad. Familiarize yourself as soon as possible with: a) the agencies that award; b) the types of award; c) the form and deadlines for application. Plan your research abroad carefully so that it comes at the right time in your time line for successful completion.

You may not need to do research abroad; perhaps the materials you need are in this country. The New York Public Library, the University of Illinois Slavic Library, the Library of Congress, the Hoover Institution, and many specialized archives exist right here in the U.S. Some provide special funding for young scholars needing to use their research collections. Your dissertation advisor will have information and suggestions on where, when, and how to seek support.

One tip about doing research abroad or at other dispersed collections: **Don't just collect it; read it there and then.** Many students photocopy and microfilm instead of reading and writing. This delays their dissertation work instead of speeding it up. Much of what they copy turns out to be unimportant; often they could have dealt with the material in less time than it took to copy; their interest in the material may have dissipated; they have deflected themselves from the productive pattern of reading and writing. Copy only what you have already read and identified as important for future projects. One more piece of news: the intensive research experience is when most scholars *really* learn to read a foreign language fast and well. Do not deprive yourself of this experience.

X. Taking the Long View.

The vast majority of defended dissertations are unpublishable in their final form. Their chief weaknesses (based on an informal poll of experienced faculty at several institutions) are that they:

- are unfocused; lack a specific research question; do not state the task/hypothesis clearly or describe its resolution (this is the number one complaint);
- take too long to say too little or belabor the obvious; are needlessly redundant;
- offer no new knowledge; regurgitate old information; do not add to the body of scholarship;
- use sources uncritically; do not differentiate between stronger and weaker arguments (need to recognize that *not* all arguments are of equal weight);
- use only the most accessible sources, not the most relevant or important sources;
- focus on “impression,” “feeling,” or “hope” rather than on analysis supported by evidence;
- neglect to consider key context that undercuts their argumentation; ignore important pieces of data;
- are unhampered by content;
- are unhampered by methodology;
- impose an inappropriate methodology on a work “as if putting a straightjacket on a sane patient” (that’s a direct quotation);
- have a hold of the wrong end of the stick (often because of lack of consultation, feedback, or sufficient research);
- are unnecessarily pedantic in tone at best, condescending and arrogant in tone at worst;
- reveal undigested, immature thinking;
- reveal fundamental flaws in basic logic; lack ability to think critically; cannot make a sustained argument;
- expose major gaps in knowledge and background;
- are based on insufficient research and reading;
- lack objectivity;
- lack balance (broad subject insufficiently researched; small subject over-researched; multiple subjects artificially glued together);

- are carelessly or poorly written;
- lack mastery of basic grammar or punctuation rules that should have been learned in elementary school;
- demonstrate inability to write tightly and succinctly;
- are poorly structured (if they are structured at all);
- bite off too much; bite off too little -- unbalanced.

You may wish to bear all of these things in mind as you work on your dissertation. They are the problems that you will need to address as you begin your career and start using parts of your research for publications and conference papers. If your dissertation has any of these problems, these weaknesses will also affect your ability to get a major publication out of your work.

XI. Conclusion.

Writing the dissertation is the first extended, intensive research experience most graduate students have. Writing a dissertation is very different from writing research papers, although the dissertation builds on that experience. In the process of its creation you will enjoy some of the most intellectually exciting, inspiring, even epiphanic moments of your life. You will master important things you should have mastered years ago, but will control only now. Relative to your pre- and post-dissertation life, you will have considerable time to read, analyze, contemplate, and enjoy working with your material. Carefully plan for your dissertation process and make the most of this capstone experience of your life as a student. Go for it!

XII. Preparing to be Post-Dissertation.

Yes, there is always the next step to think about. After you defend your dissertation, you will be seeking employment in some branch of the academy (research university, regional university, liberal arts college, community college, regional institution, exclusive prep school -- our field is a large one and we contribute to Slavic Studies in many different ways). In many cases, some level of steady publication will become a reality of your life.

The choices you make during the dissertation period will make a big difference to your subsequent professional experience. Two examples: if you love teaching and want to work at a liberal arts college, then you want a transcript, a dissertation topic, and a CV that demonstrate your breadth in the discipline, your control of a secondary field (your minor), your ability to reach a broader audience, strong teaching experience in a variety of courses, engagement in a broad range of interests, and flexibility. If you are interested in working at a research institution, you want a transcript, dissertation topic, and CV that show your focus in a particular disciplinary area, your prowess in on-site archives and libraries, your demonstrated commitment to publication, your ability to garner grants, and an indication that you have the potential to redirect scholarship in your field. You need to consult with your advisor about how to shape your profile for the kind of institution you are interested in. Bear in mind that there are about 25 PhD granting departments of Slavic Languages & Literatures in the US, and many more that offer MAs and BAs in the field. Take time to research your employment options and interests early in your graduate work. Follow the MLA Job List, available in the Department. See what is out there, and how jobs are described. Ask yourself what you need to do to prepare for them. Work with your advisor to design your graduate work and position yourself appropriately.

During your dissertation period, consider doing a book review or two, if the books are in your areas of interest and expertise. You would read them anyway, so why not maximize the effort? Check “Books Received” lists on the home pages of professional journals, and contact the Book Review Editors with an offer to review -- they are usually delighted. (Become a good colleague: *always meet deadlines* or decline the opportunity.) Consult with your advisor before embarking on extra-curricular activities.

Was there a particularly good paper you wrote during your PhD coursework that could be bumped up into an article with a little effort? Did you do good work in a research seminar? Is there some aspect of your dissertation research that is interesting, but will not be used in the dissertation? Could it become an article? Wouldn't it be nice to have a small second project to work on when you are temporarily “off” the dissertation and need a break? A brand new *Curriculum Vitae* with a couple of book reviews and one published article (and perhaps another in progress) is a good idea. Have this discussion with your advisor. What profile is expected for a newly-minted PhD in your corner of the discipline?

As you conceptualize and write your dissertation, keep in mind that it is *not* your *magnum opus*. It is a demonstration that you can undertake sophisticated research under some supervision and that you know how to communicate your ideas in writing to a peer audience. It is your credential. It does not have to be perfect; it has to be “good enough.” “Good enough” by no means implies sub-standard or poorly-written. Ask your advisor to explain what “good enough” means. But a concise, well-written, tightly argued 180-200 page dissertation that gives you directions in which to grow trumps a bloviated 500 pager every time. If you find yourself writing 500 pages, you and your advisor have picked the wrong topic. That dissertation will take you longer to research and write, extending your time to degree; it will keep you out of the professional earning pool for additional years; and it will not help you at tenure time.

Very, *very* few dissertations are of such superb quality that they deserve to be published as is. View the dissertation as your last apprentice work. In the vast majority of cases, only *after* you complete your dissertation do you realize what you *should* have written -- what you had to say of importance, how you should have presented your arguments. And what you *should* have written will logically become your first book, but it will not look much like your dissertation. You will build on your dissertation research, revise some parts of the dissertation, discard others, publish some separately, and write new material to generate an intellectually more mature project that will win you tenure and glory. Tenure at a research university demands a demonstration of your ability to undertake independent research and produce high quality work without supervision. The publication of your dissertation, as is, does not count for tenure: you wrote it under the supervision of your faculty advisor, and thus it does not constitute independent post-doc work in the eyes of the promotion and tenure committee. So there is little point in overwriting your dissertation and every reason to use it as a springboard to the book you wanted to write.

Your dissertation should be designed and executed to give you a boost when you enter that tenure-track position. The research you did for your dissertation is going to play a big role in what you write next. The dissertation may be the source of an article or two, as well as conference papers. The research you completed but did not use for the dissertation may inspire additional articles and papers. That research is going to be your area of specialization, at least until tenure. That this material is pretty much “ready to go” provides some breathing space while you plan for additional work and grant proposals to write “the book” -- and look down the line to promotion.

Abstract

Start looking for favorite research topics early.

Try out different ideas in your classes.

Find out what hasn't been done.

Get the help you need.

Write a good proposal.

Do the work now.

Write while you research.

Look for grants to support your work.

Read, Read, Read.

Write, Write, Write.