So You're A Grad Student Now? Maybe You Should Do This

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Congratulations! You've made it to graduate school. This means you're in a select group, about to embark on a great adventure to learn about the world and teach us all some new things. This also means you obviously know how to follow rules. So I have five for you – not counting the obvious one that to learn new things you'll need to break some rules. After all, to be a successful academic, you'll need to cut a new path – and so if you do exactly what your advisors and I did, you won't get anywhere near as far, since we already did it. So here are some rules, but break some of them, perhaps including this one.

First, you're probably wondering how in the world you can write a dissertation – something like 250 pages – from scratch. Well, remember this: a dissertation is both *easy* and *irrelevant*. It's *easy* because a dissertation is the equivalent of maybe three to five papers, and you must have written that number every year for at least the last ten. So write a paper, then another, and then another; at worst, you'll wind up with a series of articles as a dissertation, which often works out great; at best, you'll initiate a whole research program with a sequence of papers that sums up to more than the parts, or possibly a great book (which is something like four articles' worth of effort and maybe six in terms of credit). After all, you probably haven't the slightest idea how to write a book; so start writing articles and see where you wind up. Maybe a book will pop out naturally, but there's no reason to force it. (The same applies after grad school: all eight of the books I've written started out as articles that I couldn't figure out how to fit into 40 or so pages.)

A dissertation is also *irrelevant,* because this assignment is not about writing 250 pages; it's about reorienting your life, making the transition from a student taking classes – and doing what you're told – to being an independent, active professional, making regular contributions to the collective enterprise, competing and cooperating with your colleagues in pursuit of common goals.

To do all this, you need to arrange your whole life, or at least the professional portion of it, around this goal. You should not to change into a dissertation writer (or a dissertator!) but into a professional academic, looking for opportunities to make contributions to the scholarly community that make a difference in the world. If you do that successfully, you'll get a dissertation for free along the way.

Second, in graduate school, *never shoot for the immediate goal; aim for the one after that.* Let's start with the dissertation prospectus, the text of which will not matter five minutes after it's approved. No one will ever ask you whether you did what you promised in your prospectus, and even you are unlikely to read it again. One reason for this is that writing a prospectus is itself almost logically impossible: you are supposed to convince three experienced faculty that you will discover something that will surprise them and they do not now believe to be true. And you're supposed to do that how? By speculating about what you will find, and how important it will be, if you ran some hypothetical analysis on an imaginary dataset you do not even have access to yet and may not even exist.

So don't write a traditional prospectus; instead, write an article or chapter and bring it to your prospectus committee (stapled to a one-page outline of your imagined dissertation to meet the formal goal). Then you will have made some progress on the goal after the next one and, at a minimum, will switch the conversation from armchair speculation to a productive discussion and useful advice about your work.

The same idea applies to dissertations, which are also useless five minutes after approval. Instead, try to write papers that will work as publishable articles or a manuscript that will make a book publisher happy. Just skip the step of writing a dissertation (and certainly do not use the word 'dissertation' in your dissertation; just refer to your 'work' or 'manuscript'). Similarly, don't waste your time attending dissertation defenses (except for your friends' – and especially your own!), but go to all the job talks you can and imagine yourself standing at the front of the room, thinking of how you might respond to each question.

Third, everything you write from now on must answer this one question: *whose mind will you change about what?* This means you are not choosing a 'dissertation topic'. You've already done that by your choice of subfield and maybe even your graduate program. You should instead lead with a finding, discovery, result, or argument (and should at least be able to begin with 'In this work, I demonstrate that…'). Then rigorously organize your work to answer this key question. Remove *every* point, section, sentence, or paragraph that does not directly answer this question or address your argument. (Keep deleted portions in a folder for other projects to avoid separation anxiety, but get them out of this work.) The point of your dissertation is not (or not only!) to show how smart you are; it's to prove your point, make your argument, or solve a problem. Everything else that gets in the way of your contribution goes.

Here's a measure of whether you've succeeded: your argument (and its structure) should be crystal clear from your table of contents, without reading the text. Keep the table of contents as a separate file and keep editing it as you write. The advice you got in eighth grade about writing the outline before the text is a nice theory but doesn't work because you learn about your argument by writing it out. (You know how authors of fiction explain that they wanted to end the story in one way but the characters caused them to end it in a different way? Pretty much the same thing applies to nonfiction. The story takes on a life of its own. It is one reason we write down ideas.) Although you probably can't satisfy your eighth-grade teacher now, keep iterating between the text and table of contents. When you're done, the table of contents should be so clear it can tell the story on its own, and the text will then be unencumbered by

scaffolding or the vestige of old monsters trying to distract readers from your argument.

That monumental throat-clearing exercise called a 'literature-review section' is a great example. Fuhgeddaboudit. Those people have their own books and articles, where they make their own points; they don't get to be in your dissertation unless they help you make your point. I know you're accustomed to writing literature reviews, but that's for your teacher, testing your knowledge for class. You've now passed that test and don't need to keep taking it: do not include a literature-review section. At the same time, be professional: leave out gratuitous or fawning citations to your professors or anyone else; tell them how great they are in person if you like, but don't let them get in the way of making your contribution clear.

A final way to focus on your point is to not insist that your dissertation have 'symmetric' evidence: present all available observable implications of your theory, even if one is an ethnography of a restaurant and another is a cross-national quantitative study. Any good evidence or argument can help you evaluate your claim and demonstrate whose mind you're going to change about what. Avoid selection bias, but do not distract your audience with forced symmetry that sends you off collecting the same data from every state merely for aesthetic reasons that do not help support the evidence.

Fourth, you obviously need to get the social science right, but present your results so others not only understand what you are saying but have *no choice* but to read your work. Until graduate school, at least one person was always paid to read what you wrote. After graduate school, if you don't write so that others find they must read your work, it could be the case that no one ever reads it. You could even write a great paper, get it published in a top journal, and the only person who ever reads it is you.

The job of an academic, and the mission of the university, is the creation, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. If no one reads your work, you will change no one's mind, make no difference, and get no credit. Modern political reinterpretations notwithstanding, Christopher Columbus would have gotten tenure, but Lief Erikson would have had to go back on the market. Thus, your title needs to grab readers by the lapels and yank them into the page so they feel they must read your abstract; your abstract needs to interest readers enough so that they feel their own work is at risk, or they are so interested that they immediately read your introduction; and so on. Doing 'good work' is no longer good enough.

Imagine two dissertations, identical in all respects except that the title, abstract, and introduction in one is rewritten so that it resonates with your audience. The author of that one will get a great job and have a great future. The other not so much. You might as well be the one to learn this. Try out your idea on your grad-school colleagues, your friends, your parents, and non-academics. If they don't get it, it isn't because they weren't trained. Figure out how to convey what you're doing so anyone can understand it.

Graduate school is a transition from being a private citizen taking classes to a public figure writing for a big amorphous, ill defined audience that it is your responsibility to define, find, and engage. This is not easy, and it accounts for most of the frustration scholars have with the peer-review process. It will take more time than you think (even after adjusting for this sentence). It will require rewriting, recasting your argument, reconceptualizing your theory, recollecting your evidence, remeasuring your variables, or reanalyzing your data. You'll have to revise more than you want and you thought possible. But try not to get discouraged; they call it *re*search, not search, for a reason! Be your usual relentless self and get it done.

In my experience, almost all dissertations are written in about four months, even though it takes many people years and a spark of motivation like a job offer or graduation deadline to get started. In the end, it

is simple: educate your advisor that you're ready to graduate (yes, that's your responsibility!) and then she who shows up with the pile of paper gets the degree.

Finally, the process may sometimes seem like drudgery, but remember one last rule: you're allowed to have a life. Go have some fun. And also do not forget that you are tremendously privileged to participate in science and academia and discovery and learning – by far the most exciting thing to 99 percent of the faculty at your university. The thrill of discovery, knowing you're part of something bigger, the adrenalin-producing ah-ha moments, the feeling of learning something that no one in the history of the world has ever known before but, because of you, many will now know are more exciting than all the skiing and mountain biking you could pack into a lifetime. Don't miss how intoxicating and thrilling it all really is.

Note

1 This foreword comes from a talk at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University on a panel called 'The Dissertation: Strategies for Getting from the Beginning to the End of the Process'.My thanks to Cynthia Verba for the inspiration and for arranging this panel, and to my own dissertation committee for help getting me started – Leon Epstein, Art Goldberger, Barbara Hinkley, and Bert Kritzer.