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Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day

A GUIDE TO STARTING, REVISING, AND FINISHING YOUR DOCTORAL THESIS

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Getting Started Writing

THIS CHAPTER aims to help you get started writing. When I worked at Harvard's Writing Center, we joked that the single most useful piece of equipment for a writer was a bucket of glue. First you spread some on your chair, and then you sit down.

Thoughts on the Writing Process

In the interests of your doing more than just sitting there, I want to think out loud for a bit about the writing process, and how it doesn't and does work. I am about to violate an important behavioral principle: "Never teach someone how to do something by showing them the wrong way to do it." Let's look at what they taught me in school about how to write. First you chose a topic, perhaps off a list, perhaps at your teacher's suggestion, perhaps out of the air or by looking at which shelf in the library still had books available on it. Then you researched the topic (this step seemed to involve a lot of index cards). Then you thought about your topic. (I've always imagined here a cartoon of someone sitting at a desk, with an empty word balloon

attached to her head.) Having thought, you made an outline for your paper, then wrote, starting with I,1 on your outline, fleshing it out, making sure you had a good topic sentence for each paragraph. You proceeded through the outline in order, and when you finished, and capped the paper off with a final, summarizing paragraph, you let the paper rest for a day (sort of like bread dough), then came back, checked the grammar, spelling, transitions, and diction, and cleaned all of them up. Then you were done.

I don't think this model worked. Much of the time it led to neat, clean, boring papers, often to empty ones with good form. It very rarely produced papers that were deeply thoughtful, that had strong and distinctive voices and styles, that raised as many questions as they answered, that made you read, and reread, and then dream about the topic. I want to teach you to write using a method that does all these things.

If you look at a piece of finished writing, all neat and orderly, and know nothing about how it actually came about, you might deduce that it was created using what Arlo Guthrie calls "the good old-fashioned boring model." But this isn't how good, finished writing usually occurs, and even when it does, such a method may not have been the best or most satisfying way of producing it. In her essay "Elusive Mastery: The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art,' " Brett Candlish Millier looks at the seventeen drafts of Bishop's poem in order to discover how exquisite writing *really* gets done. The most shocking thing I found out from reading Bishop's drafts is that her first draft looks nearly as awful as my own first-draft poems do; it's what Bishop does after that—and how many times she does it—that makes all the difference.

How does one really begin to write? William G. Perry Jr. has

described the process succinctly: "First you make a mess, then you clean it up." If you think about the implications of this statement, you quickly realize that how you write is up for grabs: no more neat outlines with Roman numerals to follow, no elegant topic sentences for each paragraph, maybe not even any clear sense of where you're going. If you're not going to feel like you're in free fall, you're going to need some other strategies. What will get you through the beginning stages of this new model are a few behavioral principles, an understanding of good addictions, and a plan for producing messy writing every day.

When you sit down to begin a piece of writing, your first aim ought to be to make a mess—to say anything that comes to your mind, on the subject or off it, not to worry at all about whether your stuff is connected logically, to play with your subject the way you used to build mud pies, to do no fine detail work, to spell poorly if that's your natural inclination, and to generally forget about standards altogether (even about split infinitives!). I suspect many writing blocks come about because people aren't used to playing in the mud when they write; they think writing is a neat, clean endeavor. I don't.

You may think I'm asking you to be an irresponsible, uncaring writer. But I'm really asking you to try something that will have just the opposite effect, if you see it through. The writing process I have in mind has two parts to it, a first, "cooking," making-a-mess part; and a second, compulsive, clean-up-the-mess part. If you do only the first part, you will indeed end up with a messy, irresponsible product you won't want to acknowledge as your own. If you do both parts, though, I believe you'll be able to produce stronger, more imaginative writing that you'll feel proud to own.

When I suggest that you make a mess in writing, I don't

mean that you have to go out of your way to make your writing disorganized, or uncommunicative, just that you need to control your worry in the first part of the writing process; it helps to do this if you think of your aim as making mud pies or sandcastles, rather than stone buildings. You are making a sketch, not a finished oil painting.

What ought you stop worrying about? It would be nice if you could completely ignore your spelling (it only needs to be good enough so you can figure out what you wrote, should you decide to reread your writing). It would be even better if you could ignore sentence structure. Concentrate on what you're trying to say, and see how many different ways you can say it. You may find that your meaning, as well as your style, will be shifty at this point. You don't need to worry at all during this first stage about overall organization; I certainly hope you won't feel compelled to begin at the beginning and move from there to the middle and the end of your piece.

If the writing doesn't sound good to you while you're writing it, it's fine to make a note to yourself about this. (I find it useful to keep up a running dialogue with myself about the questions and problems I've having while I'm writing.) I often put that commentary right in the midst of my text, using square brackets, or a different color ink or pencil, so that when I come back to revise, I can recognize and engage quickly with the problems I've already noted. I don't stop to hunt for words when I'm in this messy phase; if I can't get just the right word, I list the three or four alternatives/choices/words/senses, just like this. I can stop and open the thesaurus while I'm working on a second draft, when doing that won't threaten to interrupt the flow of my thoughts and feelings.

The main goal for this first stage of writing is to keep it going,

to keep the interesting and alive associations in your brain sparking. You don't want to do anything at this point that's going to get in their way. Writing from an outline sometimes short-circuits the imaginative part of writing altogether. Obsessing about technical details can slow it down or stop it altogether. If you need to think about your writing in terms of perfection, perhaps it will help you to know that making a mess is not only functional, but essential for creating that perfect final product you have in mind. In chapter 4 I'll talk about cleaning up the mess.

Using Behavioral Principles

There are only a few simple behavioral principles you need to know. First, you need to know the difference between negative and positive reinforcement. It's possible to train ourselves to do things by punishing ourselves each time we do something wrong, but this method is both inefficient and inhumane. Positive reinforcement, rewarding ourselves each step of the way as we accomplish a series of small goals on the way to achieving the large one (what animal trainers call "shaping"), is both more pleasant and much more effective. (If you've tried, God forbid, to train a puppy by beating it, you'll know that you can end up with a docile dog, but not one with any spirit or joy. Puppies who are trained with praise and treats grow into lively, obedient dogs.)

How do you translate these observations into a process that rewards writing? You set up goals for yourself that are doable, and then you reward yourself with the legal treat of your choice, whatever that is: a run with a friend; a cup of coffee at your favorite café; a half hour to read a novel, listen to music, or chat on the phone—you'll know what your own pleasures are. You try to steer clear of self-blame and critical lectures (from other people, too), and of bad-mouthing what you've written. And you won't put yourself in circumstances in which you repeatedly fail to write. (I have actually had the following conversation with a client: "Where do you do your writing?" "At the kitchen table." "How does it work?" "I never get anything done there.")

You also need to practice two kinds of rewards—the simple sort I've described above, and also a more sophisticated kind known as the Premack Principle, or "Grandma's mashed potatoes law": "No dessert until you've eaten your mashed potatoes." This principle says you can reinforce a desired behavior by pairing it with another behavior that you value highly and will do for its own sake. Translated into a strategy for writing, it means you will find some behavior you don't want to live without—say you don't feel like a day is complete unless you've read the newspaper—and then not allow yourself to do it until you've accomplished your writing goal for that day. One of the oddest and most exciting possibilities of this sort of reinforcement is that once you've established a good writing habit, the writing itself may become the reward, the reinforcement.

The other strategy I want to emphasize is this: make very, very sure that you set realizable goals for yourself; that is, avoid assigning yourself a piece of work that is too large to accomplish. It is much better to say that you'll write two sloppy pages a day and actually do them than to set your goal at ten pages and not write anything because the task is too overwhelming even to begin. If you set yourself up to fail, you will soon discover that you're writing less. And less. And still less.

It's also a mistake to push yourself to do more than your daily

goal. If you try to do this, you'll often find yourself unable to meet your goal the next day.

Write even if you feel sluggish, even if you feel lousy, even if you feel like you have nothing to say. You can still begin to get a process started, and to learn about your writing rhythm. Days when you're productive and the writing feels like it writes itself will most likely alternate with others, when it feels like you've never written anything worthwhile and never will. When I give talks about writing, the line that consistently draws the most laughter of recognition is "Most people would rather wash the bathroom floor than write." The best way to get into a good writing rhythm is to *write every day,* except maybe your birthday, or the queen's. You can define "every day" as you please—seven days a week, or only weekdays, or at least five days out of every seven—so long as you define what you intend to do in advance and don't keep changing the rules as you go along. Don't decide, for instance, not to write on a morning when you don't feel like writing. In this respect, too, writing is very much like running: if you wait to decide whether or not to run until you wake up in the morning, the odds are you won't get your shoes on and your body out the door. The only way to run or to write regularly is to make a rule for yourself that you allow yourself to break only rarely.

About Creating a Writing Addiction

Addictions get pretty bad press. But we often overlook the human propensity for addictions: book collectors have them, opera buffs have them, those who garden beautifully, or cook well, or do anything with passion have them. There are bad

addictions and good ones. It's fine to be addicted to exercise, to being out in the air, to getting in touch with the world by reading the newspaper or listening to the news on the radio every day, to swimming, to gardening. Writing can be this kind of an addiction for some fortunate people, and, as with the others, the reason it can become an addiction is because it satisfies an essential need and gives pleasure. (Yes, I really *did* say *pleasure.*) What's the need?

For some of us, writing gives us a place to be with ourselves in which we can listen to what's on our minds, collect our thoughts and feelings, settle and center ourselves. For others of us it gives us a chance to express what would otherwise be overwhelming feelings, to find a safe and bounded place to put them. For some, it's like exercise: this is the way we warm up a muscle that we're going to be called upon to use. And the pleasure? For anyone who's ever had a running habit, it's easy to describe. The satisfaction of writing every day is very much like the satisfaction of a daily three-mile run. One begins, lives through a warmup, hits stride, has the experience of "being run" rather than "running," of a fluidity of motion that one no longer has to direct, and then, cooled down, can feel, "Now the rest of the day's my own. I've done what I most needed to do." And for those who've never run? Writing offers the pleasure of a deep, ongoing engagement in an activity that is meaningful, one where you know more at its end than you knew at its beginning.

Why do we get addicted? Because when something gives us intense pleasure, that pleasure works as a reinforcer; that is, it brings us back to the activity with greater and greater frequency. Positive addictions can also focus us; they have their own built-in motivation, complete with withdrawal symptoms. A few

weeks into our work, one of my writing clients came in looking distressed; she said that she "felt antsy" and was wondering if it was because she hadn't had the time to write for the past few days. We poked around a bit looking for the possible cause of her distress, and we decided the absence of writing was probably it. The good news, of course, was that she'd managed to develop a self-perpetuating writing addiction very quickly.

So you need to begin to experiment with cultivating a writing addiction, with establishing patterns and changing them if they don't work. Even if you're terribly neurotic, and even if you never do become a true "writing addict," behavioral methods can still help you write. It is not necessary to feel joyous about writing in order to produce a good dissertation, or even to enjoy part of its creation. Try writing while you're working on your neuroses—and should you choose not to work on them, you will probably still feel a bit better if you get some work done.

Freewriting and Making a Mess

Here is how you can use freewriting to establish your writing addiction. You start with a very small task, learning to write for ten minutes every day, come hell or high water. I get a lot of raised eyebrows from new writing clients when I suggest this, and comments like "Ten minutes? At that rate it will take me ten years to finish my thesis!" I generally point out that so far they've been unable to write anything at all, and that ten minutes a day is a great improvement over that (mathematically it's an infinite improvement). It's certainly true that you can't write a thesis if you continue to write for *only* ten minutes a day, but this is a good way to begin. Despite this book's title, I recommend starting out by writing ten minutes a day because I think it works most quickly and easily to get you on track. Once you're doing that, you can work up to fifteen minutes and, gradually, to much longer stretches of writing. Anyone can write for ten minutes a day, particularly if one is freewriting; it's a task that's pretty well guaranteed to be doable. It's essential to begin your practice with a task you're sure to succeed at. There is nothing quite as effective at killing a dissertation as vowing to write eight hours every day and failing to—as anyone must—day after day. Ten minutes a day is a very effective way to establish a writing addiction.

How do you actually do your ten minutes a day of writing? By following the directions for freewriting laid down by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*:

> Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, 'I can't think of it.' . . . The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write 'I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say' as many times as you want; . . . The only requirement is that you *never* stop.

Note the bass note: keep writing, no matter what; even if you hate it you can do it for ten minutes. And then see how much writing you've produced. Most people write, on average, about one or one and a half handwritten pages in ten minutes. What's

very surprising is that even in such a short block of seemingly mindless writing (and here we come back to the power of the unconscious) you will occasionally, on rereading your words, find something interesting, something you didn't know before, or, maybe more accurately, something you didn't know you knew. Freewriting is one of those activities in which two and two sometimes add up to five. Obviously, even ten minutes of wonderful freewriting every day won't quite get you to where you want to go, so you need to learn how to increase your writing production. But you only need to think about taking further steps once freewriting has become a familiar, comfortable, and self-reinforcing process for you.

Using the freewriting, messy model works much better than conventional methods in two different ways: it causes you less pain while you're doing it, and it produces better writing. Here's what it looks like: Say you need to write something like a rough proposal for your thesis, and you're feeling pretty uncertain about both your choice of topic and how you're going to develop it once you know what it is. You sit down at your desk and begin to freewrite, putting down on the paper any thoughts, ideas, or feelings you may have around or about your general topic. You keep asking yourself questions in writing, such as "Do I want to pick this topic, which I know I can move through methodically to the end, and risk boredom and an ordinary thesis, or do I want to risk my professional neck by picking the maverick topic that excites me?" (There is no obvious answer to this question, by the way.) Other questions may occur to you, both around and inside your project: "Can I really do this thesis stuff, sustain interest long enough to write what amounts to a book?" "Will anyone want to read this when I'm

done?" "How do I begin setting limits on a thesis about Anthony Trollope when he wrote so many books? What do I include? What do I leave out?" Or "What do I think the interesting questions are about Trollope's portrayal of his female characters?"

You do freewriting—inclusive, messy, not necessarily seeming to progress—every day, coming back to your own thoughts and feelings, seeing what the depths present you with each day. As you work on these iterations you will discover that your thoughts and feelings are becoming clearer, and your topic is becoming clearer. I don't think I've ever worked with a student who stuck with freewriting for whom this didn't happen.

Now it is time to work toward slightly more focused, less free writing that nevertheless moves along quickly, taps into the underground streams of your thought, and moves by rapid association to open up new ideas and new directions. The aim of not-quite-so-free writing is to use a bit more of your rational mind. You do this by setting yourself a somewhat more focused task at the outset, not "write about anything for ten minutes," but "write as fast as I can for the next ten minutes about one novel by Trollope, trying to focus on its politics," or "What's my best current guess about what shape this chapter is going to take?" or "What bothers me most about this chapter, and can I think of any answers to my worry?" In other words, you set yourself a sloppy topic, ask yourself a question to get you thinking along certain lines, and try to focus your scope from the whole world down to the issues of your thesis. Some of these questions that you paste, metaphorically, at the top of your page of writing will come out of the freewriting you've already done. But you will still sometimes want to follow your mind

wherever it leads you, still use association, and still not worry if your thinking is divergent. Divergent thinking is what will ultimately produce some of the most interesting ideas in your dissertation.

Some writers might do better, in fact, to start with this slightly-less-free writing. Sometimes it's easier to write about "something" than about "anything." If you find yourself struggling unsuccessfully to turn out freewriting, try instead to do the somewhat more focused writing that I've described in the previous paragraph.

By now you ought to be able to write pretty quickly, and to focus your writing without strangling the flow. You've learned, on good days, how to use freewriting to improve the speed and the fluency of your writing, and to establish the channel between your thoughts and your writing, in order, as B. F. Skinner has put it, "to discover what you have to say." (I particularly like the gentle pun in his phrase: you will discover both what you have in you to say and also what you most need to say.) Where do you go from here, and how do you begin to accumulate writing at a rate that will permit you to finish your dissertation before your hundredth birthday?

Setting Your Daily Writing Goal

What you need to decide next is how you're going to set your daily writing goal. There are three ways to do this, and all three work, although not equally well. The first—let's call it the "sit there method"—is to say that you will write for a fixed amount of time, say two hours, every day. There are not a lot of people who can just write—not stare off into space, not get up to make five pots of coffee, not talk on the phone, but write

continuously—for more than about two hours a day. You can write for a very long time on any given day, but the trouble is, you can't then do it again the next, and again, and again—and writing daily is the pattern that's best suited to finishing a dissertation. The second method, the inspiration method, is to plan on writing each day until you come up with one or two decent ideas. The third, the "many pages method," is to pick a reasonable number of pages and write that same number every day.

On the basis of my experience with lots of writers, I think the many pages method works best. If you fix an amount of time, as in the sit there method, it's possible to spend all or most of that time staring at the wall, and then you've both wasted time and produced nothing. The problem with the inspiration method is that no one has ideas every day; some writing days are deserts, yet it's important to write anyway. The advantage to the many pages method is that it rewards fast writing: writing about five pages can take between one and five hours. (I'm not talking about five polished pages, but rather five junk pages, very close to freewriting.) But with a goal of five pages, the faster you can do them, the sooner your time is your own; this method rewards learning to write faster, and from what I've seen, fast writing produces no worse results than slow writing does. This method also produces a large volume of writing, and at least *some* of it is likely to be useful. Play around with these various methods, and see which one suits your style best.

Let me describe the many pages method in a bit more detail, because I think most people will choose it. First, establish your natural daily number of pages by choosing a number arbitrarily, probably somewhere between three and six pages, and then trying to write that number of pages each day for a week. (Once again, if you're a runner, you know the feeling of the "natural

number" from the way you decide how many miles to run each day.) When you've hit your natural number of pages, you will experience this sequence: some slowness getting in, for, say, the first page, then the sense that you've hit your stride and can just write along for a while, thinking things, following some byways, exploring, maybe even discovering a new idea or two. Then you'll come to a point at which you start to tire and feel like there's not much left in your writing reservoir for the day. This is the time to begin to summarize for yourself where you've been, to write down your puzzlements or unanswered questions, to do what Kenneth Skier, who taught writing at M.I.T. many years ago, calls "parking on the downhill slope": sketching out in writing what your next step is likely to be, what ideas you want to develop, or follow, or explore when you pick up the writing again the next day. This step will help you get started more easily each day, and it will save you an enormous amount of energy and angst.

If you write between three and six pages daily (you are allowed one day a week off—even God got one day off), you will find that you rapidly accumulate a lot of writing. Much of it will be what I call "junk writing"—it will not appear anywhere in your dissertation—but it is, nevertheless, important to have written it. Ideas don't emerge from most people's minds neatly, they rise up out of a quite chaotic soup, and you need to provide the proper medium for them to emerge from. As you go along, you'll move to less free writing and find your ideas developing and your arguments beginning to shape themselves. These pages will make up the first substantial piece of your dissertation, the zero draft. Your job is to keep writing, *every day,* keep accumulating those pages and gradually focusing them, dating them,

keeping them in a notebook, or a computer file, or a literal file where you can easily lay your hands on them.

But here are my last two essential pieces of advice, as you sit down and get started writing.

The first: Don't waste words. Whenever you have an idea, a strategy, even a glimmer of an idea, *write it down.* Don't figure you'll remember it. Don't talk about it with someone before you've written it down. Have a place to put it—a notebook, a pocket computer, an index card you carry with you (finally, a use for those index cards you bought when you used the old-fashioned research and writing method); develop the habit of always writing down those bright ideas that come to you while you're on the run.

The second: I have been a very stubborn (my detractors call it "resistant") student all my life. But the bit of stubbornness I most regret was that for five years I failed to take my best writing teacher's advice. Ruth Whitman's words to me were very simple: "Write first." By this she meant, make writing the highest priority in your life. But she also meant those words literally; that is, write before you do anything else in your day. I saw how she translated this maxim into action when we were staying in the same house during a poetry workshop she led. There were eleven miles of beach right out the door of that house that sat on an island off the coast of South Carolina, but Ruth didn't begin her day with a lovely walk on the beach. Nor, for that matter, with any casual conversation with the rest of us. She woke up, made herself some coffee, and retreated to her bedroom, where she spent the next two hours reading and writing. Then she emerged, ready to teach us what she knew about writing poetry. Being quite literal-minded, I had to see

her in action if I was to believe and understand what Ruth Whitman meant when she said, "Write first!" I came home from that workshop, rearranged my clinical schedule in order to start writing first thing four days a week; the other three days I manage to tuck it in some other time of the day. I'm sustained by the feeling that I have finally managed to put my own writing first, and I hope you will hear this particular piece of fine advice faster than I did.

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From Zero to First Draft

BY NOW YOU'VE WRITTEN a lot of pages, and most of them are a mess. How do you begin to turn what you have written into a true first draft? This is one of the most anxiety-producing stages in the thesis-writing process, second only to beginning. You've been writing for quite a while, but it may not be clear that you have anything to say or to show for your effort—just a pile of messy, at times incoherent, writing. This chapter is about how to turn that chaos and mess into a piece of writing that has a shape (although not necessarily a final one) and some semblance of an argument. This is the stage at which you can begin to answer the questions, "What is this material about? What question am I asking? How might I answer it?"

The Zero Draft

You can think about where you are in your dissertation by considering the definitions of "zero" and "first draft." I first heard about zero drafts from Lois Bouchard, a talented writer and teacher of writing. What she meant by "zero draft" was this:

This is a rich soup, and that's all. You don't have to judge it, query it, make much of a fuss about it. It just is, and you can let it be. And you don't have to show it to anyone. Or this is a starting point, and not defined. Nothing you've written here is carved in stone. Nothing is even necessarily usable, but you've got something. It's called a zero draft.

A "zero draft" may or may not really exist, depending on how you write. It can be the name you give your accumulated pages the first time they begin to have any shape at all, although they are still so messy that it would be presumptuous to call them "a first draft," yet are clearly more organized than pure chaos.

The zero draft is the point where it becomes possible to imagine, or discern, a shape to your material, to see the method in your madness. This draft can take many forms: it can be a very tentative, prose outline, or a declaration of direction: "O.K., I'm beginning to see what this is all about. My question is rising up out of this mess, and I seem to keep coming back to it in many ways. . . . Here are the questions I'm following, and here are some tentative beginnings to answers to these questions (some of them mutually contradictory)."

Or "I've written about three different kinds of fictional worlds over and over during the last month, but now I see that there are really only *two* kinds, that a and b are really part of one kind, that can be described as . . . What I'm going to do now is to set up a chapter structure that compares the two sorts, and read back through this mess, culling useful examples and ideas."

Or "A month ago I drew up an outline for this chapter, and since then I've allowed myself to wander all over the place. Now I think the outline wasn't quite right, and I need to change

it in the following ways: . . . Here's the sort of shape I want it to have—and now on to the first draft."

The First Draft

A first draft is your attempt to produce a complete, albeit very imperfect, version of what you're ultimately going to say. And, unlike the zero draft, it will be subject to your analytical and critical scrutiny. You will ask questions that are out of bounds for the zero draft, such as "Is this right? Do I have any evidence for this statement? Does this argument work?" And you will build from it.

A first draft has both more form and a different feel than your zero draft. You'll know that you've reached it when you see that what you've been writing has real content—and perhaps a rudimentary shape—that it has gone from being a mess to being a document. Having a first draft means you don't have to start from scratch each time you write; you may have several paths, but you're no longer in uncharted territory. Your first draft is a piece of writing from which you can extract some sort of coherent outline. It begins to answer a question, or questions, and proves that you have made some progress toward defining it, or them. It may have the wrong shape, but it has a shape you can work on.

Getting to Your First Draft

If you have an accumulation of freewriting or a zero draft, turning out a first draft is a matter of finding ways of building on or fleshing out ideas you have already put down in writing.

Here are some strategies for getting started:

- Pick out words, phrases, or sentences in the writing you've got that seem interesting, or provocative, or resonant, and try writing beginning with them.
- Ask yourself,
  "What stands out for me most in what I've written?"
  "Is there an argument in this mess?"
  "What point do I want to make?"
  "Is what I've said here true?"
  "Do I still believe this?"
- Try writing, repeatedly, in five- or ten-minute spurts of freewriting, an answer to the question "What am I *really* trying to say in this argument/chapter/section?"

Asking Questions

How to get from zero to first draft is intimately connected to how you hone your question. The answer to "What's my question in this dissertation?" doesn't get settled for good in your thesis proposal, in your outline, or the first time you begin writing. The most unnerving and exciting part of this next stage of your writing is honing your question or questions.

We ask ourselves questions all the time: "What's going on here?" "Why am I so confused?" "What did he mean by that?" "How am I going to get from here to there?" You need to take this ability and apply it to working on your dissertation as you learn to carry on an ongoing dialogue with writing, with your reader, and with yourself.

The abilities to ask questions and to learn that the question

you ask is at least as important as the answer you get may be the most important skills you can get from a good education. What may be new for you when you write a thesis is that it's *you* who's asking the questions, not others. You should not be concerned about "getting it right." The kind of questioning you do in order to develop your ideas should open up possibilities, rather than shutting them down.

Being asked questions makes most people feel put on the spot. If you've done any teaching, you've watched your students dive for cover when you start asking questions. You probably also know from your experience as a student that even at times when you knew the answer, you worried that you had it wrong, or you temporarily forgot it.

So you may need to modify your responses when you actively begin to ask yourself questions. You are in a new position: there is no external audience, and you can try out all sorts of answers; there is no one right answer, and you can even come up with diametrically opposite answers to the same question! Of course, further along you're going to want to get to some answer that feels more or less right, but the best way to do this is to learn to ask questions that may have expansive, divergent answers. For example, "What happens if I argue the opposite of what I've just written down?" "There's something about this piece I've written that's exciting, but disturbing—what is it?" Or even, "What would happen if I ditched this dissertation right now?" Yet another sort, questions you ask yourself from your reader's perspective, can be a useful way of beginning a dialogue with that prospective reader: "Why did you say this here? What do you mean by . . . ? I don't understand." This sort of question can also open up new lines of thought.

A Few Approaches to Writing a First Draft

Choose a work style that suits who you are, not who you'd like to be; do not try to create both a dissertation and a new working style at the same time. I have one writing client who is a very organized person by nature; her tolerance for chaos is low, even though she acknowledges the usefulness of the "make a mess" strategy for getting her ideas down on paper. Jean's solution, when the mess gets to be too much for her and she begins to worry that the forest will never become visible for all the trees, is to generate an outline. She tries to construct the best outline she can at the moment, knowing it's unlikely to be her last. She uses this process as an opportunity to pose important questions to herself: What is this writing really about? Which are my main points, and which are subordinate ones? If I had to say right now what I think is true about this subject, and why, what would I say?

Jean uses making an outline to force herself to ask clarifying and organizing questions. This method works for a person who begins with theory and then moves to the concrete, someone whose thought structure is highly organized; it helps her to rise above the trees/mess/chaos and get to see the forest/order/pattern in what she has written.

But the way you begin to make order out of chaos depends on who you are. If you are by nature orderly and careful, your process may resemble Jean's; if you have, as I do, a greater tolerance for messy writing and operate more intuitively, you may let your freewriting guide you to a gradually emerging clarity. If you're somewhere in between, try alternating freewriting with analytical outlining strategies.

In this essential and anxiety-provoking stage it's very important to remember that you are not going to be able to arrange a

personality transplant: if you always work sloppily and intuitively, don't try for too careful and orderly a process. Trust that the style that's gotten you through projects in the past will do so again, perhaps with some thoughtful retooling. Don't try to turn yourself into someone else.

Similarly, if you are methodical and neat, a New Age or meditative kind of approach may make you anxious. You might want to modify your careful, cautious approach, but you don't need to turn into a hippy. Your mess may never be as chaotic as the writing of someone of looser temperament. Following are some examples of how people of different sorts manage this stage of writing.

I know a very successful professor and consultant who works in a field that's both scientific and artistic. Carl likes to read, but he prefers to meet the world directly with his eyes: shapes, forms, and images are both his stock-in-trade and his internal organizing principles. On the side, he's not only an avid fisherman, but also a talented artist. But he didn't get to be a tenured full professor at Harvard just by being lively, smart, and artistic; they demanded written work. How does someone whose primary language is not English words but pictures meet such a goal? When I ask him how he thinks one gets from chaos to order, he replies, "I speak my paper into a tape recorder and then have it transcribed. I speak it from the picture I have of it in my head."

When I ask what it is, exactly, that he dictates, he says, "I can *see* the outline, the main ideas." These are often ideas he's worked on for years and given lectures about. He either reconstructs his ideas from "the memory of the slides" he showed at his lectures, or he uses as anchor points for his major papers a series of one- or two-page "idea papers" that he's put together quickly in the past, a series of way stations on the road to the

larger work. "And what do you do then, after you've dictated this longer paper and had it typed?" I ask. Carl calls this typescript a "first draft." He says that he then reads and edits, shifting paragraphs, changing vocabulary, and deleting unnecessary parts. About 80 percent of his first draft ends up in the final paper. He is one of those people whose writing goes through several drafts in their heads—in his case, visual rather than verbal drafts—before it ever appears on paper. By the time Carl has a hard copy of his paper, he has his penultimate draft.

Peter, who's in the midst of writing his dissertation, has a different way to get from chaos to draft:

> I don't know whether my procedure for papers will work for chapters, although I suspect it will. Perhaps the word 'procedure' implies more planning and organization than actually gets done. My mess stage generally consists of an assortment of notes jotted down here and there, a pile of books full of stickies, many of which have a few notes jotted down on them, and an array of thoughts floating around in my head. Sometimes I make a rough outline to sort out what to present when. Sometimes I structure my first couple of paragraphs in such a way that they provide a roadmap I use for writing. Sometimes I have an idea in my head of the way the paper should progress. Then I sit down and write. Sometimes what I write follows the outline, but often the outline changes as I progress through the paper. I often use quotations or passages that I am analyzing as moorings for my thoughts. When I am writing I also tend to do a fair amount of in-process sentence-level editing. I know that this 'procedure' would be a recipe for disaster for certain types of writers, but it seems to work for me.

Here is my process, which is at the messy end of the continuum: I generally begin with totally free writing, holding myself only to five pages a day, which can be about anything. Or everything: my cat's sore feet, the week's menus, my offsprings' vacation plans, my reaction to the morning's newspaper, a poem, or the germ of an idea for an essay or a book. This method produces a large number of pages very quickly; very few are useful beyond themselves, but they will ultimately lead me forward into a piece of writing that will take me and itself somewhere, develop into something fit for someone else's eyes. How do I know if I've got anything useful in the midst of the mess? Sometimes it sits right up there and waves at me, or I realize, with a shock, that the line I've just written has potential. I used to leave it to chance to find it again. Now I put a mark in the margin—an arrow, or a note to myself—and in this way increase the chances that I'll remember to use it.

Five pages of handwritten freewriting a day doesn't take very long—somewhere between one and two hours for about 1250 words; sorting and cleaning it up, deciding what's usable and what's to be saved, may take considerably longer. Every so often I read through the past few days' entries, or the past week's, or two weeks' worth. If my freewriting is pouring out, day after day, I don't interrupt it by shifting to the more analytical mode. Sometimes I have a sense of time pressure (wanting to have a draft completed before I go on a vacation, for example) that will move me from freewriting to the next stage. Or I may hit a wall in my writing and decide to deal with it by changing tasks for a while, to see if I can advance on another front (hoping that in rereading I will discover some rough diamonds in what I've already done). As I read the mess I've written, I repeat a few mantras to myself: "It's *supposed* to look

like this at this stage," or "Not every single word of this can be garbage."

I will sometimes circle around the same idea or theme more than once, rewriting it without paying particular attention to what I've already written; surprisingly, these iterations move my thoughts forward. My gradually clearer writing reflects my developing thought; my writing is the form in and into which the thought emerges. This iterative development, while a bit fuzzy at first, results in something that looks suspiciously much like a first draft, with a beginning, a middle, an end, and some sense of coherence.

There are as many ways to negotiate this stage in the development of a dissertation as there are dissertation writers. The examples I've given above describe some of the ways that quite diverse people have managed the process. Look at this spectrum to see where you might (or might not) fit; also look at your own style of working, at the ways you've done this step before, at what did or didn't work for you.

You can experiment. Assume that you have created pages and pages of messily written stuff, and now you have very little idea of what to do next. Begin by exploring the mode of organizing your mess that seems most logical to you. Remind yourself that there's got to be something worth using in all of these pages. Then try the scheme that comes first to your mind—*really* try it, allowing your panic to peak and subside, giving it several days, knowing that uneven progress is par for the course. Remind yourself that this is not the first piece of writing you've ever done. Try your old cut-and-paste method (it doesn't matter if it's on the computer or with scissors and tape; it doesn't matter if people laugh, so long as it works).

What if it doesn't work? First ask yourself why not. You may

discover that you've taken on too large a job, attempted too much at once, and scared yourself stupid in the process. If so, try the chunking method: "Today I'll just read through the whole mess quickly and mark the things that stand out for me as perhaps not totally dumb. Tomorrow I'll pull them out and see if they have any relation to each other. Wednesday I'll set up some categories to sort them into, and I'll go back and see if there are any other pieces I've overlooked. Thursday I'll take a *very* tentative stab at making an outline."

What if your old revision process, whatever it was, just no longer suits you? Take a look at the various styles described in this chapter and ask yourself if one of those methods might work better for you. If so, try it, continuing to track your own progress to see what works, what doesn't, what might. If cutting and pasting no longer feels right to you, try freewriting, writing about what the problem may be. Write about the chaos, asking yourself all the hard questions knowing that this writing isn't actually going to be part of your dissertation.

What if you discover that you're having not a writing block, but a thinking block? What's the difference between the two? You have a thinking block if you're able to write, but find yourself going around in a seemingly endless series of circles, or if your writing is voluminous but devoid of ideas, or if you do far more writing about trivia and tangents than you do on your dissertation subject. Sometimes you can help yourself through this kind of block by getting tougher, saying, "I can write about any other things for the first five minutes of my writing time, but then I have to hold myself to writing primarily about my subject."

Or consider the possibility of getting a fresh look at your material by having a conversation with your advisor, or with someone else who can understand your topic; isolation sometimes

leads to stagnation. Or try writing about what there might be in the knotty place you've reached that's troublesome to you: Do you worry that your advisor won't like it? Or are you uncertain if *you* believe what you've argued? Or is there something in the material itself that disturbs you? It's usually possible to write oneself out of a thinking block. As a final strategy, approach the material again, starting as if you had nothing already written, seeing how fast you can write a really quick version of the chapter. It all came out of your head in the first place, so it's still there, perhaps just needing to be reorganized.

If you haven't created a mess, you may now want to try shaking up your neat work, asking yourself, "Have I left out anything that matters? Do I thoroughly believe what I've written? Are there any nagging questions? Is this the whole story? Have I suppressed my doubts or any contradictory evidence?" This early stage is a very good time to mess up the neatness, for the sake of making sure that your work is as inclusive, as complicated, and as close to the truth of the matter as you can possibly make it.

More Strategies for Working on Your First Draft

Now you're on your way to a complete first draft. Here is my list of specific strategies for making sure you get there.

- Sit down with all your writing, hold your nose, and read through everything you've written several times, looking for different things:
  - —Read just for material that stands out as interesting.
  - —Read for dominant themes.

  - —Read for interesting or annoying questions that occur to you as you go through what you've written.
  - —Read for organizational markers.
  - —Read in order to organize, marking themes with codes, numbers, letters, or colors.
  - —Read to extract a provisional outline.
  - —Read through and put a check in the margin next to anything that's interesting, or seems like it might have potential, or even seems terribly wrong.
- If you find recognizable paragraphs in the mess, try summarizing each of them in a single sentence. This exercise serves several functions: you find out if your paragraph has a central idea, or if it has too many ideas to be covered in a single paragraph; you also produce a collection of sentences that will make it much easier to see the shape of a possible outline.
- If you already have some idea of what approximate categories or themes you're going to develop in your chapter, take out your colored markers, assign a color to each of them, and go through what you've written, color-coding the pieces. If you're working on a word processor, move the pieces you've marked in different colors on your hard copy into different files, rearranging the text to reflect the categories you've defined. You're now well on your way to producing an outline.

These strategies will help you sift through your zero draft as you transform it into a first draft. Add your own inventions as you go along. You'll know when you have a recognizable first draft. It won't necessarily be neat, or elegantly written, or well argued—in fact, it's unlikely to be any of these things—but it will have at least a rudimentary shape and argument,

and some interesting, even if incomplete, or mutually contradictory theories. These are the kernels that will develop into the central ideas of your dissertation. Now you're ready to move on to learning how to revise further the draft you hold in your hands.

5

Getting to the Midpoint: Reviewing Your Process and Your Progress

YOU'VE ARRIVED at the midpoint in the dissertation process: depending on how you work, you've written either a first draft of your whole dissertation, or more or less complete versions of about half of your chapters. Your support system is in place. But the clearest indication that you've gotten to this point is that your sense of what it means to write a dissertation has changed. If what worried you most at the outset was "How can I possibly write a book?" you're now asking yourself questions such as "Do I still believe the main argument I've constructed?" and "What *was* it again that made me think I wanted a doctorate?" and "How am I going to arrange my life and work so I'll survive this project?"

Taking Stock of Your Dissertation

Now is the time to review and evaluate where you've come to in your writing and where you have to go, what's working well in the process you're using, and what isn't. This is a good moment to look at your timing and pace, and to think seriously