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Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day

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

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1

Beginning

IF YOU ENJOY RESEARCH and writing, some of the greatest gifts life can offer you are time, space, and a good rationalization for devoting yourself to a project that truly interests you. But there are many other stances from which to approach writing a doctoral dissertation. Most of the students I meet in my work don't often think of their dissertation projects with joyful anticipation. Instead, they're overwhelmed by the size of the task, or they don't consider themselves scholars, or they are scared that they're not up to it, or they don't even know how to begin. But even if you're not a true scholar yet (whatever that is) or are feeling frightened, you can still write a good dissertation, using a process that minimizes pain and increases your chances of feeling engaged and satisfied with your work. And the first step is to imagine your dissertation.

The best way to begin a dissertation is not by positioning yourself in a library and writing "Chapter 1" on the top of a blank piece of paper. The best way to begin is by approaching your dissertation in your imagination, preparing to write in and about this thesis at every stage, and to become the researcher of

your own work process. Imagining your dissertation allows you to develop passion, curiosity, and questions about your topic, as well as to think of yourself as someone who can make a commitment to scholarship. You may be given a topic. You may be so terrified you can't imagine "passion" or "pleasure" as words with any relevance to your undertaking. You may be writing a thesis for strictly instrumental reasons. Nevertheless, it's still worth imagining—choosing and playing with different topics and different types of theses, giving yourself some leeway to explore before you commit to a particular topic in a specific format. You can take time at this point to speculate about how it will feel to have done this work, to own a doctorate. Or you can think about the process by which you hope to research and write, and where you'll try to do your writing. You can imagine how much company you'd like or will need—friends, coworkers, the active presence of your committee—during this project, and whom you'll ask to be your advisor and your committee members. You may even want to consider seriously how you would feel, what might happen, if you were to choose not to write a dissertation.

People write dissertations for many different reasons. For some of you the goal is to meet a professional necessity, to accomplish an instrumental task: you want to spend your professional life teaching at a college or university, and you know that a doctorate is a prerequisite. Others want to learn the process of producing a major scholarly work, to begin a life of serious research and writing. Still others, before they go on to the next phase of life, want to finish a process they began some time back when they entered graduate school. And then there are the lucky ones who have a burning question that they want to spend time answering. One of the ways to begin, no matter which of these agendas is yours, is by learning to write your way in.

Writing Your Way In

Writing is at the center of producing a dissertation. This book will teach you how not to talk away your ideas or lose them in mental gymnastics. You will learn to write in order to think, to encourage thought, to tease thought out of chaos or out of fright. You will write constantly, and continuously, at every stage, to name your topic and to find your way into it. You will learn to write past certainty, past prejudice, through contradiction, and into complexity. You will come to write out of your own self, and, eventually, even though you may be afraid of what your reader will say, you will learn to write in a way that will allow you to be heard. If you're to do all of this, you need to write every day, even if it's only for fifteen minutes a day.

If you commit yourself to writing at every stage, the process will look something like this: Early on, even before you've chosen a topic, you might make daily, dated journal entries, all of them in a thesis book (which might be separate pages on a pad that then go into a folder, or a bound notebook, or a computer file) about your thoughts, worries, interest in various topics. For example,

> *12/16/95: Today I'm thinking about how intrigued I've always been by the question of the use of model systems in studying biological development. I've always been aware that there are real disadvantages that come along with the advantages of this method—I wonder if I could do something with this for my dissertation. . . .*

When you first choose a topic, you'll spell out your preliminary hunches, ideas, questions:

> *1/15/96: What difference might it make if we were to use not rats, but elephants, as the model? What are the qualities of model system animals that have made us choose them so readily for much of our developmental research?*

As you start to accumulate data you'll not only take notes, but also begin to work with the data—talk back to it in writing, ask it questions, let the material suggest questions to you, and then you'll try to summarize your current understanding of it:

> *2/18/96: Organisms that share the desirable characteristic of having rapid embryonic development may share embryonic adaptations and constraints related to this trait—what difference does this make?*

As you go through, you'll take some trial runs at writing some bits of the dissertation:

> *4/2/96: The model systems approach, clearly an extraordinarily powerful way to analyze animal development, is based on certain assumptions. One is that we can extrapolate what we learn from a few model species to many other organisms. . . .*

You'll keep track of the flashes of insight you have that are spurred by your reading, as well as any serious misgivings you have:

> *2/3/96: What am I* really *trying to say here, and does it make sense?*

At first you'll write in short stretches, and a bit farther on you may produce up to five pages a day (I'll teach you how to do this in chapter 3).

Developing Your Own Work Process

Each of you reading this book is unique, and no single prescription is going to be useful for all of you. I want to help you figure out how to devise the strategies that best suit who you are and how you work. The only rules there are in the dissertation-writing process are the useful ones you make up for yourself. You own this dissertation, and you are the one responsible for getting it from conception to birth; you can get there by whatever process works for you.

You begin by learning to pay attention to yourself as a writer, by writing at every possible stage of your work process. You'll note each day how your work has gone: how it felt, what you did and didn't accomplish; you'll ask yourself, in an internal dialogue that you record, what you think might have gotten in your way, what nagging question you've been trying to ignore, what you need to work on next, how you might have to change your work space, whether you like or hate your topic on this particular day. *You will take your own work habits as seriously as you take the material you're working on,* and you will scrutinize them frequently to see if they need revamping. If you get stuck (you discover you don't like composing on the computer, but you don't know what to do instead; or you are having trouble making time to work; or your writing is coming very, very

slowly—too slowly to make your deadline), you'll seek consultation, first with yourself, in writing:

> *1/14/96 What is going on with my work? I'm having a terrible time clearing out my schedule. I'm doing favors for all my friends, and if I don't stop giving myself these excuses for not working, I'm never going to finish my dissertation! How can I make sure that I write before I talk on the phone, before I meet Harry for tea, before I comb the dogs?*

After that, you'll consult with your advisor, or with a friend who has lived through the process successfully, or perhaps with a counselor whom your university provides for such times. But first you'll confront the stuck place you're in by writing about it, researching it, asking yourself when it began (was it after you had a disappointing meeting with your advisor, or after you drank too much, or after you heard about that article that you're terrified will scoop your idea but haven't gotten up the courage to read yet?). You'll try varying your routine to see if another time, another place, another mode of writing works better. You'll think about whether it's time to make yourself a detailed outline or to play with another chapter for a while and give this one some time to rest. You may decide to consider the worrisome thought that you're barking up the wrong tree with a particular idea. All of these issues are food not only for thought, but for writing. And writing about them, as well as about whatever static you are experiencing in your head, will serve to resolve most of the issues that are bothering you. Writing will also be an essential tool in choosing the topic of your dissertation.

Choosing a Topic

What do you want from a thesis topic? Writing a dissertation is very much like being in a long-term relationship: there are likely to be some very good times and some perfectly dreadful ones, and it's a big help if you like what you've chosen. This particular relationship asks you to give up a lot of the other pieces of your life, to work like a dog, and to postpone gratification. There are people out there who seem to be able to make such sacrifices for a subject they're not particularly thrilled by, people for whom dissertation writing is the means to an end, to getting a degree. I admire your grit, if you're among them. If you choose your topic wholeheartedly, the writing process can be a wonderful opportunity for pleasure; if you don't, it's still possible to produce a good piece of work, and you may even surprise yourself and enjoy parts of the process.

Some people seem always to have known what they want to write their dissertations about. They are the lucky ones. They still need to find an advisor who will support their enterprise, but this is perhaps the easier task. Some, like me, have written their way through the same topic in various guises often enough so they know it's theirs for life. Some of you may have topics handed to you.

Some of the most fortunate thesis writers are driven to investigate and try to answer a question that is both professionally and personally compelling. To begin, stay with, and bring to completion a project this large, it's ideal to choose a topic that's really going to matter to you, enough to keep it going even on the dark days that are an inevitable part of the thesis process. How do you do this choosing? You follow your curiosity, and, if you're lucky, your passion. One person's passion may look

strange to others, but for now you only have to please yourself. I've known writers who were entranced by the relative proportions of seeds in an archaeological dig, because they could read from those data how agriculture was carried out thousands of years ago. I was once so captivated by the possible sources for Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue" that I read in medieval Latin some of the most misogynistic literature in existence. These two projects would not necessarily turn on other people, but that doesn't matter.

You want to try to find what it is that you get excited thinking about, the academic subject for which you have substantial curiosity. As I've noted above, you can do this through writing. There may also be important clues in your academic career. Here's an example: As an undergraduate I was fascinated by questions of voice and authority; the subject of my senior thesis was the Fool in *King Lear.* As a graduate student in English I became interested in the sources of authority in Chaucer's work. The more general theme of authority gradually joined again in my work with the subject of voice—questions about who's the speaker, who gets to speak, what does it mean to have a voice, how does one grow one? Over the next fifteen years, my obsession with these issues led to a finished essay called "A Room of One's Own Is Not Enough," to work on memory, and to a dissertation on teaching writing in such a way as to promote the development of voice. All of this is visible, of course, only in retrospect: If you'd asked me twenty, or fifteen years ago, why I was writing on any of these topics, I wouldn't have known how to answer.

I'm not recommending that you necessarily try to understand your own pattern before you choose your thesis topic, or even that you necessarily have one; I'm suggesting you consider that

such a pattern may exist, and allow yourself to go on a fishing expedition. This is how you will find out where your interest lies, where your curiosity leads you.

How do you do this? You think and write about the work you've done over the course of your academic career, and you remember which particular projects best held your interest, or excited you, or allowed you to have fun. See if these projects have anything in common. Even if you don't find such a pattern, you may still unearth some useful data. You may find out, for example, that your best papers were surveys—say, of all the novels by a particular author, rather than an analysis of a single work; or that you did your best thinking in papers that were comparative studies; or that you were strongest in heavily theoretical work; or that the lab projects that required the greatest attention to detail were the ones in which you had the greatest success.

Look not only at the subjects, but at the type of project—defined in a variety of ways—that you've succeeded at and enjoyed. My own dissertation, for example, is complicated organizationally, weaving together theoretical material from three different fields, but it is anchored by quite concrete case studies; my mind works best when I can continuously tie my theories to data. I've consulted with some people whose dissertations ranged from thoroughly grounded, in-depth studies of a single question and with others whose work involved multifaceted, theoretical explorations that cut across fields. You need to figure out which sort of undertaking best suits how you like to work.

Another good way to narrow your choice is to ask yourself what kind of writing and research by other people you find most interesting and enjoyable to read. You may like highly detailed work or more general treatments, or inductive versus deductive

presentations; you may prefer many examples, or none, when you read theory; or you may opt for short chapters or long ones, a terse writing style or a more expansive one. All of these preferences are useful clues to the sort of dissertation you want to produce. And works by other people are also potentially useful models.

My thesis advisor knew how helpful a good model could be. One of her most useful suggestions was to point me toward a dissertation in an area related to mine that was a model of a doable thesis. This dissertation was mercifully short; it was also fascinating and well written. I knew that it was shorter and denser than my own would be, but throughout my own writing two essential things about that work stayed with me: I'd read an accepted thesis that was only 144 pages long, and it felt possible for me to produce that number of pages; and, quite as important, I could enjoy reading that dissertation. Ask your advisor to suggest some models; you'll probably learn something from them, and you'll also discover that some people not so different from you have managed to write dissertations.

Your advisor can also help you choose your topic by acting as a sounding board, limiting your grandiosity ("Do you really want to take on *all* of Henry James's novels in your thesis?"), helping you to clarify your main question, and talking with you about the politics of choosing a topic. Why do I use a word like "politics" here? Because your choice of topic can be central in determining your professional future, beginning with whether or not you'll get a job in the current market. I'm not suggesting that you choose your topic solely, or even primarily, on this basis. If you do, at the worst you could wind up feeling like you've prostituted yourself, and you may not produce a good

piece of work. But you also risk ending up with neither a piece of work you can be proud of nor a job.

When I was in graduate school I knew a young man who was enchanted by the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. When he decided to write his thesis on Stevenson, the rest of us sat around shaking our heads, sure that such a nonacademic topic would doom him for the rest of his career. Yet he's the one among our group who occupies a named chair in the English Department at Harvard, while serving as a housemaster, so he can hardly be said to have been punished for daring to go with his passion, rather than with one of the more politically correct topics of the times. In the bull market of the 1960s, Robert Kiely could choose to write on Stevenson and still get a fine academic position; it's not at all clear that anyone could do so today. You may have to investigate where the jobs are in your field: if there are six positions in the country each year for Shakespeare scholars, you may want to write a thesis that broadens your possibilities; if you're lucky, perhaps you can figure out how to write part of it on Shakespeare, or you can promise yourself that your first article after you've finished will be about your new interpretation of *Macbeth*. Bribes like this are useful: "When my thesis is done I'll write the book [play, poetry, music . . .] that I really want to write." You'll have to remind yourself of your future reward often if you choose a topic that may not be your first choice but that is a nice, practical topic.

There's another, more playful way of choosing your topic, once you've bumbled around for a while and have some idea of your direction. Here's what you do: Imagine yourself deciding to go with the topic you've been considering. Now imagine finishing your dissertation and holding it in your hand. Ask

yourself, "What shall I name this creation?" Try naming it; play with titles that are clearly too outrageous, and see which ones delight you. At the very least you'll have fun with your work; at the most you might be able to clarify and focus for yourself what you really want to write about. You might even want to give this exercise a try right now, and dream up the most outlandish titles you can. And, of course, write them down.

If you are a science dissertation writer, you're more likely to be given a topic, perhaps a piece of your advisor's larger research project. Or you will have to find some area in your field of interest that hasn't yet been researched, or, in a field like engineering or math, to invent or discover a technique or a theorem that's new or that has not been proved. You have to deal with the terror that you might work for years on a problem and never arrive at a solution. It may help to know that there have been successful science dissertations that explored why a given promising-looking avenue of inquiry failed; these studies do a public service by keeping others from wandering down the same dead-end paths. As a scientist you are playing a higher-stakes game than the English or history scholar, who knows (at least somewhere in her head) that if she works on a topic in earnest for long enough, she'll very likely be able to grind out a thesis. But you probably became a scientist in part for the excitement of the chase, and if and when you win, you win big: creating a successful lab experiment, inventing an original technique, discovering something surprising about embryological development, proving a new theorem. Once you get such a result, the moment of triumph is pretty clear, and the rest of the dissertation process is relatively easy. The sense of "I've got it!" can be much more subtle and elusive in dissertations in other fields.

Doing Research

How you do research varies widely from field to field: The biologist experiments in her lab, studying organisms with her eyes, electron microscopes, or biochemical assays. The anthropologist travels across the world to plunk himself down in the midst of another culture, to absorb it by thought, feeling, and senses, and then he transforms that experience into a new theory by thinking and getting a feeling about it. The historian searches old records, hoping to confirm her hunch of what an event was, to find the chink in the wall that separates her from the past, and if and when she finds it, she begins her own reconstruction. All of these activities are research; some of them use, or can make use of, writing. But sooner or later, all of these researchers will have to transform the results of their searches into written documents that explain those results. The discussion of specific research techniques is best undertaken with your advisor and your committee members, who are acquainted with the particular procedures of your field. Because of this, and because at least as many people get stuck writing up their results as doing research, I will focus here more on the psychology of research, and not on the details of how you will do it.

I probably won't ever forget the research I did for my first dissertation, the one I gave up on. This work, in medieval literature, consigned me to endless hours of sitting in the Bryn Mawr library stacks, looking out through leaded glass windows, dying of boredom, while I tried to return my attention to the work at hand—laboriously translating and reading the medieval Latin misogynistic texts of St. Jerome, which were among the sources of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue." What I found genuinely interesting about this material was the very odd way in

which Chaucer used his source; to make my point I needed to know the small details of the original text. What ultimately kept me from completing this thesis was the same failure of nerve that kept me mired in the details: the leap into speculation, into my own ideas about what Chaucer was doing, did not feel like "real research" to me; it was too much fun, too exciting, and too creative. To me "research" meant "serious," "tedious," "painful," and both the dry pedantry of the Bryn Mawr English Department in the 1960s and my own neuroses supported this misapprehension. Finally, the pain got to be too much for me. What I didn't know then—what I learned later by working on the thesis I did finish—was that ongoing writing could have helped me with both the details and the creative thinking that go into true research. I thought at the time *that if it wasn't tedious, it wasn't real research;* if the library work was mingled with my own creative juices, it wasn't real research. "Real research" was supposed to mean pain. I'd like to spare you this unnecessary misconception as you research your thesis.

If, instead, you think of research as active inquiry into a subject in order to work on it using the singular quality of your own intelligence, some things begin to be clear: "research" is not merely a matter of accumulating data that you then swallow; that is a relatively passive occupation. Research requires that your mind engage with the material, ask it questions, and act upon it in such a way as to change the material—and, incidentally, yourself. Otherwise the thousands of theses on Shakespeare would make no sense at all; it would make no sense that one of the best essays I've ever read on *King Lear* was written by a Harvard freshman. Research turns out to be not what I imagined it to be as I sat, suffering, in the Bryn Mawr library stacks, not a process of passive accumulation, but a thoroughly active one.

On Ownership

What does "ownership" of your writing mean? It means that your writing belongs, for better or for worse, to you, and you alone. If you screw up your courage to write, it is essential that your ownership of that writing be respected by your audience—of one or a thousand. Not necessarily agreed with, but respected. Your committee members can decide whether your body of writing constitutes an acceptable dissertation; a publisher or journal editor will decide whether it will reach a wider audience; any reader can like your writing or not, agree with it or not, understand it or not. But it is still yours. You get to decide what you're going to say, how you're going to say it, whom you're going to allow to read it. Other people own their responses to it, but you own the writing.

Your ownership of your dissertation means that you are stuck with it for life. In some ways, your doctoral dissertation is the most important (even if not the most famous, or the best) piece of work you'll do; in the course of producing it you learn how to be a scholar, and you may come to believe that you are one. If your topic is the best sort, it will also be seminal: you'll develop aspects of it in your future work for many years to come. And, at least initially, your topic will define your professional identity on the job market. You'll be surprised by the number of times you'll refer in various contexts to "what I wrote my dissertation about." It's therefore better if you write about something that's of deep and abiding interest to you, in a way that meets your own standards of intellectual integrity. But you may be surprised by how much you are able to invest deeply even in an assigned or instrumental topic.

About Maxims

The last thing I want to address in this chapter is the usefulness of superstition. Several of my writing clients have talked about how helpful they've found my "aphorisms" at times of struggle with their writing, and I find myself squirming at this feedback, because it makes me feel as if I'm dispensing small cans of advice to drink. What I hope is useful about these aphorisms—for example, Ruth Whitman's "Write first"—is their potential as personal maxims. We all need prompts that we devise to carry us through the hard times, to remind us that we've been here before and have gotten through it, to remind us that we can come to know what strategies work best for us.

I've sprinkled maxims liberally throughout my writing life, from the prompt that comes up on the screen when I turn on my computer, "Remember credibility," to the poems that hang framed next to my desk. Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" reminds me that life is finite, so I'd better get on with the current project; another, quite silly poem tells me that writing is also about play. And on days when I'm tempted to fill up my writing time with the endless chores of life, I say Ruth's phrase, "Write first," over and over to myself.

What you need to figure out for yourself are the words that you most need to hear, words that you have to remember in order to get your writing done. They can be as awful as "My dog will love this thesis," as silly as "What do you call the lowest-ranked Ph.D. recipient at graduation?" "Doctor." You might remind yourself that "Living (and writing) well is the best revenge." Maxims can be reminders and offer encouragement. If you think and write about them, you'll discover the maxims that are your own.

2

Choosing an Advisor and a Committee

Your Advisor

CHOOSING AN ADVISOR is one of the most important decisions you make in the dissertation process: it's up there with choosing a topic. In an ideal world your advisor would be a mentor, an expert in your field, a coach, an editor, and a career counselor; someone to guide, teach, and encourage you from the first glimmer you have of "the Right Topic" to your happy acceptance of a job offer from the institution of your choice. There are, however, few human beings who can fill that entire job description. (That is why you need a dissertation committee—even though all of its members together won't do the job perfectly either.)

How do you choose your advisor and your committee members, and what sorts of things do you need to pay attention to? Especially in the early stages of your professional life, it's useful to have at least one person who can teach you the ropes of your profession. Such a guide can encourage you to move out into the professional world and show you how to navigate in it, criticize

3

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.

4

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: