CHAPTER FOUR

FINISHING THE DOCTORAL DEGREE IN A TIMELY FASHION:
THE DISSERTATION AS A KEY FACTOR IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

During the more structured part of the doctoral program, when students are fulfilling course and examination requirements, problems of timing and maintaining momentum are more manageable, especially in departments where a timetable for exams is clearly defined. The dissertation stage for students in the humanities and social sciences is another matter: without structure and deadlines, students often flounder — in some cases, adding several extra years to the time to the degree. There is a growing recognition of the need to improve the time to the degree in the humanities and social sciences, with a special emphasis on the dissertation as a critical factor. Many departments are engaged in a search for new ways to tighten the advising and supervision of the dissertation process.

As has been noted earlier, in the science fields, the dissertation research grows directly out of research projects conducted in the lab or as part of a research team. Typically, the dissertation is an assemblage of a series of reports on independent research conducted by the student within the lab.

STAGES OF THE DISSERTATION PROCESS IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

It is helpful to think of the dissertation in terms of the different stages in the process: a) the stage of choosing a topic (in some departments this begins even before Generals); and b) the stage of research and writing, including the final dissertation year; lastly, c) the dissertation acceptance, followed by the defense. Below are some of the measures that departments employ to assist students at each of these stages. If some are not available in your department and you believe that they would be helpful, it is appropriate to raise the issue.

The stage of choosing a topic and an advisor: The goal is to seek assistance in finding a topic that is well-defined and feasible, one that matches your interests and aptitudes and at the same time addresses important themes in the larger scholarly discourse.

- Many departments require a dissertation prospectus — in some cases, there is an early deadline for submitting an informal proposal, and a later date when a more polished prospectus is expected. A number of departments are discovering that the two-pronged approach provides more opportunity for giving students feedback during the formulation and early research stage.

  Note: Once you have developed a dissertation proposal, it is also time to start preparing to apply for fellowships, since most fellowships must be applied for during the academic year prior to when support is needed — with many fellowship deadlines occurring during the fall of the previous year. (See the more detailed discussion on applying for fellowships in the following chapter.)

- A number of departments offer colloquia to assist students in defining a topic and preparing a prospectus.

- In some cases, a dissertation topic grows out of a seminar paper or out of a research project in which a student is assisting or collaborating with a faculty member. Many faculty members are alert to this possibility, and can often help to identify a seminar paper or research project that has this potential.

- At the dissertation exploration stage students often find a need to talk to people in a wide range of
fields. Each faculty member is a potential dissertation adviser. Experienced scholars are conscious that it takes a lot of discussion and airing of ideas for their own research before a viable project is launched; ideally, they should be prepared to make themselves available for students to engage in a similar airing of ideas. It may be the case, however, that the specialist in your potential dissertation field is more highly regarded for his or her scholarly achievements than for mentoring skills. It is important in this circumstance to work closely with at least one other faculty member as well — someone in a closely related field, and someone with whom you do feel that you have established a rapport. We would emphasize once again that different mentoring needs can be filled by different individuals; try to expand your mentoring relationships.

The stage of research and writing: Once you have chosen a topic and an adviser with expertise in relation to the topic — and possibly other mentors as well, including some outside of the department — your goal is to get detailed feedback on a regular basis. At this stage, students often find themselves isolated, both from peers and professors; many also continue to struggle with the problem of maintaining momentum in such an unstructured situation. The following are measures that departments employ to assist at this stage:

- Once again, a number of departments offer dissertation colloquia, this time with an emphasis on providing feedback on what has been written and providing support for maintaining momentum. In some departments, these are structured events, with designated writers making presentations at each session; in others the agenda is looser. The colloquia are not meant to replace advising on an individual basis, but are a helpful supplement.

- For advising on an individual basis, a number of students and advisers find it effective to schedule fairly frequent advising sessions in advance, regardless of the advisee’s progress in the interim period. This may mean submitting work that is a very rough draft, if it exists at all; but at least it assures some communication on a regular basis. Other students and advisors prefer to meet mainly when the students feel ready to show something. This probably means submitting more highly polished work, and some students prefer this arrangement for this very reason, but it also runs the risk that there will be very little contact or monitoring of progress. It may also mean that students waste a lot of time and energy by making fairly lengthy excursions in unfruitful directions that might have been avoided with more regular adviser contact.

- Experience shows that there is probably no single correct advising system; students and advisers often experiment with various scenarios until the right one is found for the individual student. Whatever system is used, advisers find that they can provide the best feedback if they receive new written work sufficiently in advance of an advising session so that they have a chance to give it a careful reading.

The dissertation acceptance, followed by the defense: Once the dissertation is completed and is considered ready for acceptance by the dissertation advisers or committee members, they normally schedule a dissertation defense. While the defense can be considered as a formality, a number of departments do use this session to ask probing questions about the dissertation. This final step varies considerably among departments.

Note: Making effective use of the academic advising process can also be enhanced by making effective use of other counseling sources as well. A wide range of expertise exists among staff members in GSAS, the Office of Career Services, the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, The Bureau of Study Counsel, the Writing Center, and other offices that are here to serve your particular needs. All of these services may be thought of as part of a continuum, with the overall intent of helping you to make the most of your graduate experience.
WRITING THE DISSERTATION: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The dissertation is probably the single most important and far-reaching undertaking in the entire doctoral program, having an impact that extends will beyond the program itself. At a recent panel discussion entitled “Surviving the Dissertation,” the graduate students on the panel, all in the final stages of writing the dissertation, offered variations on the survival theme, such as, “Don’t Be a Perfectionist – YET,” or “Don’t aim for the Nobel Prize.” Beyond the general theme of “survival,” the speakers did their best to put people at ease, mainly by emphasizing that the activities of research and writing are familiar ones that students commonly encounter throughout their education. And clearly the students in the audience have performed these tasks quite well. Beyond the general theme of “survival,” the speakers offered the following helpful practical tips, maintaining a remarkable balance between candid realism, on the one hand, and reassuring optimism, on the other.

Choosing a Dissertation Topic:

Focus energies early on a potential topic, even if you arrive at only a rough idea of the topic. The speakers provided reassurance to those still engaged in the search by suggesting to them that they probably had a topic—at least a rough idea of topic—but didn’t realize that they had one. What the speakers meant is that when they looked back on their own selection process, they realized that many of their early seminar papers and even their undergraduate research projects tended to form a pattern, hovering around particular themes. In taking stock of what consistently interested them, what gave them pleasure, they eventually singled out a topic that seemed to promise to be the most engaging and one most likely to bring out their strengths. In this manner they capitalized on all of the work they had done so far; choosing was a form of self-identity.

One speaker placed particular emphasis on the positive aspects of the dissertation: if you choose something that truly engages you, then you can think of it not just as fulfilling a requirement, but as a privilege to be working on it. She also likened the ups and downs of the dissertation process to the ups and downs in entering a long-term personal relationship: at first you fear that you will never find that someone; then, when you do, you experience qualms and fear of commitment; then you readjust and make compromises; then you affirm your commitment.

She also offered the valuable suggestion that choosing a topic should be thought of as choosing a central question that drives your research, rather than a “topic” per se. She emphasized that this is an important distinction. Scientists automatically think of the dissertation as a question or a puzzle, but it is more difficult for humanists to do so. Once you have a question, then you have to answer it; you enter an active rather than a passive mode in your reading and research. A central question also generates sub-questions, allowing you to see a structure. The dissertation as a whole is one large question, while the chapters are the answers to the sub-questions. Without formulating a central question, as well as subsidiary questions and a structural outline, you really don’t have a single do-able topic, but probably many do-able topics. The central question may not leap out at you immediately; but be aware that you are searching for that question. This can be one of the biggest pit-falls for dissertation writers, so be sure to set limits and recognize that you can never exhaust a topic. Formulating a central question is a way of setting boundaries. Be practical and pragmatic in scope and planning: don’t bite off too much, nor too little; allow yourself plenty of wiggle room during research and writing.

Other speakers emphasized the more subjective or personal aspects of choosing a topic. One advised that you should follow your passion even if it doesn’t fit comfortably into a field. He added that in any case, it’s impossible to predict what the external world will favor in the future. Another emphasized that you should not just focus on what is a good dissertation topic, but rather on what is a topic that is a good fit.
FOR YOU, balancing strategic selection and personal interest. Being strategic means finding a niche, or finding an angle on a familiar topic, or giving a more comprehensive treatment of a familiar topic, or juxtaposing a few approaches and topics to make your research more broadly marketable or possibly unique. A good fit for you means building on your strengths and avoiding your weaknesses, pushing yourself and avoiding boring yourself with material you are tired of, finding something new and interesting. He added that it is important to balance novelty or topical “sexiness” with the known parameters of the discipline: position yourself INSIDE the field, not out of it, so that you can still be hired to represent the field and teach classes in the field. Finally, he advised, treat yourself well: choose a topic and location of research that you will enjoy (if you have a family, they need a vote as well).

The Research and Writing Stage:

Since the dissertation is about communicating, start writing as early as possible, once you have identified a central question as topic. One speaker emphasized that writing and research should not be thought of as separate processes: the dissertation is about communicating your ideas. Each attempt at putting an idea on paper may make the next research step far more efficient, since you will have a better notion of what you are looking for, a better notion of the questions you wish to pose, a better sense of the central question versus the subsidiary questions. She advised students to imagine an audience, imagine that you are teaching about what you have found. If you think of it as implicitly engaging in dialogue with others, this can help to overcome the feeling that it is an isolating experience. She also noted that it takes many drafts to create one long argument and that most writing is actually re-writing and revision. The idea of thinking out the whole argument and even writing a very rough draft or diagram of the whole was strongly endorsed by another panelist; she found that this helped to avoid a complete re-write of earlier drafts of single chapters which might have been necessary had she not allowed the subsequent development of ideas to come into clearer view. Another speaker reinforced this idea, suggesting that you start with just bullet points to outline chapters, then return to each point and write it out in prose; this is an easy way to jump into writing when you only have a couple of hours or don’t know what to do – just turn a bullet into prose; once a lot of prose is written, step back and reorganize the outline, then reorganize the prose, then edit to make sense. The main point is to write first, edit later.

Another speaker noted that at times she became absorbed with questions that didn’t seem to fit with the rest. This absorption, however, is often an indication that a place needs to be found for the idea, which may require reformulation of the central question. On the other hand, it also can mean that it is necessary to discard an idea that no longer fits, even if it’s an idea that you cherish. One speaker said she is making a collection of her favorite discarded ideas.

Another speaker suggested that keeping a notebook or journal and writing down ideas as they occurred was a great help in getting started with writing. It can also stem panic when you are stuck in a writing block by providing an alternative outlet. Another suggestion was to work on a small section at a time to avoid being overwhelmed. Keep in mind that you don’t need to start at the beginning – start at an easy place and rearrange later. The speaker also suggested that to make writing as concrete as possible it was helpful to look for models in other dissertations. They don’t have to be specifically in your field, they can still enable you to get an idea of the dissertation as a genre. It is also helpful to set deadlines and to avoid unmanageable hundred-page chapters. Map out on paper a vision of what your progress will be for the next year and have the end in sight.

Don’t wait until you have read everything that you think you need to read. Again, this means avoid being a perfectionist; avoid a paralyzing “ideal.” A small fraction of the research that you do will make it into the dissertation. In order to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the secondary literature, one speaker suggested that it is important to skim and not immediately engage in taking copious notes. Once you have gotten a sense of what is relevant, you can go back and do a more careful reading and more thorough
Finishing the Doctoral Dissertation in a Timely Fashion

note-taking, which then becomes a form of writing. In a similar vein, she called for a separation between the creative process, which comes first, and the more careful process of carefully shaping your ideas on a page. In time it will be necessary to self-critique what you are doing, but some separation is essential. Being too critical can put a damper on creativity.

In connection with note-taking and handling the smaller details, one speaker emphasized that he wished he had paid attention much earlier to the importance of finding the most helpful software and being more systematic in entering data and recording bibliographic information.

Don’t wait too long to get feedback; figure out how to make that happen. One speaker warned against falling into the trap of putting off meeting with your advisor until you have something to share; it is a fallacy that many students share, that not having something to show is shameful, leading to avoidance of contact with advisors (what the speaker termed “a long-distance relationships”) when the opposite is what is needed: he in fact found that the meetings themselves could be generative, even producing a kind of high. In dealing with your advisor, be pro-active. Some advisors micro-manage; others can seem to be negligent. Try to elicit the help that you need; submit a cover letter with specific questions along with your chapter; suggest a meeting date. Don’t allow progress to be tied into your advisor’s timing for response. Don’t allow yourself to get paranoid and think the worst if your advisor does not respond; it seldom has anything to do with you. If you have trouble getting your advisor’s feedback, consult others; don’t stop working. When you do get feedback try to push advisors to articulate the problem as clearly as possible, distinguishing between fundamental structural problems versus a problem of grammar. One speaker offered the further suggestion that it is helpful to keep a record of dissertation meetings with faculty members. It can serve as a reference for the student in implementing suggestions, and also as a reminder for the advisor of earlier advice. The importance of communicating about the dissertation and maintaining momentum has been recognized by departments as well. Some have instituted colloquia in which students discuss dissertation ideas and progress with fellow students and faculty members on a regular basis. Several speakers strongly recommended joining a writing group; it makes you produce small pieces with regular deadlines, and then you will have something to share.

Don’t follow a strict order in writing chapters. You don’t have to write your first chapter first; you can start with the chapter you feel most prepared to write. However, when you are ready to assemble what you have written, your first chapter should present your main point, your main contributions to the field, your best examples, and your theoretical framework and interventions. Then all the other chapters will follow as elaborations on points made in the first chapter. Take a similar approach in each of the subsequent chapters: start with your juiciest examples and ask what chapter-length points each of them could introduce and support. It is important to give the structure of your argument, rather than to give the order in which you made your discoveries (which many people tend to do), even if the discoveries came later in the game. Similarly, don’t start the chapter with background information; provide background only when necessary and only as much as is needed; otherwise you’ll spend years writing background information and never get to the point; think of the dissertation as a James Bond movie, keep the audience absorbed.

Be flexible and even take a playful approach when confronting surprising research results. The speakers noted that research always entails the unexpected: if all the findings were fully predictable, after all, then the topic probably wouldn’t be worth doing in the first place. You may know the big questions, but you cannot know all the questions in advance, and you will surely discover new questions that are suggested by the archival material or other sources of data. The formulation of the topic could be expected to change many times, since it is necessary to follow research findings where they lead. It is a good idea to think of the prospectus as a “proto” prospectus, rather than a definitive statement. One speaker in fact subsequently cut his topic in half, with the positive take that now his dissertation has become “more focused.” Another positive take on changes that have to be made is to call it a “fruitful
mismatch” between the prospectus and the dissertation.

**Don’t wait too long to apply for fellowships.** The speakers strongly encouraged students to apply for fellowships, seeking help from the faculty and the GSAS Fellowships Office. They noted that winning a fellowship can make your own advisor look at you differently, and that once you win your first fellowship, that starts you on a good path to winning other fellowships. (More details on writing the fellowship proposal can be found at this site.)

**Treat the dissertation as your current job.** The speakers noted that being a PhD student could be an infantilizing experience—many of your nonacademic peers are already out in the “real world.” In thinking of your dissertation as a job this means keeping on track, keeping procrastination to a minimum, even though all the speakers confessed to having engaged in various forms of procrastination. It is helpful to write in small chunks, since it is easier to think in smaller sections rather than chapters; then make them flow together. Create deadlines, make a schedule. Interestingly, while the speakers said that conference talks could be helpful in creating deadlines that have to be met, they warned against becoming a “conference junkie.” They explained that conference talks are NOT dissertation chapters and are usually considerably shorter. It is thus easier to convert a chapter into a conference talk than vice versa (an ideal dissertation chapter is around fifty pages, according to one speaker).

**Choosing Dissertation Advisors:**

**Work to your own strengths, know your own needs, and recognize that usually one person can’t fit all your needs.** It is now a requirement in any case that three people serve on the dissertation committee. (For further details see Scholarly Pursuits, Chapter III, the “Roadmap” on the advising process, as well as the discussion on mentoring: [http://www.gsas.harvard.edu/images/stories/pdfs/scholarly_pursuits_ch3.pdf](http://www.gsas.harvard.edu/images/stories/pdfs/scholarly_pursuits_ch3.pdf). While it is helpful to have a famous senior faculty member on your committee, it is also important to have someone who can serve as a “cheer-leader,” and this might point to a junior faculty member. Talking to more advanced students in your department can give you an idea which advisors have a reputation for getting students out in a timely manner, which ones have a good student placement record, which ones are flexible and realistic enough to give students room for their own ideas. It is also important to know if the potential advisor plans to stay at Harvard, at least for a while. The speakers strongly recommended supplementing the advising process by finding a peer group of dissertation writers who are basically at your stage—it can be as small as just two people. All of our speakers had in fact found peers who really got to know their work, and noted that they felt it was less risky to share a rough draft with a peer.

**On Getting a Life:**

**During the dissertation writing stage, it is important to have social activities built into your life and to be in contact with other people.** Finally, when all practical tips had been exhausted, the speakers were unanimous in the feeling that it takes a huge amount of faith that you will prevail and finish the dissertation. We are all grateful for the many words of wisdom, especially from people who are truly in a position to speak from experience. Good luck on the dissertation to people at all stages.

**THE DISSERTATION FROM THE FACULTY PERSPECTIVE**

Additional insights for choosing a dissertation topic were offered at a panel discussion by faculty members (entitled “What Makes a Good Topic and How to Find It”). The professors were able to approach the subject from their experiences both as dissertation advisors and as scholars who have gone through the process of choosing research projects themselves. The speakers acknowledged that choosing a dissertation topic is a challenging process that can produce considerable anxiety. A student’s ego and identity are involved — it’s almost like choosing who you are.
They then devoted themselves to dispelling anxiety by offering a series of practical suggestions for choosing a good topic. They stated at the outset that they could not provide a strict set of rules. Topics are as wide as human knowledge; different fields have different criteria, different paradigms, and different methods. In the absence of a clear set of rules, the speakers proceeded instead to apply common sense and experience to arrive at helpful advice.

Originality is a principal criterion of a good topic. You can be original in diverse ways. You may examine material that has never been studied before; or you can examine well-known material, but provide a new interpretation.

Another way to view these different concepts of originality is to recognize that some topics are central to the field and that there is always new work being done; other topics are on the periphery and have been neglected.

It is important to choose a topic that is congenial to you, that you think is worthwhile not only within the framework of the discipline, but on a personal level. It is not at all irrelevant to consider how much you like interviewing, computers, dealing with insects — or whatever it is that a topic demands.

The specific topic that you study may have a personal and idiosyncratic origin. It is no accident that research on certain groups is likely to be pioneered by people of that group: women have often led the way in women’s history, Blacks in Black history, immigrants in the history of immigration.

You should have a doable thesis that has boundaries; you have to be able at least to imagine where and when it would end. If it is hard to start a thesis, it can be even harder to end one.

This means that you should be ambitious intellectually, but not too ambitious, think of it as a task that will enable you to get on with your career. Students sometimes ask if their dissertation should include A, B, C, and D. One speaker suggested first doing A and then see if that makes a dissertation. Students can then go on to B, C, and D after the dissertation is finished.

One speaker put this idea in a different way. He suggested that instead of writing a dissertation prospectus it is best simply to write a dissertation chapter. He explained that what he really meant was that it is best to do a little piece of research, think small. If it is interesting it will lead to a bigger problem. The best proposal is a pilot project; once you have picked a path you can add on different forks as you go along. He observed that everyone knows the BIG IDEAS, it is harder to do the little ones.

Modesty is also helpful in choosing a manageable topic. Some students set out to write a dissertation that will change the world; others just want to write a dissertation. In terms of results, there seems to be no correlation between the quality of the dissertation and the ambitious nature of the topic.

They noted that it is useful to make the dissertation separable into parts with short-term goals. Work on the dissertation often competes poorly with other tasks that offer more immediate gratification. Confronting the dissertation as a whole can lead to endless postponements.

There was also a warning that dissertations seldom turn out as planned; it is important to hedge your bets and be prepared in case you do not find data that speak to the issue.

A good dissertation topic should also allow you to say something that is convincing to other people. Each field has its own rules as to what is compelling evidence. There is always a logic of explanation and there must be interpretable results.
One speaker suggested that topics that involve comparisons provide a more structured framework than studies of individual subjects. He also recommended building on the work of others. This does not mean replication, but rather looking for gaps or for ways to extend other investigations. He stressed that very few things start de novo. Having a framework, testing things that others have done is very helpful.

To find out what it is you would like to do, it is helpful to be attentive to your reactions in your scholarly reading. If you find yourself saying “I wish I had written that,” you can use that as a key to finding something similar.

Preparing a research design also requires conversation. Research is often a solitary activity, but designing research is an activity that should be carried out collaboratively. Decisions made at the stage of research design are so crucial to the value of subsequent labor that issues must be talked out thoroughly at the outset. Even highly experienced researchers often collaborate with colleagues, teach courses on methodology with them, or pop into each other’s office with a query twice a day. Rule number one for graduate students beginning their first large research projects is: engage in an extended conversation with your advisors. Even Jove, with his legendary powers, could not generate a good research design full-blown from his head.

Looking to the future, the speakers addressed the relationship between the dissertation topic and job prospects. Both agreed that job considerations should be subordinate to intellectual interests. In any case, predicting the market is like “guessing in the dark.” A topic that is in the mainstream of the discipline might appear to be safer, but it may be in an overcrowded field. That problem is not completely solved by choosing a more peripheral topic, since there may be less demand. In general, you should avoid choosing a topic because you think it is fashionable. They also added that the dissertation topic does not necessarily identify your field that precisely — hiring departments tend to work by broad fields.

During the question period, several students wanted to know how best to choose a dissertation advisor — especially how to factor in problems of personality or accessibility versus area of expertise. Both speakers strongly recommended working with more than one advisor — it can be beneficial even if there are no conflicts. The arrangement would depend on departmental policies; in some cases it could be a formal dissertation committee; in others, it may be more a more informal consultation arrangement. It can extend to faculty members outside of your department and even outside of the University. In general, it is wise to have a number of potential advisors in mind. Some of the most popular professors can be in too great a demand.

The speakers tried to reassure students that most professors care about their dissertation advisees — indeed, professors often find it a source of personal pride to be an active part of the process of training a new generation of scholars. They added that the faculty have an obligation to teach and advise graduate students — that it is what they are paid to do. The speakers urged students to be more active than passive in seeking an advisor, to be more aggressive in their outreach to professors. They strongly recommended that students work hard during their first year or two in getting to know the faculty beyond their classes — interviewing professors, and attending lectures or seminars.

Another student asked about the role of advisors in getting a job — he particularly wanted to know what to do if an advisor was planning to retire soon. The speakers responded that a professor’s retirement need not pose a problem. He or she may even have more time to give to students. It is common for professors to continue to work with students after they have left an institution. It is important to talk frankly with a retiring professor about this issue.

Finally, a student asked why Harvard students seem to take so long in finishing the dissertation. The
speakers observed that the problem arose from a combination of external pressures and internal factors. After exams, most students start teaching, which is a major distraction from the thesis. In addition, some topics take a long time. However, both speakers had the impression that students take longer than they have to, and that they are especially slow to begin. Both felt that this was a mistake and that students ought to plunge in as quickly as possible. It is very important to work hard enough during the first year of the dissertation to keep it alive even while teaching.

Timing of the dissertation was also discussed in terms of reaching a crucial point in the dissertation where the problematics become clear; you reach a conceptual breakthrough that allows you to imagine the end. The earlier that you reach this crucial point, the better. If you reach it during the first year of the dissertation work, then you can probably finish in two years, which in many fields is a respectable amount of time. You should be able to project even early in the dissertation what a reasonable amount of time would involve. There was a warning that people tire of dissertations. The ideal is to pick a congenial topic, work at a reasonable pace, and FINISH.

For further views from the faculty, Professor Gary King, Department of Government, has been a regular contributor to panels on this topic; he articulates the issues in a particularly insightful and encouraging manner, based not only on his experience as a faculty advisor, but also recalling his own experience as a student. Below is a summary of his major points: (visit Professor King’s web site for a more complete version of his suggestions: http://gking.harvard.edu/class.shtml.)

* Everyone thinks in terms of 250 pages for the dissertation, which is something you THINK you have never done before; thinking in terms of 250 pages is irrelevant.
* What is needed is to re-orient your life, make a transition from being a student doing what you are told, into becoming an expert in your field; this is a very hard reorientation to make; it entails effortful study, pushing yourself beyond where you are;
* On the prospectus: he considers it speculative and deeply irrelevant; no one will ever ask whether you did what you said you would do in your prospectus; instead, do research and write the first chapter, making it sound like a prospectus;
* When you finish your dissertation, it does not count as finished until it is published; don’t ever use the word “dissertation.”
* The goal of the dissertation is to answer one question: “Whose mind are you going to change about what?” A dissertation is about a new argument; you also need to know who is your audience.
* The goal also requires rigorous organization, focusing on answering the question; have a table of contents that shows the structure of your argument; everything in your dissertation must support the argument; don’t write a literature review, but cite works that support your argument;
* While writing, test market your ideas, keep sharing your work with friends and overcome the fear of being embarrassed;
* When you feel ready, make it clear to your advisor that it’s time to graduate, taking that initiative and then bringing your advisor around to that position.
* Recognize that for those who love scholarship, it can be more intoxicating than anything else you might do; in this sense, it’s a great privilege.

See the Professional Development Timeline on the following page.
# Professional Development Timeline

**Phases of Graduate Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coursework</th>
<th>Generals (or Equivalent), Early Dissertation</th>
<th>Dissertation Completion, Job Hunt, Post-Doctoral Fellowships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assess fellowship needs in relation to financial aid package</td>
<td>As soon as possible identify fellowship opportunities and plan ahead for the application process (many fellowships must be applied for one year in advance)</td>
<td>Apply for post-doctoral fellowships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See fellowship listings at GSAS Fellowships website: Graduate Guide to Grants; Fulbrights and major Harvard Fellowships; Harvard Guide to Postdoctoral Fellowships</td>
<td>Seek advice on fellowship planning and proposals: GSAS Director of Fellowships as well as departmental advisors</td>
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<tr>
<td>See winning proposals: Scholarly Pursuits, online at GSAS fellowships website and in paper at GSAS Fellowships Office, Holyoke Center, 3rd Floor</td>
<td>Attend teaching orientations (fall and winter)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seek classroom observations or videotape consultation</td>
<td>Consider programs on: “Teaching in America”—Dudley TFs—Graduate Writing Fellowships—Senior TFs—Discussion Leading, etc.</td>
<td>Attend job talks and panel/workshops on academic job search</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consult on teaching and preparing teaching portfolio—Save course evaluations/tafi, etc.</td>
<td>Explore OCS resources and programs; attend career development workshops</td>
<td>Check job listings in professional association bulletins and Chronicle of Higher Ed job listings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore library &amp; videos on teaching</td>
<td>Start and maintain teaching portfolio, Request and save course evaluations</td>
<td>Try mock interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start and maintain dossier with faculty letters of recommendation on teaching performance timed closely with faculty observation of your teaching</td>
<td>Choose summer and other employment for professional development/career exploration, consider an internship</td>
<td>Prepare dossier for job market; recommendations to cover teaching as well as dissertation and other scholarly work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider becoming Dudley fellow, freshman proctor, resident or non-resident tutor, GSAS resident advisor</td>
<td>Attend professional conferences/meetings (seek funds: Grad Student Council &amp; Departments)</td>
<td>Join Dissertation Support Group (Bureau of Study Counsel)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seek tutoring in special areas of need</td>
<td>Develop technological computer proficiency (ICG workshops)</td>
<td>Join Dissertation Writing Seminar (Writing Center)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take ESL courses as needed</td>
<td>Map out strategic plan for studies with academic advisor(s)</td>
<td>Attend job search meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in departmental training, orientations, teaching colloquia, dissertation colloquia, observe faculty and peer teaching</td>
<td>See all announcements and job bulletins in field</td>
<td>Try mock interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Give practice job talks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pursue postdoctoral fellowships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart suggests a chronology for the use of the University’s professional development services keyed to the general stages of academic progress. There is no one sequence that works best for everyone and professional development efforts must be weighed against the particular demands of your studies.