Processing the Process:

Some Steps, Suggestions, and Resources for Navigating and Writing the Thesis or Dissertation

Introduction

Grappling with the demands and uncertainties of a graduate education can be an outright challenge for many, including and especially People of Color. Research has demonstrated that Latinos in graduate programs have struggled with feelings of losing interest in their field—about 49% based on survey and focus group data sets published in the Doctoral Initiative on Minority Attrition and Completion report (Sowell, Allum, and Okahana 2015). Yet another concern Latinos face while pursuing a graduate degree is a perceived lack of support from family members toward their professional and academic goals (p. 58). When it comes to the writing requirements of STEM graduate students, studies have revealed that while some are fine with it and others enjoy it, several also struggle with it for a variety of reasons. While writing may not be a strong suit for some, the felt lack of interest in or capability to write reports, essays, or other genres effectively can also come from a general lack of support around writing from within STEM programs. Many This short essay will address some of the pertinent issues in graduate thesis and dissertation writing, calling attention to specific resources and sets of practices that may mitigate some of the challenges graduate students face in the writing process. The essay will begin with a closer look at precisely that: how writing, across contexts, is a process beyond drafting and revising alone. The essay also provides suggestions for exercises and possible practices to help with different parts of the process. While this is not intended to be all-encompassing, a few of the steps that tend to be among the most challenging will be considered here: managing your time, getting the words out, and organizing the thesis or dissertation.

Writing is a Process

What image comes to mind when the word "writing" comes up? When you think about a work of writing, you might visualize the finished product in all its formatted and neatly organized glory. Still, it should be no secret that writing is a process, as it takes time and several interconnected steps in order to achieve the finished product. What might be less understood is how the *process* of writing extends to the outskirts of the clicking, clacking, and tapping of fingers to the keyboard (dare I say pen to paper). For graduate students in particular, the work of gathering, organizing, and annotating the references that make up the research conversation of a paper is a large part of this process. It's a step that asks writers to engage in a specific kind of academic literacy practice–one that incorporates readership as much as it does authorship. Although conventions for writing can vary minimally or greatly across different genres, disciplines, and contexts, another important step in the process is to outline an approach. While this can seem like a lot of added work beyond drafting focused paragraphs based on a driving argument or thesis, the research and outlining steps can make it much easier to "plug in" references to the concepts, ideas, and theories that will serve as the groundwork for your writing. The more leg work you take on for this part of the process, the more ready you'll be to Febreze your sources into every room (i.e., section) of your work. Something to keep in mind is that this process may not necessarily look the same every time. As conventions and requirements change, so, too, can the steps in the process. The following link will direct you to a page on the Purdue OWL with a video that walks you through what I mean by this whole *writing is a process* concept. See if this helps you conceptualize what the process may entail for your writing projects.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/graduate_writing/introduction_graduate_writing/writing_is_process.html

Setting Time Aside

One of the challenges of writing the thesis or dissertation is managing time. Graduate students typically have obligations outside of their studies that are also time consuming, whether that's coursework, preparing for preliminary exams, fulfilling the duties of a job and/or assistantship, family responsibilities, and so on. To revisit the earlier referenced report, 78% of students who took a survey and/or participated in focus groups noted that work responsibilities interfered with their educational performance ("Doctoral Initiative," p. 48). Any combination of demands outside of thesis and dissertation writing can make managing time difficult. Recent research has found that although the time students need to produce a manuscript varies, students should budget even more time than they think they may need and plan to allocate that available time as much as possible (Fleming and Kowalsky 2021). Even in those moments when you don't feel dragged down by other obligations, you might not feel like you want to write—and that's fine, too. With managing your time comes the need to allow yourself time and space away from writing, among other things, but that's no easy feat either. A Weekly Goals Sheet, such as the one available at the link below, can help mitigate some of the stress of making time for writing by allowing you to organize a week-by-week schedule that helps you visualize when to set time aside to draft amid other non-negotiable obligations or responsibilities. This resource also contains a formula that can help you calculate how many pages you should write per day or per week based on available time and the estimated number of pages you plan to have altogether.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/graduate_writing/thesis_and_dissertation/getting_started.html

Getting the Words Out

One of the exercises students and PhD candidates writing their thesis or dissertation can try is to *get the words out*. As a seasoned edit-as-I-go writer, I had to train myself to write as if grammar and clarity didn't matter—and that can be difficult to accept. Having grown up in an environment where slang and Spanglish were prevalent in the day-to-day discourse, it was a challenge to shift into academic spaces where there were expectations around not only what I wrote but *how* I wrote. I caught glimpses of this in high school, but something about the blending of education and professionalization made it click for me in college. As time went on, I realized and acknowledged that while I wouldn't let myself be discredited for having my own linguistic repertoire that served as the basis for communication within my circle, there were very particular and important reasons to rethink how I wrote in different contexts. As is true for many, this generated some anxieties that I internalized in such a way that I ended up writing at a slower rate on any given task. I would try to ensure correctness as I drafted. I had a tendency to stop, think, and edit while writing. However, I knew I had to kick that habit if I was going to meet deadlines and get my degree in time. Fast-forward to graduate school: this has translated to meeting conference and grant deadlines, as well as getting enough words out to have a foundation for my prospectus defense and ongoing dissertation. Then, there was the 24-hour and 7-day preliminary exams that I took in 2021—so, yeah, turns out I really needed to kick the habit if I was going to make it to the other side of that hill.

Although drafting in this way might be difficult, rest assured that there are resources out there to help get the words out. There are different methods for drafting without thinking too much about grammar, punctuation, or clarity. Learning what works for you is important—it may be one method or another depending on the context, or it may be a combination of methods that best suits your needs and writing style. Set yourself a timer for an hour. Set yourself a word count goal. Start with a focus, even a thesis, and just *get the words out*, even if it isn't fully coherent right away—and remember there's a time for editing later. As you begin trying a hand

at this method, work it into the writing time that you allot yourself in the Weekly Goals Sheet. All of this time should be accounted for as you log writing hours in your schedule regardless of how your schedule is formatted. To get the words out, you can start with an open document and a timer and/or a word count goal. If you prefer a platform to help with this, I suggest the private journaling space 750 Words (https://750words.com). You might even try a combined timer and word count approach where you test how much you can write about your topic in a given amount of time. Whichever approach you choose, allow your approach to be flexible week-to-week or day-to-day depending on the rest of your schedule. If you prefer to stick with one method for a while because it works for you, lean into it. If after some time you find it's a good idea to try something different, see what a different approach enables you to accomplish and go forth.

Organizing

So, now that you have gotten the words out, you may be left wondering how to organize it into a draft. The plug-in Febreze mindset that can help with navigating your source materials can also help with organizing bits of your writing into an outline, then into a draft. As a first-generation student three times over (BA-MA-PhD), I've had to continuously learn and relearn how different genres of writing require different time commitments, word counts, and patterns of organization. The five-paragraph essay went further and further out the window the further I went along on my educational trajectory. At the point of realizing I needed to write a Master's thesis—and now a dissertation—I had to rethink what I knew about how to organize my writing. With this came the need to rethink how I outline, which is around the time I learned about *reverse outlining*. By following the link below, you can find and download Purdue OWL resources that can be used to guide your reverse outlining. While you're here, check out some of the other resources that offer different models proven to be useful for thesis and dissertation writing and source analysis.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/graduate_writing/thesis_and_dissertation/genre_analysis_reverse_outline.html

Setting a production schedule is another helpful tool for two reasons: it can allow you to better visualize the working parts of your writing and help you hold yourself accountable. This resource breaks down the necessary steps involved in the process from creating your study design to gaining approvals from your advisor and IRB, to writing chapters and revising, and working with feedback from your committee. It has a space for proposed completion dates for all steps, from planning to defense, allowing you to keep your timeline in check by keeping track of the estimated time necessary for each step. You'll find the Production Schedule document below the Weekly Goals Sheet here.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/graduate_writing/thesis_and_dissertation/getting_started.html

Another organization suggestion I will offer here can serve more than one purpose: spend time reading up on theses and dissertations in your field and specific area of research. Earlier in this essay, I briefly explained how research is a conversation. On any given topic, there are multiple research methods, study contexts, and insights from those studies used to craft an argument around a topic, which is then used to propose a concept, theory, methodology, model or heuristic, or something else. Moreover, studies build on existing research in related areas, which is to say that studies both carry on particular conversations about a current issue *and* create entirely new conversations that will ideally contribute to future research in some way. It's straightforward to see why it would be useful to read up on existing studies in the field to help with crafting bibliographies and literature reviews, for example. Beyond serving this purpose, however, you can set out to find published theses and dissertations in your area of study as a way to get a better grasp of what the genre looks like— how they are written and structurally designed. Try taking note of how these manuscripts are

formatted and organized. Beyond looking at the Table of Contents, ask yourself: how does the author structure their arguments in different sections? How do they introduce the research conversation and "plug in" sources from the literature review to sections of analysis and discussion? As you look at your outline or draft alongside published theses and dissertations in your field, try to come up with questions you can ask yourself about how to approach things. At the same time, you can be thinking about how you might cite these studies in your own work. Since theses and dissertations are inherently lengthier than sources like journal articles or conference proceedings, they will contain several references that you can consider adding to your reading lists and bibliographies if they seem relevant.

Conclusion

While writing the thesis or dissertation can be viewed as a process, made up of multiple working parts, it comes as no surprise that it is a time-intensive (and time-sensitive) process that demands a lot of care and attention. When it comes to writing the thesis or dissertation, the writing process takes on a much larger-scale form than graduate students are accustomed to. Still, a graduate education should enable and empower students to adopt the sets of skills and practices that can support their writing in this culminating, degree-dependent genre. My hope is that the guidance offered in this essay will supplement the support and advice you seek out in other places as you take on your research. By no means are these suggested resources and practices definitive one-stop shops, nor are they designed to meet every need or requirement to accomplish a thesis or dissertation. Rather, they are a few among a much larger pool of available resources that you might find useful in different places and at different points in the process. They are resources you can add to your toolkit for specific purposes as you see fit, or in conjunction with other resources and materials that you think might make them more effective than they are on their own. As you march onward in the writing process, you will notice your

needs change. As they change, it will be crucial to continuously tap new resources and methods

for accomplishing your writing goals.

References

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