

## TOP TEN DISSERTATION WRITING TIPS

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| 1. Use <i>Styles</i> .  | 2. Organize your materials.  |
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| 3. Don't leave your references until the end.                                       | 4. Have a strategy for figure and table captions.                                    |
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| 5. Take writing one step at a time.   | 6. Incorporate revisions as you go.  |
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| 7. Schedule writing time wisely.  | 8. Trick yourself into believing that writing is fun.                                |
|  |  |
| 9. Maintain a sense of balance.   | 10. Use the buddy system.  |

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In many ways, writing your dissertation is akin to knowing that you have to move in the near future. There are many things that you can do to prepare in advance, such as taking bags of clothes to the thrift store, selling superfluous furniture on Craigslist, giving away hundreds of pounds of books, finding subletters, and locating a new place to live. Every time you tick a task off your to do list, you feel a sense of accomplishment, patting yourself on the back for being so thoughtful and well-organized. As the move draws nearer, you increase the pace of your preparations, throwing things into boxes willy-nilly and assuring yourself that “I’ve put so much work into this already. I’m sure everything will be fine!”

### THEN MOVING DAY ARRIVES AND EVERYTHING IS CHAOS.

In reality, no matter how well you prepare for your dissertation, the end game is always intensely stressful.

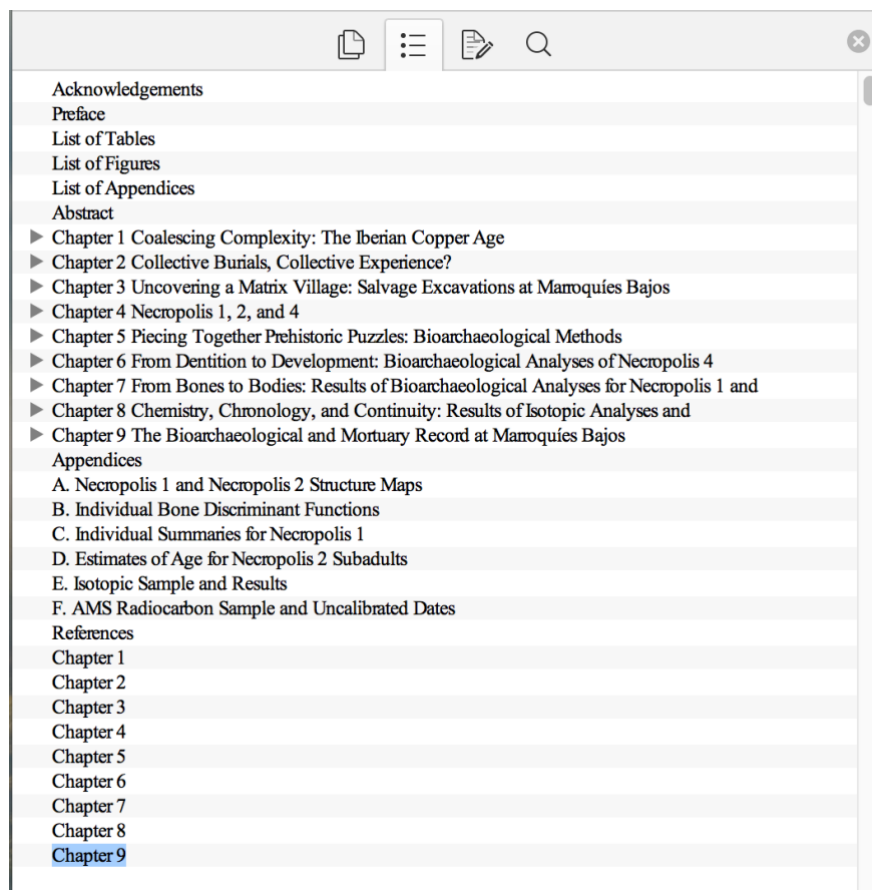
For me, the period of escalating anxiety peaked about two days before I submitted, when I was forced to remove myself from a noisy coffee shop and sit in my car to avoid bursting into tears. I didn’t have much leeway for emotional breakdowns at that point, so I wound up staccato typing part of my conclusions folded up like a human pretzel, with my legs crossed on my steering wheel and a baleful expression on my face. I have friends who cried every day the month leading up to their submission, or sleepwalked downtown, or relied pretty heavily on...alternative treatment methods... to deal with the stress, so I think I handled myself pretty well, all things considered.

I did, however, learn many useful things during my own writing period, which took about two years from start to finish, including time devoted to the last portion of data collection, analysis, publications, and conferences. I’m sharing my top ten tips here, in the hope that you will avoid making the same mistakes that I did. Instead, you’ll be free to make entirely new ones!

## 1) Use Styles

I assume that every graduate student has a mild panic attack about formatting their dissertation three years before they are due to defend and stays up until two in the morning over winter break creating a dissertation template. No? Just me?

After that initial burst of insanity, the most helpful formatting strategy that I employed over the course of dissertating was to use Styles. Microsoft Word Styles allow you to categorize different types of text in order to (1) apply a standardized format to each category, and (2) automatically generate tables of contents, figures, and tables.



In essence, they remove a lot of the frenzied busywork out of formatting, because you know that your chapter titles, sections, and sub-sections will correspond to a standard format, and you don't have to update your manually created table of contents every time you make a change to a minor portion of your document. If you've never used Styles before, my recommendation is to either (a) ask someone you know who excels\* at Microsoft Office to show you the ropes, or (b) look up some guides online and play around with sections headers and formatting in a new low-stakes document that is not

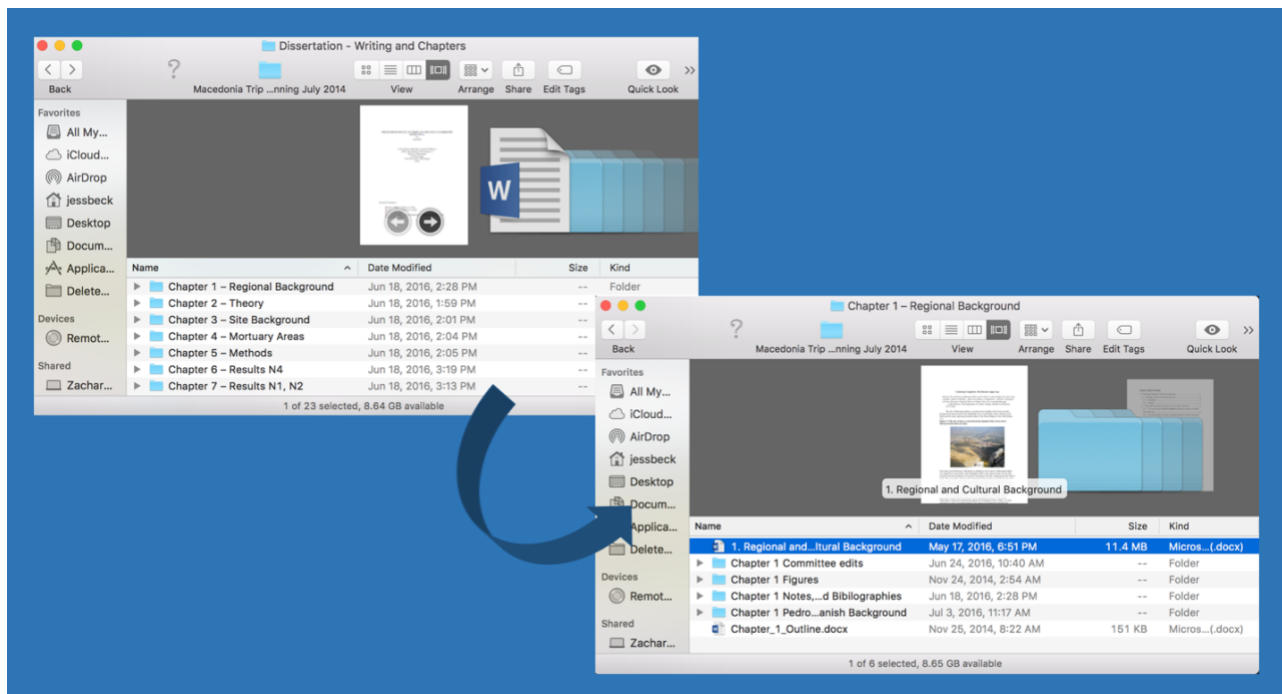
your dissertation until you feel comfortable.

\*Please note unintentional Office pun.

## 2) Organize your chapters (especially your figures)

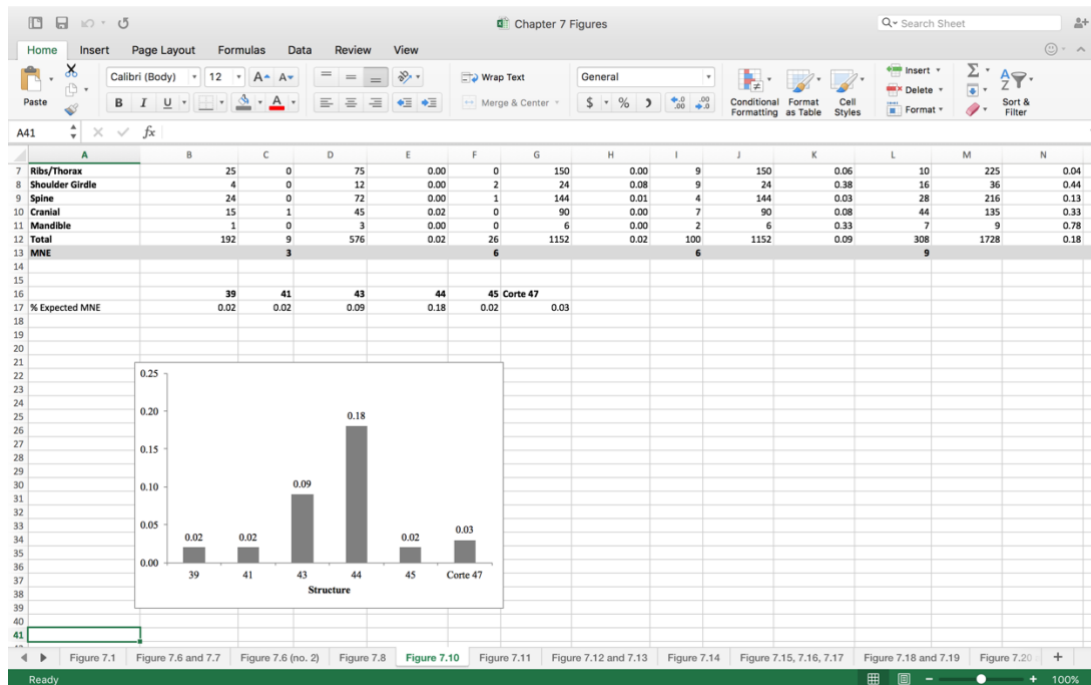
I write mindlessly and frantically, like an automaton assigned a low-level repetitive task. All that matters for me, at least initially, is getting words on the page.

I was pretty confident in my approach – “Look how many pages I have written,” I told myself, “I’m killing it!” Then I sent two of my chapters to the redoubtable B. Holly Smith and learned that my mechanical approach to writing leaves a lot to be desired. Figure captions, for example. Axis labels. Standardization in capitalization. Table alignment. Not to mention a host of other minor grammatical sins that make my first drafts read like a low-rate ransom note compiled from magazine clippings. When you have to go back and fix all of those pesky errors, it helps to have an organizational system in place that allows you to rapidly locate and replace elements of your dissertation. To cut down on formatting chaos, I wrote each chapter separately and maintained files containing drafts of the chapter, committee edits, and associated materials.



However, figure files were slightly more difficult to manage, and these often needed to be updated during the course of the writing and revisions process. Because I used hundreds of Excel spreadsheets per chapter, whenever I generated a figure in Excel I then copied

the entire spreadsheet tab to a new Excel document that contained spreadsheets for all of the figures. This meant that if I decided to modify the font on Figure 7.10, for example, I didn't need to hunt through twenty different tabs on five different spreadsheets to figure out exactly where it originated. Instead, I'd just open "Chapter 7 Figures.xlsx", and edit it there.



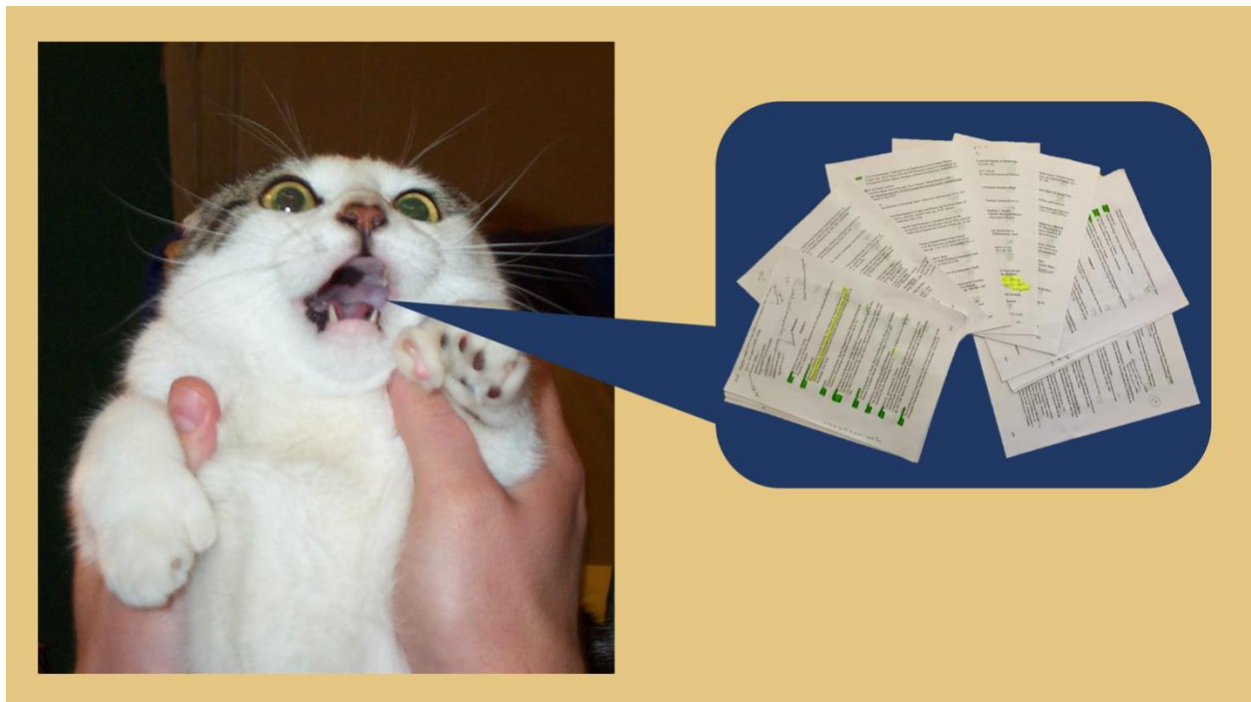
Figures generated in R were similarly vexing, because they also proliferated over the course of analysis. I used a similar filing system to take care of this issue, but if I wrote my dissertation all over again (the subject of nightmares), I would simply use a word document or text document that listed all of the figures generated from .r files, and link the figure name to the r. file name (e.g. Figure 7.2 = Subadult\_Dentition\_N1.r).

I did not start out with a system that was this organized, but after being forced to hunt for a particular figure file for about half an hour over the spring, I realized it was worth it to sink some time into some extra organizational wrangling. Now that I am working on publishing out of my dissertation I'm doubly glad, because an organized system makes it possible for me to find the original data and figures several months down the road.

### 3) Give yourself an extra few days to clean up your references

Unlike the rest of dissertation formatting, the reference section was the one place where Michigan allowed dissertators a high degree of freedom. The bibliography simply had to be "in the format preferred by the discipline," and could be located at the end of each chapter, or at the end of the dissertation.

I decided to organize my references by chapter. That way, if I decided to remove a citation from a chapter, I didn't need to hunt through the rest of the dissertation to make sure it could crop up somewhere else. I incorporated references into each chapter as I went, and when I submitted my first draft to my committee I felt fairly confident that everything was ship-shape. Then, one of my co-advisors sent me an irate email: "So I started on your references for inconsistencies. Not looking too awfully hard, I found my first one on the first page." I reacted with the considerable aplomb for which I am known:

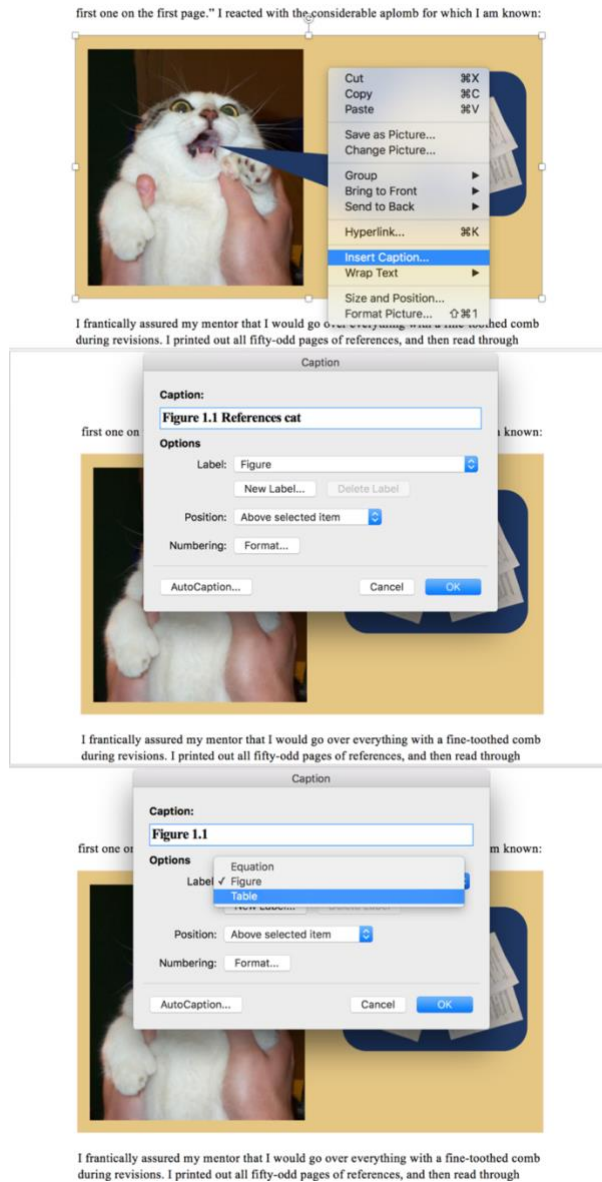


I frantically assured my mentor that I would go over everything with a fine-toothed comb during revisions. I printed out all fifty-odd pages of references, and then read through each individual chapter, checking that every reference cited in text appeared in the bibliography. All told, the process took me 8 hours, and I found 37 missing references — items that were cited in the text but not the bibliography. The lesson here? Build a few extra days into your writing schedule to make sure your references have been double-checked.

#### **4) Have a strategy for your figure and table captions**

Just as Styles are key for organizing your entire dissertation document, you can also use them to great advantage when keeping track of your figures and tables. This is important for two reasons: (1) when you decide to add or a delete a figure, you don't need to re-number everything by hand; (2) Styles allows you to automatically generate a "List of

Figures” and a “List of Tables,” which is very useful when compiling the front matter of your dissertation. Word makes using figure and table captions a relatively easy process. Simply right-click on the figure or table and select “insert caption.” The resulting menu will also allow you to categorize the object as either a table or a figure, and the label will change to reflect the appropriate category (see below).



### 5) Incorporate feedback as you go

It’s generally a good idea to keep your committee involved in the process of writing your dissertation, though this ability is contingent on your chair’s approach to mentoring. I know that some advisors feel the need to see completed chapters, or even a complete draft of the dissertation, before they recommend dissemination to any other members of

the committee. My chairs had no such policy, so my approach was to write the dissertation chapter by chapter, completing one chapter before beginning the next one. This checklist approach really helped me feel like I was making measurable progress while still being able to devote time to conference presentations, publications, and outreach.

Once I finished a chapter, I would send it to the committee member who could provide the most useful input (e.g. my background chapter went to the Iberianist on my committee, the isotopic results went to my outside member, who was a geologist, etc., etc). During the last few months of writing, however, I realized that I had put off *incorporating* a lot of that feedback until the very end of the process, and so the final stretch involved a lot of poring over comments and recommendations from the previous year. Were I to do things over again I would have built those initial revisions into my writing schedule, either working on them in between chapters or focusing on them on those days when writing simply was not going to happen.\*

\*Everyone has these. Do not fret.

## **6) Maintain a list of revisions**

Finally, I strongly recommend keeping track of your intended revisions in a format that is easy to update. While committee members can give you hand-written suggestions, or track changes in a program like Word to pass along their digital feedback, you will also receive a number of verbal suggestions during meetings, and realize that there are changes you yourself want to make in the near future.

It's tempting to believe that you can keep a running mental checklist of the changes that you want to make, but one or two minor points per day gets you in the double-digits within a week, and the chances of forgetting something important are astronomically high. For that reason, I recommend keeping a list of impending revisions and edits, whether physical or virtual. Any time I realized that I needed to make a change that I didn't have time to handle immediately, it went on my list. Though I'm sure I still forgot some things, this strategy ensured that I wasn't waking up every night in a cold sweat, wondering what I had forgotten.

## **7) Schedule writing during your most productive hours**

One of the worst possible experiences when you're writing your dissertation is setting aside a huge chunk of time in which to write, planting yourself firmly in front of your computer....and then hopelessly stalling for hours.

Producing a book takes a significant amount of time and energy, but it cannot, and should



not, take up *all* of your time and energy. I learned this lesson after I spent two months last summer in the [Sweetland Dissertation Writing Institute](#) at the University of Michigan. In the Institute I was essentially given a stipend in exchange for being locked in a basement for eight weeks and devoting all of that time to working on my dissertation. Participants were required to be in our offices from 9am–3pm; only six hours of writing per day. However, it was impossible to spend six straight hours writing. I quickly learned to divide my time between writing, translating site reports, reading articles, and analyzing data.

With the exception of panicking undergraduates fueled by a mixture of desperation and Red Bull, most humans are incapable of writing productively for eight hours a day. If you try to do this, you will rapidly burn out, and the material that you do write will not be of the highest quality.

However, for some people, 10 o'clock at night is just when their creative juices start flowing. What worked was knowing when and where I could write productively, and building my schedule around that foundation. My most productive writing days involved spending from 8:00 to 11:00 ensconced on my couch, coffee mug in hand, tapping away at my keyboard. I would then move to campus and write until 2:30 or 3:00, which is when I normally started to fizzle out. In the evening, when I was near brain dead, I endeavored to work on less taxing elements of the dissertation – figures, formatting, references, emails, scheduling, etc.

Sadly, these hours will not always be conducive to leading a normal social life. As one of my friends yelled “I hate that I work so well at night! WHY?”

I was also fortunate in that I had write-up funding for the majority of the writing process, so I wasn't always teaching while writing up. If you have other constraints on your time, deliberately block off productive time that is *just* for writing a few times a week

## 8) Trick yourself into believing that writing is fun

As I kicked into dissertation high gear during the last few months before defending I would take Saturdays off, but go back to working on Sundays. I was able to handle this without dreading every weekend by using a combination of food bribery and psychological trickery.

Instead of working at home or on campus, I drove to a nearby town called Dexter that's about 20 minutes away from Ann Arbor. Recruiting one or two friends to join me, I would spend the morning in a coffee shop, take a mid-day break for an amble through the local woods, and then worked until 6 or 7 at the Dexter Beer Grotto.\*

This would allow me to get five or six hours of focused work done, while still having an enjoyable day that felt like a break from my weekly schedule. If you live in a large city, or there isn't anything comparable in your immediate environs, I'd still suggest changing your writing environment once a week. That could mean working from home when you normally have to be on campus, or switching up neighborhoods for the weekend. Even though I was getting work done, I found myself looking forward to Sundays because of the combination of movement, time outdoors, socializing, and food.

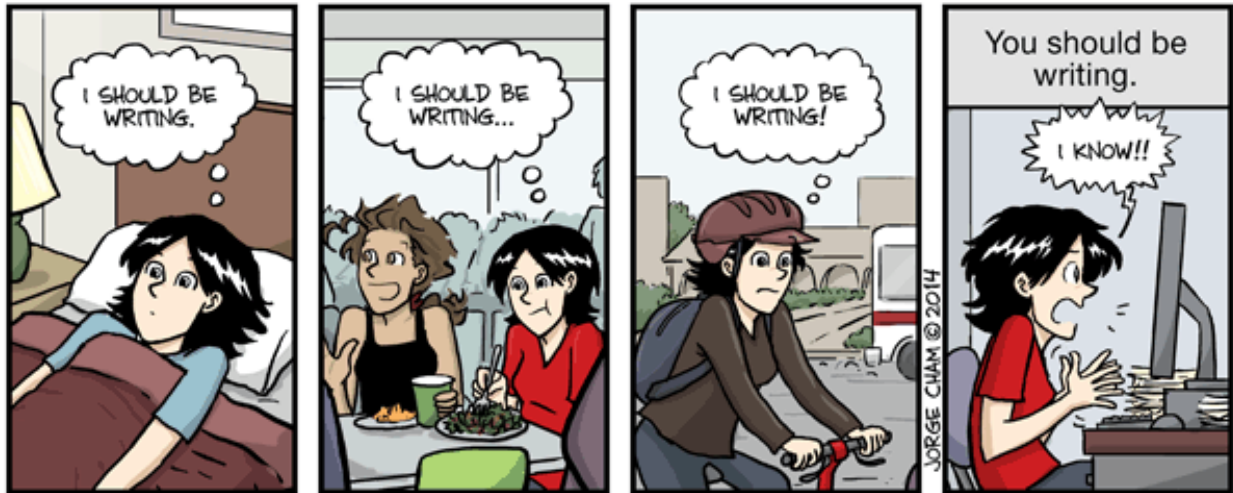
\*When writing I recommend a two-beer maximum. I nurse the first beer for an hour or so as a means of encouraging myself to stay in one place, and then I use the second beer as a way to eke out another 45-minutes or hour of writing time. I'd also recommend looking for bars with large windows and a lot of decent natural light.

## 9) Maintain a degree of balance in your life

It is incredibly tempting to devote all of your waking hours to writing your dissertation, particularly in the final throes of the process. This is compounded by the social norms of academia, where all scholars are supposed to be maximizing their productivity at any



given point time to keep up with the increasingly steep demands of the job market. As a result, every dissertating graduate student I've met is faced with a crippling sense of "writing guilt" whenever they aren't actively working on their dissertation.

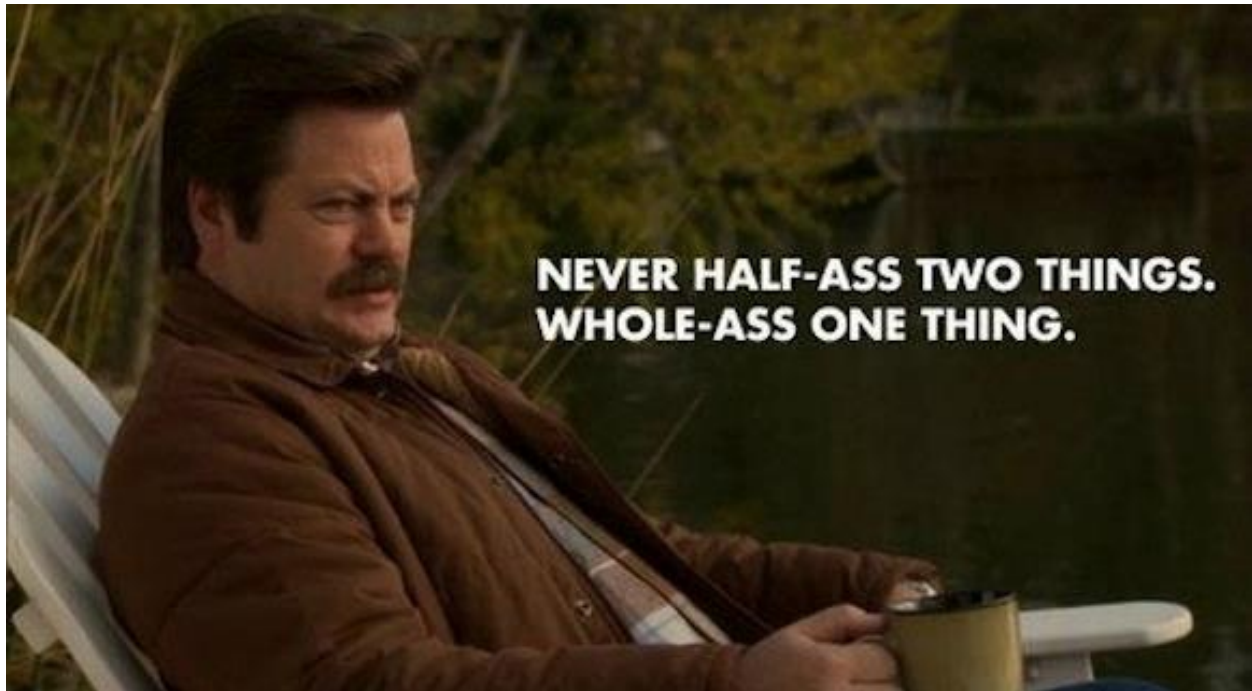


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To be fair, there will be points in time when clocking in 12-hour days working on your project is vital and necessary. However, you can't do this every day. No one writes a book overnight, or in a week, or even in a month. Remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint, and you don't want to burn yourself out in an initial burst of furious labor.

That's why it's important to remember to devote time and energy to other aspects of your life. That could entail spending time with family, exercising, blogging, cooking, cleaning, or pursuing non-academic hobbies. People have different ways of mentally and physically recharging, so pick what works for you. While it seems counter-intuitive to invest time in other activities in order to write more of your dissertation, this harks back to point #7. Instead of working on your dissertation all the time and making little progress, try to maximize your productivity during shorter periods of time. As Ron Swanson so famously stated, "Never half-ass two things. Whole-ass one thing."



What worked for me was deliberately setting aside time for workouts three or four times per week – a great motivator for exercising is knowing that the alternative is writing. I also tried to eat a few servings of fruits or vegetables every day (this was much harder, since chips and popcorn are my writing fuel). Being physically active allowed me to mentally regroup after a day of struggling to get words on the page, and also helped me maintain a normal sleep schedule. Eating healthy, at least occasionally, ensured that I didn't feel sluggish all the time. Another small change that I made was downloading the "[plant nanny](#)" app onto my phone in order to remind myself to drink water. I require a significant volume of coffee to get going in the morning, and as the day wears on it seems that simply topping up the coffee might be a brilliant strategy. The water app ensured that I didn't crash at 1pm in a fit of cranky dehydration.

#### **10) Use the buddy system**

I am one of those obnoxious people who is incorrigibly social. With the exception of the early mornings, I genuinely enjoy being around other people. In the past, I've commented on my "border collie-like" tendency to organize people into groups for events and outings. Unsurprisingly, during my last semester of writing, I began to actively seek out people to write with.



I recommend the use of the buddy system for dissertation writing with a few caveats. You need to carefully select the people you will be writing with to ensure that group writing is productive for everyone. The ideal balance entails an hour or two of quiet writing time broken up by occasional ten-minute conversations about sundry topics, or group outings to procure food or coffee. While you can write with anyone you want to, I also found it helpful and encouraging to work with other people who were at the same point in their academic career. I spent most of my time writing with two other final year archaeology students (and a primatologist who would step in when we needed a pinch-hitter). We called ourselves “write club,” and would meet in the seminar room of the museum to write for several hours several times a week. We also occasionally hosted “write club” parties at each other’s house, which provided that helpful location switching that I described in point #8. The host was responsible for providing food for the day, which was likely (a) the only time we were eating balanced lunches, and (b) gave the host an opportunity to focus on something besides the dissertation for a little while (see point #9).

The three of us spent the year navigating the same seemingly interminable steepchase of job market applications, ticking departmental funding clocks, and thorny chapter sections. Academia is often incredibly isolating, and it can be near impossible to explain the particular stresses of dissertating to families or non-academic friends, or even to younger graduate students facing different sets of obstacles. Having two other people to commiserate with who were going through exactly what I was going through was a way to keep my spirits up. By the end of the summer two of us had defended, and all of us had jobs lined up for the next academic year. I am already excited for the first annual write club reunion at the Society for American Archaeology meetings.

So there you have it. My top ten dissertation writing tips. Feel free to include your own suggestions in the comments section, and **GOOD LUCK WRITING.**

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