



Demystifying Dissertation Writing: A Streamlined Process from Choice of Topic to Final Text

Peg Boyle Single

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Research shows that five strategies correlate with the successful completion of a dissertation:

- Establishing a consistent writing routine
- Working with a support group
- Consulting your advisor
- Understanding your committee's expectations
- Setting a realistic and timely schedule

Building on these insights, this book is for anyone who needs help in preparing for, organizing, planning, scheduling, and writing the longest sustained writing project they have encountered, particularly if he or she is not receiving sufficient guidance about the process, but also for anyone looking to boost his or her writing productivity.

The author uncovers much tacit knowledge, provides advice on working with dissertation advisors and committee members, presents proven techniques for the prewriting and writing stages of the dissertation, sets out a system for keeping on schedule, and advocates enlisting peer support.

As Peg Boyle Single states, "my goal is quite simple and straightforward: for you to experience greater efficiency and enjoyment while writing. If you experience anxiety, blocking, impatience, perfectionism or procrastination when you write, then this system is for you. I want you to be able to complete your writing so that you can move on with the rest of your life."

Few scholars, let alone graduate students, have been taught habits of writing fluency and productivity. The writing skills imparted by this book will not only help the reader through the dissertation writing process, but will serve her or him in whatever career she or he embarks on, given the paramount importance of written communication, especially in the academy.

This book presents a system of straightforward and proven techniques that are used by productive writers, and applies them to the dissertation process. In particular, it promotes the concept of writing networks - whether writing partners or groups - to ensure that writing does not become an isolated and tortured process, while not hiding the need for persistence and sustained effort.

This book is intended for graduate students and their advisers in the social sciences, the humanities, and professional fields. It can further serve as a textbook for either informal writing groups led by students or for formal writing seminars offered by departments or graduate colleges. The techniques described will help new faculty advise their students more effectively and even achieve greater fluency in their own writing.

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Michael Burnam-Fink says

Acceptance to grad school should come with a copy of this book.

Single boils down the massive undertaking of the dissertation into a simple process that applies to both the humanities and social sciences. Pre-write effectively by taking interactive and citable notes, along with a strong skeleton of an outline. Stay on task by writing a little every day, and staying engaged with the problem so you don't need to cognitive warm back up. Stay enthusiastic by tracking progress, figuring out how research matters early on, and encouraging success. There's also good advice on picking committee members who'll help you succeed, and running writing groups of related students. Some of the thoughts on how to edit documents are a little old-fashioned, but not the idea that you have to find something that works for you.

One foot in front of the other, a few hundred words a day, and even the tallest mountain can be climbed.

Aisha says

[illegible][illegible]

JUST GET IT DONE !!!!

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(Edward Said, 1978) Distorted representation of the Orient made imperialism possible

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Lauren says

I got this one because of the chapters on interactive reading and note-taking and citeable notes. Those chapters were quite helpful. I plan on trying out other elements of her system as well, but first on seminar papers since I have to get through those first. Biggest takeaway is to engage first in productive prewriting (ie the interactive reading and notetaking) and THEN write. But write every day.

Jeff says

The Single System attempts to distill what is certainly a complex process into a more manageable set of steps. I admire her for the effort. Many of these activities - citeable notes; reading an article clear through with minimal marking, then revisiting key passages; developing a writing routine - speak clearly to the process that researching and writing is. Others, like the steps from a one-page outline to a long outline, are logical, but not for everyone.

Key to Single's advice is the encouragement, at the first draft stage, to just write. Get the pencil (or keyboard) going and let it all out on the page. There will always be time for cleaning it up and it often proves easier to succinctly say what you mean when you have a sloppy, first-draft version from which to build.

Shelley Guyton says

As a beginning grad student, I found this book a great practical and non-intimidating introduction to the dissertation process. There are strategies in here useful for all stages of grad school. I found Boyle's strategy for prewriting most helpful. She shows that this is the most important step in entering a scholarly conversation because you learn to reshuffle what you've read into your own unique lens. Also, you build a very useful resource for referring to your readings. See Ch. 3 "Interactive Reading and Notetaking" and Ch. 4

"Citable Notes". I know this will save me a lot of time as I progress to the next stages!

Lwin says

This is the best book to read before writing the dissertation instead of googling.

Elizabeth says

As with many of these types of books, Single provides lucid guidance that is useful for all steps of the dissertating process. There are several specific ideas she includes pertaining, especially, to outlining and focus statements that are helpful. She also explicitly discusses a series of questions that a writer/dissertator can ask him/herself in order to better define an argument at the dissertation or section level. Finally, her appendix with annotated looks at introductions to both social science and humanities articles is helpful in illustrating the moves that any academic writing must make as well as the different ways of going about doing so. As with so many of these books, I wish I had read/known many of these techniques earlier, but there is plenty here that will provide help to even the completed dissertator.

Alex says

The note taking section in this book was exceptionally useful to me and was worth the purchase just for chapters 1-4. I recommend reading this book before beginning the dissertation, i know i will be using the "Single System" as i begin writing. The only critique i have is that the chapters on writing routine and revisions had a lot of advice that I've read in other dissertation books. As a result, I didn't find the last couple of chapters all that useful.

Hil.Larious says

Demystifying Dissertation Writing is helping me a lot with my master's paper. When I just got my paper topic I had no idea where to start. Surely, I started with googling stuff. It came up with quite a number of blogs, websites, articles, eg by DW. But this book is helping me way more than even my supervisor. Indeed, a great piece of writing.

Leanna Aker says

Meh. The book started out well, and I thought..."OOooooh, I'll get some great tips for getting organized for my dissertation." I did find a few tips, but all in all, the book fell flat. I felt like the whole thing was about begging people to do all of the writing tasks from high school, albeit sometimes in different ways than you might have learned.

For most people, this book will provide good pointers and suggestions for organizing your research. If you are a fairly efficient writer, I'd bet there are better sources out there.

George says

I liked the emphasis on discipline and the manner she recommended maintaining it.

Byurakn says

It's an excellent book for someone who is just beginning their PhD. It is still worth a read when one is closer to their dissertation submission deadline but then many of the suggestions are already in practice (e.g. having a writing group) and some are too late to practice (such as choosing a topic and an advisor). However, it still helped me to figure out what my dissertation is about and come up with a structure that makes sense.

Cara Byrne says

This was a helpful read! The two best pieces of advice I took away from Single's book are:

(1) to work on the dissertation a little bit each day. She states: "On those days when [my students] know they will not be able to work on their dissertations, I ask them to review at least something to keep their brains engaged with their project. Often this means reviewing an outline, reading through the first page of a chapter, or reviewing notes they took on reading materials. I remind them that they can stay productive even in twenty-minute increments" (51), and

(2) to constantly ask questions that will help reaffirm why you're doing the project you are doing (i.e. "What will this paper buy you?" and "What audience do you want to reach and why?" (102), "When you are finished with the project, what is the one point that you want to leave with your readers?" (90)) and that will help when reading articles related to the dissertation ("What is the main point or result? Is this point well supported or not?" and "How does this reading relate to my academic interests, professional current projects, or future plans" (65)).

I won't be using the "Single System for Academic Writing," as I find drafting writing early more productive than extensive outlining, but I can see that with other types of projects, it would be an effective system.

Patrick says

I find it very helpful—nearly therapeutic at times—to read books about writing, especially one like this which focuses on starting a dissertation, finishing a dissertation, and all points between. That said, this Single's book was particularly helpful for two chapters, "3. Interactive Reading and Note Taking" and "4. Citeable Notes." I can't recommend these two chapters enough for anybody working on a dissertation, although it would be perhaps most helpful for someone entering grad school. Her recommendations build good research habits and help you become a more efficient writer. Again, recommended.

Leah says

Demystifying Dissertation Writing breaks down the dissertation writing process into a step-by-step system that seeks to make this huge writing project manageable. Single's advice on organization, structure, and finding support in writing partners/groups is invaluable. As I read, I was struck throughout by the similarities between fiction writing and dissertation writing--possibly because some of Single's advice is borrowed/adapted from fiction writers such as Stephen King. This connection reminded me that writing is writing, and even something as seemingly insurmountable as a dissertation is just a big writing project waiting to be tackled with sustained, persistent effort--and yes, even creativity.

I think this book would be particularly useful for graduate students who are in the beginning stages of dissertation writing. Faculty and staff who work closely with graduate student writers can also benefit from reading Single's book.
