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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



A HOLT PAPERBACK

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you're going to get help with this work, and plan ahead by reserving that help.

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All of which is to say: Computers are magic. And there is also no such thing as a free lunch.

## APPENDIX II



### *Some Advice for Advisors*

**TO THE WRITER:** This chapter is for your advisor. Some friends who have supervised many theses suggested that including such a chapter might be one of the most useful things I could do for you. Invite your advisor to read the rest of this book, so the two of you can use it as a starting point for ongoing conversations about how best to work together.

#### *An Advisor's Role*

Being a dissertation advisor is, next to being a parent, one of the hardest (and at times the most thankless) jobs around. It calls for knowledge of your discipline, politics, and people; for patience, good timing, a capacity for delayed gratification, and humility. You'll be asked to invest deeply—but not too deeply—in a project that's not your own, for which you'll get no credit. Doing this job is a labor of love, involving what Erik Erikson calls "generativity," the capacity to nurture the next generation. And it won't even get you tenure. (In fact, if you do it for too many people, at the expense of your own scholarship, it may

even cost you tenure. My own fine thesis director was a case in point.)

The most important piece of this job is your stance. Being a high-wire trapeze artist is easy compared to the delicacy of what you have to do. What you have to get right—you'll have many opportunities to negotiate this (and to fall off the wire)—is your closeness to and distance from your advisee's thesis project: you need to be close enough to be able to get into its details, but far enough away to make it clear that it's the student's project, not yours.

The appropriate mantra as you approach your advisee is, "Remember who owns this piece of work." If you can stay clear about ownership, many other things will fall into place. For example, you have a heavy responsibility as a reader of the thesis, but none as a writer. You can help or hinder the process, but you can't make it happen. Your responses to the thesis should always be those of a respectful and interested audience. Your job is to advise, to read, to support, and perhaps to nag, but it is not your responsibility whether or not the work gets done. That's your student's choice.

Sometimes you will get to choose your advisee, but more often a student will approach you to ask if you'll advise him on his dissertation. If you don't think you can come to like and respect the person who's asking you, don't take him on as an advisee. Years ago a potential supervisor of mine warned me that she had a poor track record advising women; I looked elsewhere and have always felt grateful to her for the warning. If you know that you are not a good teacher for a particular sort of student—that you have trouble, for example, with the ones who are too much like you, or with those who aren't compulsive about their work, or with those who are less or more indepen-

dent than you find comfortable—or if you find that you're not much help with certain kinds of thesis topics, at the very least be honest about this up front. At the best, you might be able to suggest to the student someone who would be a better choice.

So you have an advisee with whom you're pretty compatible, you've figured out that this is not your dissertation, and you've sworn not to get pulled unwittingly into writing it. What is your role now? You have several possible roles. The most important one is to be company during a process that you yourself may remember as being quite lonely, to be a steady, empathic, and steadying presence, encouraging and optimistic, and available to meet reasonable demands. You are also a coach, kind but firm, negotiating reasonable deadlines, pushing and pulling the student toward them. You will help her to define the thesis topic, suggest paths best taken or ignored, talk with your student about what constitutes an acceptable thesis, and perhaps provide her with examples of a doable one. (Many writers beginning theses have never looked at others in their field; having a few on hand to suggest as examples—not the most brilliant ones you've ever received—will help advisees begin to imagine their own.)

You'll be available for consultation at sticking points, listen carefully, point the advisee back toward things she's said that may help ("You told me last week that you thought that piece of chapter 2 didn't belong where it was. Do you think it might provide the bridge you're looking for here?"). You'll be willing to discuss the large and small details of the writing process ("How much revision do you really want to be doing this early on? Maybe you ought to save it for when it's clearer which of these sections you're keeping, and which you're discarding." Or "Think about the way you've used the passive voice and commas."). And at the proper moment you'll be an early reader,

and then a helpful critic. This begins to sound like a description of an impossible job. In a way it is, and you can be sure that none of your good deeds will go unpunished.

### *Feedback and Ownership*

Here are a few methods and some general principles for thinking about offering feedback on your students' writing. It is sometimes a great help to remember what it was like when you were writing your own dissertation—how it felt, what went wrong, what went well—bearing in mind, of course, that different people have different styles of learning, researching, and writing. It may be simpler to work with students who work more the way you do, but you'll be less tempted to confuse the ones who don't with yourself, or to think that you always know how they feel. Your field has probably changed since you wrote your dissertation, and academic writing styles and teacher-student relations have, too. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow describes some ways of envisioning feedback that both you and your advisee might find very helpful.

Even though you are neither your advisee's parent nor his therapist, the odds are good that at some point during the dissertation process you will be the unwitting recipient of what psychologists call "negative transference." That is, you'll be experienced by the student as the big bad wolf, or the wicked witch, and you'll be the target of his sometimes quite potent anger. The best advice I can offer for such an occasion is to remember that it's a developmental stage of the writer. Don't get into it with him unless you really have no choice (for example, he's bad-mouthing you all over town). Work very hard at not taking it personally, because it probably has nothing

to do with you and everything to do with your role and with the advisee's personal history. If you can stay unflappable, the chances are good that your student will cool down.

There are, of course, times when an advisee will be justifiably angry with you: you've failed to tell her about an important deadline, or to warn her in advance that you'd be out of the country at a crucial moment in the project, or you've provided feedback that was not only unhelpful but also demoralizing. At such times you ought to hear her out, accept the blame, and apologize. It is quite surprising to hear what students imagine when their advisors are unavailable, don't return messages, or take an inordinate length of time to comment on materials. The most common responses are statements like "She probably thinks I'm stupid," or "He hates my work," or "I can feel her wincing when she answers the phone and it's me." It may be difficult to comprehend that responses such as these come from quite bright people who do good work. Dissertation writers tend to take the sins of their advisors onto themselves, as in this only slightly caricatured statement: "He probably hasn't called me in the two months since I sent him my last chapter because he began reading it and was so disgusted he couldn't go on, and he didn't want to tell me how ghastly my work is." The fundamental principle of dealing with students in the midst of their dissertations is to assume paranoia.

The best dissertation your advisee can write will come from her feeling that she owns her own work. Ownership is a central force in learning to write. The sort of writing one does in creating a dissertation is an important personal possession, but one that it's easy to lose or have taken away. If a thesis writer is made to feel humiliated or stupid, even if the slight is unintentional, it will be easy for her to feel as if she no longer owns her own

words. In order for your advisee to experiment with, test, and change her writing, she has to remain attached to it. I say this despite the fact that for many years I believed that the important next step, for my own or my students' writing, was to "get distance from it," that is, disclaim ownership. I've come to believe that such distance is a myth that oversimplifies or belies the relationship between writers and their writing. It's not so hard to see one's own writing at a distance, but it is hard to bring it back into close focus, to take possession of it once again and engage with it with energy.

How do you encourage ownership of writing in your advisee? Most important is to know and believe that the writing belongs to the student, and to act on that basis. How would your actions bear out such a belief? You would listen carefully to what's being said. You would assume that your student is invested in what he's saying. You would ask him what he intended or meant in a passage you found obscure, and not attempt to guess. You would be careful with evaluations and judgments. You would not write all over his paper, but be properly respectful of it. And—this is absolutely essential—you would not write anything on his dissertation draft that you wouldn't feel comfortable saying to his face.

Given all this, how do we handle feedback and our advising role?

- A very important bit of advice: Before you launch into any detailed criticism of whatever writing your student has given you, say something positive, encouraging, and honest about it. Absent such statements, every dissertation writer I've ever worked with (every other sort of writer, too) has assumed his advisor hated his work or thought it was worthless.

- Best not to lay a thought on your advisee's work—and certainly not a pencil or pen—until you clarify with your advisee what kind of feedback would be most useful for her at this particular point in the process. Ask, "What would you like me to read for? What sort of criticism do you think would be most useful for you right now? Some of my students have found it helpful when I've . . ."

- Be extremely careful about how much feedback you give, particularly early on. Resist the urge to hack, slash, and burn your student's prose, or even just to edit, no matter how awful you think it is at this stage. Consider which one or two main issues it would be useful for *this* writer to hear about at *this* particular point in her work: structural questions? a particular knot in the argument? Do not overwhelm the student with detailed stylistic criticism in any draft before the last one. Remember that many thesis writers are paranoid about their work, and walk carefully.

- Timing is everything. Strong criticism that is essential in the next-to-final draft can be devastating if offered on the first draft. The opposite is also true: offering major criticism for the first time when the work is in its final draft can also be catastrophic. At every stage ask, "Where are we now?" Work on your ability to tolerate early chaos without saying very much. Think before you speak.

- Don't get into a tug-of-war with your advisee—with you "attacking" and him "defending" the thesis. Don't let him off the hook by giving him this opportunity to disown his own negative feelings about his work. Your job is to be good company and the best advocate for this project, in the same corner as its writer (except saner).

- Do not get seduced into turning into a sadist by a student

who says, after handing you her first draft, "I want you to tell me *everything* you see in it, including *all* the mistakes." Very few students actually want that much feedback, although many think or say they do.

- This is the student's first magnum opus, and part of the job for him is to learn how to solicit and use feedback, as well as to learn how to judge his own work. Don't feel you have to do all the work for him. Give him both feedback and space.

- Different sorts of feedback are appropriate for different stages. On a first draft it might be appropriate to be encouraging of any writing the student has accomplished, and to comment on a few of her ideas. On the second draft you might ask about the shape of the argument: "What do you think you're trying to say here, and how do you think you might support it?" When you're talking with her about later drafts, your focus will become more detailed and more critical (not negative, critical), but at each stage, don't overwhelm the writer with too much advice at once. There is only so much that any writer can hear and accept at a single sitting. Be respectful, ask her what would be most useful to her, what *her* concerns are about the writing (writers often know where the knotty places are in their argument, or where they couldn't say something important clearly). Listen very carefully to her response.

- Watch your tone. If your customary mien is on the glum side, find some way to let the student know this so she doesn't think that her project has just died. Thesis writers are exquisitely tuned to small signals because you do, in fact, hold their professional life and death in your hands.

- If you have really bad news to deliver (for example, "I don't think the argument of this chapter works as it now

stands"), do so gently, and help the writer find a bridge to something else that will work. If possible, don't leave him in free fall.

- Once again, hesitate before marking up a student's draft. Think about the possible effects of doing so. Thesis students have a strange propensity to fantasize that the red ink you've put on their draft is blood—not yours, but theirs or the draft's. Don't use red.

- Think hard about how much energy you have for dissertation advising, and don't take on more students than you can handle well. You will not go to advisor heaven if you take on a lot of students, only if they finish, and that will require a fair piece of work from you with each of them. And don't take on so much work that you neglect your own career: if you fail to get tenure, you won't be able to help any students!

- Be very clear about what you're expecting, about deadlines, about how much leeway there is, and about absolute, nonnegotiable requirements.

- About availability: What has stood out most for me in working with many, many thesis students is how much difference it makes to a writer's progress if his advisor is available. Thesis writing is a very lonely and at times frightening experience. How available you are can make each of these feelings much better or much worse. It is hell to write a thesis long-distance from one's advisor. It is also hell if the student has to call half a dozen times before you call back (I've worked with many students whose advisors took weeks or longer to return calls), or if you neglect to submit the papers required by the graduate offices, or if you take months to give feedback on a chapter. If you think you can't promise not to do these things, turn down requests to supervise theses. That, or clean up your act.

• Make it very clear how and when the student can reach you: tell your advisees what hours, which places, which days are, and are not, O.K. You are not on duty twenty-four hours a day, you do not have to be disturbed at your weekend retreat, and you do not have to make house calls (although I've known one superb thesis advisor who does). But you do have to return calls within a few days, as well as give an advisee reasonable notice of your unavailability (in January, for example, you could tell the student, "If you're not done by the fall, know that I'll be on sabbatical in Turkey the following semester, and I'll read stuff that you send me, but the mail is very slow, and the phone lines are dreadful." Or "The submission deadline for a June degree is April 1. I'm going to be away for a week in mid-March, so factor this into your work schedule.") You should also pick up your phone or E-mail messages regularly, or give your advisee another, more reliable way to reach you.

• Be very mindful of competition. You probably didn't get to your current professional position by being uncompetitive, but work consciously at stashing that inclination while you work with your thesis students, because it's not a fair game—you've won before it begins—and it's too easy to make your advisees feel even more inadequate and insecure than they probably do already. Save your competitiveness for your peers. In the sciences it is more common for researchers to work collaboratively; in the best of such arrangements people both learn more and produce more. In any field, creating a group for your dissertation advisees can help defuse competition among them, and between you and them, as well as allowing them to realize that they can be helpful to others, particularly if you're very careful not to compare one with another in public.

• Your obligation to your student doesn't end with the thesis


defense. Seeing her through includes the obligation to consult about how to publish part or all of the thesis, to give advice about professional development and the job market, and to provide encouragement even when the job market is bleak. You don't need to promise heaven on earth, or even a job, but you should be hopeful on her behalf and help her explore possibilities and alternative routes, reminding her that she'll have more than one shot at getting a job.

You should use your professional contacts to get her introductions to colleagues elsewhere who might be of help. You will have to write letters of reference in a timely fashion, so she doesn't lose out on a position because her dossier isn't complete. You also ought to tell her honestly if you feel that you can't write a strong letter of recommendation, so that she can look elsewhere for advocates.

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In summary, being a thesis advisor is like being any kind of committed guide—parent, coach, therapist, or teacher. One has to hang in for the duration, be a reliable presence whose own wants get taken care of elsewhere, and endure a certain amount of getting kicked in the shins. I have an embarrassing memory of an interchange with my advisor from the spring when I was finishing my dissertation. She had just told me the second or third draft of my whole project needed some more work, and I stood outside on the Appian Way in Cambridge with her, shouting, "Won't you *ever* be satisfied?" It's very complicated to be both the nurturer and the one who insists that there are standards to be met, something, of course, that the good parent does as well. It's essential to remember how much power you hold in your

student's life, not to abuse it, and to think hard about how best to use it on the student's behalf. When being a thesis advisor goes well, it can be immensely gratifying; the pride that you feel as your "offspring" graduate will remind you not only that your hard work was worth it, but also of how privileged you have been to preside over their growth and learning.



## Some Useful Books and Articles

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