

## **DISSERTATION WORKSHOPS**

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Last October, writing consultant Dorothy Duff Brown provided more than 100 humanities and social sciences graduate students with some unorthodox yet sensible advice on completing their dissertations.

Called “Practical Strategies for Writing a Dissertation,” the Graduate Division-sponsored workshops were based on questions posed by a student advisory committee: How do you make the transition from reading and/or field research to writing? Where do you begin? What are tips for planning and outlining? How do you keep track of the scope of ideas in a large project? What are particular practical issues for students writing in the humanities or the social sciences?

Brown, who earned her own Ph.D. from Berkeley in 1976, has been working for the past 14 years with individual clients. She specializes in helping people finish dissertations and books. In her campus workshops, she combines a psychological approach with time/memory theory and such down-to-earth details as what type of scotch tape to use for cut-and-paste jobs.

### **DISCOVER YOUR OWN WORKING STYLE**

One of Brown’s key points is that the intellectual content of a dissertation does not hang people up—rather, it’s the small, day-to-day practical decisions about *how* to work that drain intellectual energy and impede progress. Her advice is to discover the particular, idiosyncratic work habits and sequences that are most congenial to you and then to honor them. For example, several of her clients found that they had to take brief naps before they began working on their dissertations. Once they accepted this fact, they were able to use the remaining work time much more effectively.

### **CUT-UP AND CUT-OFF**

In addition to respecting one’s personal habits, Brown says, it’s crucial to have a concrete system set up for the physical act of writing. Writing is a tactile process, so Brown suggests lots of hands-on activity, including a box with “action files,” dividing a blank binder into arbitrary “chapters,” using post-its, cut-and-paste, vertical folders—all designed to help you see the dissertation actually take a physical shape at the earliest possible moment.

One of Brown’s personal crusades is to make every dissertation-writing graduate student have a definite cut-off time for work each day. She explains that knowing you must stop at a certain point ultimately makes you more productive because you know that your work time is limited.

Surprisingly, she cautions against even thinking in terms of procrastination. Instead, it’s more useful to acknowledge when you are and are not working and to keep track of just how long you actually worked.

For humanities students, Brown says the main impediment is a desire to write elegantly. Yet often such writing is a disservice to the reader (i.e., your committee), who can’t understand

the point you're trying to make. The remedy is to say the obvious and to use lots of transitions, no matter how boring you, as a writer, may find them.

She suggests that students in the social sciences look for models of the type of argument they want to use. Once you find a book that you think exemplifies your format, try studying the introduction and beginning of each chapter, pinpointing the transitions, the way the author gets in and out of each paragraph, on a xeroxed copy of the introduction and beginning of each chapter. Then you have a sort of boilerplate for your own dissertation, no matter how different its content.

Brown concludes her workshops by stressing the difference between planning and writing. "Remember," she says, "some things are best done lying down –and planning is one of them."