

Don't Waste Your Summer: Write Your Dissertation and Have Fun, Too

Avoid another summer of getting little done on your dissertation while you barely enjoy your free time. Follow these steps for a productive, fun-filled summer. I originally wrote this article for the All-But-Dissertation Survival Guide, for the May 19, 2005 issue.

Ahhhhh. The summer break. So much more free time!
I'll really get a lot done on my dissertation.

Sound familiar?

It's a universal belief. Free time = get more accomplished. Too bad it's not always true. What are the reasons that free time doesn't necessarily lead to productivity?

Let's look at it step by step. Here is a typical scenario - OK, maybe it's slightly exaggerated.

Day 1. You sit down in front of the computer. You think about how much writing you need to do. It's almost overwhelming. So you check your email. A friend calls, and you meet him for lunch. Soon the day is shot. It doesn't matter; there's a whole summer ahead.

Day 2-30. Repeat versions of Day 1.

Day 31. You have begun to be nervous. A month has passed and you've barely gotten anything done. You resolve to put in at least 4 solid hours of writing a day. Starting tomorrow.

Day 32. Just thinking about those 4 hours of writing makes you ill. You end up playing solitaire on the computer, cleaning your closet, and hating yourself.

Day 33. Someone asks you how the dissertation is going, and you realize you want to punch them. Why do people keep asking you that? Are they trying to torture you?

You no longer feel as carefree and optimistic about finishing. The burden of getting something done feels so pressing that it causes you to procrastinate further. Your procrastination lowers your self-esteem. "After all," says your completely logical mind, "with all this time available, I really should have gotten substantial work done."

Before you find yourself in this nightmarish scenario, here are some tips that will not only help you make better use of your time, but allow you to enjoy your free time without guilt.

- Even before the free time arrives, make a list of the big projects you want to accomplish during this period, and then break them into smaller tasks.
- Continue to let this list percolate. Make notes at odd moments while you're still busy. Always keep a little notebook or even just an index card with you so that you can develop the list and other thoughts whenever something comes into your mind. Some of our best thinking occurs at unplanned times.
- Select what you will work on the first week. Don't set unrealistically high goals for yourself -- this only results in discouragement. Contrary to logic, taking the excessive internal pressure off tends to allow you to accomplish more.
- The day before, write down what you will start with the next day. It's always easier to plan what you will work on before you sit down to do it.
- Schedule your work periods in small blocks of time; as short as 15 minutes may be needed to get you started. If you feel very stuck, read the article I wrote for the December issue of the ABD Survival Guide on getting back to work.
<http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/News/123004.htm>
- Write every day. Spend at least 10 minutes per day just writing. If you are in the very initial stages of an idea, do some free writing. If you are at the editing stage, edit for at least 10 minutes every day.

There is nothing more important than this writing habit in keeping you feeling fresh and on top of your work.

- At the end of each work period, make a note as to what you will do when you start up the next time.

- Use your favorite activities as rewards. If looking at email relaxes you, promise yourself you can look at it for 20 minutes after you have worked for 40.

If you miss a day or two, don't be hard on yourself, and don't decide to do extra work. This negative message will lead to more procrastination. Just start where you left off.

Finally, schedule your fun time and fully enjoy it. Feeling guilty never helped anyone write a better dissertation!