

The Party's Over... Getting Back to the Dissertation

Graduate students who have difficulty getting back to their dissertation after a break will find these helpful tips useful.

Using Robert Boice's tips from

The Party's Over... Getting Back to Work

Dread.

That is

what you may feel as you think about working on your dissertation after the holidays.

Overwhelmed.

The

clear and steady path that you had been following seems like a distant memory. Now it is just a stack of books, folders, papers, or cryptic computer files that seem to have been created by someone else.

When the

moment comes to sit down to write, it feels like trying to exercise after you

get the cast off your leg. It's

painful and slow. With that kind of

misery, it's often easier to check your email or play solitaire. The dissertation can wait until tomorrow.

There

are some steps you can take to lessen the pain of starting up again. These suggestions will make the transition back to a regular writing program more

palatable.

Make a

writing schedule. Choose a time

that you will work every day, or every workday, if possible. It doesn't have to be the same time every day.

Plan to

work no more than 30 minutes a day.

You can extend this later, but if you have been having trouble getting

back into it, this could be the most important step. If 30 minutes overwhelms you, start with 15 minutes.

For your

first session back at work, your assignment is just to read over what you had written before you took a break.

Either you'll be pleasantly surprised, or aware that you need to edit.

In the

next session you will begin writing.

If you have no trouble getting started at this point, you can skip the

next steps. If you are still

feeling unable to write, read the following.

Robert

Boice, the author of "Professors as Writers" suggests "writing before you are ready." This means that you don't

have to know exactly what you are going to write before you start. Your thinking is clarified by the very act of writing.

In order

to start writing before you're ready, dissertation writers may need to

notice that "inner critic" that is telling you that what you're writing is a

bunch of junk. The following steps

will help you to silence your inner critic.

If you feel you are completely unable to write on your dissertation subject, spend a few minutes writing about what you hate about writing. Just get some words down – it doesn't have to make sense. Then move on to the next step – writing on your dissertation topic. Write for 10 minutes. It may be somewhat "stream of consciousness." Don't worry if what you write is good enough to use in your dissertation. After 10 minutes, stop and read what you've written.

On another page, make a rough outline, mind map or diagram of the thoughts that are emerging or starting to emerge. You don't have to use complete sentences.

Go back and rewrite what you've just written a little more clearly, adding logical links and clarifications.

Keep your eye on the clock – it is very important to stop at 30 minutes.

Keep repeating steps 3 through 5 until your time is up. Do not worry about the quality of what you've accomplished. All that matters is that you started! If what you've written is wonderful, stop anyway. It will be much easier to start tomorrow.

Hope. Relief. Maybe even excitement.

It's a wonderful feeling once you get back in the writing habit. Use this technique any time that you feel stuck in writing your dissertation. Always keep in mind that short bursts of writing help clarify your thinking. And Happy New Year!

About
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Gina J. Hiatt, Ph.D. is the owner/editor of www.AcademicLadder.com, a website for both ABD's and professors. She coaches academics who want to complete dissertations or writing projects while balancing the demands of academia, including going on the job market and achieving tenure. In addition to individual coaching, Gina runs phone coaching groups for both faculty and ABD's. Most recently one of her clients got a post-doc at Princeton, another accepted a tenure track position at a research 1 public university, and a third received the highest teacher ratings in the school in her first faculty position. Dissertation coaching works!

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