

HOW TO WRITE A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION IN PHILOSOPHY

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You were admitted to graduate school, you have completed all of the preliminary requirements for the Ph. D., you are now what Americans call ABD ["all but the dissertation"], and the time has come to write your dissertation. What do you do? How do you do it? Will you ever manage to finish it? Do not panic. Doctor Bob is here to answer your questions.

First of all, What is a doctoral dissertation? In theory, a doctoral dissertation is a masterwork, which is to say a work by an apprentice in a Guild that is presented to a committee of the Masters of that Guild as evidence that the apprentice is ready to be included in their company. It is a finely wrought silver bowl, if you are an apprentice Silversmith, or an elegant pair of lady's slippers, if you are an apprentice Shoemaker. The Academy is the last medieval Guild, so a doctoral dissertation is a piece of scholarship judged good enough by a committee of Master academics to admit you to their company. Or that is the story we tell each other on cold nights. The truth is somewhat less exalted.

In Microbiology or Anthropology or History, a doctoral dissertation is a research report, which is to say a report, in stylized form, of research that the candidate has been carrying out under the guidance of a Director. In Philosophy, a dissertation is The Defense of a Thesis. [That is why a dissertation is referred to familiarly as a thesis.]

What is a thesis? It is a proposition, expressed in a declarative sentence. Here are some examples of theses:

Contrary to popular opinion, David Hume and Immanuel Kant have almost identical views on the role of the mind in empirical knowledge. [This is the thesis of my doctoral dissertation]

God is dead.

God is not dead; he has just been on vacation.

In all situations, I am morally obliged to choose the act that will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

Here are some examples of things that are not theses:

Kant and Hume on the role of the mind in empirical knowledge

Nietzsche's view of religion

Act utilitarianism

Each of these is a topic, not a thesis. You cannot write a dissertation defending a topic.

Some theses in Philosophy are historical. For example, here is an historical thesis about American academic philosophy:

With the notable exception of Pragmatism, every school of philosophy that has held sway for a while in American academic circles has been an import from Europe, arriving just about when the practitioners of the previous school are getting tenure, with the result that American academic philosophy resembles an alluvial river bed in which now extinct species are preserved as fossils in layers of sedimentary rock.

In order to write a dissertation, you must be prepared to defend a thesis. If you cannot state the thesis of your dissertation in a single declarative sentence, you are not ready to write. Do not make the mistake of thinking that if you begin writing, your thesis will become clear eventually. That way lies disaster.

You ought to be able to begin your dissertation with the sentence, "In this dissertation, I shall defend the thesis that p." You should then be able to conclude your dissertation with this sentence: "Thus we see that p."

What should you do if, midway through the writing of your dissertation, you conclude that you are wrong? In Microbiology or Anthropology or History, that can require a great deal of re-writing, or even the selection of a new thesis. In Philosophy, this problem can be handled by inserting six words into the statement of your thesis in the first sentence of the dissertation. Instead of "In this dissertation I shall defend the thesis that p," you write "In this dissertation I shall defend the thesis that it is not the case that p." No one will care. What do you do if someone publishes first? Give her a footnote.

Now you are ready to start writing. A doctoral dissertation in philosophy is a story. It is the story of an argument. Like all stories, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and like all good stories, it only includes what is essential to the story. Since this is actually the most important thing I am going to say, let me start a new paragraph and expand on it a bit.

Suppose you are called on to tell the story of Jack and the Beanstalk to a little group of very smart children. [If you do not know this folk tale, substitute one from your own culture. The point is universal.] You would not begin by saying, "And so Jack climbed the beanstalk." The kids would yell, "Who is Jack? Where did the beanstalk come from?" And you would not put

in little bits of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, even if you knew that story really, really well.

All of us know how to tell a story -- we know that we should tell our listeners, at each stage of the story, just what they need to know at that stage to follow the story line. Never mind about foreshadowing and the non-omniscient narrator and all that stuff.

When you are telling a seven year old the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, you do not drop in an obscure allusion to singing harps or speak darkly of Oedipal rages. You just tell the story. As a story teller, you know four crucial things: First, where the story begins. Second, where it ends. Third, what has to be included so that the story makes sense to the listener. And Fourth, what is not needed, and therefore should be left out.

As the writer of a dissertation defending a thesis, you need to know the same four things. In preparation for writing your dissertation, you may have done a great deal of reading, and you may even have written various fragments in which you sketched out an argument.

Now, you are writing your dissertation, and since you have your reading notes and those fragments on your computer [or your telephone, or your class ring, or whatever], you figure, Waste not, Want not, I will incorporate them into the dissertation. Wrong! If they are not a part of the story, they have no business being there. Set them aside and publish an article some time, but do not cram them into your dissertation.

If you are like me, and work in your head, then you should be telling the story to yourself over and over again until you know every step of it and have filled in all the blanks and worked out all the kinks. If you do not work in your head, then buy a friend a beer, sit her down, and tell her the story of your dissertation. Ask her to stop you whenever she gets lost or cannot see how you got Jack up that beanstalk.

The very first thing you must tell your friend [or yourself] is the thesis of your dissertation. Don't tell her the topic and then wave your hands and, as they say these days, gesture at the thesis [God, I hate that locution.] State the thesis in a declarative sentence. If you cannot do that, then no matter how charming you are, and how much beer you ply your friend with, you are not ready to write your dissertation.

So, you have your thesis, you have your story line, you can tell yourself or a friend the whole argument from start to finish, and the time has come to actually write the damned thing. Herewith some important and valuable pieces of advice:

1. It does not matter a very great deal whether your dissertation is brilliant, and it matters not at all whether it is true. What matters is that it is. In fifty years, I have seen many students fail

to get the doctorate because they did not complete their dissertations. I have never seen a student complete a dissertation and fail to get the Ph. D. If you write it, the Ph. D. will come.

2. An American dissertation in Philosophy should be about 200 to 250 pages long, and have five or six chapters. That is a very big pile of chopped chicken liver. But you have been writing seminar papers and term papers all your adult life, and you are good at it. Otherwise you would not be an advanced doctoral student. You can do this. Trust me.

3. A dissertation is quite unlike a book. When you write a book, you do not know whom the audience will be. You just put it out there and hope it finds readers. But when you write a dissertation [in America -- it may be different elsewhere], you know who the members of your committee are before you start to write. So you are writing for a small and pre-determined audience. Now, the members of your committee are also philosophers, which means they are compulsive arguers, so if you say the sun rises in the east, at least one of them will take issue with you. But unless they are total pigs [which happens, alas -- try to make sure that your dissertation director keeps the total pigs in the department off your committee, and for God's sake, do not choose a total pig as a director], they would like to approve the dissertation. This means that you have to give them something they can sign off on even if they think your thesis is false. What to do? After stating and explaining your thesis in Chapter One, you devote Chapter Two to a survey and critique of the literature. This contributes nothing at all to the story. It is like interpolating a discourse on beanstalks and giants into Jack and the beanstalk after you have introduced Jack and his mother. This just slows down the story, but it gives your readers something to nod their heads at approvingly. Needless to say, if a member of your committee has written something on the topic of your dissertation, be sure to mention it.

4. The same thing goes for footnotes. I rarely put footnotes in what I write. In the first place, if something is part of the story I am telling, it should be in the body of the text, and if it is not, it has no business being there. Besides, I can never figure out how to use the footnote function in my word processing program. But dissertation committees love footnotes, so put them in. Nobody will read them, but everyone will look at the bottom of the page to see whether they are there. Also, number them consecutively so they can see how many you have.

5. Before you write a paragraph of the dissertation, write a chapter by chapter outline of the entire dissertation, with headings and subheadings, all in the precise order of your story. If you cannot do that, then tell the story to yourself or your friend a few more times until you can. Learn to think of the entire dissertation as one connected story.

6. Oh yes, a good piece of advice that my dissertation director, Roderick Firth, gave to me in the early Fall of 1955. If you manage to say something original, be sure to call attention to that fact in a footnote, so that your committee can give you credit for it. Otherwise, they probably

won't know, since you undoubtedly know more about your topic than they do.

And now, at long last, you are ready to write. Here is what I very strongly suggest: Start on Page 1, with the sentence, "In this dissertation, I shall defend the thesis that p." [Substitute your thesis for "p" of course.] Then start telling your story. On the first day, write one page and stop. The next day, write another page, and stop. If you do that every day, including Sundays and holidays, in eight months you will have a dissertation. If you are able to, write two pages a day. In that case, you will have a dissertation in four months.

Be patient. You are telling a long story. In your head are really nifty bits of argument that you are eager to get to, but do not rush. Tell the story as fully and clearly as you can, confident that your readers will still be there when you get to page 50, page 100, and page 200. [They have to be -- they are sitting on your dissertation committee. They are a captive audience.]

Do not, I repeat do not, rewrite. If you wrote a bad page yesterday, write a better page today. Remember, your goal is to finish the damned thing. You can polish after you get tenure. Also, do not write four or five pages on a really good day and then figure you can take a few days off. Those few days will stretch into eternity. You are a tortoise, not a hare. Slow and steady wins the race.

If you do not have the discipline to write a page a day all by yourself, cut a deal with a fellow dissertation writer. You will send her a page a day by email, and she will send you a page of her dissertation every day by email. You will read her page [it only takes a minute] and send back an encouraging word, and she will do the same for you.

And that is it. No doubt, your director will require revisions. Make them. Perhaps your committee will require revisions. Make them. Don't anguish. Just make them. If you write a complete draft of a dissertation, you will get the Ph. D. If for some reason you don't, tell me and I will terrorize your committee by threatening to splash their names all over my blog. :)