

Lessons learned: 10 tips for surviving (and thriving) while completing your dissertation

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Most dissertations don't have sections for lessons learned; however, if they did, ours might look something like this:

1. Start early. Choose a topic that genuinely interests you, but keep your expectations realistic. You have the rest of your life to do Nobel prize winning research – choose a project that can be completed within your time frame.

2. A positive relationship with your advisor is crucial. Take steps to establish good communication and clear expectations. If you're unable to resolve differences early on, consider consulting with a trusted colleague or faculty member about your options.

3. Set deadlines. We all need them and they can always be renegotiated as required. Establish regular contact with your research advisor to stay on track and set dates to review work once it has been submitted. Use lab-mates to help keep you accountable.

4. Beware of procrastination and subtle forms of avoidance (e.g., is another literature search really necessary?).

5. Measure twice, cut once. It is much easier (and less stressful) to do things right the first time than to cut corners and try to repair the damage afterwards.

6. It can't be said enough - BACK UP your data, manuscript drafts and defense

presentations regularly. This is one area where a little obsessiveness can pay off.

7. While writing, develop a system early on to label successive drafts clearly. This is particularly critical if you are working on multiple computers (at home, in the lab, etc.).

8. Prioritize your research. This means scheduling time to work on it into your week. If an internship is required for your program, having a nearly completed dissertation (e.g., full draft, oral scheduled) will make you a more attractive candidate and will allow you to take full advantage of opportunities during and after your training.

9. Prepare for your defense. Attend other defenses in your department, learn as much as you can about the process in advance, and practice, practice, practice. If you have the opportunity, practice with the equipment and in the room you will be using at your defense.

10. Practice good self-care. It may sound obvious, but eating well, getting enough sleep and exercise and occasionally having a guilt-free evening out with friends is necessary to keep your motivation up. Some of the most successful graduates we know managed to have a life during grad school-you can too. It just requires a little discipline.