

Surviving Your Dissertation

Lia Wolock

Journalism, Advertising, and Media Studies

<http://people.uwm.edu/wolock/teaching/materials/>
wolock@uwm.edu
@liapold

Your dissertation is...

- Doable.
- Difficult.
- A means to an end.
To your specific,
important goals.

What are *your* goals?

- Rather than thinking of your diss as
 - something that's happening to you.
 - Or something that defines or reflects your worth.
- Think about
 - What it's doing for you.
 - Why are you working toward this?
 - How does it fit into your larger life goals?
 - What lights your fire and keeps it going?

What are *your* goals?

examples

- Setting yourself up for an R1 career.
- Or for a small liberal arts college career.
- Getting this research out into the world. Getting more support for the community you study.
- Setting yourself up for an alt-ac career (e.g. publishing, k-12, NGOs, corporate, libraries, lab manager, think tank)
- I just want to finish.

Being honest with yourself about why you're doing this can help you figure out the best way to do it. It can help you figure out how to shape your project and how you want to go about it. And it can help keep you motivated.

IN THESE SLIDES

1. Reframing Your Expectations
2. Scheduling
3. Mentorship & Community
4. Tools

Setting Healthy Expectations



Expectations

big picture

- It's crucial to set realistic expectations
 - Ex. No one's first draft is good. A dissertation takes lots of iterative work.
- That reflect your ultimate goals
 - Ex. I want my different chapters to show my interest in different fields so I can be nimble on the job market.

Expectations

fighting perfectionism

- The best dissertation is a done dissertation.
- Perfection is impossible. It's the enemy of done.
- You're a highly competent person used to shooting for the moon and satisfying everyone. But the amount/variety of expectations put on you moving forward, it's more than anyone can accomplish.

Expectations

fighting perfectionism

- Know *your* goals.
 - Might include non-academic stuff.
 - Make them reasonable. (Don't bully yourself, set yourself up for failure.)
- Then prioritize. Accept that some things will happen less well, or not at all.
- Work on setting realistic expectations; embrace “GOOD ENOUGH” as your new standard.



**You are
your own
biggest
bully.**

Expectations

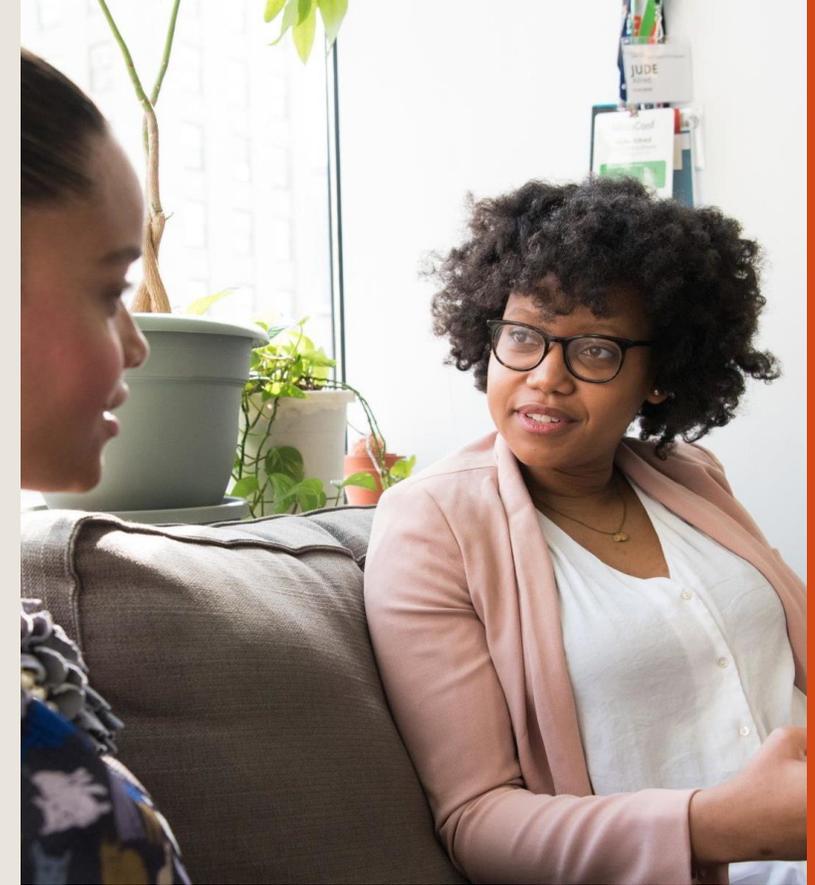
fighting impostor syndrome

- Impostor Syndrome is real, painful, common, insidious, and something you can fight, but it takes effort. Every day.
 - *See my website for separate slide set on this topic.*
- Every dissertation is the result of networks of support. The success of each person you look up to is a combination of their hard work + institutional, communal, and interpersonal support. Your success is too. (And your failures.)

Expectations

What counts as success?

- Academic “wins” are slow, and few. They often come a long time after you’ve wrapped up a project.
- Celebrate your accomplishments when they happen. Own them. Celebrate others’ accomplishments.
- Show gratitude for the labor and care people put into supporting you. The most honest “wins” I feel in academia are when my friend or student succeeds.
- Know this is a career with long horizons, ever-increasing expectations, etc...



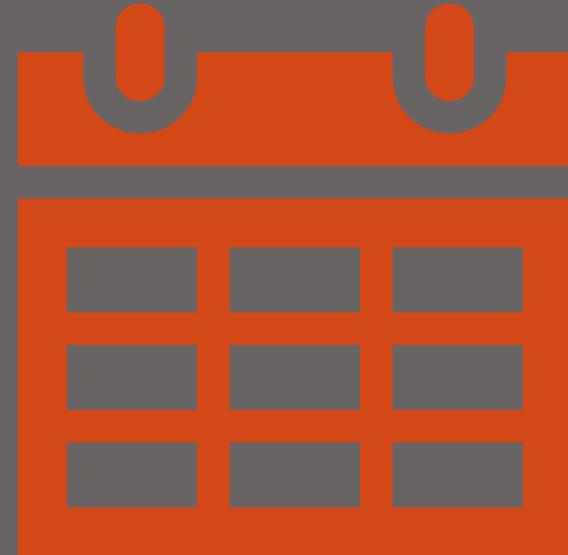
It's not easy, setting up a healthy relationship with work, and realistic expectations.

As well as turning to communities of support and love for a better perspective on everything, you can also seek professional help. *Many* academics do.

UWM mental health resources

- **Dissertation Support Group** - Norris does offer a dissertation support group, as well as other group options each semester. Please contact us to find out what groups are currently being offered.
- **Let's Talk drop-in counseling** - <https://uwm.edu/norris/counseling/lets-talk/>
- **Campus mental health resources** - <https://uwm.edu/mentalhealth/campus-and-community/>

Scheduling



Scheduling

short term

- Block off and protect your writing (and research etc.) time.
 - Certain days. Or certain hours.
 - Don't forget to include breaks in your blocked out schedule
 - Block it off on your calendar
 - Pomodoro technique - <http://mytomatoes.com/>

Scheduling

short term

- At a day-to-day scale, it can help to set TIME GOALS rather than TASK GOALS.
- The structure of your goals (e.g. time blocks, x pages or words per day, x chapter by x date) will change over time. Check in with yourself, your committee, and peers you trust.
- Always try to break down overwhelming, nebulous tasks into small, discrete tasks you can cross off your list when accomplished.

Scheduling

big picture

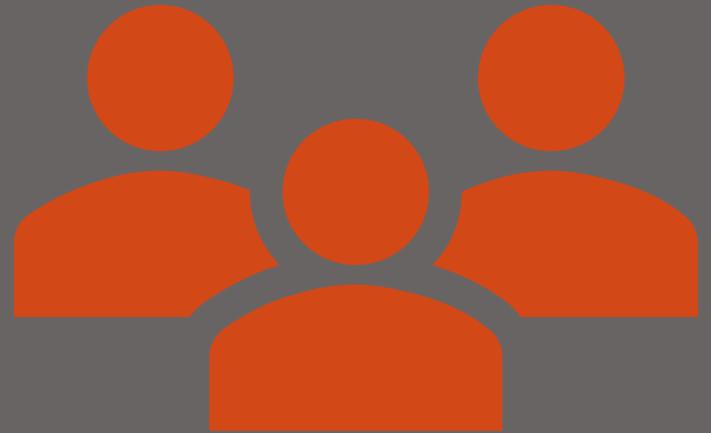
- While it may be stressful while you do it, it's important to think about all the timelines that are important to you, and then plan backwards.
- Uni timelines, department & committee timelines, job market timelines
- As you plan back, make things as realistic and concrete as possible
- Always add pad time

Scheduling

cutting down on distractions

- It's hard to build and hold onto un-distracted time these days. Treat it as precious and protect it.
- Set a time (say, noon,) before which you won't check your work email.
- Turn your phone on silent and place it in another room, face down, during your writing blocks.
- Even if it seems like a hard lifestyle for you, try out at least a couple days where you follow your writing schedule to a T to see what it feels like.
- Name it when you're doing work-crastination (when you avoid your most important task with other, less scary tasks), call it out, and try to regroup.

Mentorship & Community



Mentorship & community

- Communities that will get you through this:
 - Your committee (+ other mentors)
 - Your comrades in arms – peer grad students
 - Friend groups and family members who don't know or care about grad school, they just love you

Mentorship & community

- Advice – Not all of it is going to be helpful, even when people really want to be there for you.
 - People offer the best advice on what they know – their experiences, their goals. These might not match yours.
 - See what works for you.
- Building *multiple* supportive communities and/or mentoring relationships can help.

Mentorship & community

- It's ok to seek out mentorship in addition to your relationship with your advisor.
- Good writing is iterative. Strong communication with advisor(s), mentors, and peers helps.
- You can also seek out other venues (interest groups, conference) to share your work and get feedback. Even a journal rejection can get you productive feedback.

Mentorship & community

- You're not making it up – it is hard to get the advice and mentorship you need when you don't see anyone who looks like you or has the same struggles as you in your department, or on campus.
- Those of us already here need to step up. Reach out. Educate ourselves. Be better allies and co-conspirators.
- Get perspective – check in with yourself. Check in with other communities of support.

Mentorship & community

creating community

- Socializing, exercise
 - Weekly potluck, board game, crafting night, volunteer, running, yoga class, rock climbing, etc.
 - Outdoor trips & activities -
<https://uwm.edu/urec/outdoor-pursuits/>
- Therapy, e.g.:
 - Mindfulness
 - CBT
 - Group

Creating community

peer groups

1. Co-present writing group – schedule time to sit together while you write
2. Writing groups – rotate who shares their writing, get substantive feedback
3. Writing accountability groups – weekly check-ins on writing goals
4. Check-in group – meet to talk about how your work is going, concerns, etc.

Writing group

- 4-5 people, meet weekly
- Rotate who shares their writing
- Provides community, camaraderie, substantive feedback

Writing accountability group

- 4-5 people meet weekly
- Do check-ins on writing goals
- Provides accountability, support, community, and peer mentoring

Writing accountability group

long-term goals

- Semester-long, month-long
 - *Reasonable, realistic* expectations for the semester, such as:
 - # of hours you intend to write per day, or week
 - Name what chapters, papers, talks, abstracts, grant apps do you intend to write. (Again: Be specific and realistic.)
- Some folks then break these big goals down into week-by-week, or month-by-month goals.

Writing accountability group weekly sessions – 4 people – 1 hour

- Each person gets 15 minutes to discuss:
 1. My writing/research goals for last week were _____,
 2. I did/did not meet them,
 3. If I didn't meet them, it's because of _____.
 4. My writing/research goals for next week are _____.
- Developing a daily writing routine brings up people's *stuff*, and the group helps to support one another by identifying the limiting beliefs and behaviors that hold members back from productivity.

Mentorship & community

- Departments and universities are institutions that are built to function off your tuition, labor, and accomplishments.
- (They might include communities that care about you more holistically, but...) They are not incentivized to care about you as a full person.
- Seek validation and support from people and communities that do care about you as a *full* person.

Tools



Tools

- **Reference/data management**– Zotero, Mendelay, 2Do, <https://guides.library.uwm.edu/refworks>
- **Software that automatically backs material up** – Word autosave settings, Dropbox, Mega, OneDrive
- **Piece meal writing, outlining** – Scrivener, white board, notecards, sticky notes, Google Keep

Tools

- **Organization and scheduling** – Trello, Bullet journaling, 2Do
- **Accountability & acknowledging progress** – mytomatoes.com, (writing) accountability group, friends

Remember

- You're awesome.
- This *is* really difficult.
- But you're doing it for a reason that matters to you. A lot.
- To be persistent over the long haul, sometimes you need to take a break, check in with yourself, be kind.

Fighting Impostor Syndrome

I have more slides on the topic at
people.uwm.edu/wolock/teaching/materials/

