JOAN BOLKER, Ed.D.

Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day

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A GUIDE TO STARTING, REVISING, AND FINISHING YOUR DOCTORAL THESIS

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Getting Started Writing

THIS CHAPTER aims to help you get started writing. When I worked at Harvard's Writing Center, we joked that the single most useful piece of equipment for a writer was a bucket of glue. First you spread some on your chair, and then you sit down.

Thoughts on the Writing Process

In the interests of your doing more than just sitting there, I want to think out loud for a bit about the writing process, and how it doesn't and does work. I am about to violate an important behavioral principle: "Never teach someone how to do something by showing them the wrong way to do it." Let's look at what they taught me in school about how to write. First you chose a topic, perhaps off a list, perhaps at your teacher's suggestion, perhaps out of the air or by looking at which shelf in the library still had books available on it. Then you researched the topic (this step seemed to involve a lot of index cards). Then you thought about your topic. (I've always imagined here a cartoon of someone sitting at a desk, with an empty word balloon

attached to her head.) Having thought, you made an outline for your paper, then wrote, starting with I,1 on your outline, fleshing it out, making sure you had a good topic sentence for each paragraph. You proceeded through the outline in order, and when you finished, and capped the paper off with a final, summarizing paragraph, you let the paper rest for a day (sort of like bread dough), then came back, checked the grammar, spelling, transitions, and diction, and cleaned all of them up. Then you were done.

I don't think this model worked. Much of the time it led to neat, clean, boring papers, often to empty ones with good form. It very rarely produced papers that were deeply thoughtful, that had strong and distinctive voices and styles, that raised as many questions as they answered, that made you read, and reread, and then dream about the topic. I want to teach you to write using a method that does all these things.

If you look at a piece of finished writing, all neat and orderly, and know nothing about how it actually came about, you might deduce that it was created using what Arlo Guthrie calls "the good old-fashioned boring model." But this isn't how good, finished writing usually occurs, and even when it does, such a method may not have been the best or most satisfying way of producing it. In her essay "Elusive Mastery: The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art,' " Brett Candlish Millier looks at the seventeen drafts of Bishop's poem in order to discover how exquisite writing *really* gets done. The most shocking thing I found out from reading Bishop's drafts is that her first draft looks nearly as awful as my own first-draft poems do; it's what Bishop does after that—and how many times she does it—that makes all the difference.

How does one really begin to write? William G. Perry Jr. has

described the process succinctly: "First you make a mess, then you clean it up." If you think about the implications of this statement, you quickly realize that how you write is up for grabs: no more neat outlines with Roman numerals to follow, no elegant topic sentences for each paragraph, maybe not even any clear sense of where you're going. If you're not going to feel like you're in free fall, you're going to need some other strategies. What will get you through the beginning stages of this new model are a few behavioral principles, an understanding of good addictions, and a plan for producing messy writing every day.

When you sit down to begin a piece of writing, your first aim ought to be to make a mess—to say anything that comes to your mind, on the subject or off it, not to worry at all about whether your stuff is connected logically, to play with your subject the way you used to build mud pies, to do no fine detail work, to spell poorly if that's your natural inclination, and to generally forget about standards altogether (even about split infinitives!). I suspect many writing blocks come about because people aren't used to playing in the mud when they write; they think writing is a neat, clean endeavor. I don't.

You may think I'm asking you to be an irresponsible, uncaring writer. But I'm really asking you to try something that will have just the opposite effect, if you see it through. The writing process I have in mind has two parts to it, a first, "cooking," making-a-mess part; and a second, compulsive, clean-up-the-mess part. If you do only the first part, you will indeed end up with a messy, irresponsible product you won't want to acknowledge as your own. If you do both parts, though, I believe you'll be able to produce stronger, more imaginative writing that you'll feel proud to own.

When I suggest that you make a mess in writing, I don't

mean that you have to go out of your way to make your writing disorganized, or uncommunicative, just that you need to control your worry in the first part of the writing process; it helps to do this if you think of your aim as making mud pies or sandcastles, rather than stone buildings. You are making a sketch, not a finished oil painting.

What ought you stop worrying about? It would be nice if you could completely ignore your spelling (it only needs to be good enough so you can figure out what you wrote, should you decide to reread your writing). It would be even better if you could ignore sentence structure. Concentrate on what you're trying to say, and see how many different ways you can say it. You may find that your meaning, as well as your style, will be shifty at this point. You don't need to worry at all during this first stage about overall organization; I certainly hope you won't feel compelled to begin at the beginning and move from there to the middle and the end of your piece.

If the writing doesn't sound good to you while you're writing it, it's fine to make a note to yourself about this. (I find it useful to keep up a running dialogue with myself about the questions and problems I've having while I'm writing.) I often put that commentary right in the midst of my text, using square brackets, or a different color ink or pencil, so that when I come back to revise, I can recognize and engage quickly with the problems I've already noted. I don't stop to hunt for words when I'm in this messy phase; if I can't get just the right word, I list the three or four alternatives/choices/words/senses, just like this. I can stop and open the thesaurus while I'm working on a second draft, when doing that won't threaten to interrupt the flow of my thoughts and feelings.

The main goal for this first stage of writing is to keep it going,

to keep the interesting and alive associations in your brain sparking. You don't want to do anything at this point that's going to get in their way. Writing from an outline sometimes short-circuits the imaginative part of writing altogether. Obsessing about technical details can slow it down or stop it altogether. If you need to think about your writing in terms of perfection, perhaps it will help you to know that making a mess is not only functional, but essential for creating that perfect final product you have in mind. In chapter 4 I'll talk about cleaning up the mess.

Using Behavioral Principles

There are only a few simple behavioral principles you need to know. First, you need to know the difference between negative and positive reinforcement. It's possible to train ourselves to do things by punishing ourselves each time we do something wrong, but this method is both inefficient and inhumane. Positive reinforcement, rewarding ourselves each step of the way as we accomplish a series of small goals on the way to achieving the large one (what animal trainers call "shaping"), is both more pleasant and much more effective. (If you've tried, God forbid, to train a puppy by beating it, you'll know that you can end up with a docile dog, but not one with any spirit or joy. Puppies who are trained with praise and treats grow into lively, obedient dogs.)

How do you translate these observations into a process that rewards writing? You set up goals for yourself that are doable, and then you reward yourself with the legal treat of your choice, whatever that is: a run with a friend; a cup of coffee at your favorite café; a half hour to read a novel, listen to music, or chat

on the phone—you'll know what your own pleasures are. You try to steer clear of self-blame and critical lectures (from other people, too), and of bad-mouthing what you've written. And you won't put yourself in circumstances in which you repeatedly fail to write. (I have actually had the following conversation with a client: "Where do you do your writing?" "At the kitchen table." "How does it work?" "I never get anything done there.")

You also need to practice two kinds of rewards—the simple sort I've described above, and also a more sophisticated kind known as the Premack Principle, or "Grandma's mashed potatoes law": "No dessert until you've eaten your mashed potatoes." This principle says you can reinforce a desired behavior by pairing it with another behavior that you value highly and will do for its own sake. Translated into a strategy for writing, it means you will find some behavior you don't want to live without—say you don't feel like a day is complete unless you've read the newspaper—and then not allow yourself to do it until you've accomplished your writing goal for that day. One of the oddest and most exciting possibilities of this sort of reinforcement is that once you've established a good writing habit, the writing itself may become the reward, the reinforcement.

The other strategy I want to emphasize is this: make very, very sure that you set realizable goals for yourself; that is, avoid assigning yourself a piece of work that is too large to accomplish. It is much better to say that you'll write two sloppy pages a day and actually do them than to set your goal at ten pages and not write anything because the task is too overwhelming even to begin. If you set yourself up to fail, you will soon discover that you're writing less. And less. And still less.

It's also a mistake to push yourself to do more than your daily

goal. If you try to do this, you'll often find yourself unable to meet your goal the next day.

Write even if you feel sluggish, even if you feel lousy, even if you feel like you have nothing to say. You can still begin to get a process started, and to learn about your writing rhythm. Days when you're productive and the writing feels like it writes itself will most likely alternate with others, when it feels like you've never written anything worthwhile and never will. When I give talks about writing, the line that consistently draws the most laughter of recognition is "Most people would rather wash the bathroom floor than write." The best way to get into a good writing rhythm is to *write every day,* except maybe your birthday, or the queen's. You can define "every day" as you please—seven days a week, or only weekdays, or at least five days out of every seven—so long as you define what you intend to do in advance and don't keep changing the rules as you go along. Don't decide, for instance, not to write on a morning when you don't feel like writing. In this respect, too, writing is very much like running: if you wait to decide whether or not to run until you wake up in the morning, the odds are you won't get your shoes on and your body out the door. The only way to run or to write regularly is to make a rule for yourself that you allow yourself to break only rarely.

About Creating a Writing Addiction

Addictions get pretty bad press. But we often overlook the human propensity for addictions: book collectors have them, opera buffs have them, those who garden beautifully, or cook well, or do anything with passion have them. There are bad

addictions and good ones. It's fine to be addicted to exercise, to being out in the air, to getting in touch with the world by reading the newspaper or listening to the news on the radio every day, to swimming, to gardening. Writing can be this kind of an addiction for some fortunate people, and, as with the others, the reason it can become an addiction is because it satisfies an essential need and gives pleasure. (Yes, I really *did* say *pleasure.*) What's the need?

For some of us, writing gives us a place to be with ourselves in which we can listen to what's on our minds, collect our thoughts and feelings, settle and center ourselves. For others of us it gives us a chance to express what would otherwise be overwhelming feelings, to find a safe and bounded place to put them. For some, it's like exercise: this is the way we warm up a muscle that we're going to be called upon to use. And the pleasure? For anyone who's ever had a running habit, it's easy to describe. The satisfaction of writing every day is very much like the satisfaction of a daily three-mile run. One begins, lives through a warmup, hits stride, has the experience of "being run" rather than "running," of a fluidity of motion that one no longer has to direct, and then, cooled down, can feel, "Now the rest of the day's my own. I've done what I most needed to do." And for those who've never run? Writing offers the pleasure of a deep, ongoing engagement in an activity that is meaningful, one where you know more at its end than you knew at its beginning.

Why do we get addicted? Because when something gives us intense pleasure, that pleasure works as a reinforcer; that is, it brings us back to the activity with greater and greater frequency. Positive addictions can also focus us; they have their own built-in motivation, complete with withdrawal symptoms. A few

weeks into our work, one of my writing clients came in looking distressed; she said that she "felt antsy" and was wondering if it was because she hadn't had the time to write for the past few days. We poked around a bit looking for the possible cause of her distress, and we decided the absence of writing was probably it. The good news, of course, was that she'd managed to develop a self-perpetuating writing addiction very quickly.

So you need to begin to experiment with cultivating a writing addiction, with establishing patterns and changing them if they don't work. Even if you're terribly neurotic, and even if you never do become a true "writing addict," behavioral methods can still help you write. It is not necessary to feel joyous about writing in order to produce a good dissertation, or even to enjoy part of its creation. Try writing while you're working on your neuroses—and should you choose not to work on them, you will probably still feel a bit better if you get some work done.

Freewriting and Making a Mess

Here is how you can use freewriting to establish your writing addiction. You start with a very small task, learning to write for ten minutes every day, come hell or high water. I get a lot of raised eyebrows from new writing clients when I suggest this, and comments like "Ten minutes? At that rate it will take me ten years to finish my thesis!" I generally point out that so far they've been unable to write anything at all, and that ten minutes a day is a great improvement over that (mathematically it's an infinite improvement). It's certainly true that you can't write a thesis if you continue to write for *only* ten minutes a day, but this is a good way to begin. Despite this book's title, I recommend starting out by writing ten minutes a day because I think it works most quickly and easily to get you on track. Once you're doing that, you can work up to fifteen minutes and, gradually, to much longer stretches of writing. Anyone can write for ten minutes a day, particularly if one is freewriting; it's a task that's pretty well guaranteed to be doable. It's essential to begin your practice with a task you're sure to succeed at. There is nothing quite as effective at killing a dissertation as vowing to write eight hours every day and failing to—as anyone must—day after day. Ten minutes a day is a very effective way to establish a writing addiction.

How do you actually do your ten minutes a day of writing? By following the directions for freewriting laid down by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*:

> Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, 'I can't think of it.' . . . The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write 'I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say' as many times as you want; . . . The only requirement is that you *never* stop.

Note the bass note: keep writing, no matter what; even if you hate it you can do it for ten minutes. And then see how much writing you've produced. Most people write, on average, about one or one and a half handwritten pages in ten minutes. What's

very surprising is that even in such a short block of seemingly mindless writing (and here we come back to the power of the unconscious) you will occasionally, on rereading your words, find something interesting, something you didn't know before, or, maybe more accurately, something you didn't know you knew. Freewriting is one of those activities in which two and two sometimes add up to five. Obviously, even ten minutes of wonderful freewriting every day won't quite get you to where you want to go, so you need to learn how to increase your writing production. But you only need to think about taking further steps once freewriting has become a familiar, comfortable, and self-reinforcing process for you.

Using the freewriting, messy model works much better than conventional methods in two different ways: it causes you less pain while you're doing it, and it produces better writing. Here's what it looks like: Say you need to write something like a rough proposal for your thesis, and you're feeling pretty uncertain about both your choice of topic and how you're going to develop it once you know what it is. You sit down at your desk and begin to freewrite, putting down on the paper any thoughts, ideas, or feelings you may have around or about your general topic. You keep asking yourself questions in writing, such as "Do I want to pick this topic, which I know I can move through methodically to the end, and risk boredom and an ordinary thesis, or do I want to risk my professional neck by picking the maverick topic that excites me?" (There is no obvious answer to this question, by the way.) Other questions may occur to you, both around and inside your project: "Can I really do this thesis stuff, sustain interest long enough to write what amounts to a book?" "Will anyone want to read this when I'm

done?" "How do I begin setting limits on a thesis about Anthony Trollope when he wrote so many books? What do I include? What do I leave out?" Or "What do I think the interesting questions are about Trollope's portrayal of his female characters?"

You do freewriting—inclusive, messy, not necessarily seeming to progress—every day, coming back to your own thoughts and feelings, seeing what the depths present you with each day. As you work on these iterations you will discover that your thoughts and feelings are becoming clearer, and your topic is becoming clearer. I don't think I've ever worked with a student who stuck with freewriting for whom this didn't happen.

Now it is time to work toward slightly more focused, less free writing that nevertheless moves along quickly, taps into the underground streams of your thought, and moves by rapid association to open up new ideas and new directions. The aim of not-quite-so-free writing is to use a bit more of your rational mind. You do this by setting yourself a somewhat more focused task at the outset, not "write about anything for ten minutes," but "write as fast as I can for the next ten minutes about one novel by Trollope, trying to focus on its politics," or "What's my best current guess about what shape this chapter is going to take?" or "What bothers me most about this chapter, and can I think of any answers to my worry?" In other words, you set yourself a sloppy topic, ask yourself a question to get you thinking along certain lines, and try to focus your scope from the whole world down to the issues of your thesis. Some of these questions that you paste, metaphorically, at the top of your page of writing will come out of the freewriting you've already done. But you will still sometimes want to follow your mind

wherever it leads you, still use association, and still not worry if your thinking is divergent. Divergent thinking is what will ultimately produce some of the most interesting ideas in your dissertation.

Some writers might do better, in fact, to start with this slightly-less-free writing. Sometimes it's easier to write about "something" than about "anything." If you find yourself struggling unsuccessfully to turn out freewriting, try instead to do the somewhat more focused writing that I've described in the previous paragraph.

By now you ought to be able to write pretty quickly, and to focus your writing without strangling the flow. You've learned, on good days, how to use freewriting to improve the speed and the fluency of your writing, and to establish the channel between your thoughts and your writing, in order, as B. F. Skinner has put it, "to discover what you have to say." (I particularly like the gentle pun in his phrase: you will discover both what you have in you to say and also what you most need to say.) Where do you go from here, and how do you begin to accumulate writing at a rate that will permit you to finish your dissertation before your hundredth birthday?

Setting Your Daily Writing Goal

What you need to decide next is how you're going to set your daily writing goal. There are three ways to do this, and all three work, although not equally well. The first—let's call it the "sit there method"—is to say that you will write for a fixed amount of time, say two hours, every day. There are not a lot of people who can just write—not stare off into space, not get up to make five pots of coffee, not talk on the phone, but write

continuously—for more than about two hours a day. You can write for a very long time on any given day, but the trouble is, you can't then do it again the next, and again, and again—and writing daily is the pattern that's best suited to finishing a dissertation. The second method, the inspiration method, is to plan on writing each day until you come up with one or two decent ideas. The third, the "many pages method," is to pick a reasonable number of pages and write that same number every day.

On the basis of my experience with lots of writers, I think the many pages method works best. If you fix an amount of time, as in the sit there method, it's possible to spend all or most of that time staring at the wall, and then you've both wasted time and produced nothing. The problem with the inspiration method is that no one has ideas every day; some writing days are deserts, yet it's important to write anyway. The advantage to the many pages method is that it rewards fast writing: writing about five pages can take between one and five hours. (I'm not talking about five polished pages, but rather five junk pages, very close to freewriting.) But with a goal of five pages, the faster you can do them, the sooner your time is your own; this method rewards learning to write faster, and from what I've seen, fast writing produces no worse results than slow writing does. This method also produces a large volume of writing, and at least *some* of it is likely to be useful. Play around with these various methods, and see which one suits your style best.

Let me describe the many pages method in a bit more detail, because I think most people will choose it. First, establish your natural daily number of pages by choosing a number arbitrarily, probably somewhere between three and six pages, and then trying to write that number of pages each day for a week. (Once again, if you're a runner, you know the feeling of the "natural

number" from the way you decide how many miles to run each day.) When you've hit your natural number of pages, you will experience this sequence: some slowness getting in, for, say, the first page, then the sense that you've hit your stride and can just write along for a while, thinking things, following some byways, exploring, maybe even discovering a new idea or two. Then you'll come to a point at which you start to tire and feel like there's not much left in your writing reservoir for the day. This is the time to begin to summarize for yourself where you've been, to write down your puzzlements or unanswered questions, to do what Kenneth Skier, who taught writing at M.I.T. many years ago, calls "parking on the downhill slope": sketching out in writing what your next step is likely to be, what ideas you want to develop, or follow, or explore when you pick up the writing again the next day. This step will help you get started more easily each day, and it will save you an enormous amount of energy and angst.

If you write between three and six pages daily (you are allowed one day a week off—even God got one day off), you will find that you rapidly accumulate a lot of writing. Much of it will be what I call "junk writing"—it will not appear anywhere in your dissertation—but it is, nevertheless, important to have written it. Ideas don't emerge from most people's minds neatly, they rise up out of a quite chaotic soup, and you need to provide the proper medium for them to emerge from. As you go along, you'll move to less free writing and find your ideas developing and your arguments beginning to shape themselves. These pages will make up the first substantial piece of your dissertation, the zero draft. Your job is to keep writing, *every day,* keep accumulating those pages and gradually focusing them, dating them,

keeping them in a notebook, or a computer file, or a literal file where you can easily lay your hands on them.

But here are my last two essential pieces of advice, as you sit down and get started writing.

The first: Don't waste words. Whenever you have an idea, a strategy, even a glimmer of an idea, *write it down.* Don't figure you'll remember it. Don't talk about it with someone before you've written it down. Have a place to put it—a notebook, a pocket computer, an index card you carry with you (finally, a use for those index cards you bought when you used the old-fashioned research and writing method); develop the habit of always writing down those bright ideas that come to you while you're on the run.

The second: I have been a very stubborn (my detractors call it "resistant") student all my life. But the bit of stubbornness I most regret was that for five years I failed to take my best writing teacher's advice. Ruth Whitman's words to me were very simple: "Write first." By this she meant, make writing the highest priority in your life. But she also meant those words literally; that is, write before you do anything else in your day. I saw how she translated this maxim into action when we were staying in the same house during a poetry workshop she led. There were eleven miles of beach right out the door of that house that sat on an island off the coast of South Carolina, but Ruth didn't begin her day with a lovely walk on the beach. Nor, for that matter, with any casual conversation with the rest of us. She woke up, made herself some coffee, and retreated to her bedroom, where she spent the next two hours reading and writing. Then she emerged, ready to teach us what she knew about writing poetry. Being quite literal-minded, I had to see

her in action if I was to believe and understand what Ruth Whitman meant when she said, "Write first!" I came home from that workshop, rearranged my clinical schedule in order to start writing first thing four days a week; the other three days I manage to tuck it in some other time of the day. I'm sustained by the feeling that I have finally managed to put my own writing first, and I hope you will hear this particular piece of fine advice faster than I did.

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From Zero to First Draft

BY NOW YOU'VE WRITTEN a lot of pages, and most of them are a mess. How do you begin to turn what you have written into a true first draft? This is one of the most anxiety-producing stages in the thesis-writing process, second only to beginning. You've been writing for quite a while, but it may not be clear that you have anything to say or to show for your effort—just a pile of messy, at times incoherent, writing. This chapter is about how to turn that chaos and mess into a piece of writing that has a shape (although not necessarily a final one) and some semblance of an argument. This is the stage at which you can begin to answer the questions, "What is this material about? What question am I asking? How might I answer it?"

The Zero Draft

You can think about where you are in your dissertation by considering the definitions of "zero" and "first draft." I first heard about zero drafts from Lois Bouchard, a talented writer and teacher of writing. What she meant by "zero draft" was this:

manage instantly not to be pleased by anything they write, the most powerful rewards for screwing up your courage and writing are the process itself, the feeling that your writing is once again on track, and the lovely shuffle of finished pages in your hand.

7

You, Your Readers, and the Dissertation Support Group

Writing for Yourself and for Others

MOST OF THE GRADUATE students I meet while they're writing their theses are doing so for the best of all possible reasons, particularly in these years of a lean academic job market: they want to be able to commit their time to thinking about, researching, and writing up a project in which they have a deep interest. God knows, in struggling through a doctoral dissertation there are relatively few external rewards along the way, except for unregenerate masochists: the hours are endless, the pay is nonexistent, and the outside recognition extremely rare. Many of us who have lived through this process successfully have been driven by a powerful need to know and investigate something, and to write down the results of our investigation. We put together words in our search for truths, and it is the process in and of itself that rewards us for the time and energy it takes to produce a dissertation. In this way, we write for ourselves.

We also write for ourselves in another way: in the early stages

of writing a dissertation your major audience is often yourself. That is, you write to explain your subject to yourself, and to make sense of it for yourself. Only after you've done that, if you're lucky, do you worry about how to present it to others, to your thesis advisor, committee members, fellow graduate students. When you reach that stage, you also reach a stage of revision that begins to include thinking about your external audience. This shift, when it comes at the right time, can produce a powerful difference in your writing, as you struggle to make yourself clear: to turn your private utterances into public ones, to overcome ellipses, to find an appropriate tone and make your language precise. But before this point, you are often alone in and with your work.

Writing seriously is a lonely process; loneliness is a frequent complaint of dissertation writers, even as they acknowledge that too much company distracts them. When you reach the stage in your thesis when it's time to first invite selected, and then more general, others to hear what you've said, you also reconnect to other people, to other thinkers who can help you, with their different ideas and styles, to expand your own thinking and writing.

First you write for yourself, toward the truths you are attempting to discover. Then you write for yourself, but with a gradually increasing objectivity about the piece—you listen for the word that sounds harsh, you think about what you've said and see a hole in your argument, you look at your plan for the whole project and realize that you've bitten off too large a topic—and you work to fix each of these things, incrementally. You begin to work, that is, at hearing yourself as you want later readers to hear you.

Next you begin to write explicitly to be heard by others, and here you do the convoluted mental gymnastics required to imagine someone else's mind meeting your writing: what will someone who is well acquainted with this material think of what you have written? Have you explained your new take on the topic sufficiently to convince her? How about a reader less acquainted with the specifics of your field? Will there be such readers of this paper? What will your advisor, who has a bee in her bonnet about one aspect of the work, think of an argument that disagrees with hers? Have you worked hard enough to convince her? Have you convinced yourself? As you work back and forth between the external and the internal audience, you are writing, finally, for both: writing to be heard by yourself and by others.

You and Your Readers

You have to be quite careful, though, which others you invite to read your early writing; many writers are quite vulnerable to any criticism at this stage. Several years ago Helen Benedict, a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, wrote a wonderful short essay called "A Writer's First Readers," in which she describes that vulnerability and talks about how professional writers deal with it. She quotes Cynthia Ozick's summary of the stakes: "If we had to say what writing is, we would have to define it essentially as an act of courage." Nancy Mairs, writing in *Voice Lessons*, tells us that this sensitivity doesn't go away: "If the very thought of taking off all your clothes in the middle of the Washington Mall during a school holiday makes you blush, you haven't even begun to dream

what it feels like to publish a book." You need to think hard about whom you will trust with your early attempts; if you're fortunate, your advisor or one or more of your committee members might be such persons. Or a partner or close friend can fill this role. Fellow graduate students in the midst of the same initiation rite are sometimes useful, so long as you set up ground rules in advance to protect you all from the competition that's often endemic among classmates. There are no oughts here—but you should choose as an early reader someone who is most likely to help you get to the next stage; that means someone whom you can trust, with whom you feel comfortable.

Think very realistically about what you want from your reader. Your requirements are almost sure to change at various stages in your dissertation project. At the beginning, for example, you might want someone to cast his eyes over your chapter, but not say anything at all (unless he can't help a spontaneous exclamation of delight at the brilliance of your ideas). Writers who either haven't had a lot of experience with direct feedback or who don't realize just how powerful an effect it can have on their ability to work sometimes make a serious mistake in approaching their readers: they ask too early for "everything you think about this piece, all the mistakes you can find in it." Fortunately, many readers recognize both the dissertation writer's vulnerability and what early drafts look like, and they do not accept the writer's invitation to rip apart his first draft.

Then there are the readers from hell, who like to go for the jugular early on. You have to arm yourself properly against them, remembering that you own this piece of writing, and that you are entitled to ask for, and get, the kind of feedback that you think will be most useful to you, and most encouraging of your

work. Cynthia Ozick describes the effect of a nasty rejection on her ability to write a novel: "I lost six months in despair before I could get back to it. I was nothing and nobody and working in the dark and old already, and the amount of destruction was volcanic." Even if the harsh reader is your advisor, you can probably still find a way to let her know that you need something else; oftentimes, if you're firm enough, you can get it. And if you can't, pick other readers to review your piece at this early stage in the way you feel you need it read. Use them as antidotes, and have them standing by to comfort you. In the very worst case, if you feel as though you won't be able to write at all in the face of your advisor's criticism, think seriously about finding a new advisor. But consider first fighting back and getting energy from the thought of proving her wrong.

A good advisor will respond to your changing needs as your project changes: in the beginning, she'll mostly offer encouragement and advice to keep writing. She will listen to you as you try to clarify your arguments, will point out inconsistencies or holes, and will ask you questions that will help you get at what it is you're really trying to say, what order your ideas might be presented in. She will offer criticisms that will help you move in useful directions, but she should not pick out every flaw in your early drafts. In later drafts she will stand in for the harder critics out there in the world: "How will you answer X, who believes that this theory of yours won't hold water? This argument doesn't do it." Pray that someone on your committee is really interested in writing and can point you toward editing the style of your dissertation so that not only your ideas but also your expression of them are elegant. Later on, your advisor's and committee members' job is to help you discover as many flaws

as possible in your thesis, so that the document you ultimately put out in the world will represent you in a way that will make you proud.

You will also ask yourself to be flexible, and to grow up, as you write. In the beginning you'll allow yourself to be gentle with your dissertation, but later on, push yourself to be able to tolerate criticism, to keep your mind open, to not hold onto your words out of sheer stubbornness or arrogance or conservatism. Paradoxically, it's essential that you remember through all the stages of your work that you are the first and last owner of your words, that you get to make the ultimate editorial decisions. If you can learn to do this in the course of writing your dissertation, you will not only produce a fine dissertation; you will also learn both to think and to write.

The Dissertation Support Group

One of the best ways you can involve other people in your dissertation work is by forming a support group. Such a group can provide you with several important things: Properly chosen, it can offer you the good company of other people who are in the same boat as you, a terrific way of addressing the isolation that troubles so many dissertation writers. Having a group frees you from having to scramble again and again to make ad hoc arrangements with other people. The right group creates a supportive atmosphere—and a reliable, known bunch of people who know you and your work and can empathize, criticize, and push, as the occasion demands, *with the expectation that you will do the same for them*. It also provides additional structure in your dissertation-writing life: established, regular meeting times at which you know you have to show up, tell people what

you've been doing, and give an accounting of what you have (and haven't) accomplished since you last met—these are the best sort of deadlines!

The thesis support group I belonged to in graduate school worked beautifully; I still have warm memories of it. There were six of us in the group, all from the same department, both men and women; some of us were friends, some just classmates. One of the most useful features of the group was that its members were at different stages in the thesis-writing process. I joined the year before I got my degree, when I had my data and some early writing done; another group member was at about the same place. Two others were at an earlier stage and hadn't yet begun writing; the last two were in the thick of their dissertations, sprinting toward that year's deadline. My first year in the group I proofread the dissertation of one of the front-runners; the following year, one of the members who was then in the midst of his thesis proofread mine. The sense of continuity and of the proper balance of giving and taking in that small writing community were deeply satisfying.

That support group illustrates some important choices you have to make in setting up your own. What's the composition of your group going to be: students from a single department or several? Are the members going to be at the same stage in the dissertation-writing process, or at different stages? Will they be all men, all women, or a mixture of both? Is the group going to be leaderless or led by some expert? What sort of help do you hope to offer each other?

Define what you want from your group. Here are some useful possibilities: good company at predictable times; a cheerleading squad; your first, trustworthy readers; the kind of company that misery loves; role models who are similar to you;

people to bounce ideas off or talk with about places in your work where you're stuck; people who give you an occasion to set meaningful deadlines; people who expect you to meet the deadline you've set; people who threaten public shaming if you blow off your deadline, but will offer sympathy and help if you've really tried to meet it but gotten stuck (or the flu). All of these benefits fall under the rubric of "good company." In a group with an experienced leader, or in a multistage group, you can also expect good advice on how you might proceed, and on what it is important to think about next.

Here are some things that you might also wish a group to do for you, but that aren't reasonable to expect: listen to you kvetch, week after week, about how you can't get any work done; read your mind about the sort of feedback you'd like; listen to your personal problems; think your work is more important than their own; write your dissertation for you, revise it for you, edit it for you (proofreading's fine, if you can get it, and if you're willing to reciprocate); convince you that the work you insist on calling garbage is great, whether or not it is; deal with your neuroses.

In setting up a dissertation support group, you need to consider the group parameters, one by one. For example, there are some powerful advantages to having a group made up entirely of grad students in your department: you will speak a common language and probably be struggling with similar kinds of issues. As a first professional audience for your ideas and writing, this kind of group can be great. If you're struggling with your advisor, the group members will know whom you're talking about, and they may be able to help. But there are also some real disadvantages to this setup. It can be politically delicate, should you feel the

need to complain out loud about your advisor, to do this in the presence of other people in your department. More important, though, is the issue of competition: such a group can, at its worst, re-create the nastiest aspects of sibling rivalry, particularly if some of you share an advisor. Whether or not this happens depends in part on individual personalities, but it also depends in part on your advisor, and whether he is fair and equitable to advisees and doesn't, subtly or otherwise, play one off against another. I've seen, at the extremes, both sorts of advisor: my own thesis advisor's students often ended up as friends, a tribute to her generosity and dedication to collaborative work, but I've also heard stories about advisors increasing their own sense of power by pitting students against each other for the few favors the advisor was willing to dispense.

On the issue of trust: You may be feeling hesitant to talk in a group situation about the new ideas you've discovered, because of the risk, real, or imagined, that your ideas will end up in someone else's work. Dissertation writers are notoriously paranoid, but this doesn't mean that ideas never get misappropriated or, more bluntly, stolen. What to do about this? Be careful, particularly in choosing your group members. Think about discussing the issues of ownership, trust, and scrupulousness at the very beginning of the group's meetings. Stick with small groups. Protect any material that feels vulnerable to others' conscious, or unintentional, appropriation. If you think you have good cause to be nervous about the trustworthiness of someone in the group, make sure you collect up all the copies of your work at the end of each meeting. And consider a heterogeneous field group, where such concerns are less likely to be an issue.

An interdepartmental group is likely to focus more on writing

and on questions about the process of producing the dissertation than on the specifics of subject matter, since most of the members are likely to be unacquainted with the particular content of a field different from their own. This is not necessarily a disadvantage. Having your work read by a smart person outside your field can be a terrific way to find out if your writing makes sense, and if your argument flows well: someone already acquainted with your material is more likely to fill in any gaps from her own knowledge.

There is no single right way to set up a support group, just advantages and disadvantages to each choice. So, for example, having friends in the group can help you feel more comfortable, but it can also make the interpersonal dynamics more complicated. Having everyone at the same stage, say, just beginning to think about writing, can create solidarity: "We're all in the same boat." But it can also foster destructive, as well as useful, competition, or mutual panic. The single-stage group has one more inherent problem: all of you are probably equally ignorant of what the next stage looks like.

As for single-sex versus mixed groups, there are some fields in which it's more likely that you'll end up with a single-sex discussion group (women's studies comes to mind). I've met with many dissertation support groups that are set up as single-sex groups, and I have seen both their advantages and their disadvantages. Sometimes there's a greater comfort level in single-sex groups, where men or women feel freer to speak in gendered language and are liberated from the kind of posturing that people sometimes engage in (consciously or otherwise) in the presence of the opposite sex. Women often complain that they feel silenced by men in groups, and men sometimes believe that

women spend too much time on touchy-feely issues or that women are too vulnerable to criticism. Granted, each of these complaints may be either stereotyped or stereotypical behavior, but you probably don't want to have to fight the gender wars while you're worrying about your dissertation.

Remember, the professional world you will enter after graduate school is unlikely to be single sex. And single-sex groups have their problems too: more competition—unpleasant in different ways in men's versus women's groups, but unpleasant nevertheless—and usually characterized by less variety of thought and criticism. When a mixed group works well, with different styles of readers and writers contributing their strengths and their differences to the group, and diluting the intense games that are sometimes more easily played in single-sex groups, they are probably the most interesting and productive sort—individual personalities permitting, of course!

The last of the issues you have to consider before you go about creating your support group is whether you are going to have a leaderless group, a group in which the members rotate the leadership among themselves, or a more formal leader, most likely a faculty member or perhaps someone who specializes in consulting to dissertation writers. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow has laid out, probably for all time, the territory of the leaderless writing group, describing its process as well as strategies for setting it up so it works. He suggests seven to twelve group members and a meeting at least once a week in which everyone reads and responds to everyone else's writing. Elbow recommends that the group meet for at least a few months and that each person write something to bring to the meeting every week. (His section on the details of responding to

other people's work is particularly strong, and too long to excerpt here.) Be forewarned, though, that such a group requires a very high level of commitment from each of its members, and that such a group can, at its worst, feel like being in a country in which the blind lead the blind. When leaderless groups work well, though, they are the easiest and least formal way to go about getting the support you need.

Despite their possible advantages—greater comfort because there's no need to put on a face for the teacher, and a sense of equality—leaderless groups also face some possible hazards: no one minding the store; no guidance from someone who knows about the whole process of creating a dissertation, who can offer help when needed; no strong hand to intervene if and when the group gets off course. To counter this, you can take turns being group leader, to keep order and encourage forward momentum; share among you the work of searching for resources and advice that you then bring back to the group; and include group members who are at different stages in the dissertation process.

It can also work well to have a dissertation support "group" with just one other person, particularly if you already know that you can work well with that person. If you are writing at a distance from the university where you've studied, working with one other person might be an especially useful choice (you can also check out larger groups if you're resident in another university community).

Having decided on the kind of group you want, how do you go about setting it up? Where do you find the group members? How do you find a group leader if you want one? How do you set up the parameters of the group so it will work well? First check whether such groups already exist at your university. I've known of dissertation advisors who have set up and led groups

for their own students (a particularly useful mode for the kind of popular thesis advisor who has so many thesis students that she can't meet as frequently as she'd like to with each of them alone). Some university departments run dissertation support groups for their students, and universities that have writing centers or academic support centers sometimes sponsor groups through those offices (or they might consider doing so if you suggest it). Graduate student organizations, either within a department or universitywide, are another possible source. You might also ask your advisor, contact the graduate studies office or your department or dean for help with how you might connect with other students who are looking for the same sort of company.

But you might already know of potential members. Ask your peers if they're interested; ask around at department coffee hours or events. If this doesn't work, design an attractive ad and put it up in places where people like you might read the bulletin board. If your department is lucky enough to have an administrator who runs everything and knows everyone, ask him if he knows of others who are looking for a group, or ask him to put the word out that you are. Or you might try a message on the in-house E-mail, or an ad in the university newspaper if it's the sort of publication you yourself would read. If you're not in residence at the place where you're earning your degree, you're going to have to work harder to provide yourself with decent writing company. But in either case, you don't, after all, need dozens of people—a few will do.

So once you've got the people, how do you structure the group? First you might consider a leaderless group; to see if it sounds stylistically compatible with the way you all like to work, discuss some of the issues you might have to deal with, and

remind yourselves of strategies that will be helpful no matter what sort of group you choose. Then you think (and write and talk) seriously together about what your goals are for the group—what does each of you wish for and expect to get from the group?—because such expectations will help determine the answers to questions such as how often you will meet, for how long each time, how you set the agenda, and what that agenda will be. Make your goals specific and realizable; we all, particularly dissertation writers, have fantasies of perfect, always-available readers and editors, but remember that those are fantasies. The frequency and duration of your meetings can range from a few times a year for a couple of hours to once a week for a year. I think more is better. Much better, in fact.

Setting Up a Dissertation Support Group: A Checklist

___ Have you reached a point in your writing where you feel ready to talk with other students about your work? (Not necessarily comfortable, just ready.)

___ Do you know what you expect from such a group? Are your expectations realistic, and have you enjoyed, but discarded, your fantasy expectations?

___ Are you looking for a group composed of students who are all in your department, or one that includes people from various departments?

___ How frequently do you want to meet with such a group?

___ How big a group do you want? Just one other person or a larger group?

___ Do you prefer a single-sex or a mixed group?

___ Should the group be leaderless or led?

___ Have you decided where you'll look for such a group and made a list of the possibilities to check out (for example, talking with your advisor, the department administrator, the graduate student office, student support services, or other students and/or sending out an E-mail announcement or putting up an ad)?

The Dissertation Support Group: Expectations, Problems, and Negotiations

What's left to consider? You—both you the individual, and the collective you of the group—should plan to spend the first meeting or two agreeing on the parameters of the group. You'll have some negotiations about calendars, timing, and expectations. Try to make as much as you can think of explicit, for example, "So we've agreed that each of us will bring a one-page description of our project—with copies for all—to the next meeting and be prepared to spend ten minutes talking about our work plan and goals," or "We'll take turns bringing the snacks," or "We'll make a very serious effort to start on time, confining all chatting to before or after our meetings." By the end of the second meeting of the group it's reasonable to expect that the rules will be in place, and that you will have some sense of other people's work, and they of yours, each of you having already put a small sample of your writing out on the table for the group to see.

Farther along you may run into knots: someone regularly comes late or monopolizes the group's energy; people who promise to bring their writing fail to; feedback on writing is too harsh or too undiscriminating or just not helpful. Which brings me to the thesis group member from hell (GMFH). Anyone who's been a group leader has met this person, who exists in a

variety of forms. The one constant is that he is capable, single-handedly, of destroying a group, and this holds true for informal thesis or book groups as well as for therapy groups. Here are some possible incarnations of the GMFH: the person who is so needy that his agenda takes up most of the group's time and energy; the person who, as a reader/critic, behaves like an unreliable attack dog; the person who is so fragile that serious criticism of his work feels impossible and cruel; the person who is so competitive that everyone else feels like hiding their manuscripts; the motormouth who wastes the group's time. A leaderless group is more vulnerable to the destructiveness of any of these difficult characters; a group with an effective leader can expect that the leader will make such a person either shape up or leave. Some group members from hell have serious personality disorders; others have bad habits that they are oblivious to—the latter can be reformed, with some constructive criticism. The best thing to do about a potential GMFH is to try to screen him out in advance: if you already know that one of your fellow students is needy and difficult well beyond the norm for your basic neurotic grad student, do not give in to your charitable impulses to help out by including this character in your thesis group. Instead you might encourage him to make weekly appointments with his thesis advisor. You will all get more work done this way.

Whichever problem the group encounters, it's important to remember that this is a *work* group, not a tea party, and to take up whatever problem arises quickly, straightforwardly, and calmly as something to be negotiated and solved. *Not* doing so will prove to be much more painful than suffering through the short-lived awkwardness that comes with tending to the group's business. If you find yourself really stuck, call in a consultant—

an outsider, such as a dissertation advisor or someone from the university study center, who can help you identify and solve the problem.

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A thesis support group that works well can offer you important gifts: a cheering squad, readers, trustworthy critics and editors, people who encourage you to set goals, hold you to them, and keep you good company at the various stages of what is otherwise, for most of us, most of the time, a solitary journey.

10

Life After the Dissertation

I REMEMBER CLEARLY a day soon after I'd gotten my degree, when one of my kids answered the phone, and someone asked for "Doctor Bolker." My husband had had his Ph.D. for ten years. Without missing a beat, my offspring asked, "Which one?" Life after the dissertation is about changes—shifts in your status, in your identity, in the shape of your life and your work, and in the dissertation itself—and there is no going back.

Your new degree will make a difference both in the way others see you, and in the way you see yourself. In the course of your graduate training and dissertation writing you will change from a student who is seeking others' instruction and judgments to an expert in the field, an authority on your subject, someone who can be called upon to make judgments. You may find yourself invited to review for professional journals, asked for reprints of articles that originate in your dissertation, or consulted by struggling graduate students. You have become someone who has written the equivalent of a book, someone who has potentially changed, as Ray Huey has noted, "from being someone who reads to someone who is read."

Your advisor or members of your committee may treat you differently, more like a colleague and a peer, and less like a student. You now know about yourself (most of the time) that you can focus on and sustain effort toward a difficult goal, overcome obstacles, keep going even when you don't feel like it, and allow yourself to get something that you want.

Publishing Your Dissertation

Having finished your dissertation, you'll need to decide what you're going to do with it: leave it to gradually gather dust on your bookshelf, turn the chapters into journal articles, turn it into a book, or bury it in the backyard. There are good reasons both for publishing and for not publishing.

Reasons for Publishing

- Your topic captivates you, and you're not done with it. You'd like to polish this piece of work further.
- You've done an elegant piece of work, and you want to put it out in the world.
- You want to have a larger audience for your ideas and a broader dialogue with your readers.
- You're hoping to get an academic position, and publishing your dissertation will help you do so.
- You're hoping to have a "crossover" book: to turn your academic manuscript into a best-selling trade book.
- You've turned into a writer.

Reasons for Not Publishing

- You hate your dissertation. You honestly don't believe it's good (not just on alternate days).

• Your dissertation was on a topic of your advisor's choosing; now you've chosen your own subject and left the thesis subject behind.

• You've outgrown and are bored by your dissertation.

• You don't want to be an academic, or you're shifting fields.

There's always the chance that any of these reasons could be a rationalization, that what you really mean is, you're trying to gather together the energy to take a good hard look at your dissertation, to see if you want to reengage with it in an ongoing way. If you've written a good thesis (you'll know it, others will tell you so, your committee will be enthusiastic about it, or, in the absolutely best case, a publisher will approach you), don't put it aside permanently until you've allowed a bit of time to elapse and have tried approaching it again.

Publishing a Book or Separate Articles?

If you choose to publish your dissertation, how do you decide whether to transform it into articles or a book? What are the issues?

• Are you prepared to do the amount of work that turning your thesis into a book will entail?

• How important do you think your dissertation is in your field?

• Once you strip away the literature review, research design, and so forth; do you have a book's worth of new material? (The answer to this question in the sciences is almost always no. I've never heard of a science dissertation that became a book. On the other hand, it's very common for scientists to publish articles based on their results, often before completing the dissertation.)

• Does the dissertation have the kind of wholeness (that is, coherence and a clear progression from beginning to end) that a book has, or does it come apart into chapters that would more easily lend themselves to discrete articles?

• Were the chapters originally written as separate essays or presentations?

• Do your advisor and other committee members recommend that you publish?

• If you're really undecided, are you willing to try running a book proposal past a publisher?

Publishing Your Dissertation as Articles

You may already have submitted some chapters of your thesis to journals for publication. But if you haven't, and you have decided that you either can't or don't want to turn your magnum opus into a book, then transforming chapters, or portions of chapters, or results of experiments into publishable articles can be a reasonable and more manageable way to get a wider audience for your ideas, and to begin to build your academic résumé.

About timing: start cannibalizing the thesis as soon as you can, before you're totally caught up in a new job, before it seems a bit old and you no longer feel familiar with the material. If you're planning on being an academic, drawing on your dissertation to create articles is a good way to get a jump on one of the most important post-thesis tasks, getting your work published. Ask your committee for advice about how to get published.

How do you choose where to submit your manuscript? Think about the journals that have interested and educated you, consider the kinds of readers that you want for your work and where you're likely to find them, and, once again, seek advice

from mentors. Your advisor and other people who have more experience than you in your field can tell you which journals are good places to send your work, and how to approach them. Spend some time in a university library that has journals in your subject (don't forget that reference librarians are wonderful resources for such information), or browse the Web, looking over possibilities. I send my writing only to journals or magazines that publish authors I respect and enjoy reading; that is, I choose on the basis of the company I'll be in if my work is accepted.

Here are some more issues to consider in choosing a journal:

- Readership/audience. Whom are you trying to reach?
- Editorial policy. Do they take your kind of work?
- Visibility and ease of access. Does your university's library get this journal?
- Turnaround time. Some journals take months, others years, to review submissions. Do you need to have your paper published before a job search or a tenure review?
- If your paper includes figures, photographs, or color illustrations, is the journal known for high-quality reproduction of such material?
- Publication costs. Many academic journals, particularly in the sciences, charge their authors publication costs, but charges are sometimes waived if you're on a grant, or if you or your advisor can negotiate with the editor.
- What is the reputation of this journal vis-à-vis its dealings with its authors?
- What are the length requirements for papers submitted to the journal?
- What is the professional reputation of the journal? That is, how prestigious is it? What is its acceptance rate for papers? (Beware of new, trendy journals, which may have a good acceptance rate but may not be cited by indexing services or read by the people in your field whom you want to read your work.)
- Who is on the editorial board of the journal, and who reviews for it?

Submit your work to only one journal at a time, unless the publication's guidelines specifically say that multiple submissions are acceptable. Expect to wait several months for a reply; have in mind the next publication you're going to send your manuscript out to, should it be rejected, because no matter how good a piece of work you send off, the odds are that it will be rejected. Prestigious journals in many academic fields have very low acceptance rates.

Should you apply to the prestigious journals? It depends. Some academic departments will not take seriously publication in any other periodicals. But if being in print is more important to you than racking up résumé points, look around at journals you like and find interesting, and try sending your work there. If your manuscript is rejected by the number two journal in your field, don't despair, and still consider sending it to number one. (Every essay I've ever published ultimately appeared in a higher-ranked journal than those that had turned it down earlier.) In fact, consider sending it to number one first. Editors at both book publishing houses and journals are often idiosyncratic. They operate under many constraints: too many submissions and not enough time for screening them, their own particular taste, their appraisal of how your work will fit with other work planned for the same issue, or, for book editors, with projects on their publication list. In addition, trade journals and books are,

increasingly in these days of publishing as big business, focused on marketability.

Transforming Your Dissertation into a Book

If you decide that you're going to try to publish your whole dissertation, how do you go about doing it, and finding an appropriate press? Particular presses often specialize in several subjects, and you can discover which publish in your field by noting the titles listed in their catalogs, browsing the library shelves, and, once again, by asking your advisor. You can also look up publishers by subject matter in *Literary Marketplace*, the bible on publishing companies. You'll also have to decide if you're going to send your work to a university press or a trade publisher with a scholarly list. (Basic Books, Pantheon, and Metropolitan/Henry Holt are such trade publishers.) How you answer this question will determine important aspects of how you write your book—such as tone and scholarly apparatus.

Consider some of the differences between a thesis and a book, and the implications of those differences for the work you'll still have to do. Your thesis and your book may differ in purpose, voice, format, and your approach to your audience. You'll want to pay more attention to the style and readability of your book, and to what you hope a less specialized reader will get from reading it.

The purpose of writing a dissertation is to prove to your advisor and your committee that you are capable of carrying out scholarly work at the doctoral level. Most dissertations are written in a formal voice and style and follow a carefully prescribed format that is heavy with scholarly paraphernalia. When you write a thesis, your audience is quite small; the other essential aspect of this audience is that they're obliged to read your work. What you choose to say and, especially, *not* to say in your dissertation is often linked to what you know about your particular audience, and to the fact that they have the power to grant or deny you your degree.

When you turn your dissertation into a book for a wider audience, you can revise your answers to questions such as "What do I really want to do with this, and whom do I want to see it?" How much will you let your own voice emerge, and what do you want the style of the book to be: scholarly, informal, or somewhere in between? Perhaps most important, what is in your dissertation that is worth communicating, and to whom? How will you do so most effectively? You are no longer asking, "Will my committee accept this work and give me a Ph.D.?" You're now asking if your work is marketable.

Look at your book from the perspective of your reading public and ask, "Have I written this book in such a way that readers will keep reading, *even though they don't have to?*" (One friend decided to publish her thesis, a six-hundred-plus-page treatise on torture and censorship in Brazil, after her committee members pronounced it "a good read.") Keeping this question in mind, one of the most important things you need to do right away in transforming your thesis into a book, particularly if you're not submitting it to a university press, is to take out much of the scholarly machinery. But even a colleague who is an editor at a prestigious academic press says, "Tell them to reduce the annotations dramatically and to scotch the lit review."

Your book's opening should be quite different than your dissertation's, which is probably composed of some pretty dense (even if very well-written) theory. What do you want to do with your original first chapter? Do you still want it to be the

first thing that meets the reader's eye? You need to convince your book's readers at the outset that it's going to be worth their while to keep reading.

Finding a Publisher and Writing the Book Proposal

How do you choose which publishers to approach about your book? You probably know by now which publishers are most active in your particular field, and which of them have put out the books you think well of. Your advisor or one of your committee members has most likely published one or more books and can be a good source of suggestions, as well as possibly provide you with an introduction to an editor whom she's worked with or whom she knows has a good reputation. Such connections make it more likely that your manuscript will be read, though not necessarily that it will be accepted for publication. It will still stand on its own merits. *Very* occasionally a publisher will approach you; this is a rare occurrence (and if it does happen, it is likely to be a query from a university press). Once again, get advice—from your mentor, but also possibly from a book agent and/or a lawyer—before you sign any contract. (Poets and Writers, Inc., publishes a very useful reference book called *Into Print: Guides to the Writing Life*. Read it.)

Once you've done some library research and some inquiry by word of mouth about publishers, both formally and informally, and have made a tentative list of those publishers you'd like to approach, it's time to write a letter of inquiry. *The Writer's Handbook,* a very useful reference guide for anyone considering being published, remarks in its section on university presses, "Always query first. Do not send any manuscripts until you have been invited to do so by the editor." Write a brief letter that

states your interest in having the press look at your proposal, describes your book, and offers a short summary of your credentials ("I have been a graduate student at Superb University for the past five years, two of which I spent in the field in . . . , watching wild rhinos copulate. My master's thesis won the . . . prize for 'most original piece of work on rhinos,' and I have just won a grant from the MacArthur Foundation to return to . . ."). It's also O.K. to summarize your education quickly if you haven't yet accrued such honors. It's very important that the query letter be not only well written but also lively and engaging: you are trying to hook a big fish. It's probably fine to query more than one publisher at a time, because you haven't yet asked anyone to spend any time or energy on your proposal, but seek out the advice of your mentor or a publisher.

Let's say that you receive a letter back from Paragon Press saying that they'd be interested in seeing your work. They may invite you to submit a proposal or a manuscript. The former is more likely. You don't need to have a finished manuscript in order to submit a proposal, particularly since publishers often like to have a hand in the shape of the books they produce. The proposal is a more detailed letter than your inquiry, describing the book and its parts. Work hard at investing this description with the passion you feel for your book; this letter ought to be a persuasive argument for why the publisher will regret it terribly should it choose not to accept your book. You'll be asked to provide an evaluation of the works already out there that will compete with your prospective manuscript; you'll presumably already know some of the competition, but check carefully so you don't end up either embarrassed or having spent a year working on something that's already appeared in someone else's

book. Search the various computerized indexes and *Books in Print*, but also go to as many large, academically oriented bookstores as you can to check out what's currently available to readers wanting to learn about the reproductive habits of wild rhinos. (If there aren't any such stores in your town, do some of this checking by phone or via your computer.) Summarize the results of your search in your proposal; it's important for a publisher to know that you've done your homework.

Include along with your proposal your vita, and, ideally, one or a few of your most polished pieces of writing, so that the editor can get some idea of what sort of book you're likely to produce. If you've had an essay accepted by a journal, or if a paper you wrote was well received when you presented it at a conference, consider sending it as a part of your packet. Also offer an estimated date by which you could complete the manuscript for publication. (Don't give yourself a deadline that will force you to work forty-hour days, should the book be accepted.)

Should you try to hire an agent to shop your book around? Not if you're hoping to be published by an academic press. Agents work for a percentage of the money you earn on your book, and most academic presses offer prestige, rather than any substantial amount of money, for publishing your work. The only reason to use an agent is in the unusual case of a dissertation that is likely to have popular audience appeal, and thus will be of interest to a trade publisher. If you think you might, in fact, have such a "crossover" book, it could be worth your while to hire an agent. In exchange for about 15 percent of your earnings, an agent will search for a publisher, negotiate a favorable contract, and absorb the nearly inevitable rejections on the way to an acceptance. Books like Adam Begley's *Literary Agents: A Writer's Guide* (Penguin, 1993) can supply not only a list of literary agencies, but also invaluable advice on finding and working with an agent. An even better way to find a good agent is to ask someone who has employed one whom he recommends highly.

A coda: people have often asked me about hiring outside editors to revise their thesis manuscripts for them. This is a very complicated question. On the one hand, I much prefer to read a book that has been well edited (and there are many books currently out there that clearly haven't been, down to not having been proofread!). On the other hand, editing your book is a job that you should mostly do yourself, with helpful suggestions from literate colleagues and friends—but with you staying in charge of the process.

Rejections

Most of us have one of two (and sometimes both) fantasies about having our work rejected by publishers: either that that's the *only* possibility, or that the first person we send it to will immediately write us back with an acceptance. (There's a third popular fantasy as well: that if the manuscript is rejected, we'll die or never write another word again.) But all of these scenarios are really the exception. The reality of submitting a manuscript is more complicated. If you've polished your work and a mentor thinks it's good enough to be published, it's likely to be accepted eventually, if you persevere and choose carefully both where you send it and how you compose your query letter and proposal. But the acceptance you ultimately receive is not going to come by return mail; you may have to wait several months for a reply by mail or by phone (academic presses are usually staffed by unpaid professional readers with busy work lives of their own). If your manuscript is accepted, you'll often be asked

to make further revisions. And, finally, although you may feel awful for a while after you've gotten a rejection letter, in time you can pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and figure out where to send your work next; perhaps before you do so you'll choose to incorporate any useful suggestions supplied by the readers who turned it down.

The best antidote I know for rejection despair is a little book titled *Rotten Rejections, A Literary Companion* (Pushcart Press, 1990), a compendium of awful prior rejections of famous books. For example, this response to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "For your own good do not publish this book," or this one, to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "It is impossible to sell animal stories in the U.S.A." When I get a manuscript back I also take heart by remembering Madeleine L'Engle's story about her award-winning trilogy that begins with *A Wrinkle in Time*. At the awards ceremony where *A Wrinkle in Time* received the Newbery Medal, L'Engle had a conversation with an editor who had turned down the manuscript for publication (as did several other publishers), who said, "I know I should have published these books."

The Book-Jacket Blurb Exercise

On your way to turning your thesis into a book you will be faced with the problem of how to imagine that thesis-turned-into-a-book, how to envision yourself as the author of something you might one day be able to pick up in a bookstore. Here's an exercise that might help. You have hardbound books in your library, some of them with their dust jackets still intact. Open a few to the inside back flap of the dust jacket and read the author's biography. You'll see that the text there varies widely: some authors are very professional, telling nothing about

their private lives; others let a lot, if not all, hang out, down to the names of their pets.

Try writing your own book-jacket bio: write one either for the real book you're hoping to create or for an imaginary one. First write a stodgy, professional one; then try an expressive, hippy version. Experiment with lying: write as if this book won't be your first, but your fourth, and make up the titles and subjects of the first three. Choose the wild hobbies (skydiving, knitting with dog hair, growing exhibition Venus flytraps) you have only in your dreams. Give yourself a pet iguana, or the horse or ferret you've always longed for; six children or none. Have fun imagining the possible author you could be. And then write for yourself what you found out about the kind of writer you wish to become while you were creating your book bio. Doing this exercise may help you get there.

Becoming a Writer

Writing a dissertation is a particularly difficult job because of its powerful symbolic significance, how important it can be in determining your professional future, and how hard it is to write as a novice for the exacting audience of your dissertation committee. You've written simultaneously for yourself and for a very near audience; future writing tasks are likely to be for a more distant one. Now it's time to consider how you feel about writing when you're no longer obliged to do it. Do you have a sense that there might be another book waiting in the wings, material you'd love to take a crack at now that you know how to do it? Will you continue a daily writing habit, and, if so, how will you find the time to do it, when, finally, you are no longer writing a thesis?

Some of you will be pleased to have accomplished your dissertation project, but your heart will now be elsewhere: perhaps in research, with writing up your results as a necessary concomitant task that you now know you're competent to do. Perhaps finishing your dissertation will leave you glad to have done it, but delighted never to have to do anything like it again. Perhaps it will have proved to you that your talents and interests really lie somewhere else. (This last, paradoxically, is an especially good reason to be proud of having managed to accomplish what you have!)

But for others, the experience of writing a dissertation will bring with it an important transformation: it will open up the possibility of being a writer, set you well on the road to becoming one, or turn you into one. But know that even if you want to continue writing, there will still be many days when you'd rather scrub the bathtub. Nevertheless, writing will have become your "practice," as the Buddhists would put it. Perhaps I'm prejudiced in believing you're very lucky if writing has become part of you for life, the craft you now naturally go to in order to think, feel, and clarify problems of all sorts. If writing has become this kind of pursuit for you, you need to make room for it in this next stage of your life. Whether or not writing turns out to be your practice, writing your dissertation will still have changed you for all time.

APPENDIX I

How the Computer Revolution Affects You and Your Dissertation

BACK IN THE 1970S when I wrote my dissertation, I didn't know anyone who wrote on a computer. We had an early word processor at the Harvard Writing Center, but it took up an entire room! I recall the 1970s to remind you that it is indeed possible to finish a thesis without a computer. For probably less than what a decent computer and printer will cost, you can buy a lot of help (with typing, editing, and hunting down footnotes) from a human being who has access to a computer. If you want a word processor and lack of money is keeping you from owning one, investigate whether your university either loans computers (some even do so free of charge) or has some setup for selling used computers cheap to worthy students. (O.K., so you may not be able to relax in CD-ROM land with your recycled five-year-old model, but that will be one less distraction.) Beware, though, of truly archaic software. Very old word processing programs may not be able to talk to new printers. For example, once you've opened a Word 5.0 file in Word 6.0 and saved it, it may be permanently converted to Word 6.0; if you only have Word 5.0 on your